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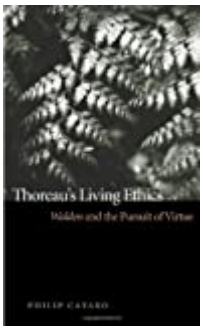

Philip Cafaro. *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. xii + 272 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2610-8.

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Environmental Protection and Social Justice: Two Expressions Of The Same Idea

Schoolchildren

When Henry David Thoreau died, three hundred of Concord's four hundred schoolchildren followed the processional to his grave. This is because he had spent much time being one of the villagers it takes to raise a child, teaching children especially about the nature of the land around Concord. He knew where to swim, knew most of the wildlife by name–and he kept learning. For instance, his journals during his last years were filled with endless observations of forest succession. In more ways than one, Thoreau knew how and where to fish.

All reports of his death, too, emphasize his serenity and positive outlook through the course of his tuberculosis. His comments to friends and visitors were gracious, taking the shock of his deathly appearance from them. This must be another reason why so many children, once asked by the moribund Thoreau to come in from the street, did. They kept returning on their own accord. Even at the burial, Thoreau's memory expressed vitality to those present–a point made by Louisa May Alcott, who was at the grave. Here he was buried in the ground with life growing around him, and he had always taught that we are a part of nature.

Virtue Ethics

Philip Cafaro's *Thoreau's Living Ethics* is the first book-length study of Thoreau's ethics in the English-speaking world. It is written from the perspective of a former forest ranger turned Colorado philosophy professor who has done a substantial amount to open up a new field: environmental virtue ethics. Cafaro's treatment of Thoreau is of a philosopher in the tradition of virtue ethics and places Thoreau's environmental philosophy at the center of its work. The study is thorough and clearly a labor of love. It is well worth having in a general collection and is a significant source for anyone working on or around Thoreau. Moreover, as this review will attempt to suggest, Cafaro's Thoreau may remind us of a broad picture for environmentalism that should not be forgotten.

The book begins with Thoreau's life, ends with his death, and moves topically through the middle–"virtue," "economy," "solitude and society," "nature," "politics," and "foundations." Cafaro's point throughout is to show how Thoreau's entire ethical outlook expressed a commitment

to virtue in its many forms.

"Virtue ethics" has, since the late 1980s, quickly become an established field in English-speaking ethical theory. It has built a substantial publishing industry and professional niche. Most major research institutions in Anglo-American philosophy now have a scholar whose specialty could be construed as virtue ethics in some form. Virtue ethics is contested as a category–even by some who are categorized as within it–but it has become widely recognized in ethics textbooks and in conferences.[1] Cafaro adds to this tradition by providing both Thoreau, a canonical American philosopher, and environmentalism, an outlier to the virtue ethics tradition, to the mix.

In the way Cafaro reads both Thoreau and virtue ethics, Thoreau is a virtue ethicist because his primary philosophical concern throughout life was to realize human excellence.[2] Virtue ethics is an ethics of excellence–as opposed, say, to an ethics of duty or prudence. Notice, too, that we did not read "moral excellence," but "human excellence." Virtue ethics concerns excellence in all our ways of being excellent. Here again it departs from an ethics of duty or of prudence. When asked the basic ethical question, "how should one live?", virtue ethicists expect more than doing our duty or being prudent and more than being moral or far-sighted. They expect a full, amazing human life. Such an expectation is demanding. After all, virtue ethics is an ethics of *excellence*.

The question for a virtue ethicist under this interpretation is, "what is human excellence?" Moreover, since you have a different set of potential excellences than I do, the question is just as well, "what is my human excellence?" How should *I* live? Thoreau's greatest novelty is that he answers all these questions by conceptualizing human nature within a larger biological vitality that is best called "freedom."

Freedom and Romantic Vitalism

At this point in the review, I wish as an interlocutor to bring out an assumption of Cafaro's work. In doing so, I am being constructively critical–for Cafaro does not center his book around freedom. Yet freedom hovers in the background of the entire study, and I believe focusing on this idea illuminates the root system of his study.

What links Thoreau's view of nature, his politics, economics, experimentalism, and practice of solitude is his view that we are–*because* natural–free. In Thoreau's mind, the Earth and every living being on, in, or above it cries out for a "specific" form of freedom.[3] Here is Cafaro illustrating this point:

"The shad, the philosopher will tell you, do not *act* at all, since they do not have conscious purposes. Yet we may watch them migrating upstream or hold one gleaming in our hands, imagine the vast distances they have traveled, and marvel" (p. 143).

The philosopher alluded to in this passage is a generic philosopher from the Western tradition, one who assumes that only deliberative beings can have freedom. Yet Thoreau, Cafaro has allowed us to see, does not think this way: fish can have a freedom that is their own–species-specific. When you block the shad from swimming upstream, this is as bad as slavery is for a human.

The fascinating point here is that freedom is shared across human and nonhuman lives. Excellence is in the realization of that freedom. Thoreau came out of a period in biology known as romantic vitalism that conceived of life as involving a primal force that runs in all species for their full and often creative realization.[4] According to this tradition, life is stunted when its vital powers are curbed or thwarted and what it is to truly live is to have those vital powers exercised to their fullest.[5] Which powers are vital ones is a matter for species and often for individuals. But without exercising them, a living being has not truly been freed into its ownmost possibilities. Hence excellence–the realization of a vital potential to a high extent–is a result of freeing and is freedom realized.[6]

Integrationism

One of the strengths of Cafaro's study is that it allows us to get an overview of Thoreau's work according to its central ethical preoccupations. For example and accordingly, Cafaro's grasp of Thoreau's universe allows us to locate the way vitalist freedom integrates humanity with nature. This integration further allows us to weave together Cafaro's display of Thoreau's multi-sided approach to excellence.

"Integrationism" is a form of environmentally minded ethics that conceives of human flourishing as inseparable from environmental ethics. Rachel Carson or Aldo Leopold are two of the most important integrationists, and the tradition is sorely needed after a last quarter century that saw many environmentalisms conceive of humanity as necessarily opposed to nature.[7] Though Thoreau emphasized we should not be narrowly

phil-*anthropic* but rather phil-*biotic*, Thoreau articulated a vision of flourishing that joined our sense of humanity's realization with ecological awareness and respect for the wider universe of life (p. 141). Thoreau's is an integrationism of striking possibilities–combining the ecological sense of a Carson with the sensibility of a Shelley and the republicanism of a Rousseau.[8]

As I've said, the canopy that allows Thoreau's integrationism is his conception of freedom. Through that conception, we can organize the expressions of Thoreau's political heroism: Thoreau's civil disobedience: his refusal to support an unjust war; his major influence on the most innovative and greatest political minds of the twentieth century, including Gandhi and King; his trenchant opposition to slavery; his support for armed intervention on behalf of slaves because of their extreme daily suffering and dehumanization; his critique of the dehumanizing effects of placing material consumption above self-realization.

And together with these facts, we can organize the expressions of Thoreau's ecological thoughtfulness: his attempt to experience nature as nature is and not as we control it; his love for other forms of life and hatred of needless killing; his awe at the autonomy of nature to fix its own problems and to out-resource the heights of human ingenuity; his sense that solitude in nature brings out our vitality by our being rejoined with a source of freedom.

If you take a moment to study these two lists, what becomes clear is that all of these political and ecological aspects of Thoreau's work are expressions of respect for freedom. They are species of phyla of the same kingdom.[9]

Environmental Protection and Social Justice Are Expressions of the Same Idea

The most helpful parts of Cafaro's study are his explorations of Thoreau's refusal to participate in either slavery or imperial wars and Thoreau's environmental ethics. Cafaro's study allows us to see these two areas of normative concern as continuous. Moreover, Thoreau's point of departure for this continuity is different from that taken in either social ecology or ecofeminism–the only fields of environmental ethics to state such a continuity at all.[10] Thus, from the standpoint of both social justice and environmental ethics, Cafaro's Thoreau discloses an exciting possibility for ethical direction: environmental protection and social justice are parts of the same project–to respect freedom, and to do so out of humanity.

Imagine, then, that environmental justice is not "light" anthropocentrism and wilderness protection isn't anti-humanism.[11] Imagine instead that environmental justice is a way to respect living creatures, just as environmental protection is. Imagine further that in making sure people have conditions in which to live a healthy human life free of toxicity and radiation, you are doing essentially the same thing as when you protect wilderness from needless oil drilling, real estate development, or of grazing land for fast-food beef, or as when you protect animals from the yoke of a pen so small that their limbs wither. Not only are all these cases "needless havoc" as Carson wrote, but all destroy or hinder the freedom of life coming forth into its own.[12] This is Thoreau's insight, and it is one that emerges across Cafaro's study. To avoid the analogy between social justice and environmental protection is to live a less than fully human life. It is to live "freedom-blind".[13]

A Parting Suggestion: Human Excellence and What Is Common

Virtue is excellence, and both Cafaro and Thoreau think excellence tends to set us apart from the common. In closing, I would urge that Cafaro reconsider this. It is worth attending closely to the phenomenology of virtue as a species-specific–for example, human–excellence, which is how Thoreau conceives of virtue (though he shares the following mistake).

When someone does something excellently human, that concept–"the human"–is basic to the judgment. The human is what we share. It is not what separates us. When, for example, Martin Luther King Jr. did the excellently human thing of sacrificing his life for the end of violent and oppressive racism, he did not set himself apart from us, but reminded us of what it is to be humane. Analogously, when Rachel Carson did the excellently human thing of taking on the entire American chemical industry at the height of its economic and lobbying hegemony while she was dying of breast cancer, she did not set herself apart from us, but let us remember that the Earth is our home and home is worth fighting for. Virtues are home-comings to humanity.

The entire phenomenology of aloofness that haunts both Cafaro's and Thoreau's experience of virtue should be reconsidered. To respect life is to do what is minimally humane. Here we have obligation–a condition on any fully excellent life. To strive to one's utmost to realize both one's life and the spirit of respect for life, human or nonhuman, is superogatory, but it is not uncommon. Rather, when we witness it, it is what is most common.

To understand this irony is the key to the virtues of humanity.

Notes

[1]. See Martha Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?", *The Journal of Ethics*, 3.3 (1999): pp. 163-201. Nussbaum, more than almost any other philosopher outside of Alasdair McIntyre and Bernard Williams, brought the study of ancient virtues into the limelight in the 1980s, although neither Nussbaum nor Williams considered or still considers themselves a virtue ethicist. McIntyre, to my knowledge, does.

[2]. "Virtue" traces its legacy through the Latin *virtu* to the Greek *arete*, which means "an excellence."

[3]. The pun on "species" is deliberate.

[4]. On romantic vitalism, see for instance Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). The idea of all living beings having a "push" inside them to realize their essence is deeply lodged in the Western philosophical tradition, through the early modern *conatus* of Spinoza back through his Stoic ancestors and their *oikeiosis* even to the way Greeks heard the word "nature"–*physis*, which Heidegger aptly interprets as a "coming forth."

[5]. For a recent addition to this tradition, see David Oates's *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature* (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 2003), which I reviewed previously for H-NILAS. See `http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=278051070865869`.

[6]. What is slightly misleading about this vitalism is that it does not allow us to easily place the importance meaning has for human life–and specifically the meaning bound up with rich human relationships. Not thirty years after Thoreau wrote, Freud was pointing out that the need to be loved and to love shapes human reality to a massive extent. Love, then, is a vital power and realizing rich relationships is its primary expression. But it is so through its mysterious connection to meaning. It is not that vitalism cannot in some very abstract way give a place for love or meaning–it is that vitalism seems too easily applied to the kind of solitary experience Thoreau explored. Vitalism does not clarify the importance of loving relationships or meaning in them, and so falls far short of a rich picture of the human.

[7]. In fairness to these environmentalisms–so called "anti-humanist" environmentalisms–they are responding to a Western philosophical and religious inheritance that has placed humans over or apart from nature for millennia and so have given us reason to think that humanity is opposed to nature. See, for instance, a book that I reviewed for H-NILAS, Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), which explores how the Western philosophical tradition has considered man and animals ontologically separate. See `http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=160141080786893`.

[8]. Cafaro might enjoy spending more time with Rousseau, who anticipated many of Thoreau's core assumptions. On how Rousseau displays an integrationist freedom preceding Romantic vitalism, see his down-to-earth analogy between the desire of colonized humans to be free from oppression and his description of how a wild horse chafes and struggles at the bit to regain its natural state: "As an untamed steed bristles his mane, paws the earth with his hoof, and breaks away impetuously at the very approach of the bit … barbarous man does not bend his head for the yoke … and he prefers the most turbulent *freedom* to tranquil subjection. Therefore it is not by the degradation of enslaved peoples that man's *natural* dispositions for or against servitude must be judged." [emphases added] (from *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Humans*, Vol. 3 of the *Collected Writings of Rousseau*, eds. Masters and Kelly, Dartmouth: University Press of New England, 1992, p. 57).

[9]. According to this Romantic taxonomy, the kingdom of necessity would be the realm of nature that is not teleological.

[10]. Deep ecology, on some formulations, seems to join anti-imperialism and abolitionism with environmental protection, but it does so by positing a staunch anti-humanism. What is fascinating about Cafaro's Thoreau is that being respectful of nature and being just with humans are parts of being humane.

[11]. Environmental justice is a species of social justice. I focus on it because some environmentalists see it as too human-centered to be authentically environmentalist.

[12]. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Mariner Books, 1962/2002), p. 85.

[13]. As when Wittgenstein says that some people are "aspect-blind"–unable to discern the way what makes sense to us can have different aspects–for example, freedom for humans and freedom for nonhumans.

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