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## Virtue and vice in environmental discourse

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## **Virtue and vice in environmental discourse<sup>1</sup>**

**Słowa kluczowe:** wady środowiskowe, cnoty środowiskowe, etyka cnót, etyka środowiskowa.

**Key words:** environmental vice, environmental virtue, virtue ethics, environmental ethics.

### **Summary**

For effective environmental protection, the necessary tools are not only the external ones in the form of commands, and legal or economic instruments. A very necessary tool for dealing with the environmental crisis can be inner work on one's own character and personality, as well as on the social virtues and vices that determine our approach to the environment. Recently, a growing interest in environmental virtue discourse can be noticed, and this paper presents a proposal for five cardinal environmental virtues, and oppositional to these, five cardinal vices. The presented virtues are: care, moderation, respect, wisdom, and responsibility. On the opposite side of the barricade are the following vices: egoism, greed, arrogance, ignorance (stupidity), and apathy.

### **Introduction**

When one thinks about and analyzes the problem of the destruction of nature, one usually thinks that the problem is morally neutral

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<sup>1</sup> The aim of article is to introduce and sketch the author's concept of cardinal environmental virtues and vices. The further and more detailed analyses of the discussed virtues and vices will be published in further articles.

and can be solved by applying environmental technology. We perceive nature as an unlimited source of resources, which are mostly used for satisfying needs that are not essential for us. Thus usually, the cure for nature's destruction is seen as external to ourselves e.g. is seen in technology. It is the same with the roots of the ecological crisis. It's the lower status of nature that excuses our unlimited resource consumption. Sometimes, however, there appears to be a weak voice telling us that the destruction of nature may be rooted in our moral ignorance or lack of recognition of our moral obligations towards nature.

But what would happen if we were to ask questions of the other type; instead of looking for reasons for nature's destruction outside, should we not rather look inside and inquire about the human qualities that make one want to protect (and to destroy) nature? Such a question was posed by Thomas E. Hill (Hill 1983), who recognized the moral discomfort connected with the destruction of the natural environment. He tells about a wealthy and eccentric man who bought a house in a neighborhood

“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. After all it was his property and he was not fond of plants.” (Ibidem: 211)

Such an action reminded Hill of strip mining in the Appalachians and he found in both situations the same moral discomfort that made him pose a question: “What sort of person would do a thing like that?” This kind of question changes the point of view and turns our focus from the outside world to the inner world and the inner qualities of human beings. It opens up the discussion on the ecological crisis to a reflection on the moral excellence of mankind, and especially on the problem of environmental virtues and vices.

## **1. Virtue and vice in environmental discourse**

Environmental virtue discourse seems to be a trial in which the following question is answered: “What sort of person would do a thing like that?” However, it also opens up the perspective for further inner inquiries in a Socratic style, whose “know thyself” became the motto of his philosophy. The word “virtue” is an old-fashioned one (van Wensveen 2005b: 15), it represents tradition and today we mostly associate it with academic discussions. However, the term is not only connected with tradition; nowadays, we can witness a revival of virtue discourse in environmental philosophy. Philosopher Louke van Wensveen believes that, ecologically, people tend to apply to “dirty virtues” (van Wensveen 2005b: 15); “dirty” in the sense that the language used in discussion expresses a connection with the earth that is dirty, which is represented by the soil. Moreover, according to her, in the language of environmental virtue one can find a connection with virtues that are not necessarily praiseworthy, which represent some sort of taboo in Western culture. What then is virtue? The term will be explained with reference to philosophical tradition, namely, Aristotle’s “the virtue of man also will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well” (Web-06). Moral virtue is a golden mean between excess and deficiency; for example, courage is a virtue placed between rashness (exemplifying excess of the quality) and cowardice (that stands for deficiency of courage). Also, Aquinas considers a habitual disposition, where virtue or vice is a source of the actions we perform (see Web-07). Virtue and vice taken as such seem to be the answer to Thomas Hill’s question, and at the core of the discussion about what sort of person would do that is the question about the virtue and vice this person presents.

Together with the discussion about virtues in environmental discourse is the question about their opposites, namely vices, which lie behind the destruction of nature. According to Philip Cafaro (Cafaro 2005:135–158) the ecological crisis stems from deficiencies in our

character: gluttony, arrogance, greed, and apathy. He enlisted just four main vices, but we could definitely find many more vices that are behind the destruction of nature. For example anthropocentrism, which is the source of man's arrogance and speciesism; consumerism, which in the form of shopping is the most widespread leisure activity in Western societies; lack of understanding and not recognizing the intrinsic value of the environment; moral blindness, which delivers excuses for indifferent attitudes towards the environment; lack of discrimination about what is good for the natural ecosystem, which leads to actions that destroy the environment instead of protecting it; an irresponsible attitude toward nature; an instrumental approach towards nature and its resources; technocratism, which excuses technological intervention in nature for the sake of achieving progress; cruelty towards the environment; dualism, which lies behind the underestimation of nature; and arrogance, when it comes to noticing other living organisms or squandering resources thoughtlessly. Deeper reflection on the ecological crisis would probably reveal many more environmental vices than those listed here; however, these seem to be the most crucial ones and they seem to determine human behavior the most.

What is the opposite of virtue, namely vice? According to Cafaro, vice is a personal habit, social practice, or an aspect of human character of which we disapprove" (Cafaro 2005: 136). Virtues and vices are here understood as character traits, and vice is a negative side of the human personality. The term "virtue" (Latin *virtus*, Greek ἀρετή) is derived from the Latin word "*vis*" meaning power, which in this context is mostly understood as moral power, and from the word "*vir*" meaning "man," which is because one of the main virtues was usually associated with being a brave, courageous warrior. The Greek term "ἀρετή" is derived from the comparative and superlative forms of the adjective "good" and the verb "*aristeuein*" ("be the best, to excel"). Thus literally it means that which is good, the best one, and excels over the others. Vice is derived from Latin "*vitium*" (Greek κακία), which means defect, blemish, and imperfection. Vice and virtue are defined as

the “character trait of a person; soul quality; inner quality that enable oneself to do moral goodness or evil” (Web-01). The concept of vice is connected with the concept of harm, which inevitably contributes to acting as a harmful agent upon the environment in which one lives. On the other hand, virtue is always connected with moral excellence: it is the quality that makes a better person. Virtuous people grow morally; they excel themselves and go beyond their own imperfections. Vicious actions are always against human nature; they degenerate humanity itself, and as a consequence they are also destructive to both the kin and kith of the vicious person. Vice makes one take wrong decisions and it leads to a moral fall – it leads to the degeneration of oneself and one’s actions. A vicious person is not able to discriminate between good and evil; vice blurs the perception of a situation and subjugates one’s actions to the realization of whims, even if they are harmful to the agent. Vice taken as such is a habit of thinking and acting, and left uncontrolled it blurs the mind and leads to vicious deeds. Vice can be seen in action as well as in the intellectual sphere and it leads to an improper perception of the world; vice weakens the intellectual sphere and subdues actions to the realization of whims, even if they are against moral norms. Vice creates a veil of ignorance in which one is not able to recognize the right right course of action and deludes oneself into achieving the wrong aims.

As previously mentioned, vice is strictly interconnected with the concept of harm, and in the case of the environment the experience of harm can be widened to all nature and all living and non-living elements that are destroyed by man. It has to be emphasized that harm is not only associated with interpersonal relationships, it also applies to those who cannot speak for themselves, and those whose rights are neglected and unacknowledged. In the case of environmental harm, it is necessary to reflect on the scale of this harm and the possible outcomes in future of our current actions. Prognoses about the future are always problematic. There is a certain amount of difficulty in predicting the results of our actions; thus, Jonas has postulated a new science,

namely comparative futurology (Jonas 1997). This new scientific discipline should predict the future results of the application of technology. However, it is doubtful whether the scale of our intervention in the environment and our current state of knowledge will enable us to judge what all the future results of our actions might be. We simply do not possess sufficient knowledge and prognostic tools to predict all the future results of our actions, and all the side effects of applied technologies. It is indubitably the case that science has achieved a lot in the area of limiting its side effects; however, with growing intervention in the environment the scale of the destruction caused by technological progress is becoming greater.

The understanding of the environment as “harmed” places it in a very unique position: previously, ethics were always anthropocentric, its norms were connected with interpersonal relations and the environmental was morally neutral. Some environmental philosophies even have hidden anthropocentric suppositions; thus, the environment is valuable only when it is useful to people, only when invisible or more subtle ways its resources play some role in people’s lives. Here, an instrumental approach is clearly seen and many environmental postulates are formulated to secure people’s needs. However, recently in philosophy, the necessity to widen the scope of consideration has been noticed; the moral *consideranda* (see Birch 1993) has been widened and the intrinsic value of nature has been emphasized. It is of tremendous importance that it is recognized that nature has to be protected and that it has an intrinsic value independent of its utility to man. Holmes Rolston III (2005), speaking about motives for environmental protection, expressed concern that we may protect the environment for improper motives. However, even if motives are not the proper ones, even if the environment is protected for instrumental purposes, it still means that we are able to protect nature. It has to be remembered that harm done to the environment influences human beings; we are elements of the natural world so even if our motives are not that pure we have to protect the environment, or at least escape the negative results

of its degradation. Harm done to nature strikes at us, which seems to be the best argument for the protection of the natural environment for those who do not wish go beyond anthropocentric ethics. At the present stage of environmental discourse, the crucial issue is noticing the necessity of environmental protection, and our motives are not so important. What is important is to notice that we should act now to stop the destruction, even if the only reason for protecting the environment is to secure humanity's interests. However, with further moral development, humanity has to rediscover the intrinsic value of nature and withdraw from direct interests and an instrumental approach. Unfortunately, currently sociological research shows that society is rather more focused on instrumental values than on the intrinsic value of nature (see: Strumińska-Kutra 2011, Gliński 1988).

## **2. Cardinal environmental virtue and vice**

In philosophy there are many concepts of cardinal vice and virtue, and a few works have even been published on environmental virtue ethics. The very interesting concept of environmental vices has been presented by Philip Cafaro (Cafaro 2005), where he names four main environmental vices: gluttony, arrogance, greed, and apathy. Cafaro's concept of environmental vices has inspired the author of the present article's approach to the problem of environmental vices and virtues. It seems that the first vice, gluttony, is more of a burning problem in the USA than in Europe. According to WHO obesity in the USA affects 25–34% of population (Web-02), while for the EU states the rate is much lower (8–25% of the population) (Web-03). It has to be emphasized that in Europe obesity, and its cause gluttony, is a problem of growing importance, but it is not the most burning issue. After analyses of man–nature relations, I have defined the following five cardinal environmental vices: egoism, greed, arrogance, ignorance, and apathy. Undoubtedly, the list of vices could be much longer; however, the enlisted five are defined as cardinal ones. For every vice there is a remedy, in



other words a corresponding virtue. The answer to environmental egoism is care, care for the “other” understood in a new holistic and biotic way. Greed should be tamed by moderation and temperance. Respect should replace arrogance, ignorance should be fought with wisdom, and apathy should give place to responsibility for living creatures and the whole ecosystem.

### **2.1. Care vs. egoism**

Egoism is one of main vices of modern man; according to Zygmunt Bauman, we live in times of fetishism of subjectivity (Bauman 2010: 152). He applied the words he uttered mostly to consumerism; however, an analysis of modern culture clearly shows that we live in a culture that cultivates the “I” and the “my”. The single person’s well-being seems to have priority over the well-being of society, not even mentioning the well-being of the whole ecosystem. Thus, the need for a wider perspective, the need for recognition of the “other” is very clearly seen and is absolutely necessary. The opposite of egoism is love, but for environmental protection what is the very much needed and absolutely necessary is an expression of love in the form of care. Care is the only quality and the only virtue that can open the hearts of people to the needs of others, and also to taking into consideration the natural world.

According to Louke van Wensveen (van Wensveen 2005a: 175), care is the winner and absolute Number 1 in the analysis of the frequency of the usage of virtue terms in post-1970 environmental literature. Although van Wensveen emphasized that the quantitative method used in research maybe not the best one, and it is quite controversial, it gives interesting results and provides inspiring information about the frequency of usage of virtue terms in environmental discourse, and thus about the importance of the term in such discourse. According to van Wensveen the “virtues of care are habits of constructive involvement within the relational structure where we have found our place” (van Wensveen 2005a: 176). The crucial point seems to be discovering the needs for our environment and the proper reaction to the discovery

of that need. The virtues associated with care may be seen in various virtuous behaviors like friendship (Goeffrey Frasz), attentiveness (Lisa Gerber), benevolence (Jennifer Welchman), and loving nature (Jim Nash) (van Wensveen 2005a: 176). The virtue of care widens the circle of moral consideration and goes beyond personal needs towards openness to the needs of whole ecosystem. In the age when “I” and “my” seem to be the only subject of consideration, it can be a challenge to notice the “other” and discover one’s moral obligations toward nature. However, it is definitely important to cross the borders of one’s narrow self and discover that we have moral obligations towards nature.

## **2.2. Moderation vs. greed**

Nowadays moderation seems to be more needed than ever. However, it is probably one of the most underestimated virtues. In this time, when shopping is one of the favorite leisure activities in Western societies, “one billion people who live in developed countries have a relative per capita consumption rate of 32. Most of the world’s other 5.5 billion people constitute the developing world, with relative per capita consumption rates below 32, mostly down toward 1” (Web-08). Consumption is in the center of our lives, as Baudillard noticed:

“We are at the point where consumption is laying hold of the whole of life, where all activities are sequenced in the same combinatorial mode, where the course of satisfaction is outlined in advance, hour by hour, where the ‘environment’ is total – fully air-conditioned, organized, culturalized. In the phenomenology of consumption, this general ‘air-conditioning’ of life, goods, objects, services, behaviour and social relations represents the perfected, ‘consummated’ [*consommé*] stage of an evolution which runs from affluence pure and simple, through interconnected networks of objects, to the total conditioning of action and time, and finally to the systematic atmospherics built into those cities of the future.” (Baudillard 1998: 29)

Consumption becomes a necessity and overconsumption has become a cultural hobby for many who spend their time in shopping malls.

Leisure has a tremendous impact on human beings and on the environment. On one hand, we see *homo consumens*, who is trapped in a vicious circle of unlimited desires, and who after satisfying one desire discovers new ones, thus incessantly following the desires. These desires do not serve a vital need, but are a means to present the higher status of consumers, their social status. “Thus the washing machine *serves* as an appliance and *acts* as an element of prestige, comfort, etc. (...) All kinds of other objects may be substituted here for the washing machine as signifying element” (Baudillard 1998: 77). This has a tremendous influence on the natural environment in consumer societies; with such a high consumption factor we witness excessive resource consumption and following it waste production. Thus, moderation seems to be a crucial virtue for *homo consumens*, a moderation that will be a golden mean between asceticism and consumerism, and between excess and deficiency of the virtue. It is of tremendous importance that moderation is an inner attitude that stems from oneself and not a limitation imposed from outside, only as such can it be a tool to achieve proper resource consumption.

### 2.3. Respect vs. arrogance

Moderation is absolutely necessary these days; its source is respect towards oneself, towards others, and towards the ecosystem as a whole. Modern culture seems to promote the opposite model; it strongly emphasizes people’s arrogance and pride. Our culture is the utmost of anthropocentric – according to Singer (2004) we should not present a speciesism that assigns human beings a higher value, rights, and consideration than the representatives of the other species. Anthropocentrism is a justification for people’s claim to be able to subdue nature and use it only for their purposes, which leads to thoughtless resource usage without considering the long-term consequences of human actions.

Arrogance can be clearly seen in many scientific and technological projects in which nature has been destroyed to achieve progress and to serve humanity's egoistic aims. Since the Baconian words *ipsa scientia potestas est* ("knowledge itself is power") the approach towards nature has changed and science as the mother of progress has achieved unlimited capabilities to change the environment. The success of science and technology and the development achieved because of it has made further development itself the very first priority and nature has started being perceived only as a source of resources.

The solution to this arrogance is both humility and respect. Respect is the second virtue on the list of most frequently used virtues in post-1970 environmental literature (van Wensveen 2005a: 175). This may show the need for the virtue and necessity of cultivating it for securing proper environmental protection. This virtue is also crucial for developing moral excellence, as Holmes Rolston III noticed; "a human virtue is generated, actualizing a uniquely human capacity and possibility for excellence, when a person respects a wild animal's life for what that life is in itself, a different and yet related form of life. This triggers awareness of otherness and feeds back into our own sense of identity and integrity" (Holmes Rolston III 2005: 67). Respect is very crucial for moral development and for virtues to flourish in humans, but respect is openness and acceptance of any other living creature. The iconic example of respect for every living creature is the thoughts and life of Albert Schweitzer, whose life was an irrefutable argument for his philosophy (Cottrell Free 1991: XI)

#### **2.4. Wisdom vs. ignorance (stupidity)**

Ignorance (Latin *ignorantia*) is a sign of lack of knowledge, a state of being unaware, not knowing, and not being acquainted with; ignorance is also lack of will to gain knowledge. Ignorance in environmental protection has at least two dimensions. In the first sense ignorance prevents one noticing moral obligations towards nature, it blurs our perception of the problem and the ability to perceive the connection between one's

actions and nature's destruction. In another sense, while one may want to protect the environment, some environmental problems are so complex that it is difficult to recognize which action is proper to achieve the desired results. The complexity of most environmental issues makes it difficult to take the right action to achieve desired results. The tremendous problem is that often ignorance makes people unable to see that they are ignorant, and it makes them trust their own knowledge about the problem.

The connection between morality and knowledge was noticed by Socrates, who recognized that the one who knew what was right would do only what was right. Wisdom and knowledge have always been strongly connected with morality and they give a practical tool for moral action. Environmental wisdom is a sign of prudence understood as a practical wisdom; that is, the capacity to reason correctly about what is to be done. Practical wisdom can be applied to the details of life (see Gambrel and Cafaro 2010: 93). Wisdom is a sign of environmental literacy that helps a person act in the way that is necessary to protect the environment. Wisdom is necessary to develop each quality, for only wisdom will enable us to see when we have developed every virtue as much as it is necessary. Wisdom is like a torch that lights our way when we go through the dim wood of moral challenges. It is wisdom that helps us to discriminate what is right from what is wrong, and thus is fundamental for morality.

### **2.5. Responsibility vs. apathy**

Ignorance has its source in apathy; apathy is the vice that prevents interest in an environmental crisis. It ignores it and does not allow us to be involved in looking for a solution to the problem of nature's destruction. While *ἀπάθεια* in ancient Greece was a desired state that enabled a person to go beyond emotions and desires, and allowed a higher state to be achieved, it was a lack of suffering and passion. In this context, apathy means not being interested in the surrounding world, not being

concerned about nature and the natural environment. Thus, taken as such apathy is very dangerous.

The remedy to this state is responsibility. The concept of responsibility in a biotic context has been laid out by Hans Jonas, who appealed for us to take responsibility, especially for the most vulnerable and for those who cannot speak for themselves. Thus, this concept of responsibility includes the responsibility not only for environment, but also for future generations. The idea of responsibility for the unborn is aimed at securing intergenerational justice and providing just and equal conditions for all people, even for those who are not born yet (Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy). Some philosophers (Birnbacher 2009) have postulated establishing an international agenda with a similar range of influence as UN bodies. Such an agenda would ensure that future generations' rights are respected. However, the concept of rights of future generations creates a problem recognized by Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman; namely, what are the needs of the next generations? In designing the policy that would secure the needs of future generations today, we have only a rough idea of what their needs will be in future, and what resources will be crucial for them. Our relationship with future generations is one-sided, that is why it is so difficult to recognize their needs. This difficulty is the reason why some philosophers have rejected the thesis of our obligations towards future generations (Schwartz 1978) and some do not agree that we influence the lives of future generations (Kavka 1982, Partridge 1998). Since the needs of future generations are unknowable, we cannot recognize what will be necessary for the unborn. We even have no guarantee that the genotype of humans will not change and that future generations will be adjusted to different conditions of life (Kavka 1982, Partridge 1998). Although the issue of responsibility for future generations evokes many questions and difficulties, we cannot escape it, and mankind should be more responsible in its choices and take the natural environment into account.

## Conclusion

Recently, there has been a noticeably increasing number of works on environmental virtue ethics; according to R. Sandler, “environmental virtue ethics remains a relatively underappreciated and underdeveloped aspect of environmental ethics” (Web-04). The growing focus on this issue expresses the need for a deeper inquiry into the roots of the environmental crisis. Moreover, such an analysis opens up further discussion on personal characteristics and moral excellence in the context of environmental protection. This analysis helps to define the virtues that it is necessary to develop to provide proper environmental protection, which stem from the inner qualities of mankind and not from external commands. It also shows which vices have an impact, not only on human beings, but also on the ecosystem we live in.

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