

Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethics

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I argue for an environmental virtue ethics which specifies human excellence and flourishing in relation to nature. I consider Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson as environmental virtue ethicists, and show that these writers share certain ethical positions that any environmental virtue ethics worthy of the name must embrace. These positions include putting economic life in its proper, subordinate place within human life as a whole; cultivating scientific knowledge, while appreciating its limits; extending moral considerability to the nonhuman world; and supporting wilderness protection. I argue that Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson themselves exemplify the potential for cultivating excellence in engagement with wild nature: their lives are among our most powerful arguments for its preservation.

I. ENVIRONMENTAL VIRTUE ETHICS

Over the past twenty-five years, much scholarship in environmental ethics has focused on the intrinsic value or moral considerability of nonhuman nature. This valuable work has clearly formulated many environmentalists' intuitions that the destruction, overuse, or excessive appropriation of nature is morally wrong. It has given us plausible reasons for extending moral considerability beyond our own species, and limiting our conduct accordingly.¹

In contrast, little has been written in environmental ethics from a virtue ethics perspective which focuses on human excellence and flourishing. While individual authors such as Arne Naess and Erazim Kohák have discussed the joy and fulfillment to be found in a more environmentally conscious life, this

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¹ Strong arguments for the intrinsic value of wild nature are found in Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), and Keekok Lee, "The Source and Locus of Intrinsic Value," *Environmental Ethics* 18 (1996): 297–309. Influential works denying such intrinsic value are John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, 2d ed. (London: Duckworth, 1980), and Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

theme has not been central within academic environmental ethics.² However, recent years have seen increased interest in developing an environmental virtue ethics, one which incorporates a respect for nature, conceives “human interests” broadly, and presents environmental protection as being in our *enlightened* self-interest.³ I believe that further development of such an environmental virtue ethics is timely and useful for two main reasons.

First, in the absence of an environmental virtue ethics, environmental ethics itself is incomplete and unbalanced. Recent virtue ethics proponents have made the (general) case forcefully.⁴ An ethics which concentrates exclusively on rights and responsibilities, and judges our actions solely on whether they violate or uphold moral duty, ignores further, crucial ethical questions: what is the best life for a person and how can I go about living it? What is a good society and how can we move closer to achieving it? These questions are just as important within environmental ethics as within ethics generally, because actions which affect the environment rebound and affect us, opening up or closing off possibilities. Our environmental decisions make us better or worse people and create better or worse societies: healthier or sicker, richer or poorer, more knowledgeable or more ignorant. Any complete valuation of our actions and lives must include a virtue ethics component, and any complete environmental ethics must include an environmental virtue ethics.

Second, there is a practical need to develop positive arguments for environmental protection. Often, the general public views environmentalists as kill-joys, willing to countenance any trade-offs of human freedom or happiness in pursuit of their aims.⁵ Partly this view is unavoidable. In defending wild nature and asserting its intrinsic value, environmentalists are necessarily proscript-

² This situation has partly been due to the commendable desire of most environmental ethicists to develop a nonanthropocentric ethical position. Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and The Stars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

³ See Bill Shaw, “A Virtue Ethics Approach to Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic,” *Environmental Ethics* 19 (1997): 53–67; Stephen Kellert, *The Value of Life: Biological Diversity and Human Society* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1996), pp. 3–34; John Patterson, “Maori Environmental Virtues,” *Environmental Ethics* 16 (1994): 397–409; John O’Neill, *Ecology, Policy and Politics: Human Well-Being and the Natural World* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 159–62; Geoffrey Frasz, “Environmental Virtue Ethics: A New Direction for Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993): 259–74; Thomas Hill, Jr., “Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments,” *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983): 211–24. Recently Louke Van Wensveen published the first book-length study of environmental virtue ethics, her excellent *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2000).

⁴ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 118–19, and papers by Sarah Conly, R. Z. Friedman, and David Norton in Peter French et al., eds., *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1988). The best short introduction to virtue ethics is Richard Taylor, *Virtue Ethics* (Interlaken, N.Y.: Linden Books, 1991).

⁵ “Without a change in consciousness, the ecological movement is experienced as a never-ending list of reminders: ‘shame, you mustn’t do that’ and ‘remember, you’re not allowed to . . .’

tive. Yet the writings of the great naturalists, and our own experiences, tell a story of joyful interrelation with nature. Just as classical virtue ethics provided strong self-interested reasons for treating others with respect—reasons based on a person’s concern for his own virtue and flourishing—so an environmental virtue ethics can provide strong grounds for environmental protection. Above all, it can move us beyond our initial ethical response to environmental destruction—contrite self-abnegation—and toward a more positive, sustainable position of respectful dwelling in nature.⁶

II. THOREAU, LEOPOLD AND CARSON

While professional philosophers have largely neglected the subject, some of our greatest environmental writers can plausibly be seen as environmental virtue ethicists. In this section, I briefly discuss three of them: Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson.

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,” Thoreau writes in a central passage in *Walden*:

. . . to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck all the marrow out of life . . . to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.⁷

Walden describes a life of personal development and enriched experience, centered on the pursuit of knowledge of self and nature. It advocates ethical, intellectual and creative striving. Thoreau alternately harangues his readers for their inertia and failure to demand more from life, and entices them onward with fair possibilities, noble ideals, and accounts of his own successes: Thoreau snug and secure in his well-built cabin, facing winter’s blasts; Thoreau floating on the calm summer waters of Walden Pond, fishing pole in hand, a symbol of personal equilibrium and harmony with his surroundings. Interestingly, Thoreau

With a change in mentality we can say ‘think how wonderful it will be, if and when . . .,’ ‘look there! what a pity that we haven’t enjoyed that before . . .’ If we can clean up a little internally as well as externally, we can hope that *the ecological movement will be more of a renewing and joy-creating movement*” (Naess, *Ecology*, p. 91). I cannot follow Naess in his ultimate synthesis of deontological and eudaimonistic judgments, as self-interest is eclipsed by Self-interest (pp. 8–9). The important point remains that recognition of our enlightened self-interest gives us further incentive to respect wild nature’s intrinsic value. This recognition can make doing our duty less onerous. Moreover, Naess is correct that it can help us lead better, more joyful lives.

⁶ See Kohák, *Embers*, pp. 90–91. This is not to say that self-interested arguments should supplant appeals to duty or to the intrinsic value of wild nature. Rather, they should supplement them. As I see it, deontology and virtue ethics are the two necessary halves of a complete ethics.

⁷ Henry Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 90–91. For a discussion of Thoreau as a virtue ethicist, see Philip Cafaro, “Thoreau’s Virtue Ethics in *Walden*,” *The Concord Saunterer* 8 (2000): forthcoming.

uses the terms *flourishing*, *living well*, and *chief end* to describe his overall goal: words and phrases employed by recent scholars to translate and resurrect the proper ancient Greek understanding of *eudaimonia*, in place of our more subjective and trivial “happiness.”⁸

Taking *Walden* as a whole, a clear picture of Thoreau’s view of the good life emerges, which includes health, freedom, pleasure, friendship, a rich experience, knowledge (of self, nature, God), self-culture, and personal achievement.⁹ He specifies his pursuit of these “goods” in detail, often in terms of his relationship to nature. Freedom, for Thoreau, includes not just the absence of physical coercion, but also having the time to explore his surroundings and the privilege to saunter through the local landscape without being arrested for trespassing. Perhaps some readers will define freedom similarly! He finds great physical pleasure and sensual stimulation in living and working in the woods, comparing his life favorably to the indoor lives of so many of his contemporaries; poor factory girls driven by necessity, but also wealthy Concord burghers who are free to live otherwise. Dwelling solitary and apart from people awakened him to possibilities for friendship and connection to the rest of nature, he reports. Thoreau makes it clear that he is not setting up rules that all must follow. But his experiment by the pond suggests possibilities for living well in nature, for those inclined to make the attempt. It also suggests what we may give up in living a more urbanized existence.

Thoreau tries, in *Walden*, to recover the ancient sense of virtue as personal excellence, asserting that nowadays, “philanthropy is almost the only virtue which is sufficiently appreciated by mankind. Nay, it is greatly overrated.”¹⁰ His catalogue of virtues includes moral virtues such as sympathy, honesty,

⁸ *Living well*: Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 51, and J. L. Akrill, “Aristotle on Eudaimonia,” in Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 17. *Flourishing*: Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 79, and Martha Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,” in Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 243. *Chief end*: Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 9, 90–91, and Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 46.

⁹ *Health* is often referred to as “hardiness.” Thoreau several times speaks of his willingness to sacrifice health for higher goods. (Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 27, 60, 61). *Pleasure* is occasionally mentioned favorably in a fairly direct way, as on p. 240. More often it is assumed to be good, and more specific pleasures are noted. *Rich Experience*: pp. 42, 46, 51, 53, 61, 90. *Self-culture*: pp. 40, 77, 109–10, 328. *Freedom* is used interchangeably with *independence*, and is one of Thoreau’s most frequently mentioned goods (pp. 7, 8, 12, 15, 33, 37, 45, 56, 60, 63, 70, 84, etc.). *Friendship* receives its fullest discussion in Thoreau’s earlier work, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 259–89. In *Walden* in the chapter entitled “Solitude” Thoreau asserts a certain independence from the need for human friendship, while in “Winter Visitors” he obliquely discusses his friendships with fellow transcendentalists Channing, Alcott and Emerson (Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 129–39, 267–70). *Knowledge*: pp. 18, 20, 90, 95–97, 100, 321–22, 327, 330–31. *Achievement* in his chosen calling—writing—is referred to obliquely yet stirringly on pp. 16–21, 162.

¹⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 76.

justice, and generosity, but also intellectual virtues such as curiosity, imagination, intelligence, and alertness, and even physical virtues such as health, beauty, and hardiness. Thoreauvian virtues crucial for the construction of an environmental virtue ethics include temperance, integrity, sensibility to beauty and, perhaps most important, simplicity.

Thoreau's "simplicity" is not simplicity of thought or experience, which he seeks to complicate and enrich. It is rather a limited use of external goods, combined with a focus on the task at hand. Simplicity, to borrow a concept from ecology, is a "keystone" virtue for Thoreau. It plays an important role in stabilizing and focusing our lives, and allows the development of a rich character manifesting diverse virtues. In a complicated world, such simplicity allows us to understand the effects of our actions and act with integrity.¹¹ Simplicity is also one key to freedom, for if we live simply, we need not trade most of our time to an employer, and can spend it as we wish.¹² Simplicity will be an important virtue for any environmental virtue ethics, for the obvious reason that living simply decreases our impact on other living things; but Thoreau, along with many environmentalists, also claims that living simply will improve our own lives.

Aldo Leopold can also be interpreted as an environmental virtue ethicist, as Bill Shaw recently argued in this journal.¹³ While Leopold's classic essay "The Land Ethic" makes a moving plea for moral extensionism and human self-restraint, he devotes much of *A Sand County Almanac* to showing the opportunities for knowledge and self-development made possible by a greater attentiveness to nature. "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us," he writes in the forward:

When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, *nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture.*¹⁴

Along with ethical extensionism, then, Leopold describes a parallel aesthetic and intellectual extensionism, in which "our ability to perceive quality in nature begins . . . with the pretty, [and] expands through successive stages of the beautiful to ["higher"] values as yet uncaptured by language."¹⁵ Capturing such values improves our lives. "To promote perception is the only truly creative part" of recreation management, he writes further on. "This fact is

¹¹ Ibid., p. 91.

¹² Ibid., pp. 15, 63.

¹³ Shaw, "A Virtue Ethics Approach to Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic."

¹⁴ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), pp. xviii–xix (emphasis added).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

important, and its potential power for bettering ‘the good life’ only dimly understood.”¹⁶ Here, and elsewhere, Leopold puts “the good life” in ironic quotation marks, suggesting that the *truly* good life is not defined solely or even mainly in material terms.

Leopold might appear to undermine this interpretation, when he writes of a “formula” for conservation which is “too easy to accomplish anything worthwhile,” continuing:

It defines no right or wrong, assigns no obligation, calls for no sacrifice, implies no change in the current philosophy of values. In respect of land-use, it urges only enlightened self-interest.”¹⁷

Here Leopold accepts the modern dichotomy of altruistic moral action, as defined by moral philosophy, versus selfish, hedonistic action, as dealt with by the economists. This acceptance clarifies his moral extensionism but obscures his environmental virtue ethics. In fact, *A Sand County Almanac* explicitly and repeatedly asks us to recognize our “enlightened self-interest,” contrasting it with a benighted, economic and *mistaken* definition of self-interest.¹⁸

Wealthy Americans have reached the point, Leopold believes, where they cannot better their lives through increased wealth or possessions. Instead, building on a foundation of material sufficiency, they should strive to live lives that are rich in perception and knowledge of their surroundings. Along these lines Leopold makes a pioneering plea for a more environmentally-informed understanding of human history. He praises and—more importantly—demonstrates an aesthetic appreciation of plants, animals, and places.¹⁹ Reading the many dramas written in the animal tracks on his farm, or wading half a day in a marsh for a closer view of a family of grebes, he exhibits the peculiar virtues of the naturalist: patience, eagerness, physical endurance, persistence, a keen perception, skill in making fine distinctions, precise description. Such activities make us happier and better people, he suggests.²⁰ They allow us to pursue knowledge and enrich our experience, without diminishing nature. Leopold

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. xvii, 50, 291.

¹⁹ For a detailed argument that aesthetic value can ground the preservation of nature, see Eugene Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989).

²⁰ Although superficially more modest than Thoreau’s *Walden*, Leopold’s *Almanac* also suggests that its author is a better person than most, due to his knowledge and finer appreciation of the world around him. Leopold whizzing across the former tall-grass prairie on the “Illinois Bus Ride” is the only passenger who knows its natural history or recognizes its remnants. This knowledge makes him better than them. The nice way to put such a point is to say that “you can improve your life through these activities,” or, even more nicely, to simply suggest by example that such possibilities are open to the reader. Leopold does the latter. Thoreau takes the more direct route, saying that “a person is a better person if they do *x*, *y*, or *z*, rather than pile up useless possessions,” or, even more obnoxiously, “*I* am better than *you*, because I know *x* or do *y*.”

asks us to conceive our own flourishing in ways which sustain—indeed, depend on—the flourishing of the natural communities of which we are part.

Reading *A Sand County Almanac*, it is striking how often Leopold praises the virtues of the nonhuman world: the “grace” of a plover, the “valor” of a chickadee, the “accumulated wisdom” of a stand of pine trees—a natural wisdom which silences the people who walk below—the “harmony” of a river ecosystem.²¹ These expressions are more than metaphors. Human and non-human beings may share some virtues because we are in some respects similar. “How like fish we are,” Leopold muses, in an interval between casts:

... ready, nay eager, to seize upon whatever new thing some wind of circumstance shakes down upon the river of time! And how we rue our haste, finding the gilded morsel to contain a hook. Even so, I think there is some virtue in eagerness, whether its object prove true or false. How utterly dull would be a wholly prudent man, or trout, or world!²²

Henry David Thoreau, fellow angler, concurs, adding that other species may exhibit virtues quite different from the human, which are no less genuine for all that:

Away with the superficial and selfish phil-*anthropy* of men,—who knows what admirable virtue of fishes may be below low-water mark, bearing up against a hard destiny, not admired by that fellow creature who alone can appreciate it!²³

Environmental ethics here takes us back to philosophy’s prehistory, beyond the reach of the army of philosophers who, from Aristotle onward, have patiently explained that only human beings have virtue—back to Homer, who could speak of the *arete* of a horse and have all Greece understand him.²⁴ This naturalizing of virtue is no mere literary conceit, but the very foundation of Leopold’s land ethic. “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community,” he writes. “It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”²⁵ Leopold identifies these three qualities as key virtues of

Nevertheless, the authors imply the same ethical contrast by writing books in which they talk about themselves and their experiences to such a great extent. An environmental virtue ethics, like any virtue ethics, is essentially inegalitarian.

²¹ Leopold, *Almanac*, pp. 37, 94, 92, 158–59.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²³ Thoreau, *Week*, p. 37 (emphasis in the original). Note the fish puns.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1, chap. 9. Similarly, perhaps, an environmental virtue ethics counters twenty-five centuries of privileging the mental by re-physicalizing the virtues. “If you have come quietly and humbly, as you should to any spot that can be beautiful only once,” Leopold writes, if you “watch closely,” “you may surprise a fox-red deer, standing knee-high in the garden of his delight” (Leopold, *Almanac*, pp. 55–56). Quietness and close watching are part of the virtue of humility here, not merely contingent aspects of the experience.

²⁵ Leopold, *Almanac*, p. 262. Just as *nobility* is a key ethical term for Thoreau, so *beauty* is a key ethical term for Leopold. Here they clearly take us back to an ancient conception of ethics.

natural and mixed human/natural communities; in a sense, they are “super-virtues,” which promote the continuous generation of virtue in individual species and organisms, including us. Recognizing nature’s excellence and ability to generate excellence gives us strong reasons to preserve it, for nature’s sake and for our own.²⁶

Rachel Carson has been called the founder of the modern environmental movement, which some date, plausibly, to the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962. *Silent Spring*’s case rests above all on numerous factual and scientific accounts of the use and abuse of agricultural and industrial chemicals. Ethically, its plea for restraint rests on the triple foundation of human health considerations, the moral considerability of nonhuman beings, and the value to humans of preserving wild nature.

Doubtless, most important for many readers were Carson’s chapters on acute pesticide poisoning and these chemicals’ potential to cause cancer and human birth defects. For these readers, Carson states the moral clearly: “Man, however much he may like to pretend the contrary, is part of nature. [He cannot] escape a pollution that is now so thoroughly distributed throughout the world.”²⁷

²⁶ Responding to an earlier presentation of this paper, Thomas Hill, Jr. commented: “The term *naturalizing of virtue* suggests that what traits are virtues for a natural kind of being simply follows from an adequate account of its natural properties. If so, nonhuman animals and pine trees are capable of having, quite literally, some of the same virtues as we are because we have in common some of the same relevant natural characteristics. These are at best controversial philosophical claims. One does not have to suppose that the word *virtue* applies only to human character traits in order to doubt that normative terms, like *virtue* and *excellence*, and the names of specific virtues, do not reduce to any set of natural properties. . . . Would we not do better simply to admit that moral virtue terms, like *valor*, *prudence*, and the like, are extended to birds and trees metaphorically, to express a recommended attitude rather than to make a literal claim capable of ‘naturalistic’ justification?” The question of what makes a virtue a virtue, for people, birds, or pine trees, is not easy to answer. Aristotle, whom I follow, defines the virtues as qualities which allow a person to fulfill his or her proper or characteristic functions, and to flourish as a good of his or her kind. This definition seems readily transferable to nonhuman beings, *provided* we see some important or foundational good in their being goods of their own kinds, and we bother to learn their characteristic functions. The question of what virtues we share with nonhuman beings, then, will largely depend on how we characterize the lives that we and they lead. We might fall into anthropocentric error in two ways here: praising other beings for qualities which they do not have, but which we value in humans; failing to praise other beings for their characteristic virtues, because these are not virtues in humans. As Hill correctly notes, the phrase “naturalizing virtue” has metaethical implications. I provide no general theory of virtue in this paper. But regarding both human and nonhuman virtue, I believe a correct theory will drop the notion of “proper” functions, as it is found in Aristotle and the natural law tradition, and instead consider “characteristic” functions, the things we typically do. Virtues, on this view, will be those qualities which help us succeed in our typical activities; to do whatever we do, well. What traits are virtues for a natural kind of being will follow from an account of its life, along with a belief that such a life is worth living. This is “naturalizing virtue” in the right way. I can see no better foundation for our virtue judgments, for humans or nonhumans (for the full text of Hill’s comments, see the forthcoming special issue of *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* devoted to environmental virtue ethics).

²⁷ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1962), p. 169.

Carson herself seems to have been equally if not more concerned with the destruction of wild nature and its resultant human loss. "I wrote [*Silent Spring*]," Carson told *Life* magazine, "because I think there is a great danger that the next generation will have no chance to know nature as we do."²⁸ As she finished *Silent Spring*, she was planning her next book, a guide to nature for parents and children, tentatively titled *Help Your Child to Wonder*.

Silent Spring clearly shows Rachel Carson's concern for all of life, human and nonhuman. Many of its arguments explicitly assert or implicitly rely on the moral considerability of nonhuman organisms:

These creatures [birds, rabbits, domestic pets] are innocent of any harm to man. Indeed, by their very existence they and their fellows make his life more pleasant. Yet he rewards them with a death that is not only sudden but horrible.

These insects [honeybees, wild bees and other pollinators], so essential to our agriculture and indeed to our landscape as we know it, *deserve something better from us* than the senseless destruction of their habitat.²⁹

Silent Spring also expresses Carson's belief that preserving wild nature helps promote human happiness and flourishing. She approvingly quotes Paul Shepard and William O. Douglas on the aesthetic value and intellectual stimulation provided by wildlife and wild places, and adds her own arguments:

To the bird watcher, the suburbanite who derives joy from birds in his garden, the hunter, the fisherman or the explorer of wild regions, anything that destroys the wildlife of an area for even a single year has deprived him of pleasure to which he has a legitimate right.

Over increasingly large areas of the United States, spring now comes unheralded by the return of the birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were filled with the beauty of bird song . . . Can anyone imagine anything so cheerless and dreary as a springtime without a robin's song?

Who has decided—who has the *right* to decide—for the countless legions of people who were not consulted that the supreme value is a world without insects, even though it be also a sterile world ungraced by the curving wing of a bird in flight. The decision is that of the authoritarian temporarily entrusted with power; he has made it during a moment of inattention by millions to whom beauty and the ordered world of nature still have a meaning that is deep and imperative.³⁰

Before we can appreciate such ethical arguments, however, we must appre-

²⁸ Quoted in Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 424.

²⁹ Carson, *Silent Spring*, pp. 95, 73 (emphasis added).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 97, 107, 118–19. Shepard and Douglas quoted on pp. 22 and 72.

ciate wild nature, and we cannot appreciate what we have not seen, experienced, or at least imagined. Carson's bestselling natural history writings—she once had two books on the *New York Times* best-seller list at the same time— took readers to places wilder and harder to imagine than any visited by Thoreau or Leopold: arctic tundra in the grip of winter; the weird, dark depths of the ocean; microscopic planktonic worlds. Just as surely, Carson uncovered the many details of nature close to hand: the fishing techniques of herons and skimmers; the fine structures and hidden beauties of jellyfish. Moreover, she was a great explainer of relationships and connections. “It is now clear that in the sea nothing lives to itself,” she writes, and what holds true in the sea holds true throughout the biosphere.³¹

This oft-repeated message resounds somewhat ominously in *Silent Spring*, but even here Carson's clear message is that life's complexity and interconnections are cause for appreciation and celebration, if also for restraint. “One might easily suppose,” she writes in an earlier book, “that nothing at all lived in or on or under these waters of the sea's edge,” but by its end we know differently, and we come to the edge of the sea with new eyes, a better sense of “the spectacle of life in all its varied manifestations,” and a desire to learn more.³² Carson never doubted that increased knowledge was more precious than increased material wealth, or that a more widespread knowledge of nature would motivate people to protect it.³³ Knowledge, for her, was not simply learned, but lived and experienced, engaging and developing the senses and emotions as well as the mind, our imaginations as much as our analytic skills.

Carson saw humility as, perhaps, the cardinal environmental virtue. She concluded in *Silent Spring* that

The “control of nature” is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man . . . [The] extraordinary capacities of life have been ignored by the practitioners of chemical control who have brought to their task . . . no humility before the vast forces with which they tamper.³⁴

Speaking directly to millions of Americans on “CBS Reports” a few months before her death, she repeated the message: “We still talk in terms of conquest. . . . I think we're challenged, as mankind has never been challenged before, to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature but of ourselves.”³⁵

³¹ Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), p. 39.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 15.

³³ Carson, *Silent Spring*, p. 118.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

³⁵ Carson on “CBS Reports,” 1962. Quoted in Lear, *Rachel Carson*, p. 450. Hill has also suggested that “a proper humility” is an important environmental virtue. Hill likewise broaches the possibility that “aesthetic sensibility” is a virtue, a position which Carson and our other naturalists would certainly endorse. See Hill, “Ideals of Human Excellence,” pp. 216, 219, 223.

Carson's own genuine humility was no meek quiescence, however. She had a strong sense of her own abilities and responsibilities, shown in all areas of her life: personal, professional, and, when the need arose, political. No one else, she realized, had the combination of literary skill and scientific knowledge to write *Silent Spring*. Her determination to publish her book and defend its conclusions publicly, in the face of declining health and a well-financed, personal smear campaign by the chemical and agribusiness industries, is one of the heroic chapters in conservation history. In her final years as earlier, Carson epitomized the virtues that environmentalists will need in order to fight, and win, future battles: tenacity, intelligence, courage, and a passionate commitment to nature.

III. COMMON THEMES

Consideration of the very different careers of these three conservation giants suggests that there will be much variety as individuals live their own good lives in nature.³⁶ Nevertheless, certain common positions emerge in their writings which I believe any environmental virtue ethics worthy of the name must also include:

(1) *Az desire to put economic life in its proper place—that is, as a support for comfortable and decent human lives, rather than as an engine powering endlessly more acquisition and consumption.* Thoreau focuses on our personal economies, Carson on whole sectors of the modern industrial economy; both approaches are necessary. All three reject a purely economic view of nature—this is the essence of Leopold's A/B cleavage. All three express, not just disagreement, but contempt, for people who fail to acknowledge higher, noneconomic values. Yet, all three acknowledge the centrality of economic problems and the need for conservationists (and others) to meet them head on: "economy is a subject which admits of being treated with levity," Thoreau writes, "but it cannot so be disposed of."³⁷ In seeking to subordinate economic life to life as a whole, environmental virtue ethics sounds an ancient and very necessary ethical theme.

(2) *A commitment to science, combined with an appreciation of its limits.* Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson were not just interested bystanders but active participants in the science of their day, striving to learn as much as they could about those aspects of nature which intrigued them. At the same time, they resisted a cold objectivity and insisted that science be supplemented by

³⁶ "A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of his land. Signatures of course differ, whether written with axe or pen, and this is as it should be" (Leopold, *Almanac*, p. 73). "This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one center" (Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 11).

³⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 20. On Thoreau's economic philosophy, see Philip Cafaro, "Thoreau and the Place of Economy," *Center: Architecture and Design in America* 11 (1999): 39–47.

personal acquaintance, appreciation, and celebration of wild things and wild places. They cultivated strong ties to particular places and worked to protect them. Carson was in some ways the first and greatest conservation biologist, deploying her knowledge and eloquence in service to nature, in contrast to the Baconian technicians who sought to dominate and radically transform nature for human benefit (and profits). As Linda Lear documents in her recent Carson biography, *Silent Spring* sparked a vigorous debate among scientists on the nature and purpose of science.³⁸ An environmental virtue ethics—concerned to know and protect nature—must take up this debate.

(3) *Nonanthropocentrism*. As shown above, Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson are all resolutely nonanthropocentric: their early love and continuing interest in the nonhuman world led them to recognize its moral considerability. Leopold states this memorably when he asserts that “a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”³⁹ Thus, an environmental virtue ethics is not an alternative to environmental ethics which focus on the moral considerability of wild nature, but rather completes them. This clarification should answer an objection some readers might have, that an environmental virtue ethics is necessarily anthropocentric, since it focuses on *human beings*’ enlightened self-interest. An environmental virtue ethics may start from a concern for human interests, but it cannot remain there, since it says it is in our interest to explore and experience the world, and in doing so we discover intrinsically valuable nonhuman beings. Furthermore, an environmental virtue ethics does not assume that our self-interest—even our enlightened self-interest—always coincides with the interests of other nonhuman beings, or that human interests should always prevail when there is a conflict of interests.⁴⁰

Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson also remind us that nonanthropocentrism is both an ethical position and an intellectual task, and the latter demands as much

³⁸ Lear, *Rachel Carson*, pp. 428–56.

³⁹ Leopold, *Almanac*, p. 240.

⁴⁰ But what should we do when there is a conflict of important interests between human and nonhuman beings? Perhaps my failure to ask or answer this question here fed the skepticism of one anonymous reviewer, who doubted that virtue ethics could help “solve real ethical quandaries.” It isn’t clear that deontological, utilitarian or contractarian moral theories fare better in the face of such quandaries; still, that hardly absolves virtue ethics from its alleged failure to speak to such hard questions. What should we do when human and nonhuman interests conflict? Neither Leopold nor Carson ask this question directly, insofar as I know. Thoreau answers it at length in the chapter of *Walden* entitled “The Bean-Field.” There he notes that woodchucks “have nibbled for me a quarter of an acre clean” out of two and a half acres planted, and immediately goes on to ask: “But what right had I to oust johnswort and the rest, and break up their ancient herb garden?” (p. 155). His answer—the only answer, he suggests, which could justify such vandalism—is that like his neighbor the woodchuck, he had to eat or starve. Thoreau’s more general answer to “the question” seems to be as follows: take only what you truly need from the earth, appreciate what nature does with the remainder, and be grateful for both. This, I believe, is the best answer we can give to this question.

from us as the former. In particular, it demands repeated attention to the nonhuman world: the setting aside of our works and purposes and a concentration on nature's own stories and realities.⁴¹ Experienced often enough and set within the proper intellectual frameworks, we may, we hope, see ourselves truly as parts of a more-than-human whole. Our naturalists are convinced that such nonanthropocentrism is a part of wisdom. Here again, an environmental virtue ethics touches on venerable themes.

(4) *An appreciation of the wild and support for wilderness protection.* Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson all seek out wild nature close to home, and all three argue eloquently for the protection of wilderness areas further afield. Protecting such areas is the key to preserving individual species and organisms, as contemporary conservation biology reminds us. But wilderness preservation also preserves human possibilities. While Leopold emphasizes the contribution of wilderness to human freedom and self-reliance, Carson emphasizes its role in stretching our imaginations and teaching us humility.⁴² She repeatedly invokes the ocean's radical non-humanity in *The Sea Around Us*, asking readers to imagine underwater "tides so vast they are invisible and uncomprehended by the senses of man," or lights traveling over the water "that flash and fade away, lights that come and go for reasons meaningless to man," though "man, in his vanity, subconsciously attributes a human origin" to them.⁴³ This ocean wilderness teaches humility and wisdom, she believes, for modern man

. . . cannot control or change the ocean as, in his brief tenancy on earth, he has subdued and plundered the continents. In the artificial world of his cities and towns, he often forgets the true nature of his planet and the long vistas of its history, in which the existence of the race of men has occupied a mere moment of time.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Yuriko Saito, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," *Environmental Ethics* 20 (1998): 135–49.

⁴² Baird Callicott has tried to divorce Leopold's land ethic from a commitment to wilderness preservation, unconvincingly, in my opinion. Whatever the merits of Callicott's views on the misguidedness of wilderness preservation efforts, they are clearly a long way from Leopold's views. After all, Leopold was the prime mover behind creation of the first Forest Service "primitive area" and a founder of the Wilderness Society. For Leopold on the value of wildness and wilderness see Leopold, *Almanac*, pp. 104–08, 120, 137–141, 150–58, 258–60, 264–79, 281–90. For Callicott on the relative unimportance of wilderness to Leopold, see J. Baird Callicott, "The Wilderness Idea Revisited: The Sustainable Development Alternative," in J. Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), pp. 337–39, and J. Baird Callicott and Eric Freyfogle's introduction to Aldo Leopold, *For the Health of the Land: Previously Unpublished Essays and Other Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999), pp. 3–7.

⁴³ Rachel Carson, *The Sea around Us*, rev. ed. (New York: Signet, 1961), pp. 106, 45.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30. Carson first published these words in 1951. By the time a revised edition was published ten years later, she and the rest of the scientific community were much more aware of anthropogenic changes and threats to the ocean. See *ibid.*, pp. x–xii.

Wildness must be known and experienced, on pain of ignorance, arrogance, and impoverishment.⁴⁵

(5) *A bedrock belief that life is good: both human and nonhuman.* “Joy!” Thoreau shouts from his perch along the shores of Walden pond, and we feel it too with Leopold along the Rio Gavilan and with Carson at dawn by the edge of the sea. All three are great lovers of spring, searching for its earliest signs in Concord marshes, on Wisconsin hills, and in the depths of winter in the mid-Atlantic.⁴⁶ All three are early risers. Indeed, Thoreau asks, “who would not be early to rise, and rise earlier and earlier every successive day of his life, till he became unspeakably healthy, wealthy, and wise?”⁴⁷ These are some of the commonalities in these environmental philosophers’ visions of human flourishing; visions which are securely grounded in their own experiences and which they worked to realize in their own lives.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson provide inspiring accounts of human beings living well in nature. They suggest to me the rudiments of an environmental virtue ethics which is noble and challenging, and makes room for the rest of creation. To arguments for preserving nature in our own materialistic self-interest, and arguments for preserving nature for its intrinsic value, they add arguments for preserving nature in order to preserve human possibilities and help us become better people. That such arguments may convince and inspire is proven by these authors’ enduring popularity and by their roles in shaping modern environmental consciousness.

There remains, of course, much to be said, and even more to be done, in furthering an environmental virtue ethics. Some of the challenges to the creation of an environmental virtue ethics are common to virtue ethics generally: is it possible to specify objective, unchanging standards of human excellence, or is excellence largely a matter of fitting in well to particular, historically contingent situations? Are the virtues unified or sometimes in conflict? Is a single, unitary and objective account of human virtue possible or desirable? Philosophers’ faith in reason and our desire for theoretical simplicity lead us to choose the first options noted, but there might be limits to the possibility of finding such all-encompassing answers, and to their value if we did find them.

There are also issues more specific to an environmental virtue ethics. Perhaps the most important is the “artificial alternatives” argument: that when

⁴⁵ Thoreau, of course, is the premier poet and defender of wilderness. See Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 207–08, 317–18, and “Walking,” in Henry David Thoreau, *The Natural History Essays* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1980), pp. 93–136.

⁴⁶ Carson, *Sea*, p. 47.

⁴⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 127.

we have specified the good human life, we will find that it can be lived just as well in a largely artificial world: that we do not need wild nature. The answer here, I believe, must build on an appreciation of diversity and of the radical otherness of nonhuman nature; and on defending an account of the good life focused on developing our higher capabilities, against accounts focused on status-seeking or increased consumption. For such an appreciation and defense, one need not argue the absolute superiority of the wild over the tame, but should rather try to specify an optimal mix of wildness and culture in individuals and landscapes. Given human dominance over so much of the biosphere, such considerations should strongly support the preservation of what wild nature remains, as well as extensive ecological restoration and "rewilding."

These and other complications exist; yet, the need for an environmental virtue ethics remains, for a strong case can be made that greater attention to our true happiness would do as much to protect the environment as the acceptance of the intrinsic value of wild nature for which so many environmental ethicists have argued. Both, if taken to heart, would result in less consumption and a more conscious production, and hence in less environmental damage.⁴⁸

Furthermore, issues of self-interest play an important part in environmental conflicts; if only for this reason, they compel our attention. When the dam builders and the river lovers argue before a town council or national parliament, they often clash over whether a free-flowing river and its wild inhabitants have an intrinsic value which must be respected. But they also clash over what sort of society is better: one with cheaper electricity and more factories, or one where it is still possible to walk along a natural river and see and study its wild inhabitants. Economists rightly point out that decisions concerning use or preservation always involve "opportunity costs." I believe a full *ethical* accounting must also tote up these "costs and benefits." It would be a mistake to dismiss such considerations and arguments as anthropocentric. They are important for the protagonists, and for coming to correct ethical judgments.

⁴⁸ Strong arguments for this conclusion include Lester Milbrath, "Redefining the Good Life in a Sustainable Society," *Environmental Values* 2 (1993): 261–69, and Jan Boersema, "Environmental Quality and the Quality of Our Way of Life," *Environmental Values* 4 (1995): 97–108.