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ARTICLES

Species Extinction and the Vice of Thoughtlessness: The Importance of Spiritual Exercises for Learning Virtue

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Abstract In this paper, I present a sample spiritual exercise—a contemporary form of the written practice that ancient philosophers used to shape their characters. The exercise, which develops the ancient practice of the examination of conscience, is on the sixth mass extinction and seeks to understand why the extinction appears as a moral wrong. It concludes by finding a vice in the moral character of the author and the author's society. From a methodological standpoint, the purpose of spiritual exercises is to create a habit of thoughtfulness in the *writer*, and by way of teaching, to suggest one to the reader. Such a habit is important, at least, because virtue is a habit. In other words, there can be no learning of virtue itself without habituation into it. Accordingly, I frame the sample spiritual exercise with a deliberately controversial objection to contemporary academic virtue ethics and with a justification for why the spiritual exercise is important for taking virtue ethically. And I end the paper with some further remarks explaining the form of the exercise and its relevance to doing philosophy. In this way, the paper makes and illustrates a methodological point about virtue ethics based on a meta-ethical assumption about virtue as a habit, and it does this by focusing on a pressing environmental problem in the twenty-first century.

Keywords Species extinction · Sixth mass extinction · Virtue theory · Spiritual exercises · Meta-ethics · Meta-philosophy

> The purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good.
> —Aristotle (1999), *Nicomachean ethics*, 1103b28-9

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> Discourse is a privileged means by which the philosopher can act upon himself and others. … It is always intended to produce an effect, to create a *habitus* within the soul, or to provoke a transformation of the self.
> —Pierre Hadot (2002), "Philosophy and philosophical discourse", p. 176

> Humanity has initiated the sixth great extinction spasm, rushing to eternity a large fraction of our fellow species in a single generation.
> —E. O. Wilson (1999), *The diversity of life*, p. 32

Learning Virtue Without Learning It

I worry that, paradoxical as it is, we[1] teach virtue without teaching it. If virtue is above all a habit, then to teach it without habituation is not to teach it. This is my first worry over academic virtue ethics—a disparity between form and content.[2]

In this essay, I will frame a way of learning virtue that attempts to meld form and content—to have each support the other. The way of learning draws on an ancient philosophical tradition that has been translated as the tradition of "spiritual exercises"—from the Greek *askesis* (the root of our word "ascetic"). However, we should not think of this tradition as the tradition of ascetic practices, but as the tradition of methods by which philosophy becomes an *ethos*—a way of life, our character. I will provide an example of this ancient way of learning, and my frame will allow us to be aware of the theoretical assumptions behind its methodology.[3]

Are we concerned with the *concept* of virtue, or with virtue itself? Meta-ethics, whose point is to understand the nature of ethics, is understandably after the former. As such, its efforts fall squarely within the domain of theoretical reason, whose point is truths and whose value is the true. However, ethics—the part of everyday life, not the field of study—are squarely practical. They fall within the domain of practical reason, whose point is doing something in the world and whose value is the good (or, for some, the right). If we are concerned only with meta-ethics, we can rest content with the concept of virtue. But, even so, we cannot thereby assume to be learning ethics. Rather, to learn ethics, we need to *take* the concept of virtue *ethically*, which is to subsume our theoretical pursuits under practical reason, the

[1] Mainstream, academic virtue ethicists, and those interested in the *point* of mainstream, academic virtue ethics. I believe the mainstream approach to virtue ethics could be related to one reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, although its causes might be more contemporary in the dynamics of university research, intellectual status, and markets. That reading of Aristotle pictures him as the first major virtue *theorist*. But that reading of Aristotle is mistaken. In what follows, I will rely on an *alternative* reading of Aristotle, according to which his reflections are not divorced from habituation, but part of a citizenry's attempt to come to grips with virtue. The goal on this alternative reading, as Aristotle himself said, is to *become* virtuous, not simply to know virtue. See Aristotle (1999), pp. 1103b28–1103b29. See also the powerful passage at 1105b14–1105b19.

[2] It is the *first* problem, because it displays a grasp of the *point* of virtue, and so of teaching virtue. Virtue is to be practiced, above all. That is its point. Without aiming to habituate people into virtue, academic virtue ethics is not lined up right *from the beginning*.

[3] I came to my approach through reading Pierre Hadot (2002) and my example of a spiritual exercise is particularly indebted to the ancient idea of the examination of conscience which Hadot discusses (pp. 198–202).

primary form of reason in matters ethical. That is to become concerned with virtue itself.[4]

My point is that someone concerned ethically with virtue will be concerned with virtue itself. The point of virtue is to live excellently, or well, and, for a person concerned with being ethical, the point of investigating virtue is not to know virtue, but to *become* virtuous.[5] That Aristotle took this as self-evident shows he took his investigation ethically. The question then is whether we can do philosophy of virtue without taking virtue ethically. *That* is a question about the nature of philosophy, the love of wisdom. I will consider it only briefly here. For my purposes, I will discuss virtue from the standpoint of taking it ethically.

Now for someone concerned with virtue itself, the forms of life that build virtuous habits are as crucial as any point of theory.[6] This conclusion implies that philosophers concerned with virtue itself should shape the styles of their theoretical discourses so that they contribute to the formation of virtuous habits.[7] Doing so is a matter of philosophical integrity, not simply a welcome ornament to philosophical work on virtue itself. I attempt to address this stylistic challenge to our integrity as virtue ethicists through my essay in environmental virtue ethics. I express not only a specific, virtuous practice, but a methodological point about how we should be doing virtue ethics if we are concerned with virtue itself. That point flows from a meta-ethical assumption about the kind of thing virtue is: a state of character expressed by habits of mind and action.

In what follows, I will present a sample, virtuous practice in which form and content cohere. My way of doing so is to frame it for academic virtue ethicists so that it is clear why the style of the practice is what it is. By way of framing, I first discuss philosophy's relation to theory and then how virtue itself exceeds theory. This second section addresses my assumption about virtue being a habit. There then follows the sample virtuous practice, what some historians of ancient philosophy call a "spiritual exercise" (Hadot 2002, pp. 189–190).[8] The example finished, I conclude with a section on the audience and style of the exercise, underlining how its form and content cohere. In particular, I focus on the idea of the form of

[4] I thank Chin-Tai Kim and Colin McLarty for discussion leading to conclusions of this paragraph.

[5] Again, see Aristotle (1999), pp. 1103b28–1103b29: "The purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good." Being good, for Aristotle, is being virtuous, as his function argument from book 1 of the *Ethics* makes clear, cf., 1098a17.

[6] They might be *more* important if, as Aristotle sometimes suggests, we cannot think straight without virtuous habits. The point is not that hard to imagine: an intemperate person will *not* think straight around bodily pleasures. See Aristotle (1999), pp. 1144a29–1144b1 and pp. 144b31–144b32.

[7] See my review of Hadot's *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Bendik-Keymer 2008). Although I do not have the space to go into the argument here, I would like to say that philosophers—not just those interested in virtue—should check to see that their styles are appropriately practical, for at least a good part of philosophy's object is a wise life, just as virtue's object is a life lived well. That is, practical reason appears to be central to philosophy, even though we may associate philosophy with theory. Currently, I am exploring this idea in other work through philosophy's relation to what I call the "grammar of being." The grammar of our being shows us that theoretical, practical and what I call "relational" reason are co-primary. Being is meaningless without the logic of any one of these kinds of reason, and philosophy is pointless then, too, since I conceive of philosophy as pursuing our full being.

[8] The technical term is *askesis*—the Greek root of our "ascetics." See also Hadot (2003) and his magisterial study of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* and its relation to Epictetus's teaching (Hadot 1998).

questioning, which allows us to distinguish the point of reflection from effects of reflection and a manner of writing from a manner of reading, and which underlines how learning virtue itself is primarily the work of practical, not theoretical, reason.

Philosophy's Relation to Theory

I do not have space to discuss fully whether we can do philosophy of virtue without being concerned with virtue itself, but I suspect that we cannot.[9] Even so, it will help to discuss philosophy's relation to theory in a preliminary way.

Philosophy is the love of wisdom, and—in its ancient form—its point was to become wise.[10] Although I think there are reasons to criticize this ancient formulation, it does pose a helpful challenge that forces us to be clear: the question is whether theory, and in general *the theoretical life*, seeks the same goal as philosophy and *the philosophical life*? If they do, then the life of a theoretician seeks to become wise above all, and the practice of theory has in view wisdom in all instances. The conclusion is a simple consequence of the relation of means to their ends, with the end being wisdom. Does the life of theory seek wisdom above all else?[11]

The answer to this question requires a definition of theory and a definition of wisdom. On my understanding, theory is comprehensive and abstract knowledge of things. By contrast, wisdom reflects our full being in all its dimensions.[12] Our full being involves truth, goodness, and beauty—the values for knowledge, action, and connection. Theory is at most a third of wisdom, then. It aims at knowledge and its

[9] To see why the matter is difficult, think about how it could be wise to *not* take virtue ethically. Suppose, for instance, one's system of virtues were predicated off of an unjust ethical system. Then it would be wise to *refuse* to take virtue ethically. It would be wise to stand back and to look at virtue theoretically and to refrain from practicing it until one has extirpated the injustice from one's system of values. That being said, it seems unlikely to me that we could approach virtue philosophically without trying to learn virtue itself. At the very least, this is because not much of life is exceptional in the sense just discussed. Most life demands what we take to be virtue unproblematically. Moreover, in the previous example of an unjust ethical system, being *truly* just seems to be necessary for adequately criticizing that system. In other words, the theoretical suspension of virtue itself depends on virtue itself.

[10] See Hadot (2002), pp. 220–231 and pp. 42–50, where, for Socrates, wisdom appears is an unattainable *regulative ideal* driving on onward (the Kantian language is my own).

[11] My main reason for criticizing the ancient conception of the point of philosophy is that I think it privileges practical reason. As I alluded to briefly before, I think theoretical, practical, and relational reason are co-primary in the grammar of our being, and it does not make sense to me that the pursuit of wisdom would distort the grammar of our being. But if it won't, then the goal of philosophy should not be primarily practical. Rather, it should be pluralistic with respect to kinds of reason. In other words, the goals (plural) of philosophy should be implicit in wisdom (singular), the many in that one, and these goals should reflect the grammar of being—a wise life (the practical reason of philosophy), truth (the theoretical reason of philosophy), and harmonious connection with others (the relational reason of philosophy). I hope to explain these points more fully in future work.

[12] The expression "full being" comes from Irad Kimhi.

value is truth. But wisdom exceeds theory. It is practical, too. And it involves connecting with others in a way that is not reducible to knowing about them or knowing how to act alongside them. Theory is a *part* of wisdom.[13]

Once you realize this logical point, it is obvious that a theoretical life needn't be a wisdom-seeking one unless it is taken philosophically. Whereas wisdom implies an acknowledgement of theory's place in our full being, one could pursue theory without pursuing wisdom, a point that is all too obvious in the twentieth century caricature of the scientist who pursues truth but forgets his humanity or in the caricature of the analytic philosopher who pursues truth but is completely out of touch with both social justice and others. So, if you are a theorist trying to do philosophy, the question to ask yourself is whether you aim to become wise. If you do, then you do philosophy, too. If not, then your activity isn't philosophical. A material biconditional obtains between aiming to become wise and philosophy, but theory is at best a necessary and not a sufficient condition of wisdom.

Virtue Taken Ethically

In the context of being ethical, my worry about theory is not about its uselessness, but about its *pointlessness*. Theory can certainly be useful. But theory seeks the true. Ethics, by contrast, seeks the good (or, for some, the right). The former concludes in truths (or realizations that truths are not forthcoming, a move in the space of the true). The latter concludes in deeds. If I am trying to become ethical, to approach virtue merely theoretically is to make a category error, and—from an ethical standpoint—a grave mistake. Another way to put this concern is, if I want to learn the wisdom of doing the right thing, it won't be enough for me to merely think about my character.

How do we take virtue ethically? Think about what virtue itself is. If virtue itself is X, then a discourse that does not promote X does not promote virtue itself. Let us say, then, that virtue itself is a habit. Then a discourse that does not promote virtue as a habit does not promote virtue itself. You'd have to promote virtue's habits to take virtue ethically.

Should we, then, regard virtue as a habit? For the most part, I follow Aristotle here. Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of virtue—virtues of thought and virtues of character (Aristotle 1999, p. 1103a5–11). The distinction corresponds to parts of the soul. Aristotle believed that a part of our psychology is purely intellectual, while another is part-intellectual and part emotional. Although the distinction is easy to undermine, there is some common sense to it. A failure to grasp logic due to a blunt mind is a different kind of failure than a tendency to erupt into angry outbursts. The angry outbursts are matters of character, and Aristotle thinks that only virtues of character are habits (Aristotle 1999, p. 1103a14–15).

[13] Although Hadot casts the ancient philosophical goal as primarily practical—i.e., an *ethos*—he does accept that theory is a part of that practice. See Hadot (2002), p. 175, par. 3. As I said before, I think there are good reasons to reject the primacy of practical reason in philosophy, whether this was the ancient view or not.

Yet I think there are grounds for disagreement. Aristotle was of the mind that only virtues of character properly required habituation, that habit made quasi-rational emotions stay in place, serving reason. Character needed a kind of behavioral reinforcement, whereas intellectual excellence was simply in the mind once learned (Aristotle 1999, p. 1103a14–15). He said the emotions must learn to *obey* (Aristotle 1999, p. 1102b36). Habit is obedience for unruly hearts. But the mind does not need to obey reasons—it needs to see them. Aristotle created a picture whereby we realize truths intellectually, but have to build them into our hearts through habit for the times when they interact with our emotions.[14]

Yet learning how to think does require habituation, just as learning how to be courageous does. It does not take the arduous task of writing a dissertation to see this. Being objective—for instance, by seeking criticism of one's own position—is an achievement of mental habits just as even-temperedness in the midst of political life is. I discipline myself to analyze arguments and consider objections using much the same *kind* of method—a practice—as I do when I discipline myself to stay level headed around disrespectful people. And the practice results in habits: look for reasons; detach oneself from the goad of impulsive reactions in one's heart. On this one point, Aristotle's picture of the intellect is too disembodied and unemotional.[15]

Nonetheless, it seems unobjectionable that virtue be seen as a habit, although I will not be able to argue the matter fully here. People of good character simply act well without thought except in exceptional circumstances provoking deliberation. That suggests they act well out of habit. As Bernard Williams famously quipped, stopping to think about what to do in most cases is one thought too many for good character. Steal? Not steal? Virtuous people don't steal as a matter of habit. Unless the poor are starving and the rich man's granary is full, you don't think about it (Williams 1981).[16]

Suppose, then, that virtue requires habit. Thus the pursuit of virtue itself is inextricable from the pursuit of virtuous habits. And that means that any ethics of virtue must be concerned with forming habits.[17]

[14] But notice how Aristotle himself throws the division between mind and heart into question at 1144a29–1144b1 and 1144b31–1144b32. The virtue of intelligence as well as wise judgment both require habits of the heart.

[15] Consider Dewey (1916, p. 142) on this point, remembering Greek gymnastics: "It may seriously be asserted that a chief cause for the remarkable achievements of Greek education was that it was never misled by false notions into an attempted separation of mind and body." Here, there is a gymnastic insight that a trained mind is habituated like a trained body. In any event, Aristotle's distinction between kinds of virtue seems to mirror the distinction between theoretical and practical reason, at least in some way. Currently, I am unclear how, since both kinds of virtues are after the good (that is, inside practical reason). Also, I have the reasons to question the distinction mentioned above.

[16] I learned this expression of Williams in the classes of Candace Vogler at University of Chicago in the 1990s. I am adapting it from a different context, which was originally Williams's critique of consequentialism.

[17] Paradoxically, one effect of the situationism debate in contemporary, analytic, virtue ethics is to turn attention to habits, because *these are what is missing* when situations solicit vicious behavior. See K. Anthony Appiah (2008), esp. Chap. 2, and see the index for "situationism", p. 272. For the most troubling situation to solicit vice I have found, and the turn to heroes as guides to habit, see Susan Neiman (2008, pp. 335ff) which has implications for Abu Ghraib. What is paradoxical about the situationism debate's effect is that proponents of situationism wish to show how virtue ethics is useless, whereas I believe they

Happily, the ancients understood these conclusions. Ancient philosophical schools aimed to train the whole character of people.[18] According to Pierre Hadot, the primary method was "ascetics"—exercises designed specifically to develop virtuous habits in someone (Hadot 2002, pp. 189–190). Wisdom came in the *form* of these "spiritual" exercises, which ranged from gym to dialectical drills, and had at their center such things as the examination of conscience (Hadot 2002, *passim*). I will illustrate the examination of conscience shortly, although its most famous forms can be found in Seneca's *Letters* and Descartes's *Meditations* (themselves modeled on Seneca's *Letters*?) (Hadot 2002, pp. 264–265).

Suppose, then, that we want to develop environmental virtue itself. It will take more than a theory of virtue.[19] We will need a practice of virtue, training.[20] And if we wish to write on virtue itself, we will need a way to put that practice into writing. How does one write so that virtue becomes a habit? Here, how one writes about virtue implies something beyond theory. In fact, it implies doing something other than writing *about* virtue—as if virtue were a theoretical object an arm's distance away. Rather, it implies becoming virtuous *in the writing*. It implies writing in such a way that a reader begins to acquire virtuous habits while thinking about virtuous ideas.

Ancient philosophy had a tradition of writing in a way that accomplished the complex, formal goals of philosophy suggested here. The purpose of this section and the last has been to set up an example of such a form of writing, a spiritual exercise, specifically, what was called "the examination of conscience" (Hadot 2002, pp. 198–202).[21] I would like now to turn to the example. It addresses an environmental problem of massive proportions and significance. Here, I take virtue ethically, and not merely theoretically.

Footnote 17 continued
have only shown why Aristotle focused on habits and role models (e.g., the man of wise judgment from book VI of the *Nicomachean ethics*).

[18] Interestingly, some Jesuit schools still have this goal. Is it a coincidence that Ignatius of Loyola (2007) popularized the expression "spiritual exercise" and made spiritual exercises central to Jesuit practice?

[19] For instance, the mainstream, academic interpretation of Ronald Sandler (2007). I believe, though, that one can read Sandler's book as an ethical practice. After all, Sandler shapes his book so that it creates a fine-tuned response to a specific problem for practical judgment, that of genetically modified crops. The book ends with Sandler's application of his theory to selecting which GMC's are worth promoting and which are not. That looks like the search for virtue, not simply the search for knowledge of virtue. The book aims at a practical judgment and enacts it.

[20] As in Henry David Thoreau (2000) and Rachel Carson (2007), or Jeremy Bendik-Keymer (2006, Chap. 9). We will need to see why Nietzsche, one of the profoundest readers of the Greeks, wrote the way he did.

[21] Hadot quotes Seneca: "What a good sleep follows the examination of one's own self! How tranquil, deep, and free it is, when the mind has been praised or warned, and has become the observer and secret judge of its own morals!" (Seneca 1995; in Latin: III, 36, 1–3).

An Example of Form Matching Content

> What is offensive about [our exceeding the natural rates of extinction by fiftyfold] is … the maelstrom of killing and insensitivity to forms of life and the sources producing them.
> —Holmes Rolston III (1988), *Environmental ethics*, p. 133

Normally, I am a conscientious man. I do my duties almost all of the time. Doing the right thing matters. When I hurt someone, it bothers me, and I am sorry. I try to make amends. If I realize my habits are bad, I try to change them. All these things and more seem typical and make me no different than the average person, and in any event acting as every human should.[22]

There have been times I have been confused by what to do when I tried to do the right thing. Usually, two duties pulled against each other. For instance, I would want to protect my friend from pain, but also knew I had to respect his autonomy. These kinds of tensions are a normal part of moral life, and people deal with them often.

However, right now I am faced with a confusion of a different kind. I do not know which duties I have at all.[23] Yet my conscience troubles me, and has for some time now, never becoming clearer and never subsiding. I feel I have a horsefly buzzing around me, waking me up when I drift to sleep. But I feel my life is like a large workhorse, and the fly is so small that while it keeps me awake, it also does not tear me away from my work and make me address what bothers me.

Therefore today, I have decided to take time to deal with my conscience. I have time. The church bells toll noon on this weekend, and a fan keeps me cool as I think and as I write. I am going to face my confusion and see if I can make some progress in figuring out what I am supposed to do, or if—by contrast—I have simply been the victim of an oversensitivity of some kind and have nothing I am supposed to do. In either case, I will be able to quiet my mind.[24]

So, then, let me take this time now, turn off my cell phone, refuse to open my internet and to read mail, and let me refuse any distraction I might enjoy on this first day of the weekend after a busy week. No music, no trips to the mall to see movies, not even shopping for food I will need. The run I would like to take will wait until later. The book of essays will be read another day. Let me take these few hours to do something far more vital to my soul than any of these things.[25]

* * *

[22] This spiritual exercise begins with an everyday person of sound moral character.

[23] Here, one thought extra *is* called for. Virtue has broken down, or is inexact.

[24] This attention to something you have to *do* is typical of a spiritual exercise and is something self-help manuals have over academic theory, at least from the standpoint of learning virtue itself.

[25] An anonymous reviewer for this journal commented on the narrative dimension of this section and referred to the body of literature—e.g., Martha Nussbaum (1992) being the *locus classicus*—on how narration figures importantly in teaching virtue. But as I will discuss in this paper's last section, my emphasis here is not on teaching virtue, but on *learning* it, and the exercise's point is in the *writing,* not the reading. In other words, this section does not emphasize narration for the reader so much as action on behalf of the writer.

What troubles me came in snippets. Over the Internet, in journals I sometimes read, or which colleagues pass on to me. It appeared in short conversations with people who are better informed than I. Recently, for instance, I was reading a book meant for new college students. The author wrote:

> Many biologists believe that the sixth major wave of extinction since life began is now occurring, and that this one, unlike the other five, is being caused by human action (Jamieson 2008, p. 6).[26]

What has been on my mind is "mass extinction."[27] I've heard it referred to technically as "anthropogenic mass species extinction," or a global wave of extinction caused by humans. It sounds ominous, yet also vague. Is 1% species extinction massive, or 5%?[28]

I did some research and found that there is a range of estimates for the number of species that will go extinct this century. Neither end of the range leaves me feeling comfortable. The worst estimates say the planet will become "like mars" with only 200 million *humans* left on it (Lovelock 2006; McKibben 2006). In such a scenario, most of life on Earth will have been wiped out as a result of many things, but mostly as a result of global warming.

A more moderate estimate by a celebrated biologist at my nation's oldest and most renowned university suggests 25% species loss over this century (Wilson 1999). Then there is a much-cited United Nations report from 2002 predicting that 25% of the world's mammals will be extinct by 2032 (Podger 2002). And there are dire things to say about other kinds of species, too. One report discussed in *National Geographic* put 1,000,000 kinds of land plants and animals extinct by 2050 due to global warming (Roach 2004). Finally, on a more cautious note, I have heard of 20% of all species at *increased risk* of extinction over this century if the globe warms as it has over the past 50 years (I.P.C.C. 2007).[29]

All of these figures trouble me. The respected biologist thinks that we will lose at least a quarter of all life forms throughout this century. That is staggering. All I have to do is go outside, or—right now—look through my window, and imagine that out of every four varieties of plants, insects, birds, and the occasional mammal I see,

[26] For accessible resources on the "current mass extinction," see Ulansey 2008. For a simple route into the phenomenon, see MNBC's website on global warming and species extinction (MNBC 2007). And Al Gore (2006, p. 163) claims our extinction rate is "1,000" times above average.

[27] David Ulansey (2008), who runs the "current mass extinction" site, writes that a 1998 article alerted him to the problem (Warrick 1998). An earlier text than the article that disturbed Ulansey is Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin (1995).

[28] Honesty is important in a spiritual exercise, even if it betrays ignorance or lack of expertise. This is how most people are, i.e., most of us are not experts in many matters.

Also, attention to the lived reality of everyday life is important to bring to mind, since when we aim to *live* virtuously, we have to see how our virtue or lack thereof come up in the mundane details of our lives.

[29] The IPCC estimate is for 1.5–2.5°C temperature rise and places species at "increased risk" of extinction. Note that the warming rate per decade for the last 50 years is 0.13°C, and that the projected range for warming is 1.5–4°C, higher on the upper end than the IPCC's range. See the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (2008) National Climactic Data Center, questions 3 and 7. Since writing this spiritual exercise, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (the IUCN) has verified that the 2002 UN report on mammal loss has been correct in its predictions so far and that as of 2008, 33% of the world's amphibians are extinct or at risk of extinction. See James Kanter (2008).

one will no longer be found on Earth by the time the grandchildren of my grandchildren see the light of day. Certainly, as I have read, many of the species that will go extinct include odd forms of life I never see: lichens and mosses, and even things no human eye can discern. But that does not assuage my conscience, as I find all these beings fascinating and part of life, the only life in the universe as far as we know.

How strange the day seems when I think of these reports, looking out my window and erasing with my mind's eye one out of every four species. As I look into the thick, green texture of summer here in upstate New York, instead of the four kinds of leaves I see, there might be only three found on this planet at century's end. Which one goes? All of them are pleasing to the eye and fascinating to look at more closely. And they make all the more interest overlapping each other on this lush, summer day. If ever I have children, I want my children to see them, and we can study them together and make comparisons.[30]

At the same time, I know that most species loss occurs in what people call "biodiversity hot spots"—areas such as coral reefs or tropical rainforests where the diversity of life is dense and lush. I also know that a good portion of estimated species loss comes from loss of insects, fungae, amphibians, and so on—that is, from species to which I have little connection, unlike trees.[31] I am showing my ignorance when I simply subtract species proportionally from my present environment.

I know. But I am trying to imagine something unimaginable to me. Take the songs of birds I hear nearby. There are many calls. One of my favorite is the cooing of doves. Will it go? It is a question of what the dove needs. Global warming throws off the hatching cycles of birds and insects, sometimes making it harder for birds to find the insects they need (Philander 2008, pp. 54–55).[32] Also, without birds and insects, much of life comes to a halt. Plants are not pollinated as readily. And on the back of plants, so much life rests. What will protect the dove, or any of these sounds that remind me I am part of the continuum of life and need not be absorbed simply by human concerns? What will make me human by taking me out of the human?[33]

I think these thoughts, and have heard those occasional items of news, but in general I don't hear people talking about the sixth mass extinction. It's not an item of politics, certainly not in the 2008 presidential election of the United States of America. Yet we are wiping out a truly massive portion of life. There are only

[30] Of course, species extinction will not work as the author depicts it. Central New York may not be affected much at all, whereas biodiversity hotspots in jungles or around coral reefs will be decimated. The author's thought experiment is heuristic: to try to picture the loss of life in a way he can understand. We should remember, too, that species exist *interdependently* in their eco-systems. At a certain point, depleting species can simply cause an eco-system to crash. To put the idea in oversimplified, everyday terms: in ecology, everything is all bound up with everything else.

[31] Thanks to Ned Hettinger for underlining these points with me. See also Wilson (1999) and Rolston III (1988, Chap. 4).

[32] Note, however, that hatching patterns must be studied with respect to each species and its prey. The results are not always bad for the predator.

[33] This inchoate rush of anxiety that rides quickly over theoretical distinctions is typical of how human psychology works. One can't work on it without acknowledging it first. The spiritual exercise will try to make some headway on it.

10,000,000 recorded species, but apparently countless more unrecorded—one environmental scientist told me recently as many as ten times more.[34] Even if we lead a quarter of the *known* species to extinction, that is over two million species gone by our deeds. I do not know how to think about this. I do not know what my duties are. I do not hear people discussing this matter in everyday affairs, and yet I know everything about this disquiets me, and does not stop disquieting me, even when I push it aside. I feel I am in a dream.

* * *

As I've read, the main causes of extinction relate to our consumption: mining and logging, fishing and monoculture, clear-cutting land for cattle grazing, and real estate development. Then there is the burning of fossil fuels and the population explosion of meat animals producing methane, both of which lead to global warming. Global warming, in turn, leads to shifting climate zones and acidic oceans. All these causes fed by our consumption escalate along with our own population and its resultant scramble for land, shelter, fuel, water, and food (Strieker 2002).[35] As we reach 9,000,000,000 by mid-century and continue an industrial form of life, it is not hard to imagine spreading our effects around Earth into almost every nook and cranny, depth and shoal.[36] We currently exist in a destructive cycle whereby we acquire, consume, reproduce, and acquire yet even more.

Yet a good portion of people in many different countries hold life to be sacred, or rare, or respect-worthy, or magnificent, or wonderful. They school their kids in it. To take just three examples that cover over half the world's population, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus all agree that non-human life is worthy of reverence. A morality of reverence for life would appear to be justified to a large portion of humanity, and so we could say that the duty—the duty to treat life decently—is known. The idea that we are currently wiping out a large chunk of life on this planet should therefore strike a large number of people as profoundly disturbing.[37]

When I think about these things, I become even more agitated and feel like giving up. The duty is in many people's hearts, but the behavior—the character—does not display it. Morality does not join with life. All sorts of memories come to mind, of when people did wrong things, knew they were doing it, and yet used sophisticated reasoning to deny themselves responsibility. A kind of inky bitterness builds up in my throat, and I want to explain that people are selfish or wicked.[38]

[34] As in the case of turning off one's cell phone and taking time out, *talking with others* and *going to find out* about the cause of one's concern is part of the *habit* of virtue. So the mention of it signals the reader to virtue's form of life, not simply its theory. It's important: this kind of signal to the reader that she's not simply reading a text but thinking about how to actually live.

[35] The big cause, however, is global warming. On this cause, see the sources cited in footnote 29 and the paragraphs preceding it.

[36] Thanks to Dan Meior for helping point out the correct population estimate.

[37] That is, where is the *habit*?

[38] It would be easy to state the contradiction simply as a proposition. But getting ourselves to find and acknowledge uncomfortable contradictions is crucial to virtue itself. It takes time, as Socrates—and by extension Plato—saw in his numerous confrontations with human resistance to uncomfortable contradiction.

But I also know, as soon as I calm down—and I must calm down; I know judgment is skewed when I am angry[39]—I know that the average person is conscientious. Indeed, I began from this point. Remembering this reminds me that I should be charitable and look more closely. Given that people are conscientious—and not normally wicked—given that a morality of reverence for life is justified [for I believe that it is (Bendik-Keymer 2006, Chap. 6)], what is the problem here? As a normal person, I am not inherently wicked. And yet I am part of the unintended sixth mass extinction, wiping out millions and maybe millions more of forms of life.[40]

* * *

When I look at species themselves, and hold them up next to my belief that life deserves reverence, I am struck by something. Not species, but *individual lives* are the primary objects of my reverence for life. Let us suppose a living being crossed my path, a being of a kind I'd never seen. Perhaps it is a worm-like being. Yet it has a strange combination of attributes. Whereas its skin is smooth like a worm, it has what appear to be legs, although they are soft and malleable, unlike an insect's legs. In addition, there's a coloration unlike any worm or millipede I have ever seen. I am so surprised, I take a photo of it with my cell phone.

Now it just so happens I have a friend, a scientist, who specializes in biology and knows many friends. He shows the picture I took around to colleagues, and indeed it appears I saw some kind of mutant, what people a 1000 years ago called a *monstrum*, that is, an individual without a species. My question is, does the fact of this mutant being species-less make it any less convincing that I ought to avoid walking on it?

No. It does not, given that I respect life. If anything, its individuality makes this living being more valuable, since it is more than one of a kind. It is one *without* a kind. A rare, living being.

The point is, not the species but the individual receives my reverence for life. As a Dutchman said 400 years ago, every living being has its *conatus*, its drive to preserve itself in its own being (de Spinoza 2005, III p. 6). And *this* is the main object of my reverence for life—this striving individual—not the universal kind—the species—to which most individuals belong in some form or another (Nussbaum 2007, Chap. 5; Bendik-Keymer and Thompson 2008; Bendik-Keymer 2009).

How does reverence for life commit me to respecting species, then? I see that species themselves still matter to me even beyond the individuals that comprise them. Species matter in some secondary sense. My concern for individuals involves something like justice—an attention *to* them—but my concern for species involves

[39] An important theme among the ancients, especially Seneca (1995).

[40] One way my spiritual exercise departs from some ancient spiritual exercises is in the role that theoretical confusion plays in it. I do not assume that our best understanding is clear on the matter of the sixth mass extinction but that only our psychology and our virtue wavers. Rather, I think that our best understanding is unclear, a matter reflected in our psychology and virtue as well. This fact complicates the charge that I am advocating merely better *application* of theory in virtue ethics. I think theory has an important place in virtue itself, provided it is taken ethically, which the present style attempts to illustrate.

something like wisdom, an awareness of something that matters.[41] After all, the world as it is contains countless forms of life. If all of these were to collapse into the same number of individuals but only half the number of forms of life, I would feel a loss, a loss of the diversity of life.

Yet species go extinct as a matter of course. In fact, some species extinction is good. I have heard it is unlikely that human beings would have evolved if the dinosaurs hadn't gone extinct. Their mass extinction was a precondition allowing mammals to flourish and evolve. With the dinosaurs gone, it was much safer to do so. So reverence for *our* life should support species extinction in some cases! The extinction of species makes way for others.

What am I bothered by then? I am bothered by two things. I am bothered by our causing extinction, and I am bothered by the scale of extinction.[42] A third to a half of all life is so massive that it exceeds my ability to visualize it. *We* are doing massive things, things that even on a smaller scale would bother me. Why do they?

* * *

To begin with, there are many arguments that claim species extinction and loss of biodiversity are bad because of what we might lose when losing the opportunity to use species. A famous version of this argument goes: Suppose some species provides the future cure to cancer, but we make it go extinct now. Wouldn't this be bad? Therefore, we should protect species from going extinct in order to protect potential but at present unknown benefits to humankind (Rolston 1988, pp. 127–130).[43]

There are two main problems with this argument, though. The first is that its reasoning could be used against it. Any species *could* be useful to us at a later point in time. Yet protecting a species might block the way for new species to come into their own, and the new species might just as easily help us, even better than the ones we protect. So we should both protect species and let them go extinct to make room for new ones. This is contradictory.

The second problem is that my moral concern emanates from what we are doing. Proposing that extinction itself is bad because of what we might lose doesn't get at the *relation* between our acts and their effects. After all, if species can be useful to us, it doesn't matter whether we put them at risk or something else does. The risk is bad all the same. But I am currently troubled by what *we* are doing. *I* feel like I am doing something wrong.

In fact, the usefulness of species does not figure at all in the central point of my conscience. Yes, I do think that if half of the world's species go extinct, it will hurt us. After all, the United Nations Environmental Program predicts that by mid-century, we will see 150,000,000 people fleeing environmental problems in the

[41] Michael Thompson (2006) calls this a distinction between bipolar and monadic norms, that is, norms involving two agents (relations of right) and norms involving only one agent and objects that matter (practices protecting the good).

[42] Here, you can see that the emphasis is on learning a *process*—the examination of conscience. In effect, what we are learning is a kind of know-how, i.e., practical knowledge, the knowledge of *how* to examine our consciences.

[43] David Keymer helped me formulate the last sentence of this paragraph.

world (University of Iowa Center for Human Rights 2007). These people are called "environmental refugees." A total of 150,000,000 of them is almost half the population of the United States of America. These refugees will suffer, and the political and economic instability they are likely to cause will expand the circle of suffering beyond them. While many of these refugees will flee desertification or flooding, it is not unimaginable that species loss could contribute to the need to flee areas in search of more habitable or nourishing ones. Or that the price of food will cause regimes to collapse, driving people away from them.

But when I look closely into myself, I see that what bothers me is what we are doing to *other* forms of life. I am bothered by the fact that our actions devastate life on Earth. The question is, apart from effects on us, what—if anything—is wrong with devastating life? And in particular, although I do care about living individuals, what is wrong with devastating *forms* of life?

The beetles and bees, the microscropic life in the sea, the many plants and birds, these all create the conditions on which life as a whole depends. Winnowing, thinning out life creates dangerous conditions for much of life, due to the interdependency of forms of life on each other in pollination, predation, decomposition, and so on.

Yet the narrowing of life's diversity *now* leaves room for future diversity, for diversity *then*. Just as we emerged out of the shadow of extinct dinosaurs, so a mass extinction might clear the way for future development, development of new diversity. That is, even if diversity matters, why should *present* diversity matter? After all, *no* predictions suggest we are likely to eradicate *all* life. According to expert estimates, life will go on, mass extinction or not. And to underline the point further, when we switch from human time to geological time, it's clear that all human history is but a second or two on the clock of geological time. What we do to life is insignificant from the standpoint of geological time, unless we destroy the Earth itself.[44] If form gives way to form, destructions should not bother me.

Is it just that I am attached to this world, to *its* species, to what has come to be? Yet that doesn't seem right. After all, I am troubled by the scale of our destruction, and that destruction takes in countless species of which I do not even *know*, much less feel attachment. Secondly, it seems arbitrary to hang the protection of species on what I happen to like, even deeply. What you like, deeply, might be different. Morality does not have this character of being decided by taste. Its reasons are universal, whereas taste is subjective.[45] But if my *moral* disquiet does not issue from my attachments, what is to preclude that a mass extinction now is acceptable, because it can clear the way for future life? According to that view, it might even be *im*moral to resist species extinction. Pulled between the possibility of future diversity and the amoral appeal to attachment, I find it hard to clarify what's bothering me.[46]

[44] Joshua Graae helped me underline the point.

[45] The *locus classicus* for these points about morality and taste is Immanuel Kant (2007) "The Analytic of Aesthetic Judgment," originally published in 1790.

[46] Although I depart from his reasoning significantly, Ben Bradley (2001) helped me think through a number of issues relating to biodiversity. Bradley deals with the work of Holmes Rolston III, Robin Attfield, Nicholas Rescher, and Robert Elliot, among others. See also Rolston III (1985).

* * *

I haven't solved my problem, and I haven't dissolved it either. My conscience still bothers me, although I cannot put my finger on the cause. When I try to turn to the species themselves and find a reason they ought to be part of my reverence for life, counter-examples muddy the stream of my reasoning and prove that I do not have a sound position for revering species just as they are over future ones. I feel that my instinct to protect them comes down to my attachment to them, and yet I also know that my conscience suggests I am doing a *moral* wrong—not simply a denial of my preferences—by participating in the sixth mass extinction. I feel groundless, and yet worry I am being unreal, misguided by abstract reasoning away from what any decent person would see looking at the scale of destruction we are causing even as I write.

What would a decent person see?[47] First, injustice, which concerns individuals (Nussbaum 2007, Chap. 5). Any extinction comprises the deaths of numerous, striving individuals. A mass extinction is mass death. Unless we have good reasons to destroy so many lives, we are already in the wrong (Rachels 2007; Bendik-Keymer 2006, Chap. 8). Yet how would a decent person see massive species loss itself?

Here, I am reminded of a piece of philosophical writing I once read. A famous environmental ethicist spent a good 35 pages working through the question of what, if anything, is morally objectionable in the loss of species themselves.[48] He led me to see that what he called "the speciation process" is indistinguishable from the history of life. He called the process "the wonderland," and what he meant, I think, is that it is the macro-order of life, by which any individual living being comes to be. Seen from his perspective, species loss is a loss in the macro-order of life. It is loss of "living historical form" (Rolston 1988, pp. 131, 135).

Such a perspective on life's macro-order gives me a way to understand decency in this situation, for decent people do not destroy thoughtlessly. They are not what we would call "destructive" people, even if they at times have to take or destroy for well thought-out reasons. I think the decent person *would* approach the loss of species themselves through the prism of order, because that would allow her to grasp the way life is at stake in species loss, even though she would not be focusing just on individuals.

Species form the historical and ecological order of the world as we've inherited it, and I have an intuitive respect for order, unless good reasons apply to breaking it. Moreover, living order is an especially wonderful thing. Given that species are the

[47] The appeal to the decent person is a classic move of virtue ethics, at least its Aristotelian form. It is not question-begging if we realize that practical wisdom is primarily know-how (and also what I call knowing others—the form of knowing in relational reason which is key to the social dimension of ethics). When we ask for theoretical clarity, as the questioner is doing here, we might learn by explicating the know-how of someone who just strikes us as virtuous. Interestingly, there is a space of learning that can arise where propositional knowledge (knowledge that, the form of theoretical knowledge) has not caught up with know how (the form of practical knowledge), and this is what I believe appeal to the decent person tries to keep in view. Obviously, a full defense of this kind of move would take a paper on its own.

[48] Here, theory is *taken* ethically. Being such, it is no longer pointless regarding virtue itself. A spiritual exercise should show people *how* to take theory ethically.

common medium of life's functioning and the archive of its history, the extinction of species is not simply a reduction of life as we know it, as if we were turning down its volume. It is the destruction of life as we've inherited it, the distortion of its worked-out song. Rachel Carson (2002), the great environmentalist, understood this when she warned against a "silent Spring"—a life where birds no longer exist due to pesticides. When we lose many forms of life, we lose also their interrelationships, which make up the order we've inherited and on which many forms of life depend. We lose the efforts of living history that have profoundly shaped who we are (Snyder 1990). In other words, we destroy the *quality* of life, not just its quantity.[49]

As I have said, there may be reasons to think that the species themselves we render extinct might be balanced in some sense by future species that will evolve, that a new kind of sound will coalesce a million years from now. Yet we are not presently considering this trade-off and the intervening silence. We are not discussing the loss of history, losses in the macro-order of life. We risk dead seas, deserts, and silent Springs—and a gutted, looted museum of the history of Earth.[50] A decent person would therefore see that we are chaotic. We thoughtlessly destroy an order we are lucky to inhabit, and do so without a whimper.[51]

"To destroy." What does that mean? It has taken millions of years for the world of life as we know it to evolve. Its forms are survivors of chance, "momentary cosmic accidents."[52] We hardly understand how they fit together. Yet they are forms beyond anything we have ever created. This makes them worthy objects of reverence. I read about reverence recently. A popular philosopher wrote:

> Reverence is the feeling you have for something none of us will ever reach. … Reverence is awareness of human limits…. [Y]ou're in the grip of something vaster than you are (Neiman 2008, pp. 232–235).

For all practical purposes, that describes an attitude that someone with reverence for life does have: awe and humility before the complexity of life, its order. That this order has come about by chance is even more reason to revere it, for chance is fully out of our control. It seems that a decent person would at the least find our hurtling thoughtlessly into the sixth mass extinction wrong, *because it is irreverent*.

[49] See also Rolston III (1985, p. 722): "It is not *form* (species) as mere morphology, but the *formative* (speciating) process that humans ought to preserve." See, finally, Wilson's (1999) opening section. He emphasizes the destruction of life as we know it, whereas Rolston III emphasizes the destruction of life's history.

[50] The use of strong metaphors is typical to spiritual exercises among the ancients, because of the way intense images can capture and train the will. One ancient master of this technique was Plutarch (1992). See, for instance, his essay on *euthymia*—"contentment."

[51] On luck, see Gould (1996). On the whimper, see Eliot (1952), originally published in 1925. See also Rolston III (1985, p. 720): "What is offensive in the impending extinctions is … the maelstrom of killing and insensitivity to forms of life and the forces producing them."

[52] Stephen J. Gould (1996, pp. 4 and 18) speaks of "the unpredictability and contingency of any particular event in evolution and emphasizes that the origin of *Homo sapiens* must be viewed as, an unrepeatable particular… ." He claims our life is "in union with other creatures as one contingent element of a much larger history," and that "we are, whatever our glories and accomplishments, a momentary cosmic accident that would never arise again" even if we repeated the conditions that gave rise to us.

And that makes sense. My conscience is all disquieted, and an Enlightenment philosopher once said that conscience is the love of order.[53] Yet our irreverence tears order apart, hard-won, lucky order.

Here, let me visualize the loss. I will make a list in my mind of the dynamic forms this order takes. I won't make a poem, but simply list the expressions of order slowly, taking my time to visualize each expression before moving on to the next.[54]

We lose order that:

feels
stirs
moves
breathes
swims
flies
grows
spreads
reproduces
blooms
drifts
evolves.

Sure, reverence for life focuses on individuals. But I now see that life's chance order can be its object, too. That's what I felt was linked to wisdom, to being aware of what matters.

To be precise, irreverence comes down to thought*less*ness. We can see this if we consider the case of having good reasons to destroy order, of which there are many. If a species led to the death of all human life, there would be good reason to render it extinct. But there is a big difference between this kind of justified, deliberate destruction and wild, thoughtless destruction. Artists, for instance, contest form thoughtfully. Their destruction does create the space for new form.[55] But the sixth mass extinction is not thoughtful in this sense or in any sense. At large in the public sphere, there is no serious discussion of what we are doing, and there is very little awareness of the extinction itself. The point is precise: thoughtless, *without a thought*.

Especially since the industrial revolution began, in the space of only 200 years, we have managed to set in motion a massive rending of our world's lucky form.[56] Even if I can't argue that each living species today has a reason it must be preserved, and even if chance will absorb our destructiveness in its branching

[53] Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1969, p. 936) claims conscience is the love of order. Apparently, his view harkens back to Malebranche. See also Bendik-Keymer (2002, Chap. 2).

[54] Note again the emphasis on a technique of visualization, on something we *do*.

[55] Example, Einstürzende Neubauten's (1981) music from the 1980s.

[56] Some will argue that increased anthropogenic species extinction rates can be traced back thousands of years to the technological conditions that allowed our population to increase, our land use to magnify, and our hunting and fishing to become more efficient. I concede this point, but still note that the scale and rate of species loss jumped massively in the twentieth century as our population exploded and does so currently in the face of climate change.

proliferation of life, the *way* we are acting legitimately bothers me. It is shocking behavior, the kind I would never permit my children, my students, or myself. Too much is at stake, we know too little about what we do, and we have not stopped to think.[57]

The *manner* of our action, the way we are heading into the sixth mass extinction is the problem. The thoughtlessness of how we act displays the vice of irreverence. And the vice of irreverence overlooks the quality of life.

I said at the beginning of my reflections this morning that most people are conscientious, and I conceded that most of us have reverence for life. Yet I now see how the problem is deeper. We are acting chaotically. There's a disconnection between our moral convictions and the outward vice of our behavior. Responsible people do not act this way. They don't believe one thing in their hearts and then contradict it.[58]

Yet if the problem is a failure of responsibility, the problem is located *behind* conscience, before we ever listen to it, or think that we do. For we have, first, to be in the habit of stopping and thinking for conscience to guide us. We have to be in the habit of *listening* to conscience. Irresponsibility undercuts both habits. It's not in a *position* for conscience. And when it comes to the sixth mass extinction, we show we're in no such position. We have not stopped to think, not as a people, and nowhere on Earth where I've lived, which is on several continents. I am beginning to revise my view that we are conscientious, because we do not appear to be in a position[59] to be conscientious.

Where, then, is the anxious chaos spinning against our hearts? There is a disconnect between our hearts and our manners, between morality and life, between the lofty realms of our consciences and the base realms of practical, everyday life. Why? Thinking about it, I think the root disconnect is between effect and cause. The effect is mass extinction, and we are the cause. But we are not owning up to the effect, taking it as our own. It is like doing something, but acting as if we were not

[57] Focus on our *manner* of action is a mark of virtue ethics.

[58] Here, what—if anything—is novel about my form of spiritual exercise opens up. Classic spiritual exercises come to philosophical closure at their end—or at least purport to (think of Descartes (1996) as the voice in early modernity for the Senecan tradition). However, my spiritual exercise ends in an *aporia*, a deliberately discomforting gap that should take a reflective person outward to different *kinds* of considerations than the moral ones addressed here. This discomfort is important for virtue itself, because much in our lives cannot be encapsulated solely by the moral. We need to bring in the political, the economic, etc.

[59] This point in the examination of conscience should make readers begin to wonder if there are *extra*-moral reasons for our irresponsibility, and this has been the case in the two audiences to whom this exercise has so far been read. Perhaps our *social* structure—combining political and economic institutions and the way they shape us—has a lot to do with why we are in no *position* to be responsible. The intent of this exercise is *precisely* to take the reader to this *aporia*, thereby to motivate a further spiritual exercise examining social structure—away from the personal, to the institutional. As I've said, in this respect, the examination of conscience modeled here is somewhat novel for its tradition. Traditionally, the examination of conscience comes *back* to the self, closing up the problem within it. But this examination of conscience, while it attempts to focus the self, opens up beyond it in the suggestion that *there is more than the self* to fault in the failure of responsibility. The exercise does not remain closed, but is incomplete. Compare, by contrast, Descartes (1996), which, once locating the problem of falsity in the will, closes up the uncertainty of life in the *self*'s newfound responsibility to judge with only clear and distinct ideas.

acting. Though the rumors of our effects have been in major media sources now for a decade, we do not hear them *and then go to confirm or to disconfirm them*. Practically speaking, *they do not matter to us*, for as the Holocaust survivor Vladimir Jankélevitch once wrote "Do not listen to what they say—look at what they do!" (Jankélevitch and Hobart 1996). Alerted to the effects of our actions, we do *not* bother to find out if the rumors are true.[60] This is where the root thoughtlessness lies: a disowning and lack of consideration of consequence, a kind of autopilot without assessing what we do.[61]

Yet a mature, human being has the habit of checking what she's doing. Maybe it is because I do check what I do, and sometimes check too much, that I was in a position to hear even what little conscience I did. But I am not checking enough, and this implicates me in irreverence, an irreverence I do not support. Unlike today, unlike an adult, I acted thoughtlessly, destroying the order in which we live, without a good reason to do so, without even a thought about looking for a reason or a minute to spare to find out if the rumors are true.[62]

Remarks on Spiritual Exercise

Even though I have claimed spiritual exercise fits the nature of the philosophy of virtue, one objection to it in a forum such as our own is that the exercise seems better intended for non-academics, rather than scholars. After all, we (theorists) have thought a lot about the issues of this exercise and their significance. Those who have not, by contrast, are non-scholars, many everyday folk who don't have the time to stop and think. An exercise like the one just given seems suited to them, and ill-suited to academics. It seems to be a kind of rhetoric for people who usually don't think. We, by contrast, need clear knowledge about what we are supposed to think. We need good theory.

But, even though non-academics *do* think (and often better than academics when it comes to practical life!), the exercise is not rhetoric. Its goal is virtue itself, theory taken ethically. Furthermore, it is not suited only for non-academics, for we (theorists) should not be too sure we actually are aiming at virtue itself. After all, we saw that the life of theory does not imply the philosophical life and that virtue itself is a matter primarily of know-how (in practical reason), not "knowledge that" (in

[60] Though unintended mass species extinction is *not* comparable to genocide (which is intentional), and so should not be compared to ecocide (which is likewise intentional), the dullness with which we respond to the rumors of it in the media bears comparison to the kind of human inertia and weakness of will that has plagued reports of genocide. I guess we can say: If people won't respond to genocide, why think they would respond to unintended mass species extinction? On the suggestion that we are committing ecocide, see Roger Gottlieb (2003), and on the claim that we are, see Frederick L. Bender (2003).

[61] The thoughtlessness I have acknowledged is thus much simpler than the kind Martin Heidegger discusses in his many writings (cf. Heidegger 1982). Rather, the inspiration for this essay began by thinking about what Hanna Arendt (1994) meant by "thoughtlessness." I sometimes think that our thoughtlessness is a form of evil's banality, although I am unsure.

[62] In Ronald Sandler's (2007) terms, I realize that I lack the *dispositions* of a virtuous agent, in particular, an agent who expresses the virtue of reverence for life. Rather, my dispositions are vicious—a *lack* of reverence for life *in practice*.

theoretical reason). The purpose of the exercise is to awaken people—theorists and non-theorists alike—to virtue itself, specifically concerning the utterly disquieting prospect of the sixth mass extinction.

So how might we distinguish a genuinely practical dimension of the exercise from a merely theoretical one, given that the exercise does trade in abstract conceptualization? The answer is through the form of *questioning*. A questioning that seeks know-how is different from a questioning that seeks only knowledge. And the exercise's form of questioning displays this difference. In the exercise, *the living person* thinks, rather than simply the intellect.

Consider. When it comes to building virtuous habits, habits of conscience, the important thing is not just to make a person *think*, but to make sure it is the *person* who thinks. What I mean by this is not hard to grasp once you think about it. There is a world of difference between thinking about a detached intellectual problem that does not emanate from our hearts and an intellectual problem growing from heartfelt disquiet.[63] The exercise, however, comes from, and always orbits around, heartfelt disquiet. *This is its form of questioning*. In so doing, the exercise makes sure any reflection brings in the whole person's existence,[64] rather than just some part of it that can easily be compartmentalized as an intellectual pursuit and forgotten. But by bringing in the whole person's existence, the reader is *already* seeking practical wisdom, whereas a paper appealing just to our intellects does not imply seeking any kind of knowledge of how to live. *The existential connection is key*.[65]

This practical dimension of the exercise—what I am calling its "existential connection" in the form of questioning—allows us to make more than one helpful distinction. First, it allows us to emphasize that even though theory can have a practical *effect* on a person, it is another thing to take theory in such a way that is has a practical *point*. That is what taking theory ethically—thinking out of an existential connection—does. It makes sure that the point of theory is living, which is a requisite for using knowledge to become more ethical. Secondly, the practical dimension of the exercise allows us to understand that the point of the exercise is in the *writing*, not the reading. The ancients shared their spiritual exercises to spur each other to do their own, or—in Plutarch's case—to keep their own "notebooks." A reader *could* take most anything ethically, but in making the distinctions I have, I have been focused on the writing and its point. It is the writing that aims at virtue

[63] One might object that a neurotic theoretician can feel heartfelt disquiet at a purely intellectual problem with no clear relation to wisdom. True, but I would say she is approaching the problem philosophically, although making a mistake. The heart is the seat of the emotion love, and love's object is a good. To have heartfelt disquiet driving one's questioning is therefore to question while engaged in a search for something that relates to the good. This is the province of seeking wisdom, however, inchoately.

[64] An existence that seeks some view of the good. See Aristotle (1999, pp. 1095b15–1095b17).

[65] This is a point Kierkegaard understood well (Kierkegaard 1988, 1983), making his writing far more fitting for virtue ethics than most virtue theory. He called his style "upbuilding." See especially *Either/or* (1843), vol. 2, "A final ultimatum," where the style was first attempted. Also, note especially his invocation of the heart's disquiet in his most mature and elegant work, esp. *The Sickness unto Death* (1848), preface. Kierkegaard learned to write either from disquiet or from love. In either case, he wrote from conscience. Whatever the merits of his theology, his understanding of the *point* of virtue ethics, like Nietzsche's, is unparalleled today.

itself and proves that aim in the way its point manifests itself in the form of questioning. Thus, a spiritual exercise is a different *kind* of thing than, say, a science textbook taken ethically by a reader or that same textbook happening to have an unintended ethical effect on a reader.

The upshot is this: learning virtue itself is primarily a practical matter, as all ethics are. If what we want is to learn virtue, then we must make sure our philosophizing coheres with the ontology of the situation. Being ethical is a different kind of thing than being scientific. To reflect this conceptual logic—what I call "the grammar of being"—we need to adopt forms that fit our content. We can't coherently speak *about* virtue itself and claim to be learning virtue. Rather, we must *pursue* virtue itself.

At the end, the kind of exercise I have presented has a legitimate claim to be philosophical because its form and content cohere. The discourse is about virtue and is written *in such a way* as to ignite and train virtue. People are not just reading about passion and how it must be shaped in their lives; they are shaping their passion in their lives. Yes, the exercise is preliminary and meant to be copied, but through it, people are not just theorizing about how thoughtlessness is at the root of the sixth mass extinction; they are confronting their own thoughtlessness and discovering an *aporia*.

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