Earthkeeping and Character

Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic

Steven Bouma-Prediger
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Introduction

Ecological Ethics Reframed

What sort of person would do a thing like that?
Thomas Hill Jr.¹

But lacking the qualities of virtue, can we do the difficult things that will be necessary to live within the boundaries of the earth?
David Orr²

What Sort of Person?

The day was picture perfect. A brilliant sun was shimmying up a clear blue sky, birds were singing to their hearts’ content, and the temperature was in the low fifties. My group of hikers—five Hope College students and one other instructor on a ten-day canoeing and backpacking expedition in the Adirondacks of upstate New York, as part of a May-term course called Ecological Theology and Ethics—broke camp and hit the trail toward our evening’s destination. As we rounded the bend in the rocky trail, we could not believe what met our eyes. The campsite by the trail was trashed. Litter was everywhere. Half-burned wood from the fire ring was strewn hither and yon. Large pieces of metal, hard to identify, were leaning up against an old log lean-to that was thoroughly inscribed with knife carvings. Birch trees were stripped of their bark all the way around. After a long astonished silence, one of my students uttered the words in my mind: “What sort of person would do a thing like that?” What kind of person would trash such a beautiful place? With this heartfelt cry, my student gave voice to an ancient but until recently neglected approach to ethics: virtue ethics. Ecological virtue ethics to be precise.
Thomas Hill had a similar experience. That is, he found himself uttering the same probing question: What sort of person would do a thing like that? In 1983 Hill, a philosopher at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, authored an essay now recognized as pivotal in the development of contemporary environmental virtue ethics. Hill writes:

A wealthy eccentric bought a house in a neighborhood I know. The house was surrounded by a beautiful display of grass, plants, and flowers, and it was shaded by a huge old avocado tree. But the grass required cutting, the flowers needed tending, and the man wanted more sun. So he cut the whole lot down and covered the yard with asphalt. . . .

It was a small operation, but it reminded me of the strip mining of large sections of the Appalachians. In both cases, of course, there were reasons for the destruction, and property rights could be cited as justification. But I could not help but wonder, “What sort of person would do a thing like that?”

This question evokes not a discussion of duties or rights or consequences but a focus on character traits—virtues and vices. What character traits (vices) allow someone to destroy a beautiful place? And what character traits (virtues) prompt indignation on seeing such a degraded place and fuel the desire to make it better?

Hill insightfully observes that even if there is a convincing case to be made, based on a careful cost-benefit analysis, for asphalting over the yard or strip-mining the mountain, there is something more at stake, evident in our underlying uneasiness about such destructive action. Something important is missed in asking merely, “Are the rights or interests of plants neglected?” or “What is the intrinsic value of a tree or forest?” Hill argues that we must turn from “the effort to find reasons why certain acts destructive of natural environments are morally wrong to the ancient task of articulating our ideals of human excellence. Rather than argue directly with destroyers of the environment who say, ‘Show me why what I am doing is immoral,’ I want to ask, ‘What sort of person would want to do what they propose?’”

In short, Hill shifts the terms of the discussion from doing to being, from actions to attitudes, from conduct to character. In this seminal essay, Hill describes the centrality of virtues such as humility and self-acceptance—two virtues that help us acknowledge that we are the sort of creatures that we are. This shift of questions and terms represents a reframing of ecological ethics away from the traditional approaches that focus on rights, duties, or consequences in favor of the ancient tradition of virtue ethics.
Ethics Reframed

This recovery of the virtue ethics tradition should come as no surprise. In our more reflective moments, most of us wonder about the kind of person we have become and the kind of person we aspire to be. Perhaps celebrating a new birth or lamenting the loss of an old friend, contemplating a job change or witnessing a wedding, reading an obituary or attending a funeral, we ask: Who am I, really? What personal character traits am I proud of? Courage and compassion, humility and honesty, generosity and graciousness? And which traits do I wish would magically disappear? Impatience and insensitivity, stinginess and self-deprecation, avarice and apathy? Character traits lie at the heart of who we are. They mark us—for good and ill, to our credit and to our shame—as the unique people we are.

So an ethics of character is not new or foreign to our lives. Parents strive to nurture in their children commonly sought virtues such as courage and compassion, honesty and hope. Teachers endeavor to form students in certain ways, for example, by discouraging plagiarism and promoting academic integrity, even if the teachers think (falsely) that they are not in the business of moral formation. Business owners set policies designed to cultivate certain virtues—for example, honesty, diligence, and inventiveness—and thus promote particular practices and behavior in the workplace. In short, character formation is taking place all the time, for better or for worse. What is new is that in recent years more scholars have given virtue ethics their attention, and scholarly discussions have shifted to recapture the virtue ethics tradition.

So what I propose in this volume is a reframing of ecological ethics. I develop an ecological ethic centered on the virtues by drawing on the rich resources of the Christian faith tradition. In so doing I join a growing chorus of scholars (philosophers, theologians, and ethicists) who advocate virtue ethics, including many Christian scholars. I also join an increasing number of scholars (again mostly philosophers, theologians, and ethicists) who espouse some form of environmental ethics. There are, however, not many scholars who focus on the intersection of virtue ethics and environmental ethics—namely, environmental virtue ethics. That is, there are relatively few who emphasize character traits (both virtues and vices) with respect to environmental issues. And within the field of environmental virtue ethics, there are, as yet, few whose work draws explicitly on the Christian tradition. With this book I offer my contribution to our understanding of ecological virtue ethics. Beyond mere understanding, important as that is, I hope this volume will, to use the words of David Orr in the second epigraph to this chapter,
help nurture “the qualities of virtue” that will enable us to “do the difficult things that will be necessary to live within the boundaries of the earth.”

Why the title Earthkeeping and Character? And what exactly is meant by the subtitle Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic? Of the many words and phrases used to express our care for our home planet, in my view the word earthkeeping best captures our human vocation to serve and protect the earth. Coined by Loren Wilkinson and his coauthors in their groundbreaking book, the term earthkeeping, with its reference to the earth, is concrete, unlike the more abstract term world. Also, earthkeeping focuses on where we actually live, this blue-green orb called Earth, unlike the hopelessly expansive term creation. This focus on the earth, furthermore, includes the entire biosphere and all the interlocking systems and creatures that are an integral part of this thin slice of life-filled existence, thereby emphasizing both human and other-than-human creatures, unlike the term nature, which tends to assume a split between human and nonhuman. Finally, the compound word earthkeeping accurately names our biblical calling as humans to preserve and protect (as well as use) the earth (Gen. 2:15). In short, earthkeeping captures our calling to care responsibly for our home planet. The third word in the title, character, points to the tradition of ethics most concerned with virtues and vices and the crucial role they play in our attempts to care for the earth.

The subtitle, among other things, names the academic territory: ecological virtue ethics. While the commonly accepted term for the field is environmental virtue ethics, I favor the term ecological virtue ethics. So when referring to the larger world of scholarship in ethics, I use the more common term, even though I think the term environmental is a poor choice of adjective. Words matter. As an ancient Chinese proverb puts it, “Whoever defines the terms wins the argument.” There will be more later (in chap. 1) on why ecological virtue ethics is my preferred term.

The subtitle also states my perspective as a Christian scholar on this academic field of study. Unlike some who argue that religion should be eradicated or at least kept private, I argue that the Christian tradition has much to offer contemporary ecological ethics, as do other religions each in their own way. The Bible has more to say on earthkeeping than many people (including many Christians) realize, and the Christian tradition is deep and rich when it comes to virtue ethics. My treatment of this topic, however, is a series of explorations, much like being a backpacker in the Sierra Nevada or a canoeist in Quetico. What follows are excursions from a journey, like a series of day trips designed to reconnoiter new terrain.

What does this bookish exploration look like? In chapter 1, I map the territory. In other words, I lay out the big-picture landscape of ethics in our
time, provide an anatomy of virtue and the virtues, outline the development of ecological virtue ethics, and articulate my own approach to ecological virtue ethics. A kind of primer in Christian ecological ethics, this chapter lays the groundwork for all that is to follow.

In chapter 2 we explore what it means to live with amazement and modesty. In a culture that all too often sucks the amazement right out of us as we proceed up the educational ladder, how do we recover our ability to recognize and appreciate the marvels of life on earth? In a culture that seems to assume that humans are divine, what does it mean to acknowledge honestly that we are not gods or demigods? If we took our creatureliness seriously, what virtues would we deem necessary? Wonder and humility are two such virtues. These habitual dispositions are at the very core of what it means to acknowledge that we are creatures of God—humble humans from the humus (to paraphrase Gen. 2) standing amazed by the world of wonders in which we find ourselves.

In chapter 3 we explore what it means to live with strength of mind and discernment. In a culture where bumper stickers proclaim, “Whoever dies with the most toys wins” and “You are what you drive,” what would it look like to live with fewer things because we are able to restrain and retrain our desires with a spirit of gratitude for what we already have? And in a culture that often mistakes data for knowledge, thinks education means regurgitating information, and confuses intelligence and insight, what does it mean to live wisely and well? Self-control and wisdom name the countercultural virtues needed here. These character traits enable us to discipline our disordered desires and discern what is genuinely good and true.

In chapter 4 we explore what it means to live with respect and care. In a culture in which lives, both human and nonhuman, seem increasingly cheap and disposable, where disrespect for all that is other than ourselves seems more and more prevalent, what does it mean to live as people animated by justice? In a culture that promotes cynical indifference, where apathy all too often accompanies our foggy awareness of the latest plunderings of our home planet, what would it mean to cultivate care for human and nonhuman alike? Justice and love name the virtues we need in this (or any) culture. Respect for rights and care for needs succinctly describe these habitual dispositions. These two virtues lie at the core of every discussion of ethics.

In chapter 5 we explore what it means to live with fortitude and expectation. In a culture of growing apprehension and seemingly endless anxiety, what would it look like to face our fears and act with a resolute spirit, without either acting recklessly or being paralyzed by fear? In a culture rife with false hopes, with prophets (and profits) of easy credibility lurking everywhere, what
does it mean to resist both despair and presumptuousness and, in contrast, embrace with confidence the expectation of God’s good future of shalom? In these circumstances, courage and hope are the virtues needed to enable us to live through our fear and overcome the temptation to despair.

Finally, in chapter 6 we explore how we become people of praiseworthy character—people who embody the virtues described in chapters 2–5. In a culture of bogus hero worship, of hollow media personalities, of spurious role models who seem to embody the glittering vices, how do we become people of virtue? How do we become people marked by awestruck wonder and unheralded humility? Grateful self-control and winsome wisdom? Passionate justice and boundless love? Tenacious courage and clear-eyed hope? As Aristotle, among others, reminds us, the aim of studying the virtues is not theoretical but practical. That is to say, our goal is not only to learn about the virtues but also to become more virtuous. May that goal be realized in your reading of this book.

“What Sort of Person?” Revisited

The day was picture perfect. A brilliant sun was shimmying up a clear blue sky, the robins and cardinals were singing to their hearts’ content, and the temperature was in the low fifties. My group of hikers—Hope College students and one other instructor on a May-term course called Ecological Theology and Ethics—broke camp and hit the trail toward our evening’s destination. Late in the day, after many miles on the rocky trail, we rounded the bend and could not believe what met our eyes. The campsite by the trail was absolutely beautiful. There was no litter in sight. A stack of firewood was neatly placed next to a small fire ring. The old log lean-to was in tip-top condition. Tall white pines provided a protective canopy overhead. After a long astonished silence, one of my students uttered the words in my mind: “What kind of people would have done this?” In other words, what kind of respectful, humble, loving people must have cared for this place for many years? With this heartfelt affirmation, my student gave voice to exactly what I was thinking. And she gave voice to an important way of thinking about ethics—ecological virtue ethics.
Mapping the Territory
On Virtue and Vice

If, then, the virtues are neither passions nor faculties, all that remains is that they should be states of character.

Aristotle

What you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are.

C. S. Lewis

A Student, His Grandparents, and a Poem

He sat in the back row, quiet as the proverbial mouse. At first he said little or nothing in class, appearing to be the stereotypical introvert. But in his papers and exams, he was anything but quiet. It was clear he had done all the reading, giving careful thought to my “questions to ponder,” and was thinking deep and long about the issues raised in class. The class was Ethics and Christian Discipleship, an introductory religion course at Hope College. Populated mostly by second- and third-year undergraduate students, many of whom were taking it to fulfill a general education requirement, this semester-long course covered the basics of Christian ethics in the first five weeks. Then in the remaining ten weeks we examined a variety of ethical issues—for example, social justice in the presence of poverty and racism, peacemaking in the face of violence, and earthkeeping in a world of ecological degradation.

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According to Andre, this was the very first time he had any instruction in ethics. Like most of his college-age friends, Andre had gut-level feelings about what was right and wrong, but he was ignorant about ethics and unsure what was at stake. Nothing in his K–12 education in public schools (or, sadly, Sunday school classes at church) had touched on these issues. When I reminded Andre that one of the purposes of education is to expand the frontiers of your knowledge, he laughed. But as the course progressed, I sensed he was growing more interested in the subject matter of the class.

When we got to the section on environmental issues, Andre became especially excited. He had heard of various topics such as species extinction and global warming but had not studied them. He dove into the reading with great enthusiasm. Indeed, he became more vocal in class discussions and argued eloquently as a member of a team debating a case study on greenhouse gases. It was as if he had become a different person from the quiet, reserved, and seemingly disengaged student sitting in class on day one.

Andre chose to write his ethical analysis project paper on an issue of more than passing interest to him. His maternal grandparents owned a farm, and he had grown up visiting this farm. In fact, as a high-school student, he worked on the farm during the summers. Andre knew the land, the cows and horses, the dogs and cats, the neighbors. He also knew that farming was changing, with fewer and fewer small family farms able to survive in a world where the mantra was “Get big or get out.” His grandparents had been tempted to “Get big” by renting more land, but that would require buying larger machinery, using more fertilizers, and hiring extra help; they were not comfortable with such radical changes to their simpler way of life. Getting big didn’t seem right—for them or for the land—so they decided to pass on the chance to get big, betting they would not be forced to get out. Andre knew one more thing: his grandparents were getting older and hoped, if possible, to pass on the farm to someone in the family.

So Andre wrote his paper on the ethical issues concerning his grandparents’ farm. He listed the various consequences (good and bad) of different possible courses of action, going beyond the typical cost-benefit analysis to include costs and benefits not usually included in neoclassical economics. He identified various moral and legal rights at stake and clarified the ethical duties and obligations implicit in those rights. All of this was helpful. But at the end of the day, Andre said what struck him the most about this family case study were the character traits embodied by his grandparents: humility and wisdom, frugality and gratitude, diligence and perseverance. Andre ended his paper, fittingly, with a poem by Wendell Berry.
The clearing rests in song and shade.
It is a creature made
By old light held in soil and leaf,
By human joy and grief,
By human work,
Fidelity of sight and stroke,
By rain, by water on
The parent stone.

We join our work to Heaven’s gift,
Our hope to what is left,
That field and woods at last agree
In an economy
Of widest worth.
High Heaven’s Kingdom come on earth.
Imagine paradise.
O dust, arise!

Ethics in Our Time and Place

What is morality, and what exactly is ethics? For the sake of clarity, let’s begin with a few basic distinctions. First, what is moral must be distinguished from what is nonmoral. Some judgments have to do with moral rights and wrongs, with what is morally good and bad, while other human judgments do not concern moral matters at all. They are, rather, nonmoral. So, for example, to say that I am wearing a really bad tie is to make not a moral judgment but rather an aesthetic judgment. Commenting that my canoeing technique is not very good is not a moral judgment but a claim about my athletic ability. So we must distinguish between the moral and the nonmoral. Second, what is moral must be distinguished from what is immoral. To say that my act of stealing that bicycle was immoral is to claim that it was not morally right and that I am morally blameworthy. To state that helping that lost child find his way back home was “the moral thing to do” is to make a judgment that my action is morally good and praiseworthy. Third, morality is not the same as ethics. Morality has to do with what is good or bad, right or wrong, with respect to our action or behavior, while ethics is the academic discipline that studies morality. Ethics, in the usual understanding, is the study of what is morally good and bad, morally right and wrong, and how and why we make such judgments.⁵

But implicit within this understanding are assumptions about the kind of people we are and aspire to be—a vision of the character traits deemed
necessary to live a good life. Indeed, one of the primary meanings of the Greek word \textit{ethos}, from which we get the English word \textit{ethics}, is “character.” So an alternative way to define ethics is to say that it is about the study of people with good (and bad) character. As David Cunningham puts it, “Ethics concerns the study, evaluation, and formation of \textit{people of good character}.” In other words, ethics can also be defined in terms of character traits (virtues and vices) that result in conduct that is morally good or bad, right or wrong.

In all human cultures, various traditions of moral discernment and ethical decision making have arisen. Patterns of thought and habits of practice have developed over time. In short, ethical theories came to be. For the last 250 years in Europe and North America, the prevailing ethical theories focused on obligations, rights, and goods. In technical language, ethical theory has been dominated by deontology and teleology. For deontology (from the Greek words for the study of that which is needful or obligatory), the central ethical question is: What are our obligations? In other words, what are our duties with respect to others (in most cases other humans)? And this question is often tied to a related question: What are our rights? What legitimate claims do we have, and what duties follow from those claims? For deontology, the good is defined in terms of the right.

For teleology (from the Greek words for the study of goals or aims), the central question is: What are the ultimate goods, and which human actions produce those goods? In other words, what actions will produce the greatest balance of good over evil? Consequentialism is the more common name for this approach since what is morally right and wrong is determined by an assessment of good and bad consequences. In contrast to deontology, teleology defines the right in terms of the good.

The most common form of consequentialism is utilitarianism, which holds that an action is morally right if and only if it brings about the greatest balance of good over bad consequences for the greatest number of recipients. For most versions of utilitarianism, the recipients include only humans, though in recent years the scope of what matters has expanded. So the relevant ethical question for utilitarians is: If I (or my company, school, city, or country) did this action, what would be the costs and benefits for the greatest number of people? This kind of consequentialism, often understood solely in terms of an economic cost-benefit analysis, is, as many argue, the predominant ethic of our age.

These two ethical theories, however, have their critics. Two of the main criticisms are nicely summarized by Clive Barnett, Philip Cafaro, and Terry Newholm:
Both consequentialist and deontological approaches are open to two related criticisms. First, both present models of ethical conduct that appear to be far too stringent in the demands they make on the capacities of ordinary people—consequentialist arguments seem to imagine it is possible to collect, collate and calculate all sorts of information and chains of causality prior to, or even after, action. While utilitarian considerations might be relevant in relation to evaluating collective public decisions, they seem rather unrealistic as complete models of personal choice. Similarly, deontological approaches seem to present an implausible picture of actors rationally judging the degree to which each of their actions conforms to a very abstract principle of universalization. This criticism . . . is related to a second problem with both consequentialist and deontological approaches. They end up presenting models of ethical conduct that are rather inflexible, leaving little room for the complexities and ambivalences of ethical decision making. They therefore present a highly abstracted model of the ways in which people are implicated and involved in their actions. 9

In other words, each of these ethical theories has an inadequate anthropological—a faulty view of the human person and what it means to be human. It is not the case that most people most of the time, when making an ethical judgment, stop to identify and collect and reflect on all the possible good and bad consequences of each hypothetical action. It is false to assume that most people most of the time, when deciding on whether and how to act, measure the degree to which each of their possible actions meets some philosophically derived principle of obligation. These ethical theories have a highly implausible view of human nature.

There is much support for this critique. Many scholars from across the academic disciplines have shown that we humans are much more than Cartesian thinking things. 10 As Mark Johnson puts it, the pervasive view “that regards moral reasoning as consisting entirely of the bringing of concrete cases under moral laws or rules that specify ‘the right thing to do’ in a given instance” is “quite mistaken.” Indeed, the Moral Law Folk Theory, as Johnson calls it, “is premised on bad psychology, bad metaphysics, bad epistemology, and bad theories of language.” 11 As he argues more recently, “What we call ‘mind’ and what we call ‘body’ are not two things, but rather aspects of one organic process, so that all our meaning, thought, and language emerge from the aesthetic dimensions of this embodied activity.” 12 So Johnson concludes, “Acknowledging that every aspect of human being is grounded in specific forms of bodily engagement with an environment requires a far-reaching rethinking of who and what we are, in a way that is largely at odds with many of our inherited Western philosophical and religious traditions.” 13 Our cognition is embodied in ways we are only now beginning to understand. 14 And since

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every ethic is rooted in assumptions about human nature—a philosophical and/or theological anthropology—the fact that our cognition is embodied has important implications for how we do ethics.

Furthermore, while these two different ethical theories—deontology and utilitarianism—have dueled for two centuries, with each side claiming victory, for all their differences they have one thing in common: each theory assumes that ethics, at its roots, is about doing and not being, primarily about conduct and not character. As Charles Taylor, among others, notes, “The dominant philosophical ethics today, divided into the two major branches of Utilitarianism and post-Kantianism, both conceive of morality as determining through some criterion what an agent ought to do. They are rather hostile to an ethics of virtue or the good, such as that of Aristotle. And a Christian conception, where the highest way of life can’t be explained in terms of rules, but rather is rooted in a certain relation to God, is entirely off the screen.”15

But what if the more important question is “What kind of person should I be?” rather than “What should I do?” What if character rather than conduct is more fundamental?

Despite the dominance of the deontological and utilitarian approaches to ethics, an increasing number of people are asking precisely these questions. In an essay on the Anthropocene and its meaning in our time, John Vucetich, Michael Paul Nelson, and Chelsea Batavia conclude that “robust arguments have already been made for how and why the key to wise relationships to nature depends on a set of virtues that include precaution, humility, empathy, and rationality. . . . Those virtues will be vitally important in any new epoch.” Despite these claims about the importance of virtues in our time, however, with honesty and no little amount of anxiety, they admit that “we live in a culture with too little capacity or interest in those virtues.”16

Social scientists Olivia Bina and Sofía Guedes Vaz also argue for the centrality of the virtues. In light of “the current market-driven and globalized socio-economic system,” they argue we need “a more holistic understanding of what it means to be human.” A virtue ethic, in their view, provides just such an understanding. Indeed, in emphatic terms, they insist “virtues need to be reclaimed as a central dimension of what it means to be human, starting from how we educate the future generations, if they are to contribute to a life that is good for them, for the planet, for all children, and all species.”17

An ecological ethic, based on a more informed and accurate view of human nature, must focus on character more than conduct.

Virtue ethics is the third of the three main traditions of ethical discourse in Western culture. Arteology is the fancy name, from the Greek words for the study of (logos) excellence or virtue (arete). Arteology focuses more on being...
than doing, emphasizes attitudes rather than actions, and takes character to be
more basic than conduct. Virtue ethics names the tradition of ethical reflection
prominent in the ancient Greco-Roman world and also in the Bible. So those
registering a minority report against the modern hegemony of deontology
and teleology are tapping into a well-established tradition, eclipsed only in
the last few centuries by these other two approaches.

The most influential scholar to argue in recent years that virtue ethics must
be reclaimed is Alasdair MacIntyre. First published in 1981, his book After
Virtue is one of the most articulate and insightful discussions of ethical theory
in its generation. It has proven to be of immense importance and influence in
moral philosophy and in Christian ethics. MacIntyre shows how virtue ethics
was eclipsed in the history of Western thought and argues cogently for why
it should be retrieved and revived. This is not the place to restate those argu-
ments. Suffice it to say that the era in which deontology and teleology were
seen as the only options available is now (thankfully) long gone.

One is tempted to view these three approaches to ethics as mutually ex-
clusive; however, there is no good reason to do so. For example, philosopher
Philip Cafaro states, “I take deontology and virtue ethics to be the two halves
of a complete ethics, rather than competing, comprehensive ethical theories.
The one describes and grounds our duties toward others, the other describes
and explains our own possibilities for self-development and personal excel-
ence.” Writing about climate change ethics, Tim Hayward argues for an
approach that incorporates all three ethical traditions—rights, consequences,
and virtues. In his discussion of “ecological citizenship,” he insists that “a
focus on the virtues—as a complement to ethics of duty, rights, or utility,
and proposals such as carbon allowances, or allowances even against a wider
range of ecological services—would seem to be a necessary factor in thinking
about what individuals should do.” And in his introductory text on environ-
mental ethics, Ronald Sandler outlines all three approaches when discussing
normative theories and suggests that “perhaps the ‘right’ deontological view,
consequentialist view, and virtue ethics view will converge on similar values,
rules, and principles as they are continually revised and improved in response
to new information and challenges from each other.”

One masterful combination of all three perspectives in ethics is evident in
the work of Lewis Smedes. Without dumbing down the nuances or avoiding
the points of tension, Smedes skillfully threads into a single cloth all three
of the main Western ethical traditions: deontology, teleology, and areteology.
His process of ethical decision making embraces all three approaches in its
four basic parts: face the facts, respect the rules, consider the consequences,
and be responsible. Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen do something similar
in their approach to Christian ethics. They view character formation (virtues) and decision making (duties and consequences) as complementary parts of a single ethic.\textsuperscript{23} Similarly, my beloved Hope College colleague Allen Verhey long argued that conduct and character must be combined in doing Christian ethics.\textsuperscript{24} More examples could be cited, but the point is clear: these three ways of doing ethics need not be viewed as mutually exclusive.

In my view, the three traditions of doing ethics can and should be seen as complementary. Conduct (habits over time) shapes character (virtues and vices), and character (dispositions to act) informs conduct (for better and worse). Indeed, virtues cannot be conceived except by reference to rules about what actions are morally permissible, and rules are powerless without the dispositions to act morally. Put succinctly: duties are impotent without moral virtues, consequences are blind without moral rules, and virtues are unfocused without moral goods. Deontology, teleology, and areteology are mutually interdependent. An adequate ethic must include all three.

This squares with the Christian tradition. For most Christian ethicists (and most Christians), an adequate Christian ethic includes duties (the Ten Commandments, Jesus’s greatest commandment), goods (shalom, the kingdom of God), and virtues (Jesus’s beatitudes, Paul’s fruit of the Spirit). Christians have a commonly agreed-on moral exemplar in Jesus and a clearly envisioned \textit{sum num bonum} or greatest good: shalom (Old Testament), the love of God and love of neighbor (Gospels), the reconciliation of all things (the apostle Paul).

Thus duties and rights are in the service of a \textit{telos} or goal that involves the formation of virtuous character. Paraphrasing Smedes’s four-part process of ethical decision making: we must follow certain moral rules while simultaneously paying attention to the consequences of our actions; or alternately, we must make decisions according to the anticipated consequences while simultaneously following the moral rules. Each is necessary but not sufficient. And while following the rules and considering the consequences, we must each be responsible as a person of moral character. We must ask ourselves whether we have used discernment (wisdom), whether the action we intend supports our commitments (integrity), whether we are willing to go public (courage).

In sum, ethics in our time and place is complicated. There are different moral traditions and ways of thinking about what ethics is. Deontology and utilitarianism have dominated ethical theory in the recent past, leaving areteology in the shadows. It is time, however, for us to retrieve the virtue ethics tradition. The most fundamental question is not “What are my duties?” or “What would be the consequences?” but “What kind of person should I be?” While obligations and consequences are important in ethics, virtues are even more central. In the chapters that follow, I develop an ecological ethic that
emphasizes the virtues, drawing extensively on the Christian tradition. But first we need more on the nature of the virtues. What exactly is a virtue?

**Virtue and the Virtues**

One significant reason for giving primacy to virtues and thus adopting a virtue-based approach to ethics is quite simple: what we do depends on who we are. As indicated previously, doing is contingent on being. Our actions arise from our desires and affections, our dispositions and inclinations—in short, our character. James K. A. Smith captures this point well: “Much of our action is not the fruit of conscious deliberation; instead, much of what we do grows out of our passionate orientation to the world—affected by all the ways we’ve been primed to perceive the world. In short, our action emerges from how we imagine the world. What we do is driven by who we are, by the kind of person we have become.”

What we do is driven by who we are. And who we are—the kind of person we have become—is best described by traits of character such as virtues and vices. This approach implies a critique of much contemporary ethics as too intellectual, too focused on rational principles and conscious deliberation. Such ethical theory has failed to notice or understand the pre-reflective and preconscious basis of (moral) action. While rational reflection is important, the simple fact is that most of our actions are pre-reflective, a result of having an intuitive, embodied feel for the world—a kinesthetic way of being in the world shaped over time by habits and routines.

Furthermore, the kind of person we have become depends on the stories with which we identify. We are, to use the words of Jonathan Gottschall, “the storytelling animal.” What does this mean? Barbara Kingsolver puts it well: “Storytelling is as old as our need to remember where the water is, where the best food grows, where we find our courage to hunt.” Contrary to what many believe, stories are useful beyond mere entertainment. Indeed, stories are, according to Kingsolver, “as persistent as our desire to teach our children how to live in this place that we have known longer than they have.”

Narratives engage that part of us that most shapes our desires—namely, the imagination. Stories, including “legends, myths, plays, novels, and films,” best speak to this imaginative core of our being because they paint a “more affective, sensible, even aesthetic picture” than do lectures or textbooks. As many biblical commentators have remarked, Jesus was on to something in using parables for the instruction of his followers.

As an example, imagine two young students introduced to issues of ecological degradation. John is given a pamphlet about deforestation in the Amazon.
He reads about the importance of these rain forests to global environmental health, looks through the predictions, and even memorizes statistics. Meanwhile, Joanna is given Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax*. She may not be able to spout off statistics, but she understands the impacts of human greed on the voiceless. The story gives her a clear sense that some things matter beyond their usefulness or economic value—that there is much to lose by “biggering and biggering” our businesses. Both of these students are introduced to the same topic, though in critically different ways. Both methods have value, and taken together they provide a student with a more thorough understanding of the matter. But taken alone, most of us would wager that Joanna is more likely to “speak for the trees.”

Stories shape our character, and all human action is shaped in terms of narratively formed character. Smith again articulates well the central insight: “And that shaping of our character is, to a great extent, the effect of stories that have captivated us, that have sunk into our bones—stories that ‘picture’ what we think life is about, what constitutes ‘the good life.’ We live into the stories we’ve absorbed; we become characters in the drama that has captivated us.”

In the succinct words of MacIntyre, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” In other words, a founding story is not a husk that can be shucked to get to the kernel inside but is indispensable to knowing who we are. As Stanley Hauerwas reminds us, “We do not tell stories simply because they provide us a more colorful way to say what can be said in a different way, but because there is no other way we can articulate the richness of intentional activity—that is, behavior that is purposeful but not necessary.” There is, in short, a “narrative quality” to human action.

So a virtue is a narratively formed praiseworthy character trait. But we find ourselves living in a world of competing narratives—competing understandings of what virtuous living looks like. For example, one strand of folk wisdom states that “cleanliness is next to godliness.” But what is cleanliness? That depends on what narrative most profoundly shapes that home. An American family shaped by the 1950s’ medically inspired preoccupation with germs and sanitation will have a different idea of cleanliness than a family in Belize in 2015. Indeed, Jesus found himself in a lot of trouble over the matter of cleanliness because he in some ways understood the story of the Jewish covenant differently from the Pharisees. We may agree that it is good to be clean, but the stories we indwell give us different understandings of what that actually means.

In addition, virtues are shaped by practices. As Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell put it, “In allowing ourselves to adopt and be adopted by a
particular story, we are in fact assuming a set of practices that will shape the
ways we relate to our world and destiny.” With the indwelling of a particular
story comes a particular set of practices—of communal, embodied rhythms
and routines—that shape and mold our dispositions. In other words, the meta-
narratives or big stories we hear and with which we identify—of manifest
destiny, of material prosperity, of an outrageous carpenter from Nazareth—
shape our character by enlisting us to engage in certain practices—reciting
the Pledge of Allegiance, shopping at the mall, saying the Lord’s Prayer. These
practices shape the kind of person we become—our virtues and vices—and
hence the actions we engage in.

And sometimes we see practices embodied in a person who displays for
us what a life of virtue concretely looks like—for example, a well-known
saint such as Mother Teresa or a well-loved if little known relative such as
Uncle Peter. Such people are models of virtue who inspire us to live such lives
ourselves. So we alter our own life narratives by cultivating the virtues of our
most admired exemplars. When it comes to matters ecological, Aldo Leopold,
Henry David Thoreau, and Rachel Carson are some of the most commonly
mentioned exemplars of an ecological virtue ethic.

So stories and practices and exemplars shape character. Furthermore, our
practices over time color the way we see ourselves and the world. There is
a connection between virtue and vision. As Gilbert Meilander says, “What
duties we perceive—and even what dilemmas—may depend upon what vir-
tues shape our vision of the world.” We see the world differently, depending
on how we have been formed by the virtues that constitute our character.
C. S. Lewis captures this point well in The Magician’s Nephew, book 6 of
The Chronicles of Narnia. The creation of Narnia by Aslan looks and feels
very different for wicked Uncle Andrew than it does for the children. While
the children find Narnia alluring and understand the words spoken by the
animals, Uncle Andrew shrinks back in fear and hears only barking and
howling. Because of his evil character, he is blind to what the children see
and misconstrues both Aslan the creator and what is created. As the narrator
comments, “For what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you
are standing; it also depends on what sort of person you are.” What you see
and hear depends on your character.

In summary, a virtue is a story-shaped, praiseworthy character trait formed
by practices over time that disposes us to act in certain ways. It is a habitual
disposition to act with excellence, molded by the narratives we identify with
and the exemplars we follow. By soaking in the stories of particular commu-
nities, engaging in their practices, and looking to their role models, we know
what is truly good and how to live well.