

Climate Virtues Ethics: A Proposal for Future Research

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Abstract

Climate virtue ethics points to the subjective/personal dimensions of climate ethics, which have been largely neglected by previous research. There is a lot of research from diverse fields that pertains to the cultural and the individual dimensions that come along with climate virtue ethics, but, as of yet, these dimensions have hardly been examined together. Future research on climate virtue ethics should draw from religions, as religious traditions contain “thick” ideas that may inspire our thinking about how we can envision a life of personal moral integrity and what sustainable life styles may look like in the future. In order to unearth the potentials (Habermas) of these “thick” ideas that are contained in religions, we need to perform close readings of our traditions and ask those traditions which visions of human life they may offer in light of current moral challenges. Future climate virtue ethics is an endeavour that asks for the cooperation of theological ethics, comparative theology, moral psychology/behavioural business ethics, environmental psychology, social theory, and so forth.

Keywords: virtue ethics, climate, human life, morality.

Introduction

Most recently, the need to work towards a more sustainable way of life has received renewed attention as climate research continuously

produces alarming results and public protest particularly by the younger generation has become louder. This paper responds to this renewed attention by proposing cooperative research in the field of climate virtue ethics. Climate virtue ethics points to the subjective/personal dimensions of climate ethics. These dimensions are quite important and worth looking at in more detail than has so far been done.¹ Doing this does not mean forgetting about the social/structural dimensions, but rather to add personal ethics to social ethics in the realm of climate ethics.

Virtue ethics can contain a host of questions: How can virtues motivate good actions? What are virtues? How do virtues relate to norms? For climate virtue ethics, all these questions are interesting only to a very limited extent—only in so far as discussing them is needed for working on the following questions: (a) How can the perspective of virtue help us understand why people are not doing what many of them would concede they are clearly obligated to do: to try to prevent climate change and the many ills that will come with it? (b) What can we do about that? How can we promote individual moral integrity? How can we develop our culture in such a way that sustainable ways of life gain attraction?

With respect to the human individual, “A virtue is a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its fields in an excellent or good enough way” (Swanton 2005, 19). With respect to society, virtues are traits which form a good human life (good in the sense of being both fulfilling and morally defensible).

1. For exceptions, cf. Sandkühler (2018) and, commenting on virtue ethics in passing, Vogt (2013, 376ff.).

Related Fields: Environmental Virtue Ethics, Business Virtue Ethics, Behavioural Business Ethics

There is a lot of research from diverse fields that pertains to the cultural and the individual dimensions that come along with climate virtue ethics, but, as of yet, these dimensions have hardly been examined together (cf. Welzer et al. 2010). The project of climate virtue ethics that I am describing aims to bring together research from various fields. The project does not aim at handing climate ethics over to specialists of virtue theory.

Environmental virtue ethics is an obvious ally to climate virtue ethics (cf. Cafaro and Sandler 2010; DesJardins 2007). Yet, environmental virtue ethics has a limited scope (focussing on happiness) and has not yet addressed some of the central questions of climate virtue ethics, such as the problem of moral discount (Birnbacher 2016; see below).

Previous work on *business virtue ethics* is only of limited use for climate virtue ethics, as most authors in the field of business virtue ethics consider market incentives, on the one hand, and virtues, on the other hand, to be either (a) allies or (b) enemies (Brunim und Sugden 2013; Sandel 2013; MacIntyre 1984, 187ff.; Brennan 2016), and yet market incentives and virtues are allies (a) in some constellations and enemies (b) in other constellations. Market dynamics can be a promoter of the common good in some cases, but sometimes they are not (cf. e.g., DesJardins 2007). The latter constellation (b: “enemies”) is more interesting. The future task is to describe how virtues can help to overcome processes of moral discount (b) or other cognitive distortions in morally relevant fields of human life (Ernst 2010). To respond well to situations sometimes means to let oneself be incited by the incentives

that are inherent to these situations (a), though sometimes it means to resist these incentives (b)—*pace* Kant’s theory of virtue (Kant 1996, AA VI, 394). In an ideal world, market incentives and virtues will be mutually enhancing (a). It is worthwhile to strive for such an ideal world by changing market incentives, but it is naïve to expect these changes to solve all our problems and it would be premature to fully leave aside virtue in the sense of moral strength and intrinsic motivation (Kant). The most convincing response to this debate is a position that creates a conjunction of different virtues, some of which ought to be moral virtues (Swanton 2016).

One of the exemplary challenges that climate ethics is confronted with lies in the realm of moral psychology (moral discount; cf. Birnbacher 2016): We favour those whom we have before our eyes, we fail to adequately perceive the moral rights and demands of people who are remote from us in terms of time and space (Birnbacher 2016, 64ff.; Kuckartz 2010).¹ We violate essential human rights of present and future populations particularly in distant countries where climate change will cause the most severe harms and where vulnerability is particularly high. People of reason can hardly deny that this is the case, yet few people are drawing sufficient consequences. The reasons for this collective moral failure are to be sought using the tools that moral psychology and behavioural business ethics are offering.

Climate Virtue Ethics and Religion(s)

Consumption and mobility will have to change if we want to slow down processes of climate change that will turn this planet into a rather inhospitable place. Hopefully, the market will incite the production of goods and services that will someday compensate these “sacrifices.” However, this is unlikely and can only happen in the first place if

1. On the problem of moral discount itself, cf. Hare (1992, 159ff.).

policies and changes in consumption put enough pressure on political powers and markets (cf. e.g., Ernst 2010), and the willingness to undergo and press for change must come first. To some people, the necessary changes will feel like a sacrifice—at least to some extent and at least for a while. There is nothing glorious about sacrifice, but there is some necessity for sacrificing habits of consumption. In this respect, virtue is a personal quality that contains the strength to sacrifice consumption habits and to honestly press for regulations that will enforce these changes on a structural level.

Again, the challenge of climate change demands response on various levels, including various academic disciplines. Religion(s) will not solve the problem of climate change by their own devices alone. But religious traditions contain “thick” ideas that may inspire our thinking about how we can envision a life of personal moral integrity and what sustainable life styles may look like in the future. In order to unearth the potentials (Habermas) of these “thick” ideas that are contained in religions, we need to perform close readings of our traditions and ask those traditions which visions of human life they may offer in light of current moral challenges (Habermas 2001; Schmidt 2017).

The Virtue of Liberty

I will make a brief allusion from my own Lutheran perspective. This allusion is intended to be an example of the close reading of tradition. My argument is that in a plural society, readings of this kind need to be publicly brought into dialogue.

In a Lutheran voice, the challenge is twofold. I will use Isiah Berlin’s distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom to point out what I mean. Negative freedom consists of the freedom from the forces of habit that consumptive behavioural patterns exercise on us—that is,

freedom from the spell of the pleasures and commodities that are very expensive in terms of CO2 emission. Negative freedom can be cultivated by cultivating the virtue of “happy sobriety” (*sobriété heureuse*) (Rabhi 2016). This is religious virtue, at least from a Lutheran perspective, in so far as the vision of the believer is the vision of a person who is “free from all things” (Luther 2007).

Positive freedom is the freedom to be perceptive of the needs and indeed of the rights of other persons. This is a religious virtue, at least from a Lutheran perspective, in so far as the vision of the believer is the vision of a person who is “a servant for everyone” (Luther) in the sense that she is perceptive to the ethical demands of others. To be perceptive requires moral and religious imagination. Indeed, moral and religious imagination are key virtues:

Moral and Religious Imagination

Moral imagination is the ability to imagine what our actions and failures to act will mean for other persons, including and especially persons whom we do *not* have before our eyes. Moral imagination extends the love of the neighbour to those who are not our immediate neighbours. The love of the neighbour is not some kind of immediate empathic infection caused by proximity; rather, love of the neighbour is tied to imagination and moral culture in many ways.

Religious imagination, in moral terms, is the capacity to perceive concrete, real life situations in light of the moral vision of a religious tradition (i.e., in light of a vision of divine and human life as affected by the suffering of the other as in the parable of the good Samaritan, Luke 10:30–37), to perceive the intrinsic worth of creation in light of the biblical view on the wonders of creation. Religious imagination is the capacity to draw productive moral motivation from the vision of a personal “religious” life (Cuneo 2015).

Conclusion

Future climate virtue ethics is an endeavour that asks for the cooperation of theological ethics, comparative theology, moral psychology/behavioural business ethics, environmental psychology, social theory, and so forth. The aim will be to move beyond sweeping and broad statements about “creation” and to explore how the personal and societal dimensions of the quest for the good life come into play when we try to envision a future for our society.

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