Environmental Virtue Ethics: A New Direction for Environmental Ethics

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In this essay, I first extend the insights of virtue ethics into environmental ethics and examine the possible dangers of this approach. Second, I analyze some qualities of character that an environmentally virtuous person must possess. Third, I evaluate “humility” as an environmental virtue, specifically, the position of Thomas E. Hill, Jr. I conclude that Hill’s conception of “proper” humility can be more adequately explicated by associating it with another virtue, environmental “openness.”

I. ENVIRONMENTAL VIRTUE ETHICS

Much environmental ethics today involves interminable debates: animal rightists entrenched against the wildlife managers, preservationists pitted against conservationists. Since these polar extremes seem to be incommensurable, I have turned to a different, more fruitful approach, one using insights from “virtue ethics.” Although virtue ethics has a long classical tradition, its application to environmental ethics is new. Nevertheless, it is often reflected in the kind of questions asked at the start when ordinary people begin about think of ethical issues concerning the environment. When philosophers start, their standard approach is to ask such questions as “Do animals have rights?” or “Why is it wrong

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1 I use the term virtue in a modified version of the sense developed by Aristotle. An environmental virtue refers to a mean between two vices, qualities the possession of which will partially enable a person to lead the environmentally good life. The good for humans in this case is living in harmony with nature. I focus on the virtues of character rather than the intellectual virtues, realizing though that a full account of environmental virtues has to consider both kinds. (A worthwhile exploration in this area would be to examine just what is involved in “thinking like a mountain.”) Environmental vices would be those qualities of a person the possession of which would frustrate the movement of a person toward the environmentally good life.

to wantonly destroy natural entities?” “Do they have intrinsic value?” In accordance with this new approach, the questions are “What sort of person would wantonly destroy natural entities?” or “What sort of personal qualities are needed for the humane treatment of nonhuman creatures?” While it may be a new approach philosophically, it is, nonetheless, a familiar one to many environmentalists who have long angst over environmental destruction.

In this essay, I first examine what is required to construct an environmental virtue ethics and consider possible dangers. Second, I analyze some qualities of character that an environmentally virtuous person must possess. Third, I evaluate “humility” as an environmental virtue, specifically, the position of Thomas E. Hill, Jr. I conclude that Hill’s conception of “proper” humility can be more adequately explicated by associating it with another virtue, “openness.”

Unlike traditional ethical theories, which focus on the acts of the agent, virtue ethics focuses on the nature of the agent, specifically, on his or her virtues. The holding of these virtues is intrinsically valuable. Every ethics must have some fundamental good. Virtue ethics begins with a primary concept of what is good—the morally good person—and derives and defines secondary concepts in terms of their relation to that primitive undefined concept. Two basic differences follow from this approach. (1) Different models of practical reasoning are employed, focusing on long-term patterns of action rather than immediate cases as atomic, isolated, and particular choices. (2) The preferred motivation of an agent is for virtue itself; virtue is sought for its own sake—that is, because it is intrinsically valuable.

These differences affect the way that environmental ethics is structured. The first difference is congenial enough to environmentalists, including environmental ethicists who place ample emphasis on long-term patterns and interconnected relations. One main point of any position on environmental consciousness is that actions taken now have far-reaching consequences that may not be known at the time of the action. According to such a position, a moral agent who habitually looks to the long-term effects of actions will more likely make environmentally sound judgments. An environmental virtue ethics seeks to foster the development of agents with such an ecological or holistic way of thinking.

One claim of the environmental movement has been that old, short-sighted patterns of thought are partly responsible for the environmental crises that we now face. The thrust of environmental virtue ethics is to foster new habits of thought and action in the moral agent—not just to get the immediate decision made right, but to reorient all actions henceforth in terms of a holistic, ecologically based way of thinking. Such an ethic requires much input from the ecologically based

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4 To be sure, this is also the case for some forms of utilitarianism. Virtue ethics does share some features of other moral theories.
sciences in order for agents to think and act within a new environmental paradigm.

In accordance with the second difference, the basic motivation in environmentally informed virtue ethics is to perform environmentally virtuous actions for their own sake. Traditional environmental ethics have focused on doing certain actions because they produce consequences that are judged to be environmentally good (the long-term view just advocated), or because they are derived from some standard reflecting what is intrinsically good. In contrast, in environmental virtue ethics long-term consequences are complemented by an immediate good, the environmentally virtuous, which is considered intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable for its own sake.

Part of the thrust of environmental virtue ethics involves the determination of just what environmental virtues and vices are so as to make clear who an environmentally good person is. As a result, a significant portion of such ethics focuses on paradigmatic individuals who exemplify virtues, or, alternatively, perhaps on persons who are “exemplary” in their vices. We are looking for model persons, rather than model cases. Examples include studies of the character and actions of such environmental heroes as Aldo Leopold, John Muir, and David Brower, as well as such environmental villains as James Watt.

Environmental virtue ethics must provide a theoretical foundation for locating its primary concept of intrinsic value in the nature of the environmental virtues themselves. In addition, it has to provide a moral psychology showing that it is possible to be an environmentally virtuous person and, moreover, that the achievement of such environmental virtue is desirable, along with or perhaps instead of other concepts that contribute to the development of a virtuous person. This demonstration constitutes its groundwork and its architecture.

There are problems to be addressed, partly those of virtue ethics in general, partly those specific to environmental virtue ethics. Robert Louden has identified some dangers implicit in virtue ethics generally.7 What he has to say can be applied to environmental ethics. The first problem, which arises out of virtue ethics’ focus on agents rather than on actions, either the act itself or its consequences, is that virtue ethics cannot give specific moral guidance on applied ethics issues. According to Louden, it is the details of the local case, not just the general, long-range attitude of the agent, that determines the making of particular decisions. If so, environmental virtue ethics cannot guide us in resolving specific environmental quandaries. It is true that virtue ethics do not abound with case studies; nevertheless, traditionally based environmental ethics does not focus on case studies either. In general, environmental ethics is as theoretical as it is

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5 For discussions on the life and significance of Leopold, see *Companion to A Sand County Almanac*, ed. J. Baird Callicott (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).


applied; it seeks a new world view as much as a particular decision. The basic underlying insight of environmental virtue ethics is that new ways of thinking and acting are needed, rather than, like lawyers arguing in court, better ways of extrapolating an ethic out of the study of prior decisions.

The kind of guidance provided by paradigmatic figures in the environmental field is admittedly vague. What does it mean to be an environmental hero? We are not told precisely how to act; rather we are told to “think like a mountain” (if we listen to Aldo Leopold) or to “monkey-wrench” destructive projects (if we listen to Edward Abbey). In fact, many of the charismatical environmental figures deliberately avoid telling others how to act, trying instead to set examples of living that embody environmental insights.

Against the charge that virtue ethics cannot assess acts in abstraction from the acting agents, environmental virtue ethicists can reply that agents should not be abstracted from what they do. These heroes are not living abstract lives. They act concretely. They are not ethicists abstracted from their ethical rules. They are not agents or thinkers who separate themselves out from nature. Indeed, it is precisely this separation that has contributed to the alienation from nature that is common to our culture. Viewed in this way, environmental virtue ethics turns what at first seems like a problem area into an advantage over other theories.

There is, nevertheless, still a problem that environmental virtue ethics cannot yet explain. Why do tragic outcomes result from the behavior of morally virtuous persons? Even with the best attitude in the world, someone can bungle his or her decisions with the wrong facts. The world is full of “virtuous persons” who are inept at handling details in complex circumstances. The danger to such an ethics is that it can blind us to the vices of environmentally virtuous persons by focusing on their overall character, when immediate, common-sense wisdom, based on competent technical knowledge, is urgently needed to deal with the decisions at hand. In terms of the analysis of humility, on which I focus below, one can ask whether “be humble” is helpful advice when one is wondering what the minimum viable spotted owl population is in the Pacific Northwest, and when and whether to stop cutting timber in order to preserve the species.

While many people hold Edward Abbey up as an environmental hero, most of them would have a difficult time justifying his advocacy of sabotage for environmental causes. Because his comments border on mere rhetoric, he does not really offer any help to most of us who need reasons for making trade-offs when we have to decide between conflicting actions. To argue that environmentally virtuous persons, with “insights flowing out of their characters,” will simply “know in their hearts” the right action in critical decisions is not enough.

Should I involve myself with a group that practices “ecotage” or should I refuse to do so, even though my refusal may well result in environmentally damaging consequences? It is difficult to see how environmental virtue ethics can answer such a question. Yet, if it cannot, it cannot answer a legitimate request for help. Some environmental yardstick is necessary to judge the various moral character-
istics of persons. Furthermore, each individual person has a moral character that grows, in which attitudes change over time. Aldo Leopold is seen as a hero not because he advocated the extermination of wolves and other predators from national forests (which he first did), but because he reformed his life when he adopted policies guided by environmental and ecological insights that he eventually came to love. Because of such changes in moral character, for good or ill, environmental virtue ethics runs the risk of having to argue away, or set aside, particular actions of otherwise environmentally virtuous persons that are “out of character.” To avoid this problem, a virtue ethics theory must come up with some way of showing that particular bad actions or moral vices do not detract from the moral goodness of an environmentally virtuous person.

Any attempt to solve this problem brings us face to face with epistemic issues that make up the second area of difficulty for environmental virtue ethics. How are we to distinguish the environmentally virtuous person from one who is not? This difficulty haunts virtue ethics because our only basis for judgment is behavioral evidence, that is, actions. Even the words that go with the actions are, strictly speaking, verbal behavior. We have no special way of peering into the soul of each person to determine if he or she is indeed “thinking like a mountain.” Unlike actions, which can be observed and interpreted, access to inner character is elusive, indirect, inferential, and uncertain. Thus, it is on the basis of actions judged by some criteria that we evaluate by back inference whether the agent is virtuous, not the other way around. We do not determine what actions are right by watching what virtuous persons do. Rather we determine who is virtuous on the basis of their performance of right actions.

The epistemic problem arises because many of those involved in the project of formulating an environmental ethics are trying to create a new tradition of what is good and bad, right and wrong. According to MacIntryre, virtues always occur in the context of some tradition. The epistemic problem appears when the new tradition does not share the same standards of what is good with the previous one. When such conflicts develop, one has to struggle for a growing consensus as to what is good. Presented in this manner, the epistemic problem can be explained simply as the expected outcome of the creation of a new tradition.

Another possible problem area for virtue ethics is that it focuses on only one kind of end, the performance of actions for their own sake, rather than on the product of those actions, leading to a charge that virtue ethics is concerned more with style than substance. It isn’t so much what you actually do, but how much charisma you have as you do it. Viewed in this way, environmental virtue ethics seems to be open to the charge that it is concerned with acting well rather than with the outcome of environmental actions.

This charge is an especially forceful objection when the “style” urged is humility. It is a hard style to cultivate. Should having proper humility, for instance,

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always take priority over any consequences of being that way? What if my cultivation of humility jeopardizes a rare bird species because I am too reticent to be aggressive in its defense? Is environmental virtue always to be sought despite the social and economic consequences that might result? Environmental virtue ethics appears to be committed to this position.

To this challenge it can be replied that the problem is an illusory one that disappears when we go beyond the short-term and immediate consequences of our actions to consider the long-term and global picture. Local harm may occur as a result of certain environmental solutions. For example, loggers in the Pacific Northwest may suffer a loss in the number of jobs open to them. However, in the long run the greater damage to remaining old-growth forests is avoided—and new jobs may be created as a result of related shifts in economics. With such an answer, style is conflated with substance by arguing that in the long run being virtuous is always the best policy. Nevertheless, such claims have struck many as utopian.

This difficulty is related to the second problem area. Because environmentally based ethics must be applied in a pluralistic society in which there is no broad crosscultural consensus concerning what is environmentally right or good, it has often been charged that most proposed solutions to environmental problems are advocated out of a utopian ethics that cannot be effectively implemented in our culture. This criticism need not be a fatal objection to environmental virtue ethics, for what is often advocated are new local solutions guided by global awareness. Environmental virtue ethicists can accept the charge that broad-scale changes cannot be implemented on the grounds that large-scale projects often have unforeseen consequences of great magnitude, and argue, in terms of it, for the creation of small or appropriate communities and projects that foster the development of such environmental virtues such as humility. To the charge that it is utopian, advocates of environmental virtue ethics can likewise reply that they seek workable ways of living with nature that foster changes in personal virtue rather than large societal changes. Such changes are attitudinal changes that come from within. They are not imposed from without. To the extent that environmental virtue ethics develops an alternative moral foundation, it exists at a personal level within communities. If it is utopian, it is a utopian ethics that produces attitudinal reconciliation and reformed life style.

II. HUMILITY AND ARROGANCE

In his attempt to provide a preliminary moral psychology of the environmentally virtuous person, Thomas E. Hill, Jr. has presented humility as his cardinal environmental virtue. According to Hill, an environmentally virtuous person feels that it is morally wrong to uproot the natural environment or to treat nature merely as a resource. He seeks to account for the moral discomfort felt by many people when confronted with the destruction of nature. As Hill notes, even when moral principles are offered to justify such destruction, dissatisfaction often
remains. He asks, “What is there in our system of normative principles and values that could account for our remaining moral dissatisfaction?”

Instead of trying to assemble a set of reasons why certain acts are morally wrong, Hill turns to a more ancient attempt of articulating certain ideals of human excellence. In accordance with this task, which goes back at least to Aristotle, Hill inquires into the nature of the moral agent who proposes to act in environmentally destructive ways:

I want to ask, “What sort of person would want to do [such wanton acts of destruction]?” The point is not to skirt the issue with an *ad hominem*, but to raise a different moral question, for even if there is no convincing way to show that the destructive acts are wrong (independently of human and animal use and enjoyment), we may find that the willingness to indulge in them reflects the absence of human traits that we admire and regard as morally important.

Hill’s focus on the moral character of such a despoiler of nature is not aimed primarily at placing blame on those who wish to remain action-focused. Rather, Hill simply wants to emphasize that if ethicists wish to promote such valued human traits as humility and gratitude, then they must recognize that loving nature for its own sake is a needed starting point, a necessary preliminary to environmental virtue. Moral approbation aside, then, just what sort of person performs environmentally destructive acts? Hill argues that such persons lack certain traits, traits that serve as a foundation for the virtues of humility, gratitude, self-acceptance, and the appreciation of the good of others.

The corresponding moral vice is arrogance, or an inflated sense of self-worth. While overcoming arrogance may not necessarily result in moral humility, doing so seems to be a necessary propaedeutic. Hill suggests, but reserves for later argument, the idea that “indifference to nonsentient nature typically reveals absence of either aesthetic sensibility or a failure to cherish what has enriched one’s life.” He adds, “Though not themselves moral values, these virtues are a natural basis for the appreciation of the good in others and gratitude.”

At this point, Hill has to answer the “last people” argument, a version of which has been presented by Richard Routley (now Richard Sylvan). In Sylvan’s presentation, a last remnant of the human race, who are certain that humans will soon become extinct, set out to destroy all things of value and beauty cherished by humankind. Sylvan asks whether there is any reason why these last people should leave all things of beauty intact? In response, Hill argues that the desire of these last people to be treated by each other with gratitude will foster a similar

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9 Ibid., p. 212.
10 Ibid., p. 215.
11 Ibid., p. 216.
attitude toward nature. In this way, Hill links the ideal of loving and cherishing nature for itself with the ideals of humanity, gratitude, and sensitivity.

Environmental virtues can be made clearer by contrasting them with their foils. What are the environmental vices that make up the character of the despoiler of nature? What qualities are lacking in such a person? Hill suggests that such a person is ignorant of nature and one’s place in the natural order of things. Anyone with a solid understanding of nature and the appreciation and awareness of one’s place in the cosmos, he argues, could not help being morally disturbed at the wanton destruction of nature.

A critic can reply to this answer in two ways. First, a full understanding of nature is itself useful for the optimal utilization of nature merely as a resource for human satisfactions. Second, in attempting to derive an appreciation of nature from such an understanding of it, one is trying to derive an “ought” from an “is,” trying to derive value statements from factual ones. One commits the naturalistic fallacy by trying to derive ethics from biology. Nevertheless, to both the utilization and fallacy objections, one can respond, even if the logical points made are conceded, that in fact and in experience increased understanding of nature quite often leads to an appreciation of nature for its own sake and to a caring concern for its preservation. Furthermore, it can be argued that what is lacking in the despoiler is not intellectual understanding alone, but a particular perspective, that of being part of a vast, cosmic order. Holding this perspective fosters an appreciation of nature over and above its utility for humans.

To be sure, critics need not be silenced by these responses, for they can argue that there is no necessary connection between holding or not holding this perspective and any particular evaluative claim or attitude. Even though some people when beholding natural scenes are moved to states of awe, sublimity, and humility, other people are moved to despair, boredom, stoic resignation, and a “live only for today” attitude. Indeed, as Hill points out, “Indifference to nature is not necessarily a sign that a person fails to look at himself from the larger perspective.”

The most fruitful way to deal with such a critic is to note that an appreciation of one’s place in nature is lacking in those who want to destroy the environment. What is missing is not simply an intellectual quality, but rather an attitude that reflects values as well as knowledge. Hill claims that a person who “understands his place in nature but still views nonsentient nature merely as a resource takes the attitude that nothing is important but humans and animals.” This attitude is not yet humility, for it puts humans and animals still too much in the center.

According to Hill, the absence of humility is part of what makes racism and elitism wrong. Both involve an attitude that only the concerns of one’s own race or class are important, and the rest do not matter.

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14 Ibid., p. 219.
The humility we miss seems not so much a belief about one’s relative effectiveness and recognition as an attitude which measures the importance of things independently of their relation to oneself or to some narrow group with which one identifies. . . . The suspicion about those who would destroy the environment, then, is that what they count as important is too narrowly confined insofar as it encompasses only what affects beings who, like us, are capable of feeling. 16

But why should one acknowledge the importance of natural entities? Is it not still begging the question to hold that an ideal of humanity is one that attributes intrinsic value to nature? This point appears to be behind the criticism of Hill by Eric Katz when he asks, “What of people who do not feel that nature is beautiful or inspiring, and thus that nature is unconnected to the virtuous life?” 17 The usual answer to this criticism reflects the often perceived incongruity between one’s motives for an action and the reasons given for why one should perform it. 18 Hill can reply that he is not trying to give reasons why someone should value nature or feel that it is beautiful, but rather he is concerned with what motivates a person to cherish nature.

This motivation can come from humility in relation to persons (something already recognized) by extending it to include humility in valuing nature. If one is motivated to foster humility toward persons, then the task becomes how to foster it toward nature. Two obstacles to such an extension are an overweening sense of self-importance and a lack of self-acceptance. The former is what Hill calls “a tendency to measure the significance of everything by its relation to oneself and those with whom one identifies.” 19 It is the source of the racism and elitism mentioned earlier, a sense of one’s relative importance with respect to others that has become overblown. The latter is a refusal to acknowledge that we are finite, mortal, “lowly,” natural creatures, who are part of the natural environment and who receive nourishment from it. A child who learns to care about other people and animals is more likely to learn to care also about nonsentient nature. In addition, the converse is also likely. According to Hill, “If a person views all nonsentient nature merely as a resource, then it seems unlikely that he has developed the capacity needed to overcome self-importance.” 20 Similarly, those people who refuse to accept the natural connection with nature lack this recognition of themselves as part of nature. The idea of the self as removed from nature is an artificial, stultified, and, ultimately, false one. Their refusal to see themselves as part of nature is a sign of the absence of humility.

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
The person who is too ready to destroy the ancient redwoods may lack humility, not so much in the sense that he exaggerates his importance relative to others, but rather in the sense that he tries to avoid seeing himself as one among many natural creatures.\(^{21}\)

Since we judge proper humility as an ideal of human excellence, such indifference to nature over and above its anthropocentric value as a resource, while not a moral vice in itself, is an attitude to be overcome before such a virtue can be achieved. This indifference is the source of the moral discomfort that we feel at the mere instrumental valuing of nature, since we recognize that such an attitude presents an obstacle to proper humility.

Indifference to nature often reveals a lack of other virtues or qualities that are highly esteemed, namely, an aesthetic sense and an ability to feel gratitude. Whether or not possession of an aesthetic sensibility is a moral virtue, “many of the capacities of mind and heart which it presupposes may be ones which are also needed for an appreciation of other people.”\(^{22}\) It is Hill’s position that the inability of a person to see beauty in nature, that is, seeing the natural world solely as a means to economic short-term goals, indicates that such a person also “probably reflects a lack of the open-mindedness of mind and spirit necessary to appreciate the best in human beings.”\(^{23}\)

No doubt those who defend an environmental ethics based on intrinsic value will immediately point out that the aesthetic enjoyment humans have of nature requires that it be used by people, that is, treated as a resource. It can be argued that someone can enjoy the beauty of nature without having to posit intrinsic value in nature. Although valuing nature aesthetically is an excellent thing for humans to do, it is still quite anthropocentric. The aesthetic experiences are in people, even though the aesthetic properties that trigger these experiences are out there objectively in nature.

Hill attempts to answer this criticism by pointing out that enjoyment of the natural environment without concern for its fate indicates an inability to cherish those things that enrich our lives. This cherishing is, for Hill, a necessary foundation for having the virtue of gratitude.\(^{24}\)

People who have no tendency to cherish things that give them pleasure may be poorly disposed to respond gratefully to persons who are good to them. Again the connection is not one of logical necessity, but it may nevertheless be important. A nonreligious

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 222.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 223.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
\(^{24}\) For another discussion of the virtue of gratitude as it applies to natural entities see Lloyd Reinhardt’s “On Some Gaps in Moral Space: Reflections of Forests and Feelings,” in \textit{Environmental Philosophy}, ed. Don Mannison, Michael McRobbie, and Richard Routley (Canberra: Australian National University, Department of Philosophy, 1980).
person unable to “thank” anyone for the beauties of nature may nevertheless feel “grateful” in a sense; and I suspect that the person who feels no such gratitude toward nature is unlikely to show proper gratitude toward people.  

In summary, Hill holds that those who want to destroy the natural environment or who see nature solely as a resource lack certain traits that are the basis for certain virtues, namely humility, self-acceptance, gratitude, and appreciation of the good of others.

III. SOME PUZZLES ABOUT HUMAN EXCELLENCES

Several features of Hill’s position need closer attention: (1) the empirical premises of Hill’s arguments; (2) his implicit position on the intrinsic value of nature; (3) the relationship of sentimentality to humility; and (4) the status of humility as a virtue. Part of what makes Hill’s position less than convincing is that he makes certain factual claims regarding the development of a moral sense. For instance, with regard to his claim that people can learn to treat nature with love by learning to treat people with care and love, Hill needs to establish the likelihood of such a causal connection by uncovering its logic or at least by demonstrating a positive correlation between the two. Likewise, he claims that the development of humility toward people also leads to its development toward nature. While it may be so, the connection between the two needs to be better established, not merely asserted. Likewise, Hill needs to establish more strongly the aesthetic connection between cherishing works of art and cherishing nature.

Until we get the people-nature connection clarified, for instance, Hill has not fully answered the “last people” who can simply reply, “If we are all soon to be extinct, and if there will not be any people to cherish the results of our cherishing nature, no one to enjoy its beauty, then we don’t care.” For people, facing the annihilation of Homo sapiens, maximizing one’s pleasure, which might include destroying everything, could be the right plan.

Another questionable point in Hill’s position is the supposed connection between knowing factual matters about the natural world and learning to value either natural things or persons. We cannot be sure that knowledge of nature will produce caring for nature. Hill claims that learning to appreciate our place in the world fosters an appreciation for other people as more than a means to our ends. Although it may be true, Hill does not establish it; he only suggests it.

As a Kantian scholar, Hill is well aware that even Kant saw nature as a means to human ends. Kant himself, nevertheless, thought that seeing caring actions by animals, such as that of mother wolves caring for their young, fosters a similar caring attitude in people. Neither Hill nor Kant, however, has argued that the study

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of natural history and animal behavior leads to greater caring for nonhuman natural entities. Nor is there any suggestion of a logical connection between humility as a cardinal virtue here and either of these levels of caring.

A related problem is that Hill appears to be operating under the standard intrinsic-instrumental distinction in value theory, holding a rather simplistic distinction between what is valued merely for utility and that which is valued solely for its own sake. It is not clear which direction Hill ultimately wishes to go. Even though his environmentally virtuous person seems to be valuing natural things for what they are in themselves, he still claims that the primary value in the end is human excellence. Yet, he also appears to hold that some value would exist in nature, even if there were no human valuers. This position, which I have referred to as a strong nonanthropocentric position, is not without difficulties of its own. At the very least, we need to know about the connections, if any, between human virtue and intrinsic value in nature.

To resolve this problem, Hill needs to fully work out his position on the source of intrinsic value in nature. If it can be argued that all value in nature is derived from the actions of human agents, then Hill’s argument, that seeing nature merely as a resource—even as a moral resource—inhibits the fostering of proper humility, loses force. Hill simply calls for human excellence and claims that mistreating the environment is uncalled for. In response to such a call, Rolston protests:

Why are such insensitive actions “uncalled for” unless there is something in the natural object that “calls for” a more appropriate attitude. . . . If the excellence of character really comes from appreciating otherness, then why not attach value to this otherness? Why praise only the virtue in the beholder? How can it be an ideal of human excellence to measure for what it is in itself something that has no value in itself? We seem incoherently to be trying to value for its own sake and for our sake what has no sake! Why take a wildflower into account unless there is something there to take into account?28

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Asking why we ought to value endangered fishes in the desert southwest, which have no utility to humans, Rolston explicitly considers human excellence as a justification:

... it seems unexcellent—cheap and philistine, in fact—to say that excellence of human character is what we are after when we preserve these fishes. We want virtue in the beholder; is value in the fishes only tributary to that? ... Excellence of human character does indeed result from a concern for these fishes, but if this excellence of character really comes from appreciating otherness, then why not value that otherness in wild nature first? Let the human virtue come tributary to that. ... Excellence is intrinsically a good state in relation to others that are not self-states of the person who is desiring and pursuing. The preservation of the pupfish is not covertly the cultivation of human excellence; the life of the pupfish is the overt value defended. An enriched humanity results, with values in the fishes and values in persons compounded—but only if the loci of value are not confounded.29

For Hill’s position on the source of intrinsic value to be convincing, he must clarify what the source of such value is and answer anthropocentric criticisms of his theory of intrinsic value.

Hill’s position is more plausible when he discusses an overweening sense of self-importance and a lack of self-acceptance as obstacles to humility. Lack of self-acceptance involves the inability to see oneself in a proper perspective. This self-delusion is certainly present in people who fail to appreciate the natural world; nevertheless, there is another kind of acceptance, what could be called “other-acceptance,” that is also needed.

Other-acceptance is an acceptance of natural entities as they really are. Unfortunately, many people who claim to love and respect nature frequently display a tendency to distort what nature is in itself for sentimental reasons. This distortion often involves the refusal to accept death as a natural phenomena—that is, not fully to face predation, killing, disease and decay, and other features of nature that many people find unpleasant. People who lack other-acceptance find all of nature to be pretty. They envision animals to be just like humans in many of their actions and hold that nature exhibits “correct” behavior and moral virtues. Many popular wildlife documentaries and films in past decades have consciously appealed to such sentimentality about nature. This distorted humanizing of nature, the “Bambi syndrome,” results from an unwillingness to accept the facts of nature. To avoid this problem, Hill’s notion of humility should be expanded so that it takes into account an honest picture not only of who we are in relation to nature, but also of what nature is. The possibility of sentimental distortion occurs in either case.30

30 For an extended discussion of sentimentality versus a proper kind of sentimental feeling toward
Finally, Hill needs to establish that humility is indeed a virtue that should be promoted. He wants a “proper” humility, not merely humility per se. This “proper” humility is “that sort and degree of humility that is a morally admirable character trait.”\textsuperscript{31} By this characterization, he seems to mean that a proper humility is a kind of mean in which the virtue lies between the vices resulting from the excess and absence of humility. If so, he needs to measure out the range of such humility.

Presumably, at one end of the scale are the qualities of obsequiousness, false modesty, and deliberate underestimation of one’s abilities and talents. Critics who doubt whether humility is an admirable character trait often have these behaviors in mind. They look at these traits as distortions of one’s nature because they devalue everything about oneself. Such behaviors are occasionally praised, for example, when an athlete refers to a game winning play as “merely nothing.” Yet, continued false modesty is not so valued. Moreover, although the line between modesty and false modesty is hard to draw, it seems to involve a continued unwillingness to accept the value of oneself and one’s actions. False modesty becomes a vice when a recognizably worthy or valuable skill is continually denied. How such excessive humility translates into an environmental vice, however, remains a mystery, for Hill does not provide us with any guidance.

On the other end of the scale is the vice of insufficient humility, which includes the traits of arrogance, self-centeredness, and an overinflated sense of self-worth. Arrogance is a trait to be avoided partly because it involves distortions of self and nature that come from seeing nature and other people merely as sources of gratification. The arrogant person lacks proper humility because he or she is primarily concerned with self-satisfaction, the feeding of his or her own ego at the expense of others. To do so involves the limited perspective of others and of nature as mere instruments. The claims and posturing of an arrogant person reveal an ignorance concerning how things really are and an excessive amount of pride in oneself. Viewed in this context, a proper humility is a state of honest acceptance of oneself and of one’s circumstance, steering between the Scylla of false modesty and the Charybdis of arrogance and pride. The latter can be translated into an environmental vice more easily than false modesty, for it is already commonly associated with the conquest of the environment and the exploitation of nature as a mere resource.

IV. HUMILITY AND OPENNESS

While Hill’s analysis is useful in relating the mean, humility, to one of the two possible extremes, arrogance, it is much less successful in dealing with the other, animals, one that presents the case for considering the feelings of animals in our moral deliberations, see Mary Midgley’s “Brutality and Sentimentality,” in Philosophy 54 (1979): 385-89.

\textsuperscript{31}Hill, “Ideals,” p. 219.
false modesty. In this section, I propose a preliminary analysis of the second extreme in terms of a related virtue, which I call “openness.” An important advantage of this approach to environmental humility is that it provides insight into both extremes. I discuss arrogance first.

Arrogance closes a person off to any experience of worth in nature other than as an instrumental means to the achievement of personal ends. In terms of this limited perspective on the world, it is not possible to see beyond oneself and what matters to oneself. One knows it all, has all the answers. What disturbs us about such a person is the “closed-mindedness” of that person; he or she is unable or unwilling to consider a different viewpoint. Narrow-mindedness toward other persons is considered a vice; an extension of this trait toward other natural entities is an environmental vice. A person who is emotionally closed off to nature is spiritually dead, incapable of appreciating natural things except in terms of resources solely for human ends. Although such a person may very well live a life of limited love and affection toward other people, he or she will value them only insofar as they can contribute to his or her own needs. By analogy, would not a person who is closed off emotionally to natural entities also live a shallow life of limited love? While there is no guarantee that being open to nature will also manifest itself in openness to other people, it can be argued that someone who is more open to other people as they are in themselves will be more likely to expand this sense of openness to nonhumans because there are fewer boundaries or obstacles between that person and other beings. Furthermore, just as the humanly arrogant person is less likely to consider the consequences of an action except as they impact on him or herself, the environmentally arrogant person, one who is closed off to natural entities as they are in themselves, is less likely to consider the environmental effects or consequences of actions toward nature. It is widely agreed that this insensitivity to environmental effects has led to the environmental crisis facing us today. Similarly, insensitivity to the feelings of nonhuman entities has manifested itself in uncaring cruelty in the ways that animals are used for food, sport, or research.

At the other end of the scale, openness is also useful in explicating the environmental significance of false modesty. As I noted above, false modesty results from an excessive lack of self worth. It can be extended into an environmental context in terms of an excessive devaluation of the importance of the individual human in environmental matters generally. This trait is manifest in the writings of some of those who propose to extend moral consideration “equally” to some or all living things. In doing so, they are “falsely modest” about the role and character of human beings. In attempts to banish “speciesism,” for example, they claim that human beings should enjoy no special status when claims of moral consideration are made. In its most extreme form, advocates argue not only for a nondiscriminating equality in which Homo sapiens is no more than just another species among many others, but also claim that there are too many humans. This claim, as it is voiced by deep ecologists and Earth First!ers, frequently surfaces in
connection with an implicit misanthropic attitude. Would it not be better for the world, promoters of this attitude suggest, if there were massive diebacks of human beings, self-induced if necessary? William Aiken has even claimed that Leopold’s land ethic favors such a radical devaluation of humankind. Such claims, however, have proven so morally disturbing to many people, both defenders and opponents of environmental protection, that it is now commonly cited as the primary danger of environmental holism, forcing many environmental ethicists to reevaluate and more carefully present their own positions. For example, after an early flirtation of his own with such attitudes, even Callicott has concluded that an untempered holistically based environmental ethic which is more properly the ethic of a termitarium or beehive than a human community richly deserves Tom Regan’s epithet, “environmental fascism.”

By focusing on these extremes of environmental openness, it may be possible eventually to determine the range of “proper” humility toward natural entities. In addition, it may help explicate the features of environmental openness in its own right. In a positive sense, openness is an environmental virtue that establishes an awareness of oneself as part of the natural environment, as one natural thing among many others. A person who manifests this trait is neither someone who is closed off to the humbling effects of nature nor someone who has lost all sense of individuality when confronted with the vastness and sublimity of nature. Such persons are capable of feeling a response triggered by natural events, who are able to let nature speak to them. It is a receptiveness to natural entities as they are in themselves. We value openness to other people as an esteemed quality of character since it fosters feelings of love and appreciation for other persons. It may be that this quality as it has developed between persons, when coupled with an understanding of human beings as they exist within nature, will foster similar openness toward nature. Once established, moreover, such openness to natural entities could reinforce a sense of openness to other persons, a quality which we already esteem and value, thereby, for example, undercutting the misanthropic tendencies of radical environmentalism.

Such analyses are, of course, only a beginning. At a minimum, for example, the concept of respect for nature needs to be connected up more fully with humility and openness. In addition, the relationship between attitude and practice requires a thorough examination. Finally, it might be helpful to examine the more intellectual environmental virtues. Though they are modest in scope, the importance of such studies in environmental virtue ethics should not be underrated, for they may well be the way in which we are eventually able to determine once and for all whether it will someday be possible really to “think like a mountain.”