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Environmental Health Virtue Ethics

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Lisa Lee's "A Bridge Back to the Future: Public Health Ethics, Bioethics, and Environmental Ethics" argues that the eco-social perspective of environmental ethics, when planted in the field of practice-oriented, clinical-paradigm bioethics, can blossom into an improved public health (e.g., environmental health) ethics. She summarizes emerging frameworks for a more integrative public health ethics; recognizes the contributions of bioethics to research ethics and professional practice; and notes that virtue ethics has played a role in the development and teaching of bioethics. However, she does not fully explore the intersection of these concepts, and she does not discuss how public health ethics can improve environmental ethics. Here I illustrate a virtue ethics approach for hybridizing traditional bioethics with environmental ethics, and suggest that interactions between environmental ethicists and bioethicists might be mutually beneficial; in particular, that the jungle of environmental ethics might yield more fruit when the bioethicists share some tools for pruning.

The field of bioethics has cultivated a rich but repetitive discourse around the concepts of *respect for persons*, *beneficence* and *justice* as articulated in the Belmont Report. The authors of the Belmont Report presented these as the "three basic ethical principles" (page 2), which are "comprehensive" (page 2), as "an analytical framework that will guide the resolution of ethical problems arising from research involving human subjects" (page 2). A virtue ethics theory of right action developed by Christine Swanton (2003) argues that actions are virtuous if they achieve the target of a virtue, and actions are right if all the relevant virtues' targets are satisfied. The target-oriented virtue ethics theory of right action is useful for real-world decision-making because it can easily accommodate situations where no course of action is "right" but one course may be more "virtuous" than another (van Zyl 2012). In this light, the Belmont Report can be read as a target-oriented virtue ethics manifesto that announces the targets of its three cardinal virtues: *beneficence* corresponds to the obligations to "do [no] harm" and "maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms" (page 6); *respect for persons* to imperatives to "acknowledge autonomy" and "protect those with diminished autonomy" (page 5); and *justice* to requirements that (i) participants be recruited from populations directly related to the problem being studied and not from source populations that are convenient to exploit, (ii) the benefits of research should be applicable to society writ large, and as a corollary (iii) participants from populations unlikely to benefit from the research should not be unduly burdened by involvement in the research (pages 9-10).

In contrast to the virtue triumvirate of the Belmont Report, environmental ethics has an anarchic panoply of virtues. As noted by van Wensveen in 1999, (pages 10-11),

“...certain virtues and vices occur across the board in environmental literature, typifying as it were the moral landscape. For example, “respect for nature” is a commonly used expression. Different authors might mean somewhat different things by it, of course, but the expression seems to be universally accepted and used. The same applies to the virtues of adaptability, benevolence, care, compassion or solidarity, connectedness, creativity, cooperation, fostering, friendship, frugality, gratitude, healing, hope, inclusivity, joy, justice, moderation or restraint, openness, passionateness, perseverance, realism, self-examination, sensuousness, sharing, spontaneity, vulnerability, wisdom, and wonder. As for vices, ecological discourse is typified by terms such as anthropocentrism, arrogance, carelessness, competitiveness, consumerism or greed, contempt, cruelty, denial, despair, domination or mastery, dualistic thinking, elitism, exploitation, (inexcusable) ignorance or thoughtlessness, indifference, insensitivity, manipulation, pride, otherworldliness, reductionism, romanticism, and wastefulness.”

Environmental virtue ethics at the same time has been weak on specifying the behavioral targets of its myriad virtues, which are necessary to translate these virtues into pro-environmental actions. As van Wensveen writes a few pages later (page 17),

“Calls to respect nature, to change our dominating attitudes, to be frugal, careful, and wise tend to remain just that: calls. Usually they are not followed by a detailed analysis of how heeding them will bring about the desired social change. Although much ecoliterature does address legal, communal, and institutional changes required to build sustainable societies, virtue discourse is rarely an explicitly integrated part of these specific discussions. Even if a single work contains much virtue language as well as a theory of social change, the two aspects tend to be in different chapters or sections of chapters. Thus we are confronted with the irony that the language of dirty virtues witnesses to a social vision without being connected to a social ethic.”

To translate ecological virtues into corresponding behaviors, it may be helpful to identify the subset of ecological virtues most useful for an individual’s day-to-day behavior, and to articulate what the targets of such virtues would be in that context. Since many people devote a substantial amount of their time to work, normative professionalism might be an effective filter for identifying a subset of ecological virtues to guide behavior.

As Cocking and Oakley (2001) note, professional integrity can be defined as having and acting with commitment to serve the proper goals of one’s profession (e.g., to satisfy the targets of profession-relevant virtues). Specific professional virtues have been articulated for nursing: *compassion*, *courage*, and *respectfulness* (Armstrong 2007); medicine: *compassion*, *trustworthiness*, and *discernment* (Gardiner 2003); and epidemiology: *self-effacement*, *fidelity to trust*, *integrity*, and *honesty* (Weed and McKeown 1998). A nurse with professional integrity, for example, will consistently do right (or at least, follow the maximally virtuous course of action) by acting according to the behavioral targets of *compassion*, *courage*, and *respectfulness*. These three examples of public health and

biomedical professional virtue ethics systems (Armstrong 2007, Gardinier 2003, Weed and McKeowen 1998) invoke virtues with behavioral targets that are either inward-looking, or outward-looking with respect to individuals rather than to larger communities or ecosystems.

Environmental health exists in the space between the other biomedical professions, for which professional virtue ethics have already been articulated albeit without ecological virtues (Armstrong 2007, Gardinier 2003, Weed and McKeowen 1998), and the other environmental professions, among whose professional ranks ecological virtues may proliferate but may not yet have been prioritized through a professionalizing lens. There is a strong precedent in the medical ethics tradition of professional virtues taking priority over individual virtues when individuals act in professional capacity (Cocking and Oakley 2001). Therefore, by inserting ecological virtues into the discourse of public health virtue ethics definitions of professional integrity, and by providing an example of how to prune ecological virtues to the most germane subset for professional praxis, defining environmental health professional virtues can be a foundation for advancing both biomedical and environmental systems of ethical thought as a basis for guiding ethical actions.

Identifying virtues pertinent to environmental health is facilitated by the principle-based environmental health ethics system developed by David Resnick and referenced in Lisa Lee's paper (Resnick 2012). His system of environmental health ethics is built around seven principles: respecting human rights, utility, justice, animal welfare, stewardship, sustainability, and precaution. These principles might be approximately translated into the ecological virtues of *compassion, inclusivity, cooperation, justice, respect for nature, prudence* and *wisdom*. If we adopt these as the cardinal virtues of environmental health, for a practitioner of environmental health to be acting with professional integrity, from an environmental health virtue ethics definition, would entail the practitioner consistently conducting right, or at least virtuous, action with respect to these virtues. Defining the actual list of best virtues for the environmental health profession is a task well-suited to discussions at the level of professional environmental health societies. For example, the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology (ISEE) has identified in the prelude to its prescriptive ethical guidelines a set of two "core values": *to strive toward being objective in subject matter*, and *to advance the health and welfare of the general public and vulnerable groups* (ISEE 2012, pages 5-6). These might map to the ecological virtues of *realism* and *compassion*. The ISEE ethics guidelines also note on page 6 that "there is no consensus among ISEE members as to whether environmental epidemiologists have a duty...to become policy advocates" and "there is no consensus as to what funding sources environmental epidemiologists should find acceptable"; thus, one might argue there is not consensus in the field whether the ecological virtues of *passionateness* and *adaptability* are necessary components of professional integrity.

From these sources, we might propose defining professional integrity in environmental epidemiology, and perhaps environmental health more broadly, as consistency in taking actions that are right or at least maximally virtuous with respect to *compassion, cooperation, inclusivity, justice, prudence, realism, respect for nature*, and *wisdom*. This is a longer list of virtues than the previously proposed epidemiological virtues of *self-effacement, fidelity to trust, integrity*, and *honesty* (Weed and McKeowen 1998), and incorporates a novel

ecological perspective. It is also a shorter list of virtues than the ecological virtue cornucopia (van Wensveen 1999), and therefore perhaps more useful for guiding decisions in practice.

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