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A Virtue Ethic for the Earth

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Abstract

Discussions and practices for biodiversity and the environment are associated predominantly with duty ethics, which spell out the do's and don'ts of good behavior. Virtue ethics offer an alternative that is much more inspirational, provided we do not reduce it to a mere enumeration of environmental virtues. Moreover, a virtue ethic is truly humanistic, in that it builds on inborn human capacities rather than on external sources of morality. Grounded in the classic Greek account of virtue ethics and in interaction with medieval and modern visions, this paper articulates a virtue ethic for the Earth. Accessible to a broad audience, we address the foundational concepts of nature-inclusive telos, eudaimonia, virtues and friendship, and connect these with social-scientific research findings. This elucidates how the virtues, sometimes supported by moral exemplars, work in lives that include nature in their flourishing. A virtue ethic for the Earth, we think, can be helpful for policy making but most of all act as a platform for people to become more inspired, courageous and effective friends of nature and the planet as a whole.

Keywords: *Virtues; nature-inclusive eudaimonia; earth ethic; happiness; ecohumanism; environmental virtues*

Introduction

During the classes on social environmental science we used to teach at our university, a discussion on altruism popped up every year. Usually, students maintained that altruism, in the end, does not really exist. If you do something to make another person happy, you actually do it for your own, egotistic self. This way, students expressed the pervasive idea in Western culture that egoism is the foundational characteristic of humanity, so that, if left to their own devices, humans will inevitably gravitate towards the bad. Consequently in this perspective, humans need *external* moral sources (laws, gods, God, rules, values, duties) to keep them on the moral track. Sometimes, students grasped at a very different notion, declaring that if indeed it can make us happy to see other people happy, this only proves that humans in general have a deep capacity – maybe somewhat like our physical 'mirror neurons' – to resonate with the happiness of others. In that second perspective, an adequate ethic is not composed of external rules designed to counterbalance our inborn moral weakness. Rather, ethics will be designed to activate and strengthen our inborn moral potentials, which may be called our potential excellences or virtues. The present paper takes that position as its point of departure, which is the only truly humanistic one, because it takes human capacities as its foundation.

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Before taking off from that foundation, it serves to briefly look at the two major examples of moral theory that arises from the perspective of human weakness. These are the well-known and currently dominant "deontological" or duty ethics and "consequentialist" ethics. Duty ethics focuses on the intentions of our actions and supplies the external duties, rules and values that should nudge us into ethical behavior. Consequentialist ethics focus on the effects of our actions and the values (criteria) by which we should evaluate these effects. Theoretically, such values could be any but, in fact, are defined largely as various forms of utility, such as personal or societal net benefits. That is why consequentialist ethics are often referred to as 'utilitarian' ethics.

We find duty ethics dominating, not only in general, but also in environmental debates and politics, framed as they are, for instance, in terms of intergenerational and climate justice, the intrinsic and instrumental values of nature, stewardship and animal rights. Out of these high clouds of abstract deontological concepts, the familiar environmental duties rain down upon the people. We should all separate our waste, accept green taxes, eat less meat, have an organic garden, buy solar cells, commute on bicycle, protect our local landscape, support biodiversity charities, and reduce our ecological footprint.

In the realities of people's daily lives, these duties then mix with the utilitarian ethic that frames the good in terms of benefits and utility. Such mixtures of duties and benefits can be effective environmentally to some degree, especially if the pills of environmental duties can be sugarcoated by pleasant incentives such as a tax exemption or a subsidy, or the knowledge that solar cells actually are also good for our purse, and that eating less meat is also good for our health. However, it would appear that this is also as far as the deontological/utilitarian ball can roll. We do not think that mixtures of values, rules, duties and pleasures, no matter how cleverly designed, will ever suffice to sustain the fundamental and urgent ecological transition needed to address the global crises of climate and biodiversity. Neither do we think that a prospect of benefits, or a compliance with duties, are actually at work when people join a climate march or engage in environmental leadership. Ethics of values, rules, duties and pleasures, alone or in combination, are simply *not sufficiently inspiring* to do these jobs (Burnor & Raley, 2011). They do not bring people to committed action. Underpinning this intuitive opinion on the theoretical level, moral philosopher MacIntyre identified the deontological/utilitarian ethics that dominate our societies since the days of the Enlightenment as a failed and depressing project.[3]

Objective, style, method

The objective of our paper is to articulate a humanist ethic that, contrary to the deontological/utilitarian project, can inspire and guide committed action for the Earth, and do so in a structure and language accessible to a broad readership. This implies that we will have to engage with rigor in some deeply philosophical issues but with our intended readership in mind, we will maintain a light style of writing throughout, relegating more specialist remarks to the footnotes.

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[3] MacIntyre (2014: 138) ends his analysis of the moral project of Modernity (the deontological and consequentialist ethics around the concepts of values, rules, duties and pleasures) with: "It is no wonder that the teaching of ethics is so often destructive and skeptical in its effects upon the minds of those taught."

In the steps towards our objective, we follow the methodological advice of Taylor (1984) that the articulation of any new philosophy should be a 'redescription' grounded in the history of philosophy. In our case, history will run from the Homeric to the classic Greeks, then onward to medieval Christianity and the present day.

The second feature of our method is related to Polanyi's (1958) concept of tacit knowledge (in our case, a tacit ethic). We assume that the acts and words of inspired real-world people in the environmental movement express, however implicitly, an ethic that does inspire. We take this real-world information from the European BIOMOT research project (De Groot et al., 2015; Van den Born et al., 2017) in which more than a hundred inspiring people, or 'heroes for nature' as Scopelliti et al. (2018) called them, were interviewed about their motivations to commit much of their lives to biodiversity conservation. The 'tacit ethic' assumption is that the principles that inspire and guide these exemplary people can also help other people to become more exemplary.

As De Groot et al. (2015) concluded, the commitment to nature represented by the exemplary actors of the BIOMOT project was strongly driven by a long-term desire to have "a life that makes sense and a difference in the world" – a meaningful, good life. *Eudaimonia* is the classic philosophical term, and a key term in virtue ethics. Therefore, empirical evidence of the BIOMOT project points to the adequacy of virtue ethics for our objective.[4]

We start our analysis by summarizing the principles of virtue ethics, and then move on to what the BIOMOT actors add to that account. At the end of this paper, we will formulate the principles as a short, 'synoptic' Virtue Ethic for the Earth.

Principles of virtue ethics

Virtue ethics are composed of foundational and operational concepts. The foundation contains the constitutive ideas on meaningful life, *telos*, virtue and their interrelationships. On the operational level, we find, for example, the inventories and discussions of the virtues themselves (e.g. on courage, moderation or practical wisdom), and how the virtues can be embedded in education. In the course of the history of the West, the operational level has shown a permanent dynamic, while the foundation has remained relatively stable. The present inquiry will be grounded primarily in the classic Greek account of virtue ethics, for reasons we will explain later.

The most essential step to understand virtue ethics is to grasp, on the foundational level, what a virtue in fact is. A virtue is empathically not a duty, not an obligation, not a norm, a value, a rule nor anything similar that is external to the person. A virtue is something good that you have perfected to do well and consistently, e.g., to engage effectively in acts of courage or support the happiness of others.[5] As this definition states, the virtues are grounded in inborn human capacities and propensities, but do not come ready-made. In the same way that we need to train our muscles for our physical development, we need to train our virtues, learning

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[4] In the background, the BIOMOT evidence links up with social-scientific branches of positive psychology (Raymond and Raymond, 2019), Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Ryan and Martela (2016) discuss the connection of SDT with virtue ethics.

[5] A more formal definition is: a virtue is a perfected disposition to engage in laudable action.

by doing, for our moral growth (Jimenez 2016).[6] And in that process, adds the virtue ethic, we flourish.

All the while, duty ethics continues to be so pervasive in the common understanding of moral theory that discussions of virtues are at a constant risk of ending up as duty talk. An example is from Sandler (2013); a paper discussing the environmental relevance of the virtues of humility, courage, benevolence, temperance, perseverance, integrity and wonder, and concluding that these virtues can do useful work as components of utilitarian or duty ethics. This was already noted by MacIntyre (2014) in the 1970s: if we forget what virtues really are, that is, if we disconnect them from the foundational level of virtue ethics, the virtues die. Instead of inspiring human excellences-to-be trained, they come to act as just more rules.[7]

Therefore, in order to articulate a virtue ethic for the Earth, we need to engage the *whole* of virtue ethics, rather than a mere list of old or new 'environmental virtues'. As a basis for that endeavor, the remainder of this section sketches the principles of this whole of virtue ethics, focusing mostly on the classic Greek version developed by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Ross, 1980). Henceforth, this work is referred to as 'NE', with the line numbers added. The section ends with a brief sketch of the history of virtue ethics (its Homeric, classic Greek and Christian formulations).

(1) Things we do can differ strongly in the kind of happiness they create. A day of digging and planting a garden in the rain, for instance, sometimes may leave us with a much deeper satisfaction, a deeper happiness, than a day of, say, eating ice-creams in the sun. Why could that be the case? Is it because planting a garden has more economic utility? Is it because digging earth is more pleasurable than eating ice-creams? It is because planting gardens is a duty or a divine command? Or rather, is it because more than eating ice-creams permanently, planting a garden *fits into a greater picture of what we want our life to be*? That would be the answer of virtue ethics.

(2) The ground-laying characteristic of virtue ethics is this focus on the whole life rather than episodical acts. For this whole-life focus to become the foundation of an ethic that can inspire and guide us, the ground-laying assumption of virtue ethics is that we have an inborn capacity to (inter-subjectively) discover that our lives have a purpose, a *telos* in classic Greek, a purpose that we help develop through practicing our virtues (*cf.* Golluber, 1999).[8] Thus, when Aristotle talks about the happiness that comes with *eudaimonia* (the good, meaningful, flourishing life), he means the happiness in, and brought about by, acts that fit into the whole-life perspective

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[6] As Aristotle points out in the *Nicomachean Ethics* II.1, one important virtue is exempt from this rule: practical wisdom (*phronesis*), being the most intellectual of the virtues, is acquired mostly through instruction, experience and knowledge about the world (including, of course, about the environment). Although not emphasized by Aristotle, other authors discuss the role of emulation and exemplars in the acquisition of the virtues – see later in this paper.

[7] Jordan & Kristjánsson (2017) are another illustration of the temptation to disconnect the virtues from their foundation. Even though Jordan & Kristjánsson set out to address issues on the foundational level of virtue ethics and are also well aware of the limitations of Sandler's approach, their argument culminates in proposing yet another addition to the virtues list, ready to act as another external duty. Contrarily, the focus of the present inquiry lies on the foundational level, such as the concepts of *eudaimonia* and friendship. The new emphasis on certain virtues that we will propose (courage and loving the truth) are, we think, important enough but on the operational level and not part of our key argument.

[8] This assumption replaces the scientific foundation of human *telos* that Aristotle sought in his teleological biology. Teleological explanations are not regarded as untenable in current biology (Haig, 2020), but that is still a far cry from grounding *human* telos in biology. What might replace this failed foundation is not discussed in modern virtue ethics. In MacIntyre's work, the concept of the 'unity of human life' comes closest, but is associated primarily with narrative tradition (Mela, 2011). In empirical psychology, *telos* is studied under the term of 'life purpose'; for an overview, see Burrow & Hill (2020).

(Vittersø, 2016a). As illustrated in the garden example, this foundation distinguishes virtue ethics from moral theories grounded in transcendence (Plato and the theistic religions), emotions, pleasures or utility (Hume, Bentham), or rational duties (Kant). Because neither the concept of rationality, nor the concept of emotions, are necessary to define the foundational level of virtue ethics, virtue ethics are free to use these two concepts at their operational level – see Principle 5.

(3) The *telos* of every human life is different.[9] Aristotle also gives a universal characteristic of human *telos*, however, stating that "the human is a social animal".[10] Because of this, friendship is seen as an essential component of any good, meaningful life. Aristotle's term here is *philia*; broadly meaning all bonds of mutual goodwill (NE 1155b31), expressed in bonds of affection, family ties and business partnerships. The highest form of friendship is when friends enjoy each other for the excellences (the virtues) they embody and not for some other reason (NE 1156b10).

(4) About the specific *telos* of individual human lives, Aristotelean virtue ethics hold that in the course of their lives, people gain in strength on the road towards their life purpose through virtuous action. As said already, a virtue is a disposition to engage in laudable action, grounded in inborn capacities and propensities, and growing stronger through their exercise. Jointly, the virtues lead us to the meaningful, good life and the deep happiness that comes with that (MacIntyre, 2014: 174).[11] Before their virtues are fully grown, people may need external guidance on their road to *eudaimonia*. In this context, Aristotle points at the *phronimos*, the exemplars of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that the learner can emulate (Hampson, 2019).

(5) On the operational level of classic virtue ethics, courage is seen as an essential virtue, the first one discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Curzer, 1996) and often seen as the virtue that makes all other virtues possible. Another essential virtue is *phronesis* (practical wisdom), which is, in a way, the last virtue because practical wisdom is what shapes a good balance between all virtues applicable in a given situation, thereby making action effective, "calculated toward the best attainable option" (NE 1141b14). Practical wisdom integrates considerations from both the emotions (e.g. joy) and reason (e.g. efficiency). Using the image of the classic Greek temple, one could say that the other virtues stand as the pillars between the base of courage and the tympanum of *phronesis*. Two important ones of those are justice (giving other people what is due to them) and moderation. The latter virtue is allied to Aristotle's well-known 'principle of the middle' that depicts all virtues as lying in-between two vices, e.g. courage between cowardice and recklessness (Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2017). Next to these four virtues of courage, practical wisdom, justice and moderation, the *Nicomachean Ethics* discusses other virtues such as generosity, truthfulness, dignity and friendliness. Note that, in keeping with Aristotle's point of departure that the human is a social animal, all these virtues are social.

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[9] Here we must forgive Aristotle for the inconsistency (and banality, as MacIntyre (1974: 83) adds) of proclaiming philosophical contemplation as the superior *telos* for everybody.

[10] Aristotle uses the term *politikon* here, often translated as 'political', but, as explained by MacIntyre (1974: 57), Aristotle does not discriminate between the social and the political, writing as he did in the context of elite circles of a relatively small self-governing city (the *polis* of Athens), in which social and political life were practically the same.

[11] At this point, Hursthouse & Pettigrove (2018) add that contrary to Socrates' view, "for Aristotle, virtue is necessary but not sufficient [for a flourishing life]; what is also needed are external goods which are a matter of luck". For our paper, this means that, implicitly, our argument is confined to lives that are not bogged down in serious misfortunes.

In the grand scheme of history, virtue ethics has gone through two important transformations. The first one was a shift away from the pre-classic Greek ('Homeric') warrior ethic, in which the virtues were primarily seen as military excellences. This reconstruction – with Aristotle as its most renowned author – transformed the pre-classic warrior ethic into the classic Greek virtue ethic, in which the virtues were still seen as human excellences, but now geared toward people's functioning in the Athens *polis,* rather than on the battlefield. The second transformation came about when, centuries later, the Christian church incorporated and adapted Aristotle's ethic into its teachings, designed to function for the common faithful.

One element of this change was a de-emphasis of *eudaimonia* and friendship as its major component (Pangle, 2002). This was logical because the focus in Christianity was more on flourishing in the afterlife than on flourishing in this world. The place of friendship (as a component of the good life) was taken over by charity (as a virtue), derived from Plato's *agape*. Contrary to Aristotle's friendship that emphasizes mutuality, the love in *agape* is unconditional. In the 6th century, Pope Gregory canonized four Aristotelian virtues: fortitude (from courage), justice, prudence (from *phronesis*), and temperance (from moderation); to which he added the 'theological virtues' of faith, hope and charity. During the process, subtle changes took place in the formulation of the four originally Aristotelian virtues. Fortitude, for instance, is the courage to endure what is terrible without moving[12], while Aristotle's courage has the much more active definition of "to despise things that are terrible and stand our ground against them" (NE 1104b1) – a notion that includes to rise up against the spread of terrible things. The same tendency towards passivity in the Christian virtue ethic can be heard in the term 'prudence'. Prudence is about being cautious, while the original *phronesis* is about being effective. Finally, and maybe most importantly, a shift took place in the vision of what, in fact, a virtue is. In the classic view, a virtue is a human excellence to be trained in action. In the Christian view, humans do not have much excellence. They need God to become good and worthwhile. In that perspective, the virtues become seen as rules to help people stay outside the reach of evil.[13] In the remainder of this paper, we continue to build on the Aristotelean platform. We do so not for any principled reason but because we intuit that the classic account links more intimately with the objective of our paper.

Heroes for nature express an earth-inclusive virtue ethic

A researcher in the BIOMOT project once remarked about the biodiversity actors he had interviewed: "They all claim to be so happy with their lives!" In other words, the virtue ethic that these actors appeared to express was '*eudaimonia*-based' as Hursthouse & Pettigrove (2018) put it, which is a virtue ethic in the Aristotelian tradition.

However, one strong tension does remain between the BIOMOT actors' narratives and virtue ethics, even in its Aristotelian formulation. This can be exemplified by the image with which we started our summary of virtue ethics: the digging and planting of a garden. Surely Aristotle has good things to say about this activity. With Aristotle, we dig and plant the garden with a certain degree of courage, e.g., to ignore bystanders, parents and economists remarking that we would do better searching a regular job and buy our vegetables on the market. With

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[12] St. Thomas writes: *principalior actus fortitudinis est sustinere, immobiliter sistere in periculis. (Quaestio 123, Articulus 6 in Summa Theologiae Secunda Secundae, The Aquinas Institute, 2012).*

[13] Illustrative is another list of seven virtues, designed by pope Gregory to help people avert the seven deadly sins: humility, kindness, temperance, chastity, patience, charity and diligence.

Aristotle, we know that digging goes so much better if we do it with friends, preferably with a good work song added. With Aristotle too, we use our practical wisdom to divide tasks, integrating emotions (e.g. the good feeling that comes with all doing the same thing) with rational considerations of efficiency (e.g. with people specializing on what they are good at). Finally with Aristotle, we do it all with a proper amount of moderation, not breaking our backs, but adding to our happiness by stopping midday to have the very ice-cream that we wouldn't wish to eat the whole day.

The tension that remains lies at a deeper level than this. It concerns the question of why digging and planting a garden, in itself, could be a good thing for us to do. What can we find in virtues ethics that would help see the planting of a garden, or any other commitment to nature or the earth, as an integral part of our *telos* (life purpose)? Unfortunately up till the present day, virtue ethics in all its variants (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018) are about things human, things social, and maybe things metaphysical, but not about, or inspiringly *for*, people who, like the BIOMOT actors, define their purpose and their flourishing as *earth-inclusive*. This is visible on the non-theoretical level too. Of the 36 chapters in the 'Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being' (Vitterso, 2016b), for instance, none discusses our relationship with nature.

Towards a virtue ethic for the Earth

In this section, we will focus on the steps needed to articulate a virtue ethic that can inspire and guide people in environmental action, starting out from the Aristotelean foundation. As we will show below, steps appear to be needed in three directions. The first and most important one has already been introduced in the previous section. The other two concern the concepts of truth and exemplars.

Friendship *(philia).* Aristotle was an enthusiastic scholar of nature, even the father of the teleological explanation in biology (Haig, 2020), in which living beings are seen as having a *telos* (purpose), and with that, a good of their own. Undoubtedly, Aristotle was also well aware that nature forms the physical foundation of human life. Yet, nature is absent from Aristotle's ethic. In Aristotle's time, nature and the earth were a foundation that did not require ethical attention. In our days, they do.

The inclusion of nature in virtue ethics is possible without leaving the Aristotelian platform (Freiman, 2009). To begin with, Aristotle's acknowledgment that all living beings have a *telos* of their own (a will to live, a happiness in flourishing), makes it possible for all living beings to be a "someone" in the following text from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

> "There are three grounds on which people love. For the love of lifeless objects, we do not use the word 'friendship', for that love is not mutual, nor is there a wishing of good to the other. (It would be ridiculous, for instance, to wish wine well. We rather wish it will keep so that we can enjoy it.) But to a friend we wish what is good for his or her own sake. When people wish someone well without this wish being reciprocal, we call it goodwill. If goodwill is reciprocal, we call it friendship [*philia*]" (NE 1155b27-1155b33).[14]

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[14] Lightly edited for clarity from the translation of Ross (1980), with help of Pannier & Verhaeghe (1999).

So, at a moment it makes you happy to see a pig enjoying a perfectly wallowy wallow in the mire, this emotion is endorsed in the Aristotelean scheme. However, Aristotle would resist calling it friendship, because the pig is probably not very busy with your welfare in turn. In his terminology, it is goodwill. You are the pig's well-wisher and, if you would have dug the hole for the mire to accumulate and the pig to be happy in, you would be the pig's well-doer. It is for this reason that Freiman (2009) proposed goodwill as the key term for nature-inclusiveness in virtue ethics.

Here we feel it would be better to move away from the issue of reciprocity and the associated friendship/goodwill dichotomy. It complicates discussions without much fruit. Instead, we can fall back on the broader classic Greek tradition, in which the single term *philia* was used for any sort of connectedness, without a requirement of reciprocity (Pannier & Verhaeghe, 1999: 240). [15] Using the word 'friendship' for Aristotle's terms of friendship and goodwill alike has the important advantage that it leaves the kinds and degrees of reciprocity unproblematically open. Open, that is, to the endless variety of 'mutualities' in the humans-nature relationship, physically and spiritually.[16] If, say, you devote a lot of time and energy to ocean clean-up, you can call yourself a friend of the ocean without any need to explain what sorts of good, if any, you get back from other people or the ocean itself.

The choice of the broader friendship concept also creates an unproblematic relationship with the Christian virtue of *agape* (charity), which is unconditional love, i.e. without a need of reciprocity. Someone who prays and works for the earth as an expression of Christian charity is a friend of the earth, too.

On this basis, we can say that 'nature-inclusive *eudaimonia*' stands for a life that flourishes and is meaningful because it includes friendship with nature as a flourishing relationship expressed in feeling, acting and togetherness. In the words of Cafaro (2015: 441), it is "human flourishing embedded in the flourishing of all life".[17]

For this to become an unproblematic part of a true virtue ethic, it is necessary to consider if human actions expressing friendship with nature can do without some form of external forcing in the form of duties or utility arguments. Is being a friend of nature associated with a real virtue, that is, grounded in an inborn human propensity and capacity that, with training, can grow into a human excellence? Can you dig the mire pit for the pig just because that is part of your own happiness?

At this point, we may consult recent empirical studies showing that humans are not only social animals, just like Aristotle said they are (Fiske, 2009), but also possess an inborn propensity and capacity to affiliate with non-human nature, a *bio-philia* hypothesized by Wilson (1984) and later substantiated in countless psychological and social studies focusing, for instance, on the health effects of being with nature (e.g. Hartig et al., 2014) or the responses of children

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[15] This also resonates with current use of the term friendship. You can be a 'Friend of the Met' or countless other organizations, for instance, and donate without reciprocity being implied.

[16] Freiman (2006) gives several examples. Countless more abound in the literature on organic farming, eco-spirituality, relational values, partnership with nature, place attachment and so on. See, for instance James (2009) and Knippenberg et al. (2018).

[17] As already stated, virtue ethic is the truly humanistic ethic. Additionally, in the words of the present journal's inaugural editors' note (Karpouzou & Zampaki, 2022), the inclusion of nature in the foundational concepts of friendship and *eudaimonia* brings virtue ethics "beyond the binaries of nature and culture", developing an ecohumanist ethic as "a new perspective" on "what humanism has to offer".

(e.g. Kahn, 1999) and adults (e.g. De Groot et al., 2011) in interviews and surveys. Therefore, acts that are inspired by a desire for a flourishing life that includes nature in its happiness can be truly virtuous. They are grounded our inborn capacity to love. Training this capacity in the praxis of life, in turn, contributes to our flourishing.[18]

Truth. Truthfulness is an Aristotelean virtue (NE 1127b6). To speak the truth is good. However, to actively *search* the truth is no point of attention in Aristotle's account. As is still the case in ethical theory generally, the facts (the truth) were assumed to be brought to us by science and common sense. This does not suffice any longer in our present predicament of immensely complex global crises, fake news conspiracies and the permanent contestation of everything. With Cheney and Weston (1999), we cannot say anymore that ethics exists merely for the 'ethical sorting' of facts. The truth itself becomes an object of moral theory and action. In the words of Jennings (2017), "an earth ethics discourse must offer a reconnect with truth". Thus, we can say that *loving the truth* – seeking it and upholding it – is a prime virtue for the present day. This love of the truth then includes the critical examination of one's own truisms, for instance, our received ideas that nuclear power, end-of-pipe carbon capture and multinational corporations are inherently bad. The crux of this virtue is to act upon the certainty that no-one, including ourselves, can ever 'have' the truth. But *loving* the truth is open to all. Therefore, loving the truth can act as a bridge between all who may see the world and the truth differently, but subscribe to the same virtue.

Exemplars. Climate marchers, nature lovers, ocean cleaning innovators and so many others in the environmental movement are young. Many others are not so young, but still open to inspiration. Who then will inspire and guide them? This is the question of 'exemplars', that is, inspiring guides on people's pathways to earth-inclusive *eudaimonia*. As said, Aristotle allows a degree of imitation of exemplars as one way to help the moral apprentice in the training of the virtues (Hampson, 2019). He identifies these exemplars as the old, cultured and wise possessors of maximum *phronesis*. This remains quite a thin account, however. The old teach the young, and what is taught is balanced, practical wisdom. Moreover, Aristotle sees the *phronimos* primarily as rule-makers for the common people; they are virtue exemplars only for those who are already 'cultured' (NE 1179b6-b24).

This contrasts sharply with many life stories of the BIOMOT actors, who often express an intense admiration and gratitude towards people who inspired them during crucial stages of their road to environmental leadership, ranging from grandmothers to forest guards and university professors. We think we should look elsewhere in virtue ethics to move beyond Aristotle's narrow idea on exemplars, allowing, for instance, that also the young may teach the old, and that exemplars may be exemplary not only for their practical wisdom but also for, say, their courage or generosity.

We could look at ancient pope Gregory again, who recognized the inspiring and guiding power of the life stories of the great saints and described many of them (Zimmerman, 2016).

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[18] Logically then, there is no need to install any specific new 'virtue for nature' (action for nature, harmony with nature or suchlike) in the virtues inventory. From the foundational nature-inclusive *eudaimonia* upwards, the place of nature in the virtues list is that all virtues can be nature-inclusive, e.g., to be courageous for nature, to seek the truth about and for nature, to practice moderation in environmental action, and so on.

We might also consider calling upon even more ancient Chinese sages who wrote about the roles of exemplars (*junzi*).[19] For a more recent input on exemplars, we turn to Linda Zagzebski.

Zagzebski (2010) puts 'human nature' at the foundational level of virtue ethics, equivalent to our earlier ground-laying assumption. She then proceeds by saying that effective moral theory should link up with people's pre-theoretical moral concepts, stories and practices. On that basis, Zagzebski proposes to take the exemplars of moral goodness, or moral heroes we could say, as the cornerstones of moral theory. The outstanding advantage of this approach is that contrary to good lives, exemplars are often directly imitable in the aspect by which we find them exemplary, such as courage, practical wisdom or searching the truth. The question then, obviously, becomes how we can pick our exemplars – who is a moral hero? Zagzebski's answer is that the picking of exemplars, connected with the emotion of admiration, is already embedded in our common moral practices. Zagzebski's own ground-laying assumption then follows, which is that the emotion of admiration is generally trustworthy when we have it after reflection, empirical investigation and critique by others (i.e. a search for truth). At this point, we might wonder if Zagzebski may not be too optimistic. Also the Hitler Jugend had an exemplar, after all. Maybe, at the end of our escape from the Aristotelean narrowness on exemplars, we find some truth in Aristotle's notion that, before picking and celebrating our moral heroes, we should be sufficiently 'cultured' in knowledge and wisdom.

Principles of a virtue ethic for the Earth

The classic Greek philosophers re-articulated the Homeric warrior ethic to fit the civic *polis*. Now, with humanity and the planet entering the Anthropocene and becoming one intertwined system, this virtue ethic needs to be re-articulated to include the Earth. Based on the preceding sections, underneath is our proposal, again formatted as a number of principles. The first Principle states the character of basically any virtue ethic. The second Principle considers the friendship concept, and the third states our ground-laying assumption.

(**1**) The aim of any virtue ethic is to inspire and guide people on the road to the good, which is the meaningful, flourishing life (*eudaimonia*). Separate acts (like planting a garden) can come with a degree of pleasure but more importantly, if they fit into the whole-life purpose (*telos*), contribute to the meaningful life and the deep happiness inherent in that life.

(**2**) Friendship is an essential component of the meaningful, flourishing life. In the current era, with the whole earth at stake, friendship is not only the easy empathy of the human ingroup, but also includes compassion and togetherness with the Earth and all its creatures, i.e., to be a true friend of the forest, or the ocean, or nature, or the planet as a whole, and all people depending thereon. Thus, our *eudaimonia* is earth-inclusive.

(**3**) The ground-laying assumption of virtue ethic is that humans have a natural capacity to (inter-subjectively) discover a *telos* of their life. Because of our innate propensity to affiliate with other people and with nature, our *telos* is naturally pro-social and pro-nature. This does not preclude that people can also be side-tracked into indifference, mindless consumption or violence against outgroups (Bregman, 2020). We need the virtues.

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[19] Exemplars (*junzi*) are especially important in Confucianism (Harris, 2005), even though Confucianism overall is more akin to duty ethics. Moreover with respect to Chinese thought, the similarities between virtue ethics and Daoism are often striking, due to Daoism's focus on the realization of one's true nature (cf. *telos*) through the virtues (the *De* in the title of the *Dao De Ching*, a word with the same root as the Germanic words for virtue, which are deugd, dyd, Tugend and variants).

(4) A virtue is not an external rule or duty but a disposition to act towards the good, grounded in inborn propensities and capacities. Just like our muscles, our virtues need to be strengthened in action, supported by learning and moral exemplars. Jointly then, the virtues lead us in the growing awareness of our purpose and into a meaningful, flourishing life. Between persons and over time, the roles of exercise, learning and exemplars may vary by virtue. The classic Greek adage to "Know Thyself" is not an invitation to esoteric identity-searching, but emphasizes this very point: know thine weaknesses in order to know which virtues to train most.

(5) In a virtue ethic for the Earth, the two most important ('cardinal') virtues are *courage* and *loving the truth*. They are the two first virtues that make all others possible. Courage as a virtue comes directly from Aristotle. For the present time, we may think of courage as a willingness to risk much, to rise up in defense of the earth, to ignore the mainstream voices, to change one's life radically. Loving the truth is not an original Aristotelean virtue, but made necessary by the complexity of current problems. Loving the truth includes scrutiny of one's own 'truths' and a willingness to engage in an open discussion with opponents who see the world differently but seek the truth as we do. The two cardinal virtues need each other. Courage on its own is blind, and knowledge on its own is passive. Jointly they put lives in motion towards happiness and a happier world.

(6) The other virtues form a more or less open list, with the one of Aristotle as the most time-tested. Adding to courage and loving the truth, these virtues include moderation, generosity, dignity, friendliness and *phronesis*, the practical wisdom that integrates emotions and rationality and connects the virtues towards effective action.[20] Not all virtues apply equally in different situations but usually, several do, and practical wisdom then has the final word. We may, for instance, even when knowing the truth, give part of the truth away to reach an effective agreement. Thus, the old *phronesis* is still the 'last virtue'.

The traditional role of ethics is to guide behavior and moral reflection. We think that the virtue ethic we have articulated here supplies a coherent array of concepts through which questions of action and policy design can be addressed. More important than that, people need not only a moral compass once moving, but also, and first of all, a moral energy supply that makes moving possible. Therefore, even though less saliently mentioned as a role of moral theory, an ethic should inspire people to act at all. We think that more than any other, virtue ethics has this power, because it builds on capacities we all share and leads us to what we desire most deeply, which is a meaningful and flourishing life on a flourishing earth. Thus, a virtue ethic for the earth will help create and sustain energies for the earth, inspiring people to also become courageous, truth-loving friends of nature, the forest, the ocean or the planet as a whole.

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[20] Many specifically "environmental" virtues repeat elements of this list, as we already saw in Sandler's (2013) example. Other proposals are more innovative, see for instance Stuart (2020) on hope and Cafaro (2010) on patriotism.

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