

Virtue and Climate Ethics

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How do we deal with global warming? Recent moral discussions on climate change focus on what governments and global institutions ought to do in order to mitigate and adapt to global warming. States and international organizations need to adopt relevant policies and programs that address climate change. These policies and programs however need to be complemented by an ethics that cultivate the virtues needed to live in a warmer world. In this paper, I will propose a virtue ethics approach to climate change. Virtue ethics as a normative moral theory focuses on developing and cultivating the right attitude and disposition rather than principles and duties regarding a moral issue. An ethics based solely on principles and duties may not be enough to curtail global warming, because they only regulate and control human behavior but do not shape and mold the right character necessary for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

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Climate change is a natural phenomenon. But its pace since the Industrial Revolution is increasing due to anthropogenic causes (Garvey 2008: 20). Greenhouse gas emissions are already beyond the carrying capacity of our planet's atmosphere. The scientific evidence for human induced climate change is mounting and no less than the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is spearheading the research and campaign for climate mitigation and adaptation. People in poor countries are the most vulnerable to the negative impact of

climate change. But rich nations are affected as well. So this calls for a concerted effort on the part of governments and global institutions to do something drastic in order to reduce the causes of climate change.

Justice is one important moral issue in climate change discussions (see, for example, Harris 2010). Since many rich nations are responsible for the accumulated greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, much of the burden to mitigate climate change must be lodged in them. Poor nations cannot be expected to share much of this burden because they contribute little to climate change. Justice demands that those who contribute more to climate change should shoulder much of the burden. To expect poor countries to share the same amount of burden will have an adverse effect on the quality of their lives. This paper, will not discuss justice issues nor will it develop an ethics based on duty, principles and consequences. Instead, it will propose a personal ethic of virtue. Though it is important for governments and global institutions to create programs and policies for climate change mitigation and adaptation, it is also important for each individual person to cultivate virtues appropriate for climate change. The implementation of these programs and policies will only be effective if people expected to conform to them are properly motivated. These policies and programs need to be complemented by an ethics that cultivate the virtues needed to live in a warmer world. Virtue ethics as a normative moral theory focuses on developing and cultivating the right attitude and disposition rather than on principles and duties. An ethics based solely on principles and duties may not be enough to curtail global warming because they only regulate and control human behavior but do not shape and mold the right character necessary for climate change mitigation and adaptation. In what follows, Christine Swanton's pluralistic virtue ethics and Iris Murdoch's account of virtue as "selfless attention to nature" (1970: 41) will be employed in order to develop a climate ethics.

Virtue, according to Swanton, is a good character trait or disposition to respond well to the "demands of the world" (2003: 19). These demands could come from either "people, objects, situations, inner states, or actions" (2003: 1). So, for Swanton what makes a trait of character a virtue is not only that it is a disposition that leads to a flourishing life but it also responds well to the demands of the world. I will interpret this response, following Murdoch, as our aspiration for the good. The argument that follows encapsulates this preliminary account of virtue ethics:

(P1) *Virtue is a disposition that responds well to the demands of the world.*

(P2) *A disposition that responds well to the demands of the world is one which aims for the good.*

(C) *Therefore, a virtue is one which aims for the good.*

The conclusion does not imply that anyone who aims for the good is already virtuous. Virtue is something which one achieves and acquires through what Murdoch calls the disciplined and patient attention towards the reality outside of the self. “Moral change”, Murdoch writes, “comes from an *attention* to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egoism through an increased sense of reality of, primarily of course other people, but also other things” (1993: 52).

Following Plato, Murdoch thinks that we all desire or love the good. It is something that we discover in our personal experiences and it pervades our whole lives, whether we are aware of it or not. “That we can and do love Good and are drawn towards it is something that we have to learn from our experience, as we move all the time in the continuum between good and bad. This is our everyday existence where spiritual energy, Eros, is all the time active at a variety of levels” (1993: 507). The good is also that to which we give our attention to, directing all our time and energy towards it. Murdoch, following the German theologian Paul Tillich, refers to the good as “those matters of ‘ultimate concern’” (1993: 512).

For Murdoch, there is no logical and empirical proof for the existence of the good. In fact, it does not exist in the way that a tree or a horse exists. But it is there, “real as an Idea, and is also incarnate in knowledge, work and love” (1993: 508). If the reality of the good is to be proven, it can only be done by way of morality and love (1993: 509). Intuitively, we just know that it is there, existing as an object of our desire and love. Murdoch thinks that there is some resemblance between the reality of the good and the notion of God as a perfect being in the ‘ontological argument’ of St. Anselm. Just as the ontological argument proves the existence of God from the idea of a perfect being, so Murdoch posits the reality of the good from the notion that it is an object of our desire and love. If perfection implies existence, then desire and love implies the reality of the good. If Anselm says that we should believe in order to understand, Murdoch says that we should love in order to be good.

For Murdoch, the good is not an abstract concept and “an empty receptacle into which the arbitrary [human] will places objects of its choice” but it is “something which we all experience as a creative force” (1993: 507). In desiring the good, we are transformed and become more like it. “Our emotions and desires are as good as their objects and are constantly being modified in

relation to their objects. What is good purifies the desire that seeks it, the good ennobles the lover. There is no unattached will as a prime source of value” (1993: 507). Thus, to desire the good is also at the same time to respond to the demand that we be virtuous.

We humans desire and are attracted towards the good. Plato and Aristotle have bequeathed to us this valuable insight from antiquity. What this good is remains beyond our complete grasp despite the fact that we have some experiences of it. Individual things like natural entities, art and the intellectual disciplines somehow instantiate what this goodness is. They, however, do not fully exhaust it. That is why goodness as we experience it is not singular but plural. There is a plurality and diversity of goodness in nature. It is this good, according to Murdoch, which enables us to transcend the narrowness of our personal concerns to embrace and give significance to other things which we consider good.

The good, which Murdoch compares to beauty in nature and art (and with the intellectual disciplines like mathematics and the sciences) and which she considers as a “kind of goodness by proxy”, “transcends selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility of its consumer” (1970: 87). Murdoch is convinced that “enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue” (1970: 86). She illustrates her point through this example:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important (1970: 84).

Beauty in nature has the uncanny ability to transform human consciousness and behavior. Murdoch thinks that “more naturally, as more properly, we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals (1970: 85).” Her view points to the reality of a metaphysical ideal of goodness which is somehow embodied in things in nature. And it is this notion of goodness, and not merely the goodness or value of things themselves, which inspires and attracts us to the virtuous life.

How then should we respond to the demands of climate change. Murdoch’s notion of virtue as “selfless attention” can be employed to develop

a climate ethics. By giving focused attention to the state of our climate system, we are able to temper and control our selfish tendencies often expressed in our consumptive habits and materialistic lifestyle. This lifestyle relies so much on the use of non-renewable resources and fossil fuels to produce the material things we need. Through “selfless attention” we realize that nature, including our climate is not something that we dominate and manipulate to satisfy our selfish cravings. This teaches us the virtue of simplicity, temperance and humility. The virtue of simplicity helps us avoid a consumerist lifestyle. Temperance helps us overcome our greed. Humility helps us realize that nature, including our climate, is not something that we just dominate. It is our pride that makes us disregard the value of nature and our climate, as if they are just for our consumption or a sink where we throw our wastes. Science and technology are not to be blamed for the present crisis in our climate. It is the mindless use of them which will spell the destruction of our planet. Murdoch has already told us that science, just like art, mathematics and other intellectual disciplines, is a training in virtue. We can use science to help us attain a virtuous life and attain a stable and conducive climate. ■

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