

Phronesis Without a Phronimos: Narrative Environmental Virtue Ethics

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How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book?

—Henry David Thoreau

I. Introduction

Increasingly, philosophers are coming to appreciate the potential contributions of virtue ethics to questions and issues of environmental concern. Although this approach is not without problems, addressing environmental issues under the rubric of a virtue ethics does offer a perspective that integrates environmental virtues into a larger picture of human flourishing. One of the great benefits of this approach is the possibility of framing environmental virtues as essential to the *good life*, rather than merely a burden we must shoulder out of necessity. Such an approach is essential if there is to be any hope of widespread acceptance of environmental virtues prior to environmental collapse.¹

Rather than focusing on individual environmental problems, an environmental virtue ethics asks broader questions—e.g., “how ought we to live?”, “what constitutes human flourishing?”, and “what is the role of non-human nature in the answers to these first two questions?”—and does so in a way that takes seriously the relationship between human flourishing and the non-human environment. Environmental virtue ethicists address and answer these questions in a variety of ways. Ronald Sandler suggests that there are at least four common strategies for forming an environmental virtue ethics: (1) arguing by extension from standard interpersonal virtues; (2) appealing to environmental virtues that benefit the agent; (3) arguing from considerations of human excellence; and (4) by studying the character of recognized

¹ Regarding the necessity of a wider view of environmental concern see, in addition to the literature on environmental virtue ethics, Shellenberger and Nordhaus, *The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World* (2004). Although this polemic has been widely criticized in the environmental community, the claim that environmentalism should move beyond specific issues to articulate a more comprehensive program of individual and social flourishing is spot on.

environmental role models.² However, while it is useful to isolate these general strategies, certain themes and thinkers seem to crop up again and again in the literature, and combinations of these approaches are frequently found together in accounts of environmental virtue ethics.

In his impressive and original *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue*, Phil Cafaro notes that one of Henry David Thoreau's most important philosophical contributions is to articulate an *environmental* virtue ethics, that is, an account of human flourishing in which a virtuous relationship with nature is "central to living the good life."³ Thoreau makes explicit use of the first three strategies enumerated by Sandler, so successfully in fact that he is certainly one of most well known subjects of the final strategy. However, as I have argued elsewhere, Thoreau's account is beset by a significant difficulty, one common to most if not all virtue ethics in our contemporary milieu.⁴ While I agree wholeheartedly that Thoreau is offering us a philosophical account of human flourishing—one obscured, perhaps, by its narrative rather than normative style—his idiosyncratic project does not operate consciously or explicitly within the tradition of virtue ethics. This non-traditional approach leads to certain problems of application that stem from the very flexibility that makes virtue ethics so attractive.

It is taken for granted in most accounts of virtue ethics that each virtuous individual exhibits the character traits that contribute to human flourishing differently. For example, simplicity is one of, if not the, cardinal virtues for Thoreau. However, in keeping with Aristotle and other virtue ethicists, Thoreau explicitly states that simplicity will, and should, manifest itself differently in each person's life. "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears,

² Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro, eds., *Environmental Virtue Ethics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 4-6.

³ Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 17.

⁴ Brian Treanor, "The Virtue of Simplicity" in *The Concord Saunterer*, vol. 15, 2007, forthcoming.

however measured or far away.”⁵ Virtues may be *universal in theory*, but they are clearly *individual in application*. The difficulty encountered in applying universal virtues in particular situations is complicated by the fact that, according to Aristotle, (1) the virtues cannot be exactly prescribed—although we can say they are “destroyed by excess or defect, and preserved by the mean”—and (2) their acquisition is grasped by perception rather than reason.⁶ Each of us will manifest simplicity, temperance, courage, and all other virtues differently. And, while there are useful indications that one has achieved a virtuous character, ultimately it is something one feels rather than something one knows. Each individual exhibits the virtues in his or her unique way and only that individual “knows” (i.e., feels) when the virtuous disposition has been achieved. However, these characteristics—individual application, ambiguous definitions, vague criteria, etc.—inevitably raise the specter of relativism. Can any decision, act, or lifestyle “count” as adequately simple (or courageous, or generous) merely because the agent in question feels she is acting virtuously?

Aristotle, famously, addresses this problem by reference to the *phronimos*. He states that that “virtue... is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., a mean relative to us,” but qualifies this flexibility by asserting that the mean is to be “determined by a *rational principle*... by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom [*phronimos*] would determine it.”⁷ So, while virtue is contextual, it is prevented from sliding into full-blown relativism by the requirement that it conform to a “rational principle” as determined by the *phronimos*. But this “solution” to the problem of relativism would be highly problematic for Thoreau. Although he would certainly appreciate the concept of *phronesis*, Thoreau would be

⁵ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, 564-565.

⁶ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 31 and 46-47 respectively.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 39. Emphases mine.

opposed to the notion of a *phronimos*. For example, while he has a deep appreciation for the lessons of experience, it is always *his own* experience to which he refers.

Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost... Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures... I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me any thing, to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it.⁸

In contrast, Aristotle is always turning to the example of other virtuous people in his community, a pattern he repeats in his attempt to circumscribe *phronesis*: “Regarding practical wisdom we shall get at the truth by considering who are the persons we credit with it.”⁹ Aristotle thinks the community is an ally in attempting to live a good life; however, while Thoreau is no misanthrope, he is convinced that his society is a bad influence and an obstacle to living well. Thoreau simply lacks the bedrock faith that Aristotle has in his community. “The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of any thing, it is very likely my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?”¹⁰ This lack of faith in community, and therefore in the community’s role model for living well (the *phronimos*), means that Thoreau cannot make use of Aristotle’s response to the charge of relativism. One possibility, as I suggested in “The Virtue of Simplicity,” is that Thoreau would dismiss, or at least minimize, the problem, embracing the ambiguity and individuality of the choice even at the

⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 264. In *Life Without Principle*, Thoreau pokes fun at those who would ridicule this position: “I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else who I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience.” (Ibid., 259). In fact, it must be acknowledged that Thoreau’s likely discomfort with an idea like a *phronimos* raises problems for the very notion that he is a virtue ethicist, especially along Aristotelian lines.

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 142. See also, among many possible examples, “we must consider happiness (*eudaimonia*) in the light not only of our conclusion and our premises, but also of what is commonly said about it...” (Ibid., 15).

¹⁰ Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, 266.

risk of relativism.¹¹ Thoreau recognizes the infinite number of ways in which a person might live well: “There are as many ways as radii can be drawn from the centre of a circle.”¹²

Despite my previous assertion that Thoreau would be willing to risk relativism to preserve individuality, here I want to try to venture a more creative solution this difficult issue. For, while relativism may or may not be a problem for an ethics of individual flourishing, it is clearly a very serious problem for an environmental ethics, which is inherently communal in nature. While it might be the case that incontinence with respect to alcohol or rich food is harmful only to one’s own flourishing, greed and gluttony with respect to issues of environmental import clearly impact the flourishing of many others.

II. “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there”: Virtue Ethics in a Paralogical Age

Although I have suggested it is Thoreau’s radical individualism that prevents him from accepting and using the Aristotelian defense against relativism, in the contemporary cultural landscape I don’t believe any virtue ethics can seriously adopt the notion of the *phronimos* as envisioned by Aristotle. Thus, relativism remains a serious problem for *any* virtue ethicist in our “postmodern” age and the complexities associated with Thoreau’s position, while particularly relevant for those of us concerned with environmental virtue ethics, are merely an example of a much broader difficulties.

In the global marketplace of ideas different, even wildly divergent, conceptions of the “good life” come into contact. So-called Grand Narratives—the overarching systems that give

¹¹ Treanor, “The Virtue of Simplicity,” forthcoming.

¹² Ibid. However, an infinite number of ways to be good is not equivalent with all ways being good. Clearly there are ways of living that Thoreau thinks are bad. The problem I am addressing here—a problem that is not unique to Thoreau’s virtue ethics—is how maintain the flexibility that allows for as many ways “as radii can be drawn from the centre of a circle” while justifying the exclusion of certain ways of living. It is the problem of how to avoid relativism without sliding into absolutism, and vice versa.

meaning to our world—are called into question by other, competing Grand Narratives. In his famous “report on knowledge,” Jean-Francois Lyotard characterized this situation as one of “paralogy.”¹³ Jack Caputo points out that *phronesis* was a virtue of the “homogeneous, top down, aristocratic, rigidly closed little society” that was Aristotle’s Athens; it assumes an agreement regarding ethical schemata and a univocal view of the right way to live that are simply lacking in the postmodern milieu.¹⁴ “Aristotle has a more settled view of things than [we do today]. Aristotle thought the main problem facing ethical judgment lay in the movement from the general schema to the concrete situation, but he did not think there was a crisis in the schemata.”¹⁵

Aristotle’s problem was articulating the move from universal to the particular, the method for adapting universal ethical truth to diverse, particular situations. He assumed, with justification, a high degree of correspondence between his own ideas about virtue and the ideas of his students and readers; if asked, they would likely come up with very similar “short lists” when discussing the identity of the *phronimos*. Today, however, “even Aristotle . . . would have a tough time telling us who the *phronimos* is. . . .”¹⁶ In our world, characterized more by heterogeneity than homogeneity, there is much less agreement about the good life and how to achieve it. We must choose amongst a bewildering array of good lives, in a situation where there is no broad agreement about the schema for the good life or the *phronimos* who embodies it. Thus, we are confronted with two substantial problems: (1) how to *identify* the good life and the virtues that constitute it and (2) how to *develop and cultivate* these virtues in the particularity of our individual lives.

¹³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

¹⁴ Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 182.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

These difficulties have not been entirely overlooked by environmental virtue ethicists. Louke van Wensveen notes the critical importance of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which she calls the “necessary ingredient of all other virtue cultivation.”¹⁷ “After all, can you imagine doing anything well without the ability to judge how to strike the right tone in particular situations?”¹⁸ In her book, *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics*, van Wensveen takes aim at this problem.¹⁹ While she acknowledges a remarkable diversity in accounts of ecological virtues, she maintains that there must be “limits” to such diversity and proposes four “tests” to help agents maintain the integrity of prudence (*phronesis*, practical wisdom). Van Wensveen’s tests—the “repression test,” the “alienation test,” the “guilt test”, and the “fetishism test”—offer real insight into the difficulties associated with self-cultivation. Her main point is that a judgment clouded by repression, alienation, guilt, or fetishism should not be trusted. However, as insightful as this account is, it only defers the aporias associated with self-cultivation. How can we accurately judge our own (unconscious) repression or alienation? Van Wensveen suggests that we can distinguish between harmful “counterfeit” virtues and “semblance” virtues on the one hand and “genuine” virtues on the other by reference to “an ultimate telos.”²⁰ However, it is the very existence of an ultimate telos that is called into question by postmodern undecidability. There is no “privileged access to The Secret [of an ‘objective’ meta-perspective, a transparent *arche*, or an ultimate *telos*].”²¹ Indeed, “the secret is, there is no Secret.”²² Although van

¹⁷ Louke van Wensveen, “Cardinal Environmental Virtues” in *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro eds. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 182.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Louke van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics* (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 87-95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

²¹ John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 1.

²² *Ibid.* The problem is not unique to van Wensveen’s account. Although there are non-Aristotelian accounts of “practical wisdom”—e.g., Kant, Scotus, Aquinas, et al.—in the contemporary context it seems difficult to see how any one of them can avoid the problems that we identified above.

Wensveen herself acknowledges the importance of the author's or agent's "view of the life of virtue"²³ and points out the difficulty of assessing one's view of virtue—due to repression, alienation, and guilt—she makes these qualifications against the backdrop of four tests designed to "safeguard" moral prudence (*phronesis*) from corruption.²⁴ However, for Caputo, there is no judgment that is not always already contaminated or corrupted. There is no privileged perspective from which we can objectively assess our moral judgments; *we cannot escape the hermeneutic circle.*

III. "I'll tell you a story...": A Narrative Virtue Ethics

One promising response to the problems that confront virtue ethics in the postmodern context can be found in the hermeneutic philosophy of the late Paul Ricoeur, especially his work on narrative identity. As a hermeneutic thinker, Ricoeur fully embraces the ethical ambiguity that calls for *phronesis*. Even when we have universal rules—the categorical imperative for example—the application of these rules requires *phronesis* (or, as Kant himself admits, "judgment sharpened by experience"²⁵). Ricoeur characterizes his own understanding of ethics as "aiming at the good life with and for others, in just institutions,"²⁶ and he envisages it as falling generally within the tradition of virtue ethics. However, like Thoreau, his contribution to the field is unique; Ricoeur's understanding of virtue and its cultivation is fundamentally *narrative*.

Hermeneutics is not only a tool for reading and interpreting texts. Human life is itself essentially narrative, so hermeneutics is also of use for "reading" and interpreting lives. The

²³ Van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues*, 91.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 45.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 172.

narrativity essential to human being is evident in any question of identity, which is inevitably answered via a narrative of some sort.

The fragile offshoot issuing from the union of history and fiction is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity. Here “identity” is taken in the sense of a practical category. To state the identity of an individual or a community is to answer the question, “Who did this?” “Who is the agent or author?” ... To answer the question “Who?” as Hannah Arendt has so forcefully put it, is to tell the story of a life. The story tells us about the action of the “who.” And the identity of this “who” therefore itself must be a narrative identity.²⁷

According to Ricoeur, human identity is constituted by both *idem*-identity (sameness over time) and *ipse*-identity (self-sameness, self-constancy). The former indicates mere spatiotemporal sameness, which applies to things as well as human beings. However, the latter sort of identity is not static, but includes change over time, as is clear when a person considers whether or not she is the “same” person she was ten, twenty, or thirty years ago (the answer, clearly, is both yes and no). If *idem* addresses the “what” of a person, *ipse* addresses the “who.”

Unlike the abstract identity of the Same... narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime. The subject then appears both a reader and the writer of its own life, as Proust would have it. As the literary analysis of autobiography confirms, the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life a cloth woven of stories told.²⁸

It is this “refiguration” of a life that constitutes narrative’s special usefulness for any postmodern (i.e., contemporary) virtue ethics. This understanding of identity recognizes narrative’s special power: it does not merely recount stories, rather narrative both *describes* and *prescribes*.

Ricoeur’s formula is “describe, narrate, prescribe—each moment of [this] triad implying a specific relation between the constitution of action and the constitution of the self.”²⁹ How does this work? To illustrate, let’s look to the example of a “normal” text. What happens when we

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3 trans. trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 246.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 246.

²⁹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 114-115.

read a story like *Moby Dick* or *Ulysses* (or *Walden*, *A Sand County Almanac*, or *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*)? How can such a reading affect my own identity?

Ricoeur describes metaphor and narrative in terms of *mimesis*, which he views through an Aristotelian rather than Platonic lens—that is, in terms of imitating *action* rather than imitating *nature*. His understanding of *mimesis* follows a tripartite model. First, in order to comprehend any narrative, we must have a preliminary understanding of human action. Ricoeur calls this prefigurative understanding “*mimesis*₁” and describes it as having three main components: structural, symbolic, and temporal. We approach any narrative with an understanding of structure that allows us to make sense of the “what,” “why,” “who,” “how,” “with whom,” and “against whom” of any action, and to link these categories to each other.³⁰ Thus, we can grasp, for example, that “Ahab pursues Moby Dick to avenge the loss of his leg” and “Thoreau went to the woods in order to live deliberately and to learn what life had to teach.” We also have a symbolic preunderstanding of narrative that confers the “initial readability of an action”—that, for example, a raised hand is hailing a taxi as opposed to voting (both actions using the same movement of the hand).³¹ In addition to the descriptive aspect of symbolic understanding, there is a normative aspect that allows us to attribute *value* to actions and to agents, pointing towards the implicit ethical quality of any narrative. “There is no action that does not give rise to approbation or reprobation, to however a small degree, as a function of a hierarchy of values for which goodness and wickedness are the poles.”³² Finally, we have a temporal preunderstanding that, among other things, helps us to understand the role of temporality in action. For example, we can grasp the temporal development of an action—how actions unfold over time as related to

³⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol.1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 55.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 58

³² *Ibid.*, 58

other events—and understand, for example, that John Muir left his job and home after nearly losing his eye in an accident.

*Mimesis*₂, in turn, is the configuration or “emplotment” of the narrative. This includes: (1) the “organization of the events”, not as a series of sequential events, but into a intelligible whole that “transforms the events into a story” with meaning or purpose; (2) bringing together heterogeneous elements such as “agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, and unexpected results”; and (3) mediating the temporal characteristics that allow the aforementioned synthesis of the heterogeneous.³³ The upshot here is that the reader does the “work” of emplotting the narrative. The heterogeneous elements of the narrative must be organized by the reader so that they make sense as a narrative. Rather than finding the narrative “whole cloth” in the words of the text, the elements of the narrative must be organized and connected by the reader (indeed, in some sense the author herself is merely the “first reader” of her narrative).

Finally, *Mimesis*₃ is the “intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader”; it is in the reader or hearer that the narrative reaches its fulfillment.³⁴ Herein lies the real power of narrative for our purposes: the power to refigure our lives. Reading stories is more than (just) an exercise in historical curiosity or whimsical fantasy. Narratives allow us to see things from a different perspective; no logical argument, however well constructed and compelling, can ever do this. When we read stories we enter new worlds and try out new identities—worlds and identities that may, and in fact always do in some sense, reshape the world and identity with which we began the story. Through narrative we can gain a sort of “virtual” or “as if” experience. This is not to say that one can become courageous merely by

³³ Ibid., 65-66. “It is the reader who completes the work [of emplotment]... [The written word] consists of holes, lacunae, zones of indetermination, which, as in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, challenge the reader’s capacity to configure what the author seems to take malign delight in defiguring. In such an extreme case, it is the reader, almost abandoned by the work, who carries the burden of emplotment.” (Ibid., 77)

³⁴ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol.1, 71.

reading accounts of courage; we need to practice *actual* virtuous acts in order to habituate ourselves to virtue. Nevertheless, one can learn something of courage (what courageous actions are like, how to recognize courage) from hearing and reading about courage, and we should not discount this fact. It is because of the ability of narrative to facilitate the refiguration of our lives that a text can genuinely teach us something beyond textual “facts” of the persons, places, and events of the story. Good narratives—good in both senses: virtuous and well constructed—call us to be better people and, moreover, they can help us to effect this change. As Thoreau asks rhetorically in the epigraph to this essay: “How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book?”³⁵

Given the co-constitutive roles of the text and the reader, it is clear that the process of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration cannot proceed according to fixed and rigid rules. While the reading of each narrative unfolds, as it were, along these lines, the process is eminently individual. No two readers are the same and, therefore, every intersection of “the world of the text” and “the world of the reader” will be unique. Although every reader comes to the text with a prefigurative understanding, each individual has a unique background—her preexisting “library,” so to speak, of narratives—that shapes her preunderstanding. Likewise, each reader configures the plot uniquely. No two people put the elements of the plot together in quite the same way. Finally, because of differences in prefigurative understanding and configuring emplotment, the refigurative possibilities of each reading are unique. This is true even when we look at the example of subsequent readings by the same (*idem*) person, who, precisely because of the narrative aspects of identity, is also not the same (*ipse*) person who read the text previously. Each reading teaches us something new and different; each reading discloses new and unique possibilities for refiguration. Given this threefold idiosyncrasy in narrative

³⁵ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, 360.

understanding, it is clear that a rigid application of technique is inappropriate for a narrative virtue ethics; a narrative virtue ethics will require something more akin to *phronesis* (practical wisdom) than *episteme* (science) or *techne* (art).

Before preceding it is worth noting that, while the narrative *phronesis* we have been articulating is not Thoreauvian in origin, there is a good argument to be made that it is not in conflict with Thoreau's own perspective. Thoreau, like his friend Emerson, believes that books are for inspiration rather than idolization.³⁶ A good book inspires us to better ourselves. Thoreau also agrees that we can read well or poorly, and that reading well is an essential skill. He speaks of reading "heroic books," in which "we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line."³⁷ Great books must be read "deliberately" and "reservedly" so that they may inform life (surely an indication of Thoreau's openness to something like a narrative virtue ethics). "A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually be breathed from all human lips..."³⁸ Finally, Thoreau himself makes extensive use of narrative devices in order to make a point or explore an idea; indeed, he is one of the American masters of the genre. Take, for example, the stories of the "Canadian woodchopper" (Alek Therien), "John Field," and the "artist of Kauroo" in *Walden*. Most obviously there is the example of *Walden* itself, which is clearly a narrative designed to *exhort others to better themselves*, not through logical argumentation, but as a result of *hearing the story* of Thoreau's experience and what it did for, and to, him.

³⁶ See, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 57.

³⁷ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, 353.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 355.

III. A “Dead Planet” and the “Finer Fruits of Life”: Two Important Narratives for an *Environmental* Virtue Ethics

How might the configuration (*mimesis*₂) of stories work to refigure (*mimesis*₃) our lives in ways that encourage flourishing in the context of an environmental virtue ethics? Above, I pointed out that postmodernity makes both identifying and cultivating virtues more complex than might have been the case in smaller, more homogeneous societies. However, I’ve also suggested that narratives might play a useful role with respect to both these challenges. Any postmodern virtue ethics will require an appreciation of narrative and, obviously, this applies to any environmental virtue ethics. I think that the success of any robust and widely accepted environmental virtue ethics will require considering two at least two sorts of narratives: narratives focused on human survival and narratives focused on human flourishing.

Let’s take the virtue of simplicity, the analysis of which led me to the problems we are considering here. Most committed environmentalists would agree that simplicity is an important environmental virtue. How can narrative refiguration help to bring skeptics to the conclusion that simplicity is indeed a virtue essential to human flourishing? And, once this has taken place, how might we determine, or at least narrow down, which amongst the various models of simplicity we ought to pursue? Although there is broad consensus that simplicity is indeed a very important virtue within any environmental ethics, here we have to step back from that assumption to consider the possibility that simplicity might not be conducive to flourishing. Putting ourselves into the shoes of a skeptic—say, someone who embraces wanton consumption in the context of absolutely unrestrained free market capitalism as most conducive to human flourishing—what narrative accounts might contribute to an understanding of the importance of simplicity?

The first step requires that we illustrate the *practical necessity* of simplicity. We need narratives that convincingly and accessibly illustrate the need for reduced consumption of the

world's resources. One example of such a narrative is Jared Diamond's *Collapse*, which catalogues, in vivid detail, the potential consequences of an unsustainable (i.e., non-simple or extravagant) lifestyle.³⁹ Diamond is a Pulitzer prizewinning author and is therefore a recognizable and relatively high profile narrator. *Collapse*, despite substantial criticism from certain quarters, was widely read and well-received. While the book is no silver bullet, because it received so much press it undoubtedly got more people thinking about and discussing sustainability. *An Inconvenient Truth* is another excellent example of a "practical" narrative. Like *Collapse*, *An Inconvenient Truth* received aggressive criticism from certain interests. Nevertheless, the movie was an undeniable phenomenon—the first mainstream documentary about global warming that could legitimately be called a "hit." Gore can no more take credit for this response than he can for creating the Internet, despite his undeniable long-standing commitment to the environment. Nevertheless, *An Inconvenient Truth* appears to have struck a chord and there is some likelihood that history will look back upon this film as a watershed event. Other examples of this sort of "narrative" include Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, among others. These narratives and others like them highlight the necessity of including environmental virtues like simplicity in any legitimate account of human flourishing. By focusing on the consequences of an unsustainable way of life, such accounts do the important preliminary work of convincing people of the *necessity* of simplifying our lives—if we do not we will, sooner or later, be our own undoing. We might note, paraphrasing David Brower, that "there is no flourishing to be done on a dead planet."⁴⁰

However, I fear that such accounts, which focus on the practical necessity of simplicity or sustainability, will be insufficient to motivate a robust environmental virtue ethics. Why? As

³⁹ Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

⁴⁰ Brower's jibe, aimed a big business, was that "there is no business to be done on a dead planet."

long as simplicity is understood in terms of a burden that must be shouldered or a sacrifice that must be endured—even one that is undertaken in order to prevent or forestall a greater catastrophe—simplicity will never be widely adopted. First, there is the danger that “survival narratives” run the risk of overwhelming people with the enormity of the problem, leading to resignation rather than action (something acknowledged in both *Collapse* and *An Inconvenient Truth*). Moreover, the “tragedy of the commons” coupled with the externalization of costs will lead people, especially in affluent nations that are likely to suffer less from the initial effects of environmental collapse, to assume that others in developing nations will pay the price for their own environmental vices (and, sadly, this is likely to be true, at least initially).⁴¹ The prospect of a 5-foot, or even a 5-meter, rise in sea levels—especially one they are told *may* happen by the *end of the century*—does not seem like an immediate threat to many Americans and it is therefore unlikely to motivate any significant change in behavior, especially when the tragedy of the commons suggests that immediate benefit can be had by increasing bad behavior.

Collapse and similar narratives represent an essential first step in the widespread appreciation of environmental virtue, if only because they have the potential to help people appreciate the seriousness of the problem. However, they must be supplemented by accounts that communicate the importance of environmental virtue for the *flourishing of the individual* in addition to the flourishing of the society, the species, or the biosphere. If the first sort of narrative is aimed at convincing people of the necessity of simplicity (for survival) the second sort of narrative will help to make a virtue of this necessity or, more accurately, will show that what appears to be a necessity is also, *already*, a virtue. Until people come to view simplicity as a state or characteristic to be desired, sustainability will always fall prey to the tragedy of the commons. It is here that the strength of a narrative environmental virtue ethics really shines through. It is

⁴¹ Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of Commons” in *Science*, vol. 162, 1243-1248 (1968).

narrative that allows us to imagine ourselves otherwise. Only narrative can facilitate the conversion necessary to move from one “view” of the virtues to another.

Where can we find accounts of simplicity that expand on the role of simplicity to articulate its role, not in human *survival* (a la *Collapse*), but in human *flourishing*? We need accounts that convey the benefits of simplicity in a way that will be both convincing and palatable to a general audience. And we need accounts that will help to articulate how we might go about cultivating simplicity in ourselves. There are many figures that detail the virtues of simplicity; however, Henry David Thoreau, whose meditations on simplicity occasioned these remarks, remains one of the most poetic and persuasive advocates of this virtue. For Thoreau, simplicity is essential for human flourishing; it helps us to pick the “finer fruits” of life.⁴² “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.”⁴³ He goes so far as to call simplicity a *sacrament*, “that is, as the dictionary defines it, ‘outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace...’”⁴⁴ Other obvious sources of such narratives include *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold), *The Inward Morning* (Bugbee), *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (Dillard), and the books, essays, and poems of Wendell Berry. Thoreau and these other authors see simplicity as a *gift* to be celebrated rather than a sacrifice to be endured and, insofar as their narratives help us to imagine simplicity as a gift in our own lives, they help others to see simplicity in this way.

These two sorts of narratives are not mutually exclusive; rather, they compliment each other.⁴⁵ Ricoeur’s hermeneutics insists on the complementarity of explanation and

⁴² Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, 261.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁴⁵ Look at the backlash to *An Inconvenient Truth*, which made so much hay of Gore’s own consumption of resources. Critics point out, justly to some degree, the performative contradiction of celebrities like Gore, Prince Charles, and Laurie David leaving one of their multiple extravagant homes to flit around the world on private jets touting the virtues of reducing one’s carbon footprint. I myself am not one of these critics; however, it is hard to

understanding; the former denotes objective and empirical accounts, the latter hermeneutic interpretations.⁴⁶ The complementarity on which Ricoeur insists is both necessary and desirable. It is necessary because explanation and understanding represent differences in emphasis rather than distinct and separable ways of proceeding—even the most “objective and scientific” account exhibits narrative elements, and even the most poetic narrative maintains some connection to reality. It is desirable because our appreciation of a given issue is enhanced when we consciously complement explanation with understanding and understanding with explanation. Explanation assumes understanding (because no account is devoid of interpretative elements) and when we explain more we understand better. We need explanation *and* understanding, hard science *and* poetic narratives, arguments *and* examples. Narratives like *Collapse* and *An Inconvenient Truth* may get people to realize the precariousness of our situation; but narratives like *Walden* and *A Sand County Almanac* are necessary to help people realize that the very thing we need do in order to save our planet (and, thus, our material existence) is something that will help us to save ourselves in, if I dare say so, a spiritual sense.

IV. Conclusion

What began as a way to address the challenge of relativism in Thoreau’s work has revealed itself to be a more general prescription for contemporary environmental virtue ethics. Today we are confronted with the problem of how we might encourage the cultivation of

ignore the contradictions inherent in these actions (or, I might add by way of fairness, my own presence at a conference on environmental ethics held about 1000 miles from my home). While Gore, David, Prince Charles, Professor Treanor and other wealthy celebrities (actually, I am still waiting for either the wealth or celebrity of philosophy to materialize) tout the virtues of sustainability; it would be good to see them make a good faith effort to practice sustainability.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, “On Interpretation” in *From Text to Action*, Kathleen Blamey and John Thompson trans. (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1991). Ricoeur addresses explanation and understanding in the discussion of historical narratives, that is, with respect to “non-fiction” stories about the past. Nevertheless, his account of the complementary nature of these two approaches is eminently applicable to environmental concerns.

environmental virtues in a public that is only beginning to awaken, really awaken, to the essential role of the environment in our physical survival, the survival of our current way of life, and the possibility of a better way of life. We must meet this challenge in the context of an increasingly postmodern marketplace of ideas, wherein we can no longer assume a broad acceptance and similar interpretation of the virtues that contribute to human flourishing.

My suggestion is that narrative is a tool of unmatched usefulness in this context; it offers an expansive, nearly limitless, source of wisdom related to the ways in which “environmental virtues,” such as simplicity, do far more than help us to survive—they allow us to flourish. Because of the tragedy of the commons and externalization of costs, logical arguments and empirical analyses will always fail to motivate the lifestyle changes that are necessary for a sustainable world, or, just as bad, will fail to do so until it is too late. Therefore, in order to be effective any future environmental ethics should include a robust virtue ethics that attempts to establish the desirability of sustainable living, not for survival (though that is certainly true) but for happiness. However, most people lack firsthand experience with someone who has cultivated environmental virtues to a high degree. Having no experience of someone who lives or attempts to live sustainably, they have no model to follow. This is a problem because, assuming a person is not yet virtuous, she needs some way of beginning to walk the path. In any of its various forms, virtue ethics requires a model of some sort in order to help us identify the virtues, inspire us to pursue them, and guide us in doing so. Lacking firsthand experience with a *phronimos*, only narratives can serve as such models, introducing people to alternative ways of being in the world. Therefore, any future virtue ethics should include narrative strategies. Such narratives cannot provide us with step-by-step instructions for virtue, but neither could a *phronimos*. Aristotle is clear that the discussion of virtue is “adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter

admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions...⁴⁷ When speaking of virtue and human flourishing, “we must be content to indicate the truth roughly and in outline... speaking about things that are only for the most part true, and with premises of the same kind, to reach conclusions that are no better.”⁴⁸

One might point out, justifiably, that this strategy seems awfully familiar. After all, people who are environmentally aware and ethically concerned have been recommending *Walden* and *A Sand County Almanac* to friends for years, with no perceptible change in the public perception of environmental virtues. Moreover, thinkers including Cafaro and van Wensveen are not unaware of the aporias associated with *phronesis* or with the importance of narrative in environmentalism. True enough. However, the preceding account makes several significant points. First, it illustrates the importance of narrative to those who might not have appreciated it. Most importantly, it shows us that the all-too-common scare tactics used in environmental debates are unlikely to work on their own. Even amongst those who do appreciate the power of narrative, Ricoeur’s analysis of *mimesis* offers a well-developed account of the way in which narrative functions. Making explicit narrative’s role in self-improvement suggests new strategies and emphases.

Outside of the community of committed environmentalists, the public discourse about environmentalism has tended to focus on dangers of unsustainable living rather than the benefits and virtues of sustainable living. Certainly the first approach is appropriate in many situations; many environmental challenges are already extreme, require urgent attention, and, as such, lend themselves to such an approach. However, we need to appreciate the tendency of those who are not environmentally inclined—or those that are so inclined, but in a relatively shallow and non-

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 2-3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

committal way—to view such an approach as alarmist and alienating fear tactics. Fear motivates best when the danger is imminent; however, environmental crises often cannot be adequately addressed if the response is postponed until disaster is “imminent.” On top of this, selfishness, the externalization of costs, the tragedy of the commons, and the possibility of resignation in the face of the enormity of the problem work against such fear-based strategies—people in so-called “developed” nations know that they can act in an environmentally vicious manner while other, less fortunate people suffer the worst of the consequences (at least initially).

However, an approach that touts the genuine personal benefits of living a simplified, more sustainable life has the potential to convince at least some people that environmental virtues contribute to their own flourishing and well-being. Imagine the potential impact of narratives that suggest simplicity would be desirable *even if resources were infinite*. At the very least we, as environmental philosophers and activists, should couple the “doom-and-gloom,” “urgent action required” approach (true though it is) with an approach that addresses the innate desire (of most people) to live well. In advocating for environmental causes we should address people’s *hopes* as well as their *fears*, and a narrative environmental virtue ethics seems to offer one of the very best ways to combine these tactics.