
TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE ETHIC FOR THE PRESERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss how a virtue ethic for the preservation of biodiversity may look like. The starting-point is the virtue ethic proposed by Celia Deane-Drummond. She suggests that the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance should form the basis of an ethic of nature. Of this four, prudence is the most fundamental. Moreover, Deane-Drummond states that the intellectual virtue of wisdom also is important in the context of environmental policy-making. In this paper I argue that another fundamental virtue is needed whose degree of abstractness is situated somewhere in between prudence and wisdom and I propose that respect could be such a virtue. In the last section I outline how it can be applied in the context of biodiversity preservation.

Keywords: biodiversity, virtue ethics, prudence, wisdom, respect

1. Introduction

As is well-known, threats against biodiversity is today one of the most serious environmental problems and it is essential for Christian environmental ethics to develop a response to it. One promising approach for such a response is the virtue ethical tradition. Recently several important attempts have been made to relate the discourse on virtue ethics to the discourse on Environmental ethics. In this paper I discuss how a theological virtue ethic for the preservation of biodiversity may look like, based on a critical analysis of some proposals from the theological and philosophical debate. I begin with a brief description of the concept of biodiversity and a brief discussion of the relevance of a virtue oriented approach to Environmental ethics.

2. The concept of biodiversity

Simply put, biodiversity is the variety of life forms on different levels of biological organization. You can talk about the diversity of a certain region, a certain country, a continent or the Earth as a whole [1]. In earlier definitions

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biodiversity was often defined as species diversity, while later definitions acknowledge also the variety on other levels of the biological hierarchy. One example of such a definition, and probably the most influential, is the one found in the Convention on Biological Diversity. Biodiversity is there defined as “the variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.” [2]

Although the scientific debate about biodiversity is concerned with the variety on all levels of biological organization, most of the political debate has been focused on species, probably because this is the level that is most easy to understand for people without biological expertise. However, the difference between the political and scientific discourse is not so important from a practical point of view since species diversity is often used as a measurement for biodiversity in general. Actions that protect the variety of species normally have positive effects also for the diversity at other levels of biological organization.

3. The relevance of a virtue oriented approach

For most parts of the twentieth century the ethical debate was dominated by teleological and deontological theories, but during the last 30 years virtue ethics has experienced an upsurge. Virtue ethics has its roots in ancient Philosophy, for instance the Ethics of Plato and Aristotle. One reason for the increased interest in virtue ethics is that it acknowledges certain aspects of morality that often is overlooked by teleological and deontological theories, for example questions about moral character, moral upbringing and the role of emotions in ethics.

Several well-known contemporary moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Alasdair MacIntyre have taken interest in the Ethics of Plato and Aristotle since they discuss certain elements of moral thinking that often have been neglected in the modern debate.

So far the debate within Environmental ethics has been mostly concerned with questions about the moral status of natural entities. Environmental ethicists have often criticized the traditional anthropocentric tendency within Moral philosophy according to which only humans are seen as morally considerable. Lately, there has also been a certain interest in the virtue ethical tradition. I think the virtue ethical tradition with its emphasis on moral development and concrete moral decision-making has much to contribute to the environmental ethical debate. Besides the more theoretical question of what natural entities are morally considerable we also need to acknowledge the more context-specific moral issues that arise in environmental policy-making. The virtue ethical tradition can give us many valuable clues on how we can develop our moral sensitivity for nature.

4. Some proposals from the theological and philosophical debate

Celia Deane-Drummond is one of the theologians that in most detail have discussed questions of environmental virtue ethics. She argues that virtue ethics has important contributions to give to Environmental ethics. Deane-Drummond takes as her starting-point the virtue ethics developed by Thomas Aquinas. She argues that prudence should be considered the most fundamental virtue. It is regarded as 'the mother of all virtues' since it is the presupposition for the development of other virtues. Deane-Drummond follows the tradition of Thomas and maintains that the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance should form the basis of an Environmental virtue ethics [3].

Deane-Drummond states that prudence should be understood as practical wisdom. Thomas understands prudence as 'wisdom in human affairs' in contrast to absolute wisdom. To exercise prudence is to make the right judgements and then to act in the right way. Prudence makes it possible to realize the good. It is not only theoretical, but concerned with practical actions. To exercise prudence is to be self-reflective. It also entails openness towards others, since it includes receiving advice from others. According to Thomas, prudence can only be accomplished through the grace of God. The goal for a Christian is not goodness in an abstract sense, but participation in the life of the Triune God [3, p. 10].

Deane-Drummond describes also wisdom as an important virtue. Wisdom is a connecting link between scientific knowledge and faith, between the knowledge of the created world and knowledge about God's intentions with it. Wisdom is distinguished from prudence since it is also one of the intellectual virtues together with understanding and science. Wisdom is manifested as prudence on the worldly realm, but it also transcends prudence since it strives for knowledge about the spiritual world. Prudence is the servant of wisdom since it prepares for wisdom, which is knowledge about the ultimate truth. Wisdom can therefore act as a judge over Science. Science is concerned with this world, while wisdom is concerned with God. Thomas argues that we can never reach full knowledge about this world only through our natural abilities. We need the light of supernatural understanding as a gift from God in order to fully comprehend reality [3, p. 20].

Deane-Drummond claims that prudence is a central virtue in the context of environmental policy-making. One aspect of prudence is to make deliberations. It is not only an issue for a few experts. All citizens should take part in these deliberations based on their experiences. Other aspects of prudence that are important in an environmental context are to be open to receiving advice from others and to make prediction about the future when it is possible [3, p. 43].

Deane-Drummond argues that we should regard other living beings as intrinsically valuable and not only as a resource for humans. She states that one way of extending the concept of prudence in order to include concern for the intrinsic value of all living beings is to relate it to the concept of wisdom. It acts

as a link between prudence as a philosophical concept and theological ideas about God as creator. Wisdom encourages us to live in community with God, who is not only Father but also Son and Spirit. Through the incarnation of Christ the value of creation is confirmed and through the Spirit God is present in creation. Traces of wisdom are found in all living creatures, but in humans it can manifest itself in a special way as the imitation of Christ. For this reason humanity has a special moral responsibility to take care of creation [3, p. 43].

I agree with Deane-Drummond that prudence and wisdom are fundamental for a Christian environmental virtue ethics. Wisdom tells us how we should look on nature in the context of God's plan for creation, while prudence tells us how we should solve practical problems. However, I think that we also need some other fundamental virtue whose degree of abstractness is situated somewhere in between these two virtues. On the one hand, we need a virtue that is more abstract than prudence since prudence does not tell us whether we should view non-human life forms as morally considerable or not. Prudence is rather concerned with practical problem-solving given a certain moral attitude towards nature. On the other hand we need a virtue that is more concrete than wisdom since wisdom does not in itself tell us what moral attitude we should have towards nature, although such an attitude may well be deduced from wisdom.

Benevolence is an example of such a fundamental virtue, which has been discussed in the ethical debate. Geoffrey Frasz argues, for example, that benevolence should be considered a central environmental virtue. According to Frasz, benevolence means that the moral agent shows concern for the welfare and happiness of both human and non-human beings. The benevolent person cares not only for pets, domestic animals and cultivated plants, but also for wild animals and plants. She must take account of all species, not only the species she perceives as beautiful and fascinating. Frasz says that the benevolent person should be concerned with the whole of ecosystems. It is habitats that should be preserved, not individual species. Benevolence as an environmental virtue should be based on the insight that nature is a part of the community we belong to. The flourishing of nature is a necessary condition for the flourishing of human life. The benevolent person should develop a humble attitude towards other life forms [4].

Frasz claims that benevolence should be extended also to creatures that are insentient. Certainly compassion can only be directed towards creatures that can experience suffering, but benevolence is a broader concept than compassion. Benevolence includes concern for all living beings and it can therefore comprise also plants. To show benevolence towards a tree, for example, can mean to protect it from dangerous chemicals. According to Frasz, it is a fundamental task for the benevolent person to find out what best serves the interest of non-human beings. The benevolent moral agent must develop her ability to get acquainted with the living conditions of other creatures. When performing this task we can benefit from the natural sciences as well as depictions of nature in novels. We

need to develop character traits such as patience and persistence in order to gain sufficient knowledge about nature [4, p. 127].

Although I agree with Frasz that we should show moral concern also for animals and plants, including those species that are not valuable for humans, I am sceptical whether benevolence is appropriate as an ethical attitude towards wild animals and plants. Benevolence is a concept that has its roots in interhuman ethics and it cannot easily be applied to our relationship to the non-human world. In the human realm benevolence implies a concern for suffering individuals, but it is problematic to extend such a concern to individual wild animals and plants. If we, for example, give medical treatment to wild rabbits that are ill, we can disturb the ecological balance. Such actions can have negative effects for the population of rabbits since ill and weak individuals are not eliminated in a natural way. Often we should avoid interfering with the natural processes of ecosystems, although we must, of course, take into account that we already have affected the ecological balance and therefore have a responsibility to limit the negative consequences. Moreover, I think the virtue of benevolence may require too much of us in our relationship to non-human species. To be benevolent towards other species seems to imply that we should avoid all actions that may render them extinction, but in some situations such actions can be necessary in order to safeguard the well-being of human communities.

Another virtue that is sometimes mentioned in the ethical debate and which I think is more appropriate is the virtue of respect. To show respect for non-human species means to acknowledge that there are certain moral limits to our treatment of them. To respect other species is to recognize that they are valuable in themselves, not only as resources for humans. However, respect for non-human species does not imply that we should avoid actions that may threaten them, if such actions are necessary in order to guarantee the health and sustenance of human beings. Therefore I think the concept of respect is more reasonable and suitable than the concept of benevolence in the context of biodiversity preservation. In the following section I outline how the virtue of respect should be expressed in our relationship to non-human species.

5. Respect as a fundamental virtue for biodiversity preservation

As stated above, to show respect for non-human species means above all to recognize that other species exist in their own right. They have a value even if they are not valuable as a resource or have aesthetic value for humans. Actions for preserving biodiversity should be directed not only towards 'charismatic' species such as whales or pandas, but also towards ugly or less known species. From a theological point of view the concern for non-human species has its basis in the belief that they are created by God. The natural world is fundamentally good, even though it is imperfect and marred by sin. The virtue of respect is related to the virtue of wisdom since it is wisdom that gives us insights into

God's will for creation and therefore demands of us to regard all species as morally considerable.

To respect other species means also that we should, at least in some cases, avoid interference with the natural processes of ecosystems. We must respect that nature has its own order that we cannot fully understand. Actions that interfere with the order of nature may have negative consequences although they have good intentions. If we, for example, try to save a species that is threatened by extinction due to reasons not created by humans, it may have detrimental effects for the ecosystem as a whole. However, we must realize that we already have interfered with most ecosystems and therefore have a responsibility for their future existence and well-being.

However, to respect other species does not necessarily entail that we should avoid all actions that can threaten their existence. Anthropogenic extinction has occurred throughout the history of humanity and also in the future we may be forced to perform actions that lead to the extinction of species in order to promote the well-being of human populations. From a theological point of view such actions can be considered legitimate if we believe that the creation of the human race and human culture is part of God's will. However, we must recognize that such actions are morally problematic and cannot be carried out without careful deliberation. In this context the virtue of respect is connected with the virtue of prudence since it requires prudence to judge how the interests of humans should be weighed against the interests of non-human species.

References

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