

# TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE ETHIC FOR THE PRESERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY

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**Abstract.** *As is well known, the depletion of biodiversity is a significant environmental problem and it is essential that Christian ethics develops a response to it. One promising basis for such a response is the Christian virtue ethical tradition. In this paper I discuss some problems and possibilities with developing a theological virtue ethic for the preservation of biodiversity. My starting-point is Thomas Aquinas' virtue ethics, which still has a strong position within Christian ethics. It has also been suggested by some authors, for instance Celia Deane-Drummond, that it can be applied in an environmental context. First, I describe Deane-Drummond application of Aquinas and then I discuss some problems and possibilities with such an application.*

**Author Keywords:** Biodiversity, Virtue Ethics, Aquinas, Deane-Drummond

## 1 INTRODUCTION

As is well-known, the depletion of 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. In the tradition of Christian virtue ethics the ethics of Thomas Aquinas has a strong position and it has also been suggested by some authors, for instance Celia Deane-Drummond, that it can be applied in the environmental context. In this paper I first describe Deane-Drummond's application of Aquinas' ethics and then I discuss some problems and possibilities with this application.

## 2 THE APPLICATION OF AQUINAS VIRTUE ETHICS IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Celia Deane- Drummond is one of the theologians that in most detail have discussed questions of environmental virtue ethics. She takes as her starting-point the virtue ethics developed by Thomas Aquinas and maintains that the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance should form the basis of an environmental virtue ethics. Deane-Drummond 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 [1, pp. 9-10]. Strictly speaking, prudence is not a moral virtue, although it is necessary for the application of the moral virtues. According to Jean Porter, Aquinas regards it as an intellectual virtue [2, p. 103].

Deane-Drummond states that prudence should be understood as practical wisdom. Thomas describes 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 [1, pp. 10-11].

According to Aquinas, prudence can only be accomplished through the grace of God. The virtue of prudence should be understood in the light of the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. The goal for a Christian is not goodness in an abstract sense, but participation in the life of the Triune God. An aspect of prudence is to take counsel not only from other humans, but also from the Holy Spirit. It is through the grace of God that prudence can be perfected [1, pp. 10-15]. Aquinas argues that we, because of the corruption of sin, need the theological virtues in order to attain even the natural human good which the cardinal virtues aim at. Human beings also need the theological virtues in order to lead a fully unified life. Even if we were able to realize the aim of the cardinal virtues without the grace of God, the duties they impose upon us would sometimes conflict. Moreover, even if we could handle these conflicts, we would still experience inner tension and regret. The pursuit of finite aims can only lead to partial happiness [2, pp. 168-169].

It is above all the virtue of charity that can help us realize a unified life, according to Aquinas. The theological virtues differ from the cardinal virtues since they direct the human person toward a personal union with God. This union can never be reached through human efforts, but must be given us from without by God. Aquinas states that charity is the highest of the theological virtues since it makes us love God for God's own sake. In the personality of the justified it is charity rather than prudence that functions as the highest organizing principle and which directs his or her actions, desires and impulses towards God. Charity enables the individual to participate in the mind and will of God so that the individual can not only fulfil the duties of the natural law, but also understand God's will for him or her in every specific situation. Aquinas states that wisdom is the gift of the Holy Spirit that corresponds to charity [2, p. 169].

Charity enables the individual to live in friendship with God, in spite of the infinite gap between creature and Creator. It also unites all humans in friendship, since everyone has the potential of living in friendship with God due to the gift of grace, according to Aquinas. He states that charity is associated with all those virtues which manifest themselves in concern for the neighbour such as beneficence and acts of mercy and almsgiving. Aquinas argues that charity transcends the duties of the natural law, but it does not abrogate them. Even a justified individual who lives in friendship with God is still an inhabitant of this world and has to follow the duties of the natural law [2, p. 170-171].

According to Aquinas, prudence is necessary for exercising the other cardinal virtues of justice, fortitude and temperance. Justice is connected with the idea that everyone should be given his or her due. It directs the actions of the other virtues towards the common good. For Aquinas justice is not only a secular concept since it can only be perfected if it is inspired by charity. Fortitude is the ability to endure difficult circumstances and the willingness to suffer for the sake of the good. It has its source in prudence and justice. For Aquinas temperance is connected with an awareness of the ordered unity of the self. To be temperate is to give the sensual desires the proper place in the human life. It is connected with chastity and humility [1, pp. 15-17].

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 one of the intellectual virtues together with understanding and science. Wisdom is manifested as prudence in 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 [1, pp. 20-22].

Deane-Drummond claims that prudence is a central virtue in the context of environmental policy-making. One aspect of prudence is to make deliberations, which is an issue not only 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 [1, pp. 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 [1, pp. 43-44].

Deane-Drummond states that justice is another important environmental virtue, which is related to prudence. According to Aquinas, justice is not only an individual good that we should pursue. To be a virtuous moral agent also entails cooperating with others. Aquinas tried to unite individual, local and global justice. Deane-Drummond wants to extend the virtue of justice to include also non-human beings. She argues that Aquinas' view of justice is compatible with the idea that justice also comprises other life forms, although justice to non-humans has a different meaning than justice to humans. Deane-Drummond states that Aquinas assumed that all life forms have an inclination to preserve themselves and that this implies that every living being has a right to enjoy the fullness of its own life. Because of our kinship with other living beings our morality should encompass also them [1, pp. 45-47].

Deane-Drummond acknowledges that Aquinas had an instrumental view of animals. He argued that animals are irrational and for this reason we do not owe any duties to them. For example, it is not murder to kill an ox. He who kills another man's ox does not commit the sin of murder, only the sin of theft or robbery. We cannot join with animals in friendship since they are irrational. Cruelty towards animals is morally problematic only because it may lead to cruelty against humans [1, pp. 67-68].

Deane-Drummond argues, however, that Aquinas' theology taken as a whole is not negative towards other life forms. He describes plants, animals and humans as part of the Great Chain of Being. A living being has a higher value the closer to God it is. Because of their rationality human beings are elevated above other living beings. The ranking is, however, gradual and some plants have nearly the same value as animals and some animals have nearly the same value as humans. Deane-Drummond says that there is a discrepancy between Aquinas' animal ethics and his ontology. According to his ontology all living beings should be assigned intrinsic value, even if the degree of value depends on its divine likeness. Since animals are not rational in the same way as humans, they cannot be moral agents and have moral rights. However, they can still be moral objects and humans can owe moral duties towards them. As created beings they also participate in the goodness of God [1, pp. 67-74].

### **3 SOME PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES WITH APPLYING AQUINAS VIRTUE ETHICS IN THE CONTEXT OF BIODIVERSITY PRESERVATION**

Although I agree that Aquinas' virtue ethics is an interesting starting-point for Christian environmental ethics, I think it needs revision if we are going to extend it to include also our moral relationship with other living beings. Aquinas has a clear anthropocentric understanding of the different virtues; an understanding which is connected with his outdated static worldview according to which every being has been created from the beginning by God and has its predetermined place in God's world order. When he speaks about justice, for instance, he defines it as a virtue that governs our relationship to other humans. It is a virtue that regulates the relationship between individuals who are at least in some respect equal. Aquinas' concept of justice rests upon the Christian belief that all persons are equal in the sight of God. They are equally God's creatures and have the same need of grace. He also affirms the anthropological thesis which is common to the "pagan" and the Christian interpretation of the natural law that all persons are equal since all are equally capable of moral virtue [2, pp. 137-140].

Contrary to Deane-Drummond, I doubt whether justice is an appropriate concept for describing our moral relationship to non-human species, even if we try to revise it to make it compatible with a non-anthropocentric starting-point. Since it is based on a presupposition of equality, it would lose too much of its original meaning if we reinterpret it in order to cover also our relationship to other life forms that are radically different from us and with less intrinsic value. The concept of justice seems to imply some form of reciprocity. The duties it entails are duties towards individuals that also can owe duties towards us and therefore it seems unfit to cover also our duties to other living beings. Nor do I think that Aquinas' view of the theological virtue of charity is helpful in this context since it is only concerned with the relationship between persons who have the potential for living in friendship with God. However, if we assume that salvation also encompasses other living beings than humans, I think we have reason for revising the concept of charity so that it includes also our relationship to other life forms.

Although I agree with Deane-Drummond that Aquinas' theology as a whole affirms the intrinsic value of non-human beings, I think that respect is a better term than justice for denoting our moral relationship to them since it does not imply that this relationship is based on equality and reciprocity. Even if wisdom affirms the intrinsic value of other living beings, it does not imply that they have the same intrinsic value as humans. J. Claude Evans has given an important contribution to the discussion of the meaning of respect in the context of environmental ethics. He criticizes the interpretation of respect by Paul W. Taylor and other environmental ethicists who maintain that humans owe a *prima facie* duty to avoid harming individual animals and plants. Instead Evans wants to affirm the concrete process of life which is characterized by the fact that all life forms live from other life forms. It is unavoidable for humans to in some way participate in this process. In order to survive we must appropriate nature. According to Evans, the purpose of environmental ethics is to define what a respectful appropriation of nature would be [3, pp. 130-133].

Evans states that living with an attitude of respect means to live with a constant mindfulness of one's basic orientation towards life. It is different from living with a number of predetermined rules that do not demand our own deliberation. Moreover, an attitude of respect does not require of us to minimize actions that affect the natural world. Instead, it is based on judgement that we are permitted to appropriate the energy and nutrition that we need for our health and well-being [3, pp. 152-153].

According to Evans' interpretation, the virtue of respect entails recognition of the difference between the human sphere and the natural sphere. Principles of human ethics cannot simply be extended to the human-nature relationship. Humans are the only being we know of who have the capacity to act as moral agents. We can owe duties to other creatures, but they cannot owe duties towards us. In this sense we cannot stand in a relation of reciprocity with other life forms. Respect also implies that we should let the natural order function according to its own laws and not impose human standards on it. Evans' interpretation of the virtue of respect seems consistent with Christian environmental ethics. If we believe that the creation of humanity and human culture is the will of God, we should conclude that humanity has a right to perform such actions that are necessary for the survival and well-being of the human population.

I think that the concept of respect is more helpful than some other virtues, which have been proposed in the environmental ethical debate and which to a lesser extent recognize the difference between humans and other life forms. Benevolence is an example of such a virtue. 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 [4, pp. 125-129].

Benevolence and similar concepts such as love and care seem difficult to apply to our relationship to the non-human world. In the human realm such concept 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.

As for the virtues of temperance and fortitude, I think they can be helpful in the context of biodiversity preservation, although they are dependent on our view of what moral relationship we should have towards species. They are considered by Aquinas as affective virtues since they have the function of regulating our emotions in order to enable us to live a morally good life. His view of the affective virtues is based on the belief that humans are desiring creatures with subrational passions. The affective virtues shape the human individual so that he or she spontaneously desires what is in line with the truly good life that he or she wants to live. Fortitude and temperance regulate the passions of fear, desire and anger. According to Aquinas, these passions are not fully rational, but they still have a cognitive component and can therefore be influenced by reason. When we develop the affective virtues, we re-educate our emotional responses. The formation of fortitude, for instance, requires that we learn not to be afraid of what is not really harmful to us. The truly virtuous person will have immediate emotional responses that are in accordance with his or her rational judgements [2, p. 103].

When making decisions, both on the personal and the political level, that affect other species the virtues of temperance and fortitude are important. When linked to the virtue of respect, temperance helps us to not forget the effects on other species when we are planning projects that will increase human welfare. When building a road that affects a rare species, for instance, we should not let us be so disturbed by our desire for increased well-being that we make a decision which conflicts with our belief about the moral status of the species. Temperance is a valuable virtue in the context of environmental policy-making since our current environmental problems to a large extent is a consequence of our high consumption. The virtue of fortitude is also important since we should not let ourselves be affected by irrational fears about human welfare or the welfare of other species. When we hear about the serious threats to our environment, it is easy to be gripped by fear and to make foolish decisions. An advantage with a virtue oriented approach to environmental ethics is that it helps us acknowledge our emotions and the effect they have on our moral decision-making.

In order to better understand what the virtue of respect requires of us in relation to species of animals and plants, we have to answer difficult questions concerning their relationship to God's will. Our view of what duties we owe to protect non-human species depends partly on our view of the evolutionary process and its relationship to the will of God. These issues are not recognized by Aquinas since his ethic is based on a static worldview according to which every living thing has been created from the beginning by God and has its predestined role in the Great Chain of Being. One possible standpoint is to accept the scientific thesis that the evolutionary process is governed by chance and to argue that chance is a part of God's plan for creation. Such a position is advocated by, for instance, Niels Henrik Gregersen, who claims that the distribution of chance is established by God. The purpose of God is expressed in the aggregate effects of random happenings [5, pp. 354-355]. Gregersen's view seems to imply that it is the will of God that a diversity of life forms exists. If we accept this belief, we seem to have strong reasons for preserving other species.

However, it is not an obvious Christian belief that evolution is an expression of the will of God. Another possible standpoint is to claim that the evolutionary process is a result of the Fall and that the current natural conditions that a great number of species develop and most of them become extinct is a consequence of sin. If we accept this standpoint it becomes more ambiguous how we should relate to other species. However, even if we do, I still think we have to affirm that the different species have their ultimate source in the will of God, in spite of the fact that their existence also is a consequence of sin. To give up this belief would conflict with the Christian doctrine of creation. The outcome of this standpoint seem to be that we still have some duty to preserve other species, although this duty seem to be weaker than if we believe that the current biodiversity is not a result of sin.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Although I think that Aquinas' virtue ethics can be fruitful as a starting-point for developing a Christian response to the issue of biodiversity preservation, it is also in need of revision. First, I think that respect is a more appropriate concept than justice for denoting our moral relationship to other life forms since it does not imply a relation of equality and reciprocity. Second, I think our view of what duties we owe to protect non-human species partly depends on our view of the evolutionary process and its relationship to the will of God. These issues are not recognized by Aquinas since his ethic is based on a static worldview according to which every living thing has been created from the beginning by God and has its predestined role in the Great Chain of Being.

As for the virtues of temperance and fortitude, I think they can be helpful in the context of biodiversity preservation since personal and political decisions concerning our use of natural resources requires of us that our moral judgements are not clouded by fear and desire for pleasure. Virtue ethics has the advantage compared to other approaches to environmental ethics that it puts more emphasis on the fact that our moral judgements can be negatively affected by our emotions.

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