

Article

The Ecological Community: The Blind Spot of Environmental Virtue Ethics

Rémi Beau 

Institute of Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Sorbonne Université, F-75005 Paris, France; remi.beau@cnr.fr

Abstract: Since their emergence in the 1980s, environmental virtue ethics (EVEs) have aimed to provide an alternative to deontological and consequentialist approaches for guiding ecological actions in the context of the global environmental crisis. The deterioration of the ecological situation and the challenges in addressing collective action problems caused by global changes have heightened interest in these ethics. They offer a framework for meaningful individual actions independently of the commitment of other actors. However, by shifting the focus onto individuals, EVEs appear to grapple with the tension between anthropocentrism and respect for nature, as well as between self-flourishing and concern for other living beings. This article argues that this difficulty is rooted in the neglect within EVEs of the communitarian aspect of ancient virtue ethics. Drawing from Baird Callicott's ecocentric approach and Val Plumwood's works, this paper explores the possibility of conceiving ecological communities as collective frameworks in which both public and private virtues are defined and practiced.

Keywords: environmental virtue ethics; ecological community; collective virtues; relational self; egocentrism; ecocentrism; self-realization



Citation: Beau, R. The Ecological Community: The Blind Spot of Environmental Virtue Ethics. *Philosophies* **2023**, *8*, 112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies8060112>

Academic Editors: Sylvie Pouteau and Gérald Hess

Received: 7 October 2023

Revised: 20 November 2023

Accepted: 21 November 2023

Published: 23 November 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, environmental ethics have significantly echoed the revival of virtue ethics in moral philosophy [1]. While deontological and consequentialist approaches struggled to show concrete effects on the deterioration of the ecological situation, environmental virtue ethics (EVEs) emphasized the role of character and flourishing in the environmental movement. Remaining faithful to the Aristotelian idea that “by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust” [2] (1103b15), EVEs aim to extend this moral approach to our transactions with Earth others. These reflections took the form of a series of studies aimed at identifying dispositions for action that could be described as ‘environmental virtues’ (e.g., humility, frugality, and attentiveness) [3–5]. Several approaches emerged in this regard. Some followed the path of eudaimonist virtue ethics, aiming to demonstrate how respect for the environment was a necessary condition for human flourishing [6]. Others pursued agent-centered approaches, which sought to identify the motivations found in the actions of exemplary individuals that enable virtuous acts to be defined. The goal was to illustrate how some of the great figures in environmentalism (such as Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson) embodied a particular environmental virtue [7].

Now firmly established in the field of environmental ethics, virtue ethics are facing the most pressing questions that permeate the discipline, particularly those related to global changes. How do we define moral virtues aimed at protecting a nature that is constantly changing? How do we care for ecological communities in the Anthropocene, that is, in a world where climate change and the erosion of biodiversity continue to accelerate? This article will begin by showing in Section 2 how EVEs address these questions by proposing a response to the problem of collective action that lies at the heart of the “moral storm” [8] triggered by global change. Section 3 will analyze two strong objections to this response,

claiming that it amounts to a return to an anthropocentric and individualistic ethical framework. The following two sections will examine how some EVEs have attempted to escape this criticism by demonstrating how the relational nature of the self implies consideration of Earth others in self-realization. However, after pointing out the limitations of these relational approaches in light of the works of Val Plumwood and Baird Callicott, Section 5 advocates for shifting the focus away from the self to explore collectives in which environmental virtues can be exercised. Finally, Section 7 demonstrates how the de-individualization of EVEs can involve characterizing collective virtues conceived on the scale of ecological communities.

2. A Response to the Problem of Collective Action

Virtue ethics have grown in significance within environmental discourse as the global dimension of the ecological crisis has become one of the primary challenges to environmental action. Indeed, on a global scale, environmental issues present a particularly challenging “collective action problem”. This type of problem, extensively discussed in moral and political philosophy, characterizes situations in which cooperation that would benefit all parties involved is hindered by the risk that some agents may opt not to act, prioritizing their individual self-interests over the common good. An early formulation of this is to be found in David Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature* published in 1739:

“Two neighbours may agree to drain a meadow, which they possess in common; because it is easy for them to know each others mind; and each must perceive, that the immediate consequence of his failing in his part, is, the abandoning the whole project. But it is very difficult, and indeed impossible, that a thousand persons should agree in any such action; it being difficult for them to concert so complicated a design, and still more difficult for them to execute it; while each seeks a pretext to free himself of the trouble and expence, and would lay the whole burden on others”. [9] (p. 538)

In this light, climate change emerges as an immense challenge for cooperation, as it affects all inhabitants of Earth and spans multiple generations. Furthermore, as philosopher Stephen Gardiner has pointed out, the characteristics of this global problem, particularly the spatial and temporal dispersion of its causes and effects, foster forms of ‘moral corruption’ and free-riding strategies among individual or collective actors [8]. In the absence of binding regulations enforced by an international institution capable of sanctioning non-compliance, the prospect that the commitment of some may not be reciprocated by others fosters a sense of inaction. Without cooperation, the calculation of costs and benefits does not necessarily support committing to action, as it may be more disadvantageous to combat climate change than to do nothing in a world where cooperative partners are not reliable.

At various levels, this issue prompts the question of the significance of ecological commitment. Particularly at the individual level, recognizing the imperative need to profoundly transform the production and consumption patterns of industrial societies, alongside the observation of collective inertia, threatens to undermine the definition of an ethical life project. Why should I change my way of living, eating, moving, traveling, or housing myself if I know that these changes will not have any impact on global changes? In this context, virtue ethics provide a solution by no longer tying motivation for ecological action to the success of cooperation. Instead, they advocate for the development of dispositions for action, seen as intrinsic qualities of virtuous individuals, and therefore pursued regardless of the actions of others. As noted by American philosopher Dale Jamieson, in the context of climate change, virtues “give us the resiliency to live meaningful lives even when our actions are not reciprocated [10]”. Therefore, virtue ethics prove particularly relevant due to their ability to guide individual behavior in a context where environmental disruptions pose new moral challenges that cannot be solved on an individual basis.

3. Back to Anthropocentrism and Individual-Centered Approach?

However, an ethical response similar to Jamieson's, in turn, raises an important question. Does it ultimately lead to a departure from the realm of collective action, embodying an individual retreat into ethics, partly motivated by the failure of climate and environmental policies? Thus, EVEs may not truly offer a solution to the problem of collective action in environmental matters. Instead, they might lead to giving up on attempting to address it and pose the question of the possibility for individuals to lead a good life, knowing that we have failed to address global environmental issues. In doing so, it would result in a refocusing of environmental ethics on human individuals.

In *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* [11], Carolyn Merchant schematized the shift in ethical thinking brought about by the environmental ethics movement, describing a progression that began with an egocentric stance and moved towards ethics centered on relationships among members of the same eco-community. In light of what has just been said, would the emergence of EVEs lead us to travel in the opposite direction?

In fact, from the outset, the resurgence of virtue ethics starting in the 1960s generally faced criticism that viewed this movement as a focus on self-concern at the expense of concern for others. To put it simply, some virtue ethics were accused of theorizing a form of moral selfishness. Canadian philosopher Thomas Hurka argued in this regard that Aristotelian-inspired virtue ethics were, at their core, egoistic because they ultimately made the individual pursuit of eudaimonia the central core of ethics [12]. In such a framework, he believed that the ultimate reasons for moral action always relate to one's own flourishing and not to the flourishing of others. According to him, they would fail to escape a form of moral solipsism: the idea that by placing the self at the center of ethics, they render concerns for others secondary or even inconsequential.

Within the field of environmental ethics, these approaches centered on moral agents presented a second issue. The pursuit of individual flourishing, as theorized by eudaimonistic ethics, also seemed to narrow the sphere of moral consideration, limiting concerns to humans alone. From this perspective, virtue ethics represented a return to moral anthropocentrism. For many proponents of the intrinsic value of nature, this focus disqualified them from their claim to be an alternative to non-anthropocentric environmental ethics. In this regard, Holmes Rolston highlighted the limitations of these approaches in the field of environmental ethics:

Environmental virtues, as achieved by humans, will initially involve concern for human quality of life. But our deeper ethical achievement needs to focus on values as intrinsic achievements in wild nature. These virtues within us need to attend to values without us. Perhaps one starts with a love of nature that is tributary to self-love. Later one discovers that this self-love is quite inclusive, for the health of myriad nonhumans is implicated, entwined with ours. One is called to an active concern and positive engagement with the object of encounter. The other cannot be seen simply as a source of personal transformation. We must make the model at least an ellipse with two foci: human virtue and natural value. [13] (p. 69)

For Rolston, the reflection on human virtues can indeed demonstrate how self-concern can benefit others, especially non-human beings. The flourishing of humans indirectly involves, without being aimed at as a moral end, the flourishing of other forms of life. However, according to him, this position, which resembles a weak anthropocentrism, cannot replace the moral imperatives that stem from the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature insofar as it requires respecting other Earth beings, even if they do not contribute to any human's self-flourishing.

In his discussion of EVE, Callicott, in a similar line, critiques the strictly individualistic approach adopted by their theoreticians. He writes as follows:

The Aristotelian cast of the contemporary revival of virtue ethics, consistent with the hyper-individualism of Modern moral philosophy, renders contemporary

environmental virtue ethics supportive of the first prong of the virtue ethics at which Leopold hints, the self-respect of the individual. [1] (pp. 255–256)

In summary, EVEs would represent a significant regression toward anthropocentrism and individualism compared to the ambitious thinking carried out in environmental ethics since the 1970s.

4. Relational Approaches

Faced with these criticisms, EVEs could rely on the arguments put forth by virtue ethics theorists to counter the objection of egoism. One of the most robust responses is based on the assertion that the flourishing sought by the virtuous individual is fundamentally relational. This involves affirming the primacy of relationships in the pursuit of flourishing. This is, for example, clearly articulated by the philosopher Christopher Toner in his response to John Hare's formulation of the self-centered objection:

This, then, is the template for a non-self-centred eudaimonistic virtue ethics: the agent seeks to live a life of virtue, where the virtues are simply those traits the possession and exercise of which constitute flourishing for a rational agent of that sort, where to flourish is to stand in the right relation to 'objects' according to their degrees and kinds of goodness, and where the right relation is that which acknowledges the nature or status of each relatum, in such a way that it is held in regard at least in part for its own sake. It is not self-centred to seek one's own flourishing because such flourishing is essentially relational. Attachment to others is not secondary as Hare alleges, but is of the essence of flourish. [14] (p. 613)

Toner responds point by point to the previous objections. Because virtues are relational dispositions, they necessarily entail extending consideration to others than oneself. Furthermore, because a relationship cannot be considered good if it only contributes to the flourishing of one of the two related beings, virtue ethics must take into account the specificity of the good for each of these beings. The flourishing of others, which presupposes the recognition of their existence as moral agents who matter for themselves, no longer appears as secondary but as a necessary correlate of one's own flourishing.

The scope of this theoretical reflection on virtue ethics, in general, quite explicitly extends to the specific domain of environmental ethics. Indeed, taking into account the flourishing of others for their own sake appears to open up virtue ethics to considering the intrinsic value of non-human beings. In his proposal for EVEs, Ronald Sandler responds precisely in this manner to the objection that "a Virtue-Oriented Approach Cannot Value Environmental Entities for Their Own Sake [6] (p. 114)". The relational approach allows him to refute this criticism because, as he writes regarding certain environmental virtues:

They are not excellent in themselves, abstracted from the rest of the world. They are excellences in relating to the world. The facts about us (the sort of beings we are) and our world (the sort of demands there are for beings like us) are what make particular character traits virtues or vices. The bases of the virtues, therefore, in elude entities with inherent worth and values "without us". Moreover, they justify responsiveness to all sorts of environmental entities, including landscapes, ecosystems, living things, and sentient beings. Thus, there is no danger of environmental virtue losing touch with values or worth in the natural world. [6] (pp. 112–113)

This conception of ethical inquiry strongly resonates with Arne Naess's moral perfectionism. The theory of the ecological self that he unfolds in his works appears indeed as a relational approach to the self. It asserts that the self is not a social atom separate from the relationships it forms with the world but rather that it is fundamentally constituted by its relationships with others and with nature. In this framework, making self-realization the goal of ethics would not signify a retreat into a form of egoism and anthropocentrism. Instead, it would involve defining ethical work as a practice aimed at continually improving one's connection to the world. Naess writes:

The greater our comprehension of our togetherness with other beings, the greater the identification, and the greater care we will take. The road is also opened thereby for delight in the well-being of others and sorrow when harm befall them. We seek what is best for ourselves, but through the extension of the self, our 'own' best is also that of others. The own/not-own distinction survives only in grammar, not in feeling. [15] (p. 175)

In summary, proponents of relational approaches counter the criticisms of EVEs by arguing that these objections hold true only if one assumes a flawed conception of what constitutes a moral agent. In an atomistic ontology, a moral theory does not seem capable of simultaneously being agent-centered and other-centered. However, they contend that this apparent contradiction dissipates when one adopts a relational conception of the self.

5. Redefining or Decentering the Self

However, while they may offer an elegant response to the objections of egoism and anthropocentrism, relational approaches to virtues maintain a certain ambiguity concerning how they seem to describe the merging of personal interests and the interests of others. According to these propositions, the risk of theorizing a form of moral egoism dissipates when one understands that self-realization entails the realization of the others who constitute this self. In Naess's terms, self-realization cannot be selfish if it pertains to an ecological self. But how can we ensure that this is indeed an overcoming of egoism and not merely a resolution of the tension that may exist between self-flourishing and the flourishing of others through the absorption and dissolution of others' interests?

Analyzing the discussion between Naess and the existentialist philosopher Peter Reed on this matter, Val Plumwood highlights the indecisive nature of self-realization:

On first glance, Naess's account does not appear to appeal to either fusion or to egoism—since we are supposed to defend not the self but the big Self as 'the totality of our identifications'. But, says Reed, there seem to be inconsistent requirements hidden here: we are supposed to retain a sense of our individuality as we work to save the big Self from destruction—but at the same time we are supposed to lose interest in our individuality as we cultivate our identification with the big Self. We are required to be egoists and also not egoists, to retain the intensity and defence drive of egoism, but also to abandon certain key differentiations between ourselves and others, in order to establish that equivalence between self and other which enables a transfer of our selfregarding motives. Naess's position, on closer inspection, ultimately is based on a kind of self-interest and upon a form of fusion or expulsion of difference—taking the form, as Naess explains in his reply, of identity of interests. [16] (p. 199)

According to Plumwood, the model of identification that guides the realization of the ecological self ultimately leads not to a critique of egoism but to its extension through this expansion of the self.

In an article on the concept of self-realization in Naess's philosophy, Callicott presents a similar critique by arguing that Naess's thought has evolved from a genuinely relational conception of the self that was emerging in the foundational article on deep ecology [17] to a monist conception inspired by Hinduism. Regarding the former, he writes:

What is an ecological approach to being in the world? In the context of 'The Shallow and the Deep' article Self-realization is a relational conception of the self and, more importantly, an experience of oneself in relational terms. One is and one experiences oneself to be a 'knot in the biospherical net of intrinsic relations.' Or better: as a node or nexus in a skein of internal socio-environmental relations. One experiences 'the beauty and complexity of nature [as] continuous with [one]self[f]'. [18] (p. 239)

However, according to Callicott, this conception fades later on, particularly in *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* [15]. In this work, he observes a unification and merging of selves that he finds problematic and describes as follows:

In the metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta, the atman or Self at the core of oneself is equated with Brahman, the one universal Being at the core of all other selves (jivas) and indeed at the core of all phenomena whatsoever. In short, there is a unity in multiplicity and that unity is Atman-Brahman. There is, thus, an actual, literal common identity that oneself shares with other selves. My Self is also your Self; my Self and your Self are not two (advaita); they are one and the same. All Selves are one and the same Self. [18] (p. 244)

From this perspective, it becomes apparent that relational approaches can lead ethical reflection into what Plumwood refers to as the “Ocean of continuity [19] (p. 155)”, which no longer allows for the recognition of the distinct differences of each moral agent. If everyone is directed on an ethical path that leads from the ego to the Self, this process takes the form of a “one-place relationship” [16] (p. 197) that does not acknowledge other beings as centers of resistance with their own interests and goods. Consequently, ethical reflection may fail to break free from the monological relationship between the self and nature that characterizes centric constructions of ethics. In the end, EVEs that follows this path would fall under the previous charge of defending egocentrism.

For Plumwood, this is the reason why virtue ethics should redirect the focus from self-flourishing towards interpersonal relations. Virtues, especially environmental virtues, are, in her view, dispositions to act against “the oppressive ideologies of domination and self-imposition that have formed our conceptions of both the other and ourselves” [16] (p. 194). She calls them counter-hegemonic virtues. Through the exercise of these virtues, moral agents cultivate a form of decentering that involves attention and openness to the alterity of the diversity of Earth others. The horizon of this virtue ethics is a world without a single center, in which beings, acting as nodes in the biospheric network, are recognized in their specificity.

6. From Counter-Hegemonic to Collective Virtues

Against the holistic view of the merging of the moral self into a vast, undifferentiated whole, Plumwood and Callicott emphasize the plurality of selves and non-human agents. From this perspective, they assert that adopting a relational ontology does not imply the absorption of divergent interests or their alignment toward a single process of flourishing. Furthermore, they argue that EVE’s central concern should not be the flourishing of individual agents but rather the characterization of a state of the community to which they belong, conducive to establishing a coexistence that respects the diversity of interconnected beings.

In that sense, Callicott assesses that EVE’s main shortcoming is precisely that it failed to draw on what ancient philosophy offered in terms of thinking about virtues not merely as individual or even relational traits but as attributes of collectives. Collective virtues, in his view, represent the unexplored dimension of the contemporary revival of virtue ethics in the environmental domain.

In his own analysis of the potential of virtue ethics to address environmental issues, Callicott outlines three levels: personal, professional, and societal [1] (p. 158). The latter two differ from the first in that they refer to institutions or collective actors. Professional virtues are associated with ways of excelling in the practice of a profession. Societal virtues, on the other hand, characterize an entire community capable of cultivating traits that enable self-respect. According to Callicott, these virtues are particularly important because they allow us to address environmental problems at the collective level. However, EVEs, including their relational versions, have not been able to provide satisfactory answers because they have primarily focused on personal virtues.

What exactly does Callicott mean by collective virtues? A rich philosophical debate on the definition or even the existence of this type of virtue and the nature of the groups

capable of exercising them has emerged [20,21]. This debate intersects with the theoretical discussions initiated by Margaret Gilbert's work on collective actions and beliefs [22]. Without going into the details of this discussion, it is sufficient to mention here that the concept of collective virtue does not imply granting personhood status to groups. Following Ryan and Meghan Byerly's proposal, a collective virtue can be defined as follows:

A collective C has a virtue V to the extent that the members of C are disposed, qua members of C, to behave in ways characteristic of V under appropriate circumstances. [21] (p. 46)

The collective dimension of these virtues is expressed in the fact that individuals or agents exercise them as members of a community to which these virtues are attributed.

But what communities are we referring to here? In his discussion, Callicott mainly mentions the ancient model of the polis. His references are to Aristotle and Plato [1] (pp. 259–261). However, this anchoring raises serious difficulties, first of all, because these social forms no longer exist, and moreover, their highly unequal structure makes them difficult to mobilize as a normative horizon within contemporary societies. These difficulties are at the heart of Alasdair McIntyre's work. How can we revive a virtue ethics that depends on social conditions that have disappeared? The analysis of this question takes an aporetic turn in *After Virtue* [23]. McIntyre does not believe that modern nation-states can embody social forms conducive to the development of a communal life oriented toward a common ideal of a good life that would allow for the definition of private and public virtues. He then retreats to small face-to-face communities that he believes are the only remaining spaces for the development of virtue ethics.

However, does the idea of public virtues necessarily lead to this pessimistic and politically conservative conclusion? A first response can emphasize that virtue ethics may not be destined to embody the type of moral authority capable of ordering society, as McIntyre aspires to. In a version more compatible with democracy, it can be conceived more modestly as an ethical reflection that engages in public discourse about the organization of common life. A second response can draw inspiration from the critique addressed by Plumwood to McIntyre, in which she asserts that virtue ethics are not necessarily linked to the attempt to resurrect social structures from the past but can accompany the invention or recognition of other more emancipatory social forms [19] (p. 186). Such a proposition allows us to redirect the discussion on environmental virtues toward the identification of collective virtues that can be exercised within ecological communities.

7. Collective Virtues within Ecological Communities

Critiquing the individualistic approach of EVEs, Callicott calls for a shift in thinking by suggesting that environmental virtues could pertain to collectives or communities. This notion prompts us to delve further into two questions: At what collective scale is it relevant to locate environmental virtues? Which environmental virtues can be defined as collective virtues?

The first question has the merit of drawing attention to the contextualization of the reflection on environmental virtues. While the theorization of individual virtues has often leaned towards the abstract characterization of virtuous environmental individuals, the approach through collective virtues appears as a way to reposition ethical reflection within a specific place and among a community of members who feel at least partially responsible for the decisions and actions of this community. In this regard, Plumwood repeatedly emphasizes the contextual dimension of the virtue ethics she describes.

Because spatial proximity promotes attention to the ecological consequences of our actions, small-scale communities seem to provide an especially conducive framework for practicing ethics that value the care given to the relationships that bind the diversity of living beings. Plumwood appears to align with McIntyre in this regard by focusing on small face-to-face communities. In her discussion of bioregionalism, she acknowledges how the movement has effectively highlighted the invisibilization of ecological relationships resulting from the remoteness of chains of production and distribution and the benefits

of relocating production activities. She also subscribes to the idea that decentralizing decision making, on the contrary, encourages the consideration of the effects of these decisions on the environment. Finally, she argues that true participatory democracy can only occur at this local level. She writes on this subject:

Democracy can only be truly participatory at the level of the small, face-to-face community, people will be in a position to have the knowledge and motivation as well as the democratic and communicative means to make good ecological decisions, decisions that reflect their own extended long-term and familiar interests as well as those of their local ecologically-defined communities. [16] (p. 74)

In summary, Plumwood's analysis leads us to consider that local socio-ecological communities represent a good scale for the collective practice of environmental virtues. However, she also cautions against the risks of becoming confined to localism that could generate other forms of invisibility. She observes that the proximity to nature facilitated by small-scale communities does not necessarily guarantee "the first condition of the bioregionalist, the transparency to inhabitants of ecological relationships and dependencies [16] (p. 76)". From this perspective, while McIntyre tended to focus on goods internal to communities, Plumwood's concerns also revolve around embedding these communities within the broader network of socio-ecological relationships. According to her, environmental virtues must precisely help cultivate a "critical sense of place that can situate local relationships and communities in relation to wider communities" [16] (p. 77).

This leads us to the second question raised concerning the identification of collective and environmental virtues. What kind of trait or disposition to action could members of an ecological community cultivate as members of that community and be described as an environmental virtue? Among the list of virtues identified by Plumwood, solidarity emerges as an interesting candidate in this context. Thus, while this reflection will need to be broadened by considering other collective virtues, such as conviviality, the end of this section will focus on the concept of solidarity, which has already found significant resonance in ecological thought [24].

While she does not explicitly define it as a collective virtue herself, solidarity does indeed meet the criteria of a virtue that characterizes a collective rather than an individual. One would describe a community as "solidary" if the members of that community act and make decisions that demonstrate empathy towards others and an acknowledgment of the interdependent situation in which all members of that community find themselves. As noted by Byerly, there is no individual-level analogue to solidarity, which is why it constitutes a specifically collective virtue [21].

Plumwood assigns a pivotal role to solidarity in her virtue ethics. She carefully distinguishes it from unity in her concern for respecting differences. Analyzing the central role of this concept in Plumwood's work, Chaone Mallory writes:

Political solidarity for Plumwood is a relation in which one (or, as is more suitable for our purposes, the collective) does not claim an identification with the other—political solidarity describes a relation in which beings are motivated to act on behalf of others with whom one admits one does not (necessarily) share experiences, interests, worldviews, or subjectivity. However, those standing in solidarity become joined both with the object of solidarity and others involved in struggling for change through the shared recognition of injustice and oppression and through acting to change it. [25] (p. 8)

As Mallory suggests, ecological solidarity is a form of political solidarity in Plumwood's philosophy. It is indeed a collective and public virtue, in the sense of being a "character trait[s] that bring[s] us into virtuous relationships with our communities and environments" [26] (p. 18).

This approach has the merit of undoing most binary distinctions that seemed to render EVEs ineffective, particularly the dichotomies between the individual and the collective, the private and the public, or ethics and politics. In addition, rather than in opposition to

the realization of an ecological self, the work on collective virtues can be interpreted as a process through which members of an ecological community care for the flourishing of the diversity of living beings within it.

8. Conclusions

During their initial phase of development, EVEs were associated, both by their theorists and their critics, with the solitary practice of virtues that exemplified what a life respectful of the diversity of living beings on Earth could be. This analytical framework aligned with a common way of narrating the history of environmental conservation, which successively invokes the prominent figures of the environmental cause, such as Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, and Carson. Despite their claims to the contrary, these individualistic approaches to EVEs are seen by many of their critics as a form of depoliticization of environmental action.

However, the contributions of Plumwood and Callicott to this debate introduce a different perspective within EVEs. By reintroducing social forms and ecological communities in which environmental virtues can be practiced, they demonstrate how a virtue ethics approach can, on the contrary, resonate with new forms of politicization of ecological issues.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Callicott, J.B. *Thinking Like a Planet: The Land Ethic and the Earth Ethic*; Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2013; ISBN 978-0-19-932489-7.
2. Barnes, J. *Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2: The Revised Oxford Translation*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 2014; ISBN 978-1-4008-3585-0.
3. Hill, T.E. Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments. *Environ. Ethics* **1983**, *5*, 211–224. [[CrossRef](#)]
4. van Wensveen, L. *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics*; Humanity Books: Amherst, NY, USA, 2000; ISBN 978-1-57392-649-2.
5. Sandler, R.D.; Cafaro, P. (Eds.) *Environmental Virtue Ethics*; Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, USA, 2005.
6. Sandler, R. *Character and Environment. A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics*; Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2007.
7. Cafaro, P. Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethics. *Environ. Ethics* **2001**, *23*, 3–17. [[CrossRef](#)]
8. Gardiner, S.M. *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*; Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2011; ISBN 978-0-19-537944-0.
9. Hume, D. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed.; Selby-Bigge, L.A., Nidditch, P.H., Eds.; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1739.
10. Jamieson, D. *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed—And What It Means for Our Future*; Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2014; ISBN 978-0-19-933766-8.
11. Merchant, C. *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 1992.
12. Hurka, T. Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret. *Ethics* **1996**, *106*, 555–575. [[CrossRef](#)]
13. Rolston, H., III. Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole. In *Environmental Virtue Ethics*; Sandler, R.D., Cafaro, P., Eds.; Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, USA, 2005; pp. 61–78.
14. Toner, C. The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics. *Philosophy* **2006**, *81*, 595–617. [[CrossRef](#)]
15. Naess, A. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1989; ISBN 978-0-521-34873-7.
16. Plumwood, V. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*; Routledge: Londres, UK, 2002.
17. Naess, A. The Shallow and the Deep Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary. *Inquiry* **1973**, *16*, 95–100. [[CrossRef](#)]
18. Callicott, J.B. Notes on “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World”. *Worldviews* **2017**, *21*, 235–250. [[CrossRef](#)]

19. Plumwood, V. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 1993; ISBN 978-1-134-91668-9.
20. Fricker, M. Can There Be Institutional Virtues. *Oxf. Stud. Epistemol.* **2010**, *3*, 235–252.
21. Byerly, T.R.; Byerly, M. Collective Virtue. *J. Value Inq.* **2016**, *50*, 33–50. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Gilbert, M. *On Social Facts*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 1992; ISBN 978-0-691-21462-7.
23. MacIntyre, A. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed.; University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN, USA, 2022; ISBN 978-0-268-20405-1.
24. Mathevet, R.; Bousquet, F.; Larrère, C.; Larrère, R. Environmental Stewardship and Ecological Solidarity: Rethinking Social-Ecological Interdependency and Responsibility. *J. Agric. Environ. Ethics* **2018**, *31*, 605–623. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Mallory, C. Val Plumwood and Ecofeminist Political Solidarity: Standing with the Natural Other. *Ethics Environ.* **2009**, *14*, 3–21. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Treanor, B. Environmentalism and Public Virtue. *J. Agric. Environ. Ethics* **2009**, *23*, 9–28. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.