ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series
ECL2016-0010
Athens, 24 April 2017

Virtues, Ethics and the 'Moral Tragedy' of Climate Change

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ABSTRACT

This paper will provide some critical reflections on what some ethicists refer to as the moral tragedy of climate change. It will argue that Virtue Ethics provides a helpful and useful response to the problems that have arisen as a result of global warming and climate change and also to the possibility of avoiding a scenario where genuine tragedy results as a result of carbon emissions, global warming and destructive climate change.

Keywords: Climate change, global warming, Virtue Ethics

I

There has been much talk recently about climate change, global warming and some of its potentially catastrophic effects in ecological, climatological, economic, and other contexts. As a consequence of the level of concern, globally, and as a response to rising temperatures and seemingly accelerated global warming, many ethicists have begun to reflect on the dimensions of the damage, even the tragedy – what Stephen Gardiner for example calls the "ethical tragedy" of climate change and accelerated global warming.[1] A very recent study of the effect of global warming and climate change on the Great Barrier Reef (arguably one of the natural wonders of the modern world), commissioned by The Guardian, and published on June 10 (when this paper was being written) draws some conclusions which are not only thought-provoking, but genuinely alarming. For example The Guardian report, the most recent to be published up to this point in time, notes:

> *What's at stake here is the largest living structure in the world, and by far the largest coral reef system. Today there are more than 70 Indigenous groups with a connection to the reef, many of whom depend on it for their livelihoods …. the catastrophic nature of the current mass bleaching event on previously pristine parts of the Great Barrier Reef can now be revealed…*

And reveal this they certainly do! They note that
> *in data produced exclusively for the Guardian by Mark Eakin, head of Coral Reef Watch at Noaa, we can now reveal exactly how stressful ocean temperatures have been increasing on the Great Barrier Reef over the 34 years that satellite data has been available. Since 1982, just after mass bleachings were seen for the first time, the data shows that the average proportion of the Great Barrier Reef exposed to temperatures where bleaching or death is likely has increased from about 11% a year to about 27% a year.*
> *Eakin says looking at that data revealed a clear trend that hadn't been quantified before. "In seeing that what it immediately showed was that there was a real background pattern of increasing levels of thermal stress."*
> *They ran climate models thousands of times, and simulated a world with human CO2 emissions and a world without them. They found that in a world without humans and their carbon emissions, the conditions on the Great Barrier Reef that caused the current bleaching would have been virtually impossible. Today they're still unusual, but have been made at least 175 times more likely as a result of our carbon emissions.*

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[1] A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011.

This is not the place to assess the presuppositions and methodology of the study or the validity or otherwise of its data, inferences and conclusions. It needs to be noted that it is largely consistent with the findings of other important bodies such as the IPCC.

If these conclusions are valid, and if these reefs, and the animal and other populations, are affected in the kinds of ways that are described in the study, then it is certainly possible that a crisis may come about (if it is not already unfolding) and one would have good reasons to assert that a tragedy may occur globally, not just of physical and ecological proportions potentially or actually unfolding, but also a tragedy of an ethical kind. It will be argued here that talk of a moral tragedy is a little exaggerated, a little rhetorical, and that it is important to investigate the possibility further. Given that we know, with a significant degree of probability, that a world without human carbon emissions would be a significantly different and in an important sense, a better world (in the specific sense, for example, of the difference between a world with deteriorating reef systems and all the damaging consequences, under the influence of high carbon emissions and warming oceans, on the one hand, and a world with far lower levels of carbon emissions and reef systems with far less bleaching , and therefore lower levels of deterioration and destructive thermal stress).

By "ethical tragedy", Gardiner (2011) means a severe challenge for us collectively, potentially catastrophic for future generations (if not the present one), that brings to the fore urgent moral questions, challenges, frameworks, reflection and models of practical decision-making. He argues, quite reasonably, that our future is indeed at stake - certainly the future of many human populations, and other animal populations, not to mention natural habitats, are at stake if oceans continue to warm, some ecosystems continue to perish under the influence of thermal, and other stresses, and some island systems are inundated by rising ocean levels and severe climate patterns, and so on. He poses the question of which ethical frameworks will help us to find good solutions ethically, that is, at the level of moral values concerning our reason, the principles or activities that ought to guide us, the choices that we make collectively, the values that we choose to instantiate, our responsibilities (for example, towards the natural world of which we are an integral part), the habituation that we may or may not adopt towards such momentous challenges, the duties we choose or do not choose to embrace, the consequences that we seek or do not seek, again collectively, and so on. Clearly our ethical decisions are going to be important and they may even be decisive in the medium to long term. Time will tell. Nonetheless, he points out, quite persuasively, that the moral values and the ethical frameworks we put in place to guide our decision-making now, and in the near future, may be crucial. (For example, he asks eloquently whether or not the global danger posed to future generations -and to all of us, even - does not outweigh the difficulties and complications that arise from cutting carbon emissions drastically now. Certainly it would be difficult to argue reasonably that such questions are not pressing and important ones, or that they should be cast aside.)

He argues for example, on the basis of "global justice":

many people believe the existing world system to be seriously unjust, especially because of the history of colonialism, currently pronounced global poverty and inequality, and the role of rich nations in structuring existing transnational institutions.
The fact that the tragedy of the commons analysis obscures many issues of fairness is of independent importance in the perfect moral storm. We should notice that a focus on that model facilitates the neglect of considerations that would, other things being equal, impose stronger burdens on the better off. At first glance, it is unfair for any agreement to ignore the disproportionately large contributions of the rich to causing the problem, the greater vulnerability of the world's poor to its worst impacts, and the issue of aiding and compensating its victims. When matters are obscured in this way, the problem of moral corruption looms large [and Virtue Ehics allows an intelligible account of this corruption, as a moral vice][2].

It is difficult to deny that there are serious inequalities and injustices in the world, generally speaking. The issue of moral corruption, crucially, goes back to the issue of *character* which is of fundamental importance in Virtue Ethics. If a moral tragedy occurs, that is, if we neglect important ethical dispositions and activities, as well as our duties and responsibilities towards the natural world, its biodiversity, and future generations, to a degree that leads to catastrophic consequences, then it is difficult to see how such a thing will not reflect on our character as a whole. Gardiner adds:

my proposal is that the use of the concept of a generation to structure talk of ethics and the future can be made sense of indirectly. Talk of 'generations' gains its point from the need to confront a certain kind of severe moral problem that is best conceived of in generational terms. Given this an account of intergenerational justice is one that provides an answer to the severe problem, since that is the point of a distinctively intergenerational theory. One advantage of this approach will be that it can explain and accommodate the use of intergenerational language across divergent contemporary settings. Since the intergenerational problem can arise for groups of different temporal sizes and over different time-frames, it makes sense to be flexible about what one is willing to count as a generation.
If earlier generations have legitimate interests in what happens after their members are dead, and if later generations have some moral reason to take those interests into account, then if later generations ignore these

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[2] Gardiner, 2011, pp.119-120.

reasons, then they may be taking advantage of temporal asymmetry in a morally reprehensible way.[3]

The point about the intergenerational relevance of ethics is well made (one need only think of the influence of Virtue Ethics from Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to MacIntyre, Hursthouse and Annas, among many others.) However, it is important to note a logical distinction here between a "severe moral problem", even one that extends to future generations, and a "moral tragedy", which implies a far greater degree of severity than the one described in such passages; the former can be overcome in the short term, conceivably, whilst the latter plunges us towards catastrophe, so to speak; the former need not be catastrophic, or even destructive; the tragic dimension (as Aristotle reminds in *Poetics*) highlights vices rather than virtues (such as *hubris*), pity, fear and terror. And though some of the destructive aspects of global warming are apparent, there is no justification for this kind of scenario today (though this is not to deny that we may well be on the way to global catastrophism). It also needs to be noted that "taking advantage of temporal asymmetry in a morally reprehensible way", though it ought to be noted from a virtue ethics perspective as an ethically problematic activity, nonetheless does not necessarily reinforce the idea that a "moral tragedy" is actually taking place *globally*.

Such caveats aside, it should also be noted that Yadvinder Malhi's research currently at Oxford University reinforces a number of Gardiner's concerns about accelerating climate change and attendant, troubling ethical questions. Malhi's team has found recently in a study of the effects of global warming on the carbon cycle of tropical forests, that climate warming does not help tree and plant growth, and further that as warming increases and decomposition increases, more carbon will be released from these forest systems. Certainly this kind of study suggests that we may have something far more serious than a "severe moral problem" to deal with, if sensible, ethical and rational interventions are not implemented.[4]

So, talk of a "moral tragedy" brings something really important into view, certainly, because it highlights what we are not doing, or what we may believe is not worth doing, collectively in the present. It will be argued here that what we do not do, not just what we do, will say something important about who we are (or in the worst possible scenario, who *we were* - that is to say, the sort of people we were, and the sort of character that may justifiably be attributed to us as a group or even as a species.) It will be argued that Virtue Ethics will help us to address these issues, if not conclusively, because as many virtue ethicists note, this ethical model emphasises character rather than duty, traits and dispositions (to act) rather than abstraction, not uncommon, rationally grounded communitarian virtues (such as honesty, compassion and informed,

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[3] Gardiner, 2011, pp.147-148.
[4] "How global warming is changing tropical forests", 2016, at http://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/field/field_document/How_global_warming_is_changing_tropical_forests.pdf (accessed June 11 2016).

reflective, environmental care) and a kind of wisdom as a form of moral excellence (*phronesis*). Whilst Gardiner is right that the climate change debate does have an important ethical dimension, and Virtue Ethics furnishes good tools to guide us, so to speak, such as justice and community, the argument here will go further: it is important to consider the question of character, the question of virtue and the question of who we are, if we are to find a collective solution to the momentous challenge of global warming and climate change.

II

Many have noted the importance of Virtue Ethics in an environmental context. For example, Nicole Loewe writes about nothing less than "environmental virtue".[5] She argues that five kinds of virtue are important, at least: "virtues of sustainability" (such as temperance, far-sightedness and humility); "virtues of communion with nature" (such as wonder, appreciation and love); "virtues of respect for nature" (such as reverence, compassion and restitutive justice); "virtues of environmental activism" (such as diligence, cooperativeness and commitment); and "virtues of environmental stewardship" (such as justice and honesty). She also highlights the role of "environmental vices" and "character weaknesses" like apathy, greed and excessive pride (drawing on the work of Cafaro and Sandler [6]). And she regards far-sightedness and responsibility as crucial virtues in terms of action on climate change (p.70). Such an *environmental virtue* approach is also highlighted by Keith Douglass Warner and David DeCosse, among others.[7] Others emphasise a duty based or rights based approach: for example, Simon Dietz, Cameron Hepburn and Nicholas Stern[8]; Sumudu Atapattu[9]; Ottavio Quirico and Mouloud Boumghar[10]; Moellendorf[11]; among many others. The resurgence in Virtue Ethics is notable especially in relation to environmentalism (see for

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[5] Loewe, N., Climate Ethics and Responsibility: A Study of Environmental Virtue ["begutachtet durch Dr. Rafael Ziegler und Prof. Dr. Micha Werner"], Greifswald, September 2013 pp. 1-81. http://www.uni-greifswald.de/fileadmin/mp/3_organisieren/CO2-neutrale_Uni versitaet/Diplomarbeit_Loewe_2013.pdf (accessed June 11 2016).

[6] Environmental virtue ethics, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2005.

[7] Short Course in Environmental Ethics (2016) at, https://www.scu.edu/ethics/focus-areas/ more/en vironmental-ethics/resources/a-short-course-in-environmental-ethics/lesson-six/ (accessed June 11 2016).

[8] "Economics, ethics and climate change", at http://www.lse.ac.uk/GranthamInstitute/wp-con tent/uploads/2014/02/economics-ethics-climate-change.pdf (13 January 2008) (accessed June 12, 2016).

[9] Human rights approaches to climate change: challenges and opportunities, Routledge, New York, 2016.

[10] Editors, Climate change and human rights: an international and comparative law perspective, Routledge, New York, 2016.

[11] The Moral Challenge of Dangerous Climate Change, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014.

example, Tomlinson[12]; Moss[13]; Williston[14]; Blanchard and O'Brien[15]; Kronlid[16]; Schonfeld[17]; Thompson and Bendik-Keymer[18]; and Driver[19]; among many others.)

A number of virtue ethicists note the relevance and/or the efficacy of the theory. For example Julia Annas promotes "Eudaimonism", which she describes in these terms:

> *a viable and powerful way of thinking of our lives, more attractive and available to ordinary thinking than alternatives such as hedonism, desire-fulfilment theory and life-satisfaction accounts. Once we understand virtue as something like intelligent virtue, we can also see that living virtuously is an appealing, rather than a hopeless, account of what living happily is. It is intuitively clear that having the virtues is at least an element in living happily. So much is clear from Rosalind Hursthouse's well-known point that we want our children to grow up brave and honest rather than cowardly and shifty, and that we want this for their sake, not (or not just) ours. This is not, though, a strong enough point to get us to the interesting and controversial claims, namely that living virtuously is either necessary or (necessary and) sufficient for a happy life. I don't defend either of these claims in the book; rather, I try to do what I take to be the preliminary work of showing how a claim of this type can be effectively defended, at least where happiness is taken to be the living of a happy life and virtue is construed as intelligent virtue.*[20]

It is viable because most of us, for example, want our children to be honest rather then dishonest, as she points out, compassionate rather than heartless, and so on. We want them to be men and women of good character (notwithstanding some complications with claims of this kind, which Annas is

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[12] Procedural justice in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change: negotiating fairness, Springer, Dordrecht, 2015.

[13] Editor, Climate Change and Justice, 2015.

[14] The Anthropocene Project: Virtue in the Age of Climate Change, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015.

[15] Ecology, Virtue, and Ethics: An Introduction to Christian Environmentalism, Baylor University Press, Waco, 2014.

[16] Climate change adaptation and human capabilities [electronic resource]; justice and ethics in research and policy, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014.

[17] Global Ethics on Climate Change: The Planetary Crisis and Philosophical Alternatives, Routledge London, 2013.

[18] Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change: Human Virtues of the Future, MIT, Cambridge, Mass. 2012.

[19] "Ideal Decision Making and Green Virtues", in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Richard B. Howarth, Editors, Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics (Advances in the Economics of Environmental Resources, Volume 5) Emerald Group Publishing Limited, London, 2005, pp.249 – 264.

[20] "Pre´cis of Intelligent Virtue", Journal of Value Inquiry 49, 2015, pp. 286-287..

certainly aware of and addresses in her writings, though this aspect is outside the immediate scope of this paper).

It is difficult to equate destructive behaviour which is conscious and chosen, with the pursuit of a happy life or well-being, for the world's populations, especially those living on outlying island systems which may be engulfed by rising oceans in the foreseeable future. Whatever we think of happiness, or well-being, it is surely a significant insight that our collective solutions ought to promote not just the interests that we share but the possibility of flourishing lives (where flourishing means successful solutions which serve our own interests as well as the interests of other communities, and their well-being, as well as the well-being of our natural environment, and which are driven by decisions informed by things like moral courage - to make positive changes such as diminishing the destructive effects of global warming and climate change - integrity, compassion, honesty and justice.

Thomas Hill Jr argues that virtue

broadly speaking, is a manifest readiness to appreciate the good in all sorts of things, and not just as an instrument or resource for something else. Although this does not appear on every philosopher's list of moral virtues, arguably it is widely (and rightly) recognised as a human virtue or excellence, an admirable trait of character. The basic idea is simple enough. There seems something important missing in those who persistently ignore, cynically dismiss, or remain coldly indifferent to the vast range of things that are sources of joy, inspiration and value for others, and potentially for themselves. Obviously such people are more liable than most to behave in ways that mistreat, hurt and dampen the spirits of others, but, even apart from that, arguably their systematic lack of appreciation is a defect of character, at least a falling short of an ideal. We may hesitate to label this strictly a moral vice, comparable to cruelty, dishonesty and injustice, but we commonly treat the opposite trait as an aspect of an ideal person – that is, their openness to find and respond to value in a wide diversity of people, things and experiences.[21]

If appreciating the good is a virtue, and if appreciating the good in nature matters –and this need not be obscure, for it means appreciating not just the benefits that natural habitats and ecosystems bring to us, but also beauty and the sublime in the natural world – and if the capacity for such appreciation is good (one could certainly argue that a life full of such appreciation is to be preferred to a life without such appreciation, though that argument is outside the scope of this essay), then in as much as nature is a source of joy, inspiration or value to us, it becomes not just entirely possible, but important to articulate a virtue based approach to the challenge of climate change and the consequent devastation, destruction or deterioration of natural habitats and ecosystems. It is surely not too much to say that conscious activity that leads, or may lead, to

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[21] "Finding Value in Nature", Environmental Values 15,3, 2008, p.333.

a "moral tragedy" on a global scale, especially when it is driven by greed or excessive pride or selfishness, does constitute a moral vice; it most certainly does not constitute a virtue. Indeed, if a moral vice is the expression of a character trait which is wilfully and knowingly destructive or which disposes us towards activities which accelerate global warming and its destructive effects, out of greed or excessive pride or selfishness, for example, then it would certainly be defensible to argue that such activities may reflect a moral defect or two! He argues that w*e* "may hesitate to label this strictly a moral vice, comparable to cruelty, dishonesty and injustice" but it ought to be noted here that it is quite conceivable that some who have a vested interest in not slowing down or addressing meaningfully the rate of global warming and its destructive aspects, may not be entirely innocent of moral vices like greed or injustice.

However, Hill Jr. adds:

most readers would probably concede the general idea that it is an admirable trait to appreciate what is good, but they would understandably require some qualifications in a fuller account of the virtue. We should appreciate what is good, at least in appropriate contexts. For example, we expect that a virtuous person, in most familiar circumstances, will value love and respect among friends, acts of courage and kindness, innocent pleasures of children at play, and so on. Perhaps we should appreciate these things in all contexts, but we do not suppose that in all circumstances a good person will value and take pleasure in everything that is generally good.[22]

The point is well made. It is worth noting the question of what a virtue-informed response to global warming would look like, and many have tried to give such accounts, as noted above. Hill Jr notes that "we expect that a virtuous person, in most familiar circumstances, will value love and respect among friends, acts of courage and kindness, innocent pleasures of children at play, and so on", but there is no logical contradiction in arguing further that virtuous persons will, "in most familiar circumstances", value "love and respect among friends, acts of courage and kindness" not just in relation to each other but also in relation to aspects of nature and our environment, if not nature as a whole. This much seems prudent. For it is true that "perhaps we should appreciate these things in all contexts", but it is becoming increasingly apparent that we ought to appreciate the value in global eco-stability and in the existence and health of ecosystems, for without such things, there may be no human beings, virtuous or otherwise, left to appreciate anything at all. So, on a broad virtue ethics based reading, it is not necessary to "suppose that in all circumstances a good person will value and take pleasure in everything that is generally good"; it will suffice to suppose that in the current climate (pun intended) good persons (that is, persons disposed towards virtue rather than vice, broadly

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[22] "Finding Value in Nature", Environmental Values 15, 3, p.334.

conceived) will value activities, in general, that help us to overcome catastrophic or potentially catastrophic global warming and climate change.

III

So how might virtue ethics help us further so that we do not face, ultimately, a "moral tragedy" or find ourselves having to talk, necessarily, in such terms?

Annas makes a number of crucial points in this respect:

> *in ethical theory there is no shortage of people who in one way or another keep making and remaking the objection that virtue ethics cannot provide something that we need for an ethical theory to be any good. This is 'action guidance'. We learn rules and we learn how to apply them, this goes, and we learn cost-benefit analysis and we learn how to apply that, but we learn about virtue and — then what?*
>
> *Having a virtue isn't just a matter of acting in a certain way. I could sit down and write a large cheque for a good cause, but this might not be out of generosity. I might want to impress someone, or to avoid tax, or to relieve feelings of guilt about something. Someone observing me might well say that that was a generous thing to do, but they wouldn't be well-advised to infer from this that I was generous. Generosity is a matter of character — it's a matter of the kind of person I am. This is, again, something we can recognise well before having a precise account of what character is.*
>
> *How can I become brave in such a way that bravery is characteristic of me, constitutive of the kind of person I am? The answer since Aristotle, and it's never been bettered, is habituation, a process of learning. Becoming brave is an ongoing process of learning, which starts in childhood and continues all my life. It needs experience and the ability to deal with experience in ways that intelligently appreciate what is worthwhile and what is not. This is what I first learn from parents, teachers and the wider culture, and then learn to understand and apply for myself. It is essentially practical: what we learn to do, we learn by doing it. So by the time I worry about whether I am generous enough, I've already learnt, by being brought up, to be generous to some degree. I have been habituated by what I have learned from my parents, my school, my surrounding culture. I have to take up the results of all this and deal with it for myself. Habituation isn't mere routine habit...* [23]

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[23] Applying Virtue to Ethics (Society of Applied Philosophy Annual Lecture 2014), Journal of Applied Philosophy, Volume 32, No. 1, 2015, p.2.

She notes the importance of three things. First, generosity, practised with prudence and moderation, is an important virtue and can, at the very least, conceivably reveal something about our character (she adds that the "virtue of generosity does not demand that you give money, but that you do what is generous in the circumstances that demand it; this might be giving money, giving time, listening to someone, sharing knowledge, and so on"[24]). Our generosity, in this context, can also be extended to the environment, in order for example, to recognise rationally that ecosystems ought to be protected (like the Great Barrier Reef); generosity is then a matter of recognising and protecting – extending life to - living systems of many kinds, not just human communities and interests. As Annas would argue, such approaches do raise the question of what kind of persons we are. Second, bravery (which she understands as "very roughly, facing or enduring danger or difficulty for a good cause"[25]) will be required of such undertakings – for example, in tackling powerful vested interests which show no willingness or urgency in addressing accelerated, potentially catastrophic climate change. It will in all likelihood, as Annas notes, require all the experience we have and all our "ability to deal with experience in ways that intelligently appreciates what is worthwhile and what is not". Third, such an ethical approach will require habituation which is concerted, rational and systematic, and oriented towards a good like collective well-being, or eco-stability, ideally, and certainly is not "mere routine habit", since routine habit may serve to perpetuate entrenched high carbon emitting practises and increased global warming.

Annas notes that the "brave person, for example, is dealing with different situations from a developed disposition not just to evaluate actions in terms of what is worth fighting for, or enduring for, but to act on this, and to feel in ways appropriate to and harmonious with this (to a greater or lesser extent, obviously). This disposition has been developed by an ongoing process of learning, specifically learning to respond to, and to deal intelligently with, experience."[26] She also notes that such sketches of "the dispositional aspect of virtue" "properly require a fuller account"[27] and certainly this applies to the present paper also (though a fuller account can certainly be given, and will be given in subsequent papers).

If we are to pursue a course of meaningful, effective action against accelerating global warming that is brave, honest and compassionate, for example, Virtue Ethics is particularly useful not because it tells us precisely what to do, for it does not aim to do that, but rather brings into focus an important perspective on the problem, and helps us to clarify values which matter interpersonally and which ought to considered carefully. In the words of Annas:

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[24] "Pre´cis of Intelligent Virtue", Journal of Value Inquiry 49, 2015, p.123.

[25] "Pre´cis of Intelligent Virtue", Journal of Value Inquiry 49, 2015, p.123.

[26] Applying Virtue to Ethics (Society of Applied Philosophy Annual Lecture 2014), Journal of Applied Philosophy, Volume 32, No. 1, 2015, p.4.

[27] Applying Virtue to Ethics (Society of Applied Philosophy Annual Lecture 2014), Journal of Applied Philosophy, Volume 32, No. 1, 2015, p.4.

Virtue ethics makes use of virtue rules — that is, rules of the form, 'Be honest', or 'Be generous'. By this point you can see that they are not empty exhortations, as they might have seemed if introduced differently. You are being directed to respond to this situation honestly, rather than dishonestly or indifferently. And this focuses your thoughts in a way that they are left hanging by a rule like 'Don't lie', which needs all sorts of further work before we can do anything with it. Being told to be honest, or compassionate or fair, far from being empty, gives you a perspective on the situation which makes clear what the most salient aspects of it are.[28]

Moreover, Virtue Ethics can provide "action guidance":

virtue can provide 'action guidance', how we can apply it in ethical thinking: it's thinking in terms of acting bravely or fairly that guides us to act, and to do the right thing. Just thinking in terms of doing the right thing is useless until we specify what the right thing to do is, and we do this by thinking in terms of the virtues, which enables us to specify what it is, in this situation, to do the right thing. The brave person will have been brought up to be brave and will thus be able to act bravely in situations quite unlike those in which he first learned the virtue. Although this is a sketch, we can see that there is nothing empty or useless about thinking ethically in terms of the virtues.[29]

It should be noted that if *action guidance* is required, it would be a mistake to discount Virtue Ethics. The theory suggests forcefully and validly that if carbon emissions are a root cause of unprecedented or accelerated rates of coral bleaching, then the right thing to do in the case of the devastation to the Great Barrier Reef (among many other examples that one could produce), is not obscure or mysterious: it will take moral bravery in the first instance (in order to overcome resistance, for example, from those who wish to keep the full extent of the damage caused by the bleaching and thermal stress from our view); to do the right thing according to the theory, means also acting not only *eudaimonically* as Annas might argue, but also prudentially (*phronesically*, one might say, though the two are certainly connected in a response based on virtue) and an appropriate *telos*, which means seeing the effects and the causes very clearly and adopting an effective strategy (that is, decreasing emissions which are harming oceanic reef systems).

Moreover, once we agree on the causes (we do not need unanimity here - though it would certainly help - just a deliberative response to, and in the light of, the climate science and the high probabilities that it is quite capable of producing), we can begin to think about addressing both causes and effects, in as much as we understand these, in a globally meaningful way.

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[28] Applying Virtue to Ethics (Society of Applied Philosophy Annual Lecture 2014), Journal of Applied Philosophy, Volume 32, No. 1, 2015, p.7.
[29] Applying Virtue to Ethics (Society of Applied Philosophy Annual Lecture 2014), Journal of Applied Philosophy, Volume 32, No. 1, 2015, p.8.

Then our activities will not only begin to address the problem, by identifying effective means, before it becomes a moral "tragedy"; *phronesis* guides our decision making and the nature and form of our interventions (and if one wishes to argue here that this is a little unclear, then the virtue ethicist can certainly counter-argue that ways of reducing carbon emissions in the short to medium term are not exactly unknown to us!); *eudaimonism* would help us to identify worthy and good ends such as the flourishing of our own lives near the reef, and the flourishing of other forms of life which are important to the survival of the reef system itself, and therefore to the communities which rely on the natural habitats themselves. "Environmental virtue" is no doubt important but it also needs to be *eudaimonian* in just this sense.

As Annas notes,

virtue ethics, at least in most of its forms, is a theory about how we can live better, and so must start from how we live. Virtue ethics starts from the dispositions we have, because those are the material we have to work on in order to improve ourselves… I have urged us to think again about virtue and its role as demanding that we do what is required of us.[30]

Indeed! Given the damage wrought by global warming and high emissions (of which a vivid very recent example is the bleaching of significant parts of the Great Barrier Reef), it is a reasonable proposition that we can live and do better in this context. This much seems uncontentious and uncontroversial. It also seems clear from the theory that we ought to start *from how we have been living*, and this will take bravery, honesty, some temperance (for example, in our habits in relation to the natural world around us such as the habit in some places of seeing the natural world as subordinate in value to powerful economic or industrial interests), some prudential decision-making and clear-headed decisive action would guide towards *eudaimonian* ends. And so on.

She adds:

There is no general answer to the question, 'How shall I live virtuously?' You cannot begin on the answer until you reflect in depth and honestly on your life, and its components, including items like your own temperament. You have to live well given the material you have.[31]

To extend the point, one might argue that there is no general answer to the question, "How shall we all live and act virtuously?" We cannot begin the necessary work on decisive and effective answers until we reflect in depth, and honestly, on the way in which we have been living (in relation to the climate and the natural world, especially since the industrial revolution and the advent of national, but especially, global technologies which have played a role in

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[30] Applying Virtue to Ethics (Society of Applied Philosophy Annual Lecture 2014), Journal of Applied Philosophy, Volume 32, No. 1, 2015, p.8.
[31] Applying Virtue to Ethics (Society of Applied Philosophy Annual Lecture 2014), Journal of Applied Philosophy, Volume 32, No. 1, 2015, p.8.

increasing global emissions). The dispositions, habits and virtues, and ends (that we identify as worthy and good) we employ will say a lot about us, as persons and as a species, if the climate and the natural world do finish up in such a state that talk of "moral tragedy" becomes unquestionable, fully accurate and necessary.

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