

ENVIRONMENTAL VIRTUE ETHICS: PURSUING ECOLOGICAL VIRTUE THROUGH THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The thesis of this paper is that a viable, distinctively Christian version of environmental virtue ethics (EVE) must be grounded in the nature of God, guided by moral norms revealed in Scripture, and teleologically focused on God's glory. Evidence will be presented to defend the proposition that the most influential writers in the popular and growing field of EVE do not adequately ground, derive, or direct their ethical systems in ways that are adequate for a distinctively Christian environmental ethic. The methodology used to demonstrate this thesis will be in the form of critical analysis applied to the ethical systems of current EVE writers with a specific focus on the ontological, epistemological and teleological components of their comprehensive environmental ethical systems. Finally, the purpose of this presentation will be twofold: First, to promote increased Christian engagement in this up and coming segment of environmental ethics and, two, to offer a platform for further work in the field of EVE that promotes not only a **guide to normative behavior** but also instruction on character formation as it relates to caring for God's created order. This purpose will be accomplished with the presentation of six premises which are reflective of several of the most important points of departure in the current EVE discussions. These premises combine the ontological, epistemological, and teleological conclusions of a historically biblical approach to virtue theory with the strengths of prominent EVE writers to provide Christians with a viable starting point for cultural engagement. This will not be an exhaustive meta-ethical system but rather a beginning foundation, which can serve as a normative guide for a more thorough treatment.

INTRODUCTION

Before I begin my presentation today, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Drs. George and Little for the opportunity to speak at the Falls Lake Symposium. It is an honor to be a part of this event and to be able to speak on something for which I am so passionate. I have thoroughly enjoyed the conference thus far and look forward to the remainder of the presentations this afternoon.

I have used a picture of a wind farm as the background for my PowerPoint presentation today. I have chosen this picture as a way to highlight what I believe is a major factor in discouraging Christians towards Creation Care. In a recent article published on May 1st, USA Today reported that new research indicates that wind farms used to generate alternative energy have been shown to raise local, night time surface level temperatures by an average of

almost 1 degree Fahrenheit.¹ While the article concludes that these findings most likely are a result of thermal redistribution and not an indication that wind farms are contributing to global warming, the inevitable result is confusion on the part of ecological sensitive readers. After all, aren't alternative energy sources like wind farming *the* way to rid the world of its dependence on fossil fuels? And, if alternative energy sources aren't good for the environment, what is? This and other similar questions can often be paralyzing and drive at the very heart of what I will address in the brief time that I have today.

Affirming the theological foundations established by Dr. Milioni in his presentation last night, I intend to move the discussion forward in attempt to answer, at least in part, the meta-ethical question of "How should Christians live in light of the truth of Scripture concerning the care of God's creation?" Specifically, I would like to address Christians who find themselves in the midst of a Public Square which is often characterized by enflamed rhetoric, competing interests, and conflicting reports. With projected outcomes of global models in dispute and right and wrong in constant flux, how are Christians (and non-Christians for that matter) and the Church to adjudicate what actually helps the environment and what harms it? Unfortunately, time will not permit me to answer each of these questions fully but I should have just enough time to lay out the beginnings of a framework by which an adequate methodological system of action can be constructed. In previous work, I have argued that focusing on the development of character as it relates to Creation Care is a better approach than the predominant rule-based and outcome driven theories that dominate the environmental ethics landscape. Today, I will engage briefly with the most prominent writers in a promising sub-section of environmental ethics called Environmental Virtue Ethics (or EVE) and will present four premises which I believe are essential to building a distinctively Christian environmental virtue ethic which can serve to adequately guide environmental action.

Premise #1: A DCEVE Must be Objectively Grounded in the Nature of God.

One of the most difficult questions to answer in any ethical system is "who's to judge what's right and wrong?"² Underlying this question is a debate that has dominated recent philosophical and ethical discussions. On one side of this debate, postmodern deconstructionists have attempted to dismantle all meta-narratives of the past and have argued that there is no such thing as objective truth. Ethical relativism has been the inevitable result of this position and is the dominant position of all prominent EVE writers.

On the other side of the debate are moral objectivists such as Dennis Hollinger who argue that, "ethics in the Bible is not blind obedience to laws, principles, or virtues but rather a response to the living, all-powerful God of the universe, who is himself the foundation of those moral guidelines."³ Therefore, God, not experience, culture, or the individual is the appropriate ground for a distinctively, Christian environmental virtue ethic.

¹ Wendy Koch, "Texas Wind Farms Impact on Climate Causes Stir," n.p. [cited 7 May 2012]. Online: <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/greenhouse/post/2012/05/study-of-a-wind-farms-impact-on-climate-causes-stir/1?csp=34news>.

² Pojman, *Ethics*, 25.

³ Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*, 64–65.

Premise #2: A DCEVE Must be Theocentric but Appropriately Anthropocentric

One of the most debated topics in environmental virtues ethics concerns the issue of human responsibility to the natural world. The overwhelming philosophical tradition of the Western world has been characterized by humans treating all of nature as instrumental resources and functionally or explicitly declaring that only human beings have moral standing.⁴ The recent cultural shift in ecological awareness, though, has begun to question this traditional Western mindset. This shift has produced additional options regarding this important relationship, such as biocentrism, ecocentrism, and theocentrism. This shift in thinking raises an important question for environmental ethics but, even more so, for an environmental virtue ethic, which utilizes (mostly) human-centered virtue theory. So, how should a distinctively Christian environmental virtue ethic address this issue?

The most prominent writers in EVE, some of which write from a Judeo Christian worldview, all but deny the importance or existence of a transcendent reality. They also downplay the significance of humans in the biosphere and instead hold to a form of ecocentric holism. As mentioned above, theocentrism with its focus on God as supreme creator has thankfully emerged as an alternative to both econcentrism and biocentrism but has unfortunately, in some discussions, completely overshadowed the merits of anthropocentrism. Over and against these writers, I argue that a DCEVE must recognize the existence of God but not lose sight of the fact that ethics cannot be divorced from the human element. Therefore, a DCEVE must be theocentric but appropriately anthropocentric.

Premise #3: A DCEVE Must Hold to a Complementarity View of the Relationship Between Deontology and Virtue.

In the recent revival of virtue theory, some influential writers such as Anscombe have suggested that all deontic language should be eradicated from discussions of right and wrong. For Christian ethics, this is obviously not possible as the Scriptures are replete with commands and principles for right living. This is an especially important discussion for environmental ethics because of the heavy use of “rights” language as it pertains to both human and non-human entities. Historically, there have been three ways of viewing the relationship between virtues and principles: Purely aretaic ethics where principles are derived from virtues; The standard deontic view where virtues are derived from principles; and Complementarity or pluralistic ethics where both deontic and aretaic models are necessary for a complete ethical system.

For the most part, current secular EVE writers rely heavily on the purely aretaic model while evangelical writers tend toward the standard deontic position. I argue, along with such ethicists as Scott Rae and Mark Liederbach, that a complementary view of virtues and principles would appear to be more consistent with Scripture. For evidence of this assertion, I point to the

⁴ DesJardins, *Environmental Ethics*, 95–96.

co-dependent relationship of the Sheema (love of God) and Decalogue (obedience to God's commands).

Premise #4: A DCEVE Must be Properly Ordered Towards the Glory of God

One of the distinctive features of a virtue ethics system is the idea of a *telos* or end goal, which is why virtue ethics are often referred to as teleological in nature. Classically, the *telos* was referred to as *eudemonia* or "the chief end," while in modern terms it is commonly described with phrases such as "human flourishing" and "the good life." Virtue ethics are commonly ascribed to Aristotle who wrote extensively about the topic in his work *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this classical work, Aristotle argued that the *telos*, or end goal, of all human life was happiness.

The most influential writers in the contemporary EVE movement all affirm human flourishing as a proper end for environmental virtue ethics. Collectively, they affirm that environmental degradation is not constituent of human flourishing and that eudaimonistic and noneudaimonistic flourishing should be pursued through simple living, moderate consumption, the pursuit of knowledge, and deference to future generations. In and of themselves, these conclusions are not bad ones. However, the historically biblical approach to virtue ethics in theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Edwards has a more clearly defined end—the glory of God. Man, created in the image of God, was not created simply to exist. Man was created with a mission and it is a mission that he must take seriously—much more seriously, even, than the praise-worthy pursuit of knowledge or positive interaction with nature in the name of enlightened self-interest or the duties to future generations. As a Christian, man's mission is to live altruistically—first in love for and service to God and second to one's neighbor for the glory of God. Simply put, humans were created for this purpose.⁵ Therefore, a distinctively, Christian EVE must be teleologically ordered towards the glory of God.

For Christians, the environmental road ahead may be a difficult one as the issues surrounding Creation Care become more and more complex. Thankfully, I believe that classical virtue theory combined with the truth of Scripture as presented in this paper provides a solid foundation upon which Christians can decipher how to live in an increasingly "green" world.

⁵ Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 23. Jones writes, "Since believers are called to respond consciously to the revelation of the goal of their redemption, the glory of God may be said to be the controlling purpose of the Christian life."