

Respect for Nature

by Dale Jamieson

Excerpted from 'Climate Change, Responsibility, and Justice' (2009)

Thus far I have claimed that both prudence and ethics can be seen as providing reasons to respond to climate change, but in both cases they stray from the norms. In my view there is another value that climate change puts at risk that is often not noticed, and recognizing this value helps to explain why some people are so passionate about this issue. I call this value 'respect for nature', and I claim that embracing this value should motivate people to acknowledge a responsibility to respond to climate change.¹ While I think that such a duty is recognized by many people, it is difficult to make clear and to defend. Like many duties, it is easier to say when it is violated than when it is respected.

In 1997 a distinguished group of scientists published an influential article in which they assessed the human impact on nature (Vitousek et al. 1997). They calculated that between one-third and one half of Earth's land surface had been transformed by human action; that carbon dioxide in the atmosphere had increased by more than 30% since the beginning of the industrial revolution; that more nitrogen had been fixed by humanity than all other terrestrial organisms combined; that more than half of all accessible surface fresh water was being appropriated by humanity; and that about one quarter of Earth's bird species had been driven to extinction. From these facts they inferred that 'it is clear that we live on a human-dominated planet'. It is of course clear that over the last decade these measures of human domination have only increased.

While it may be difficult to say what exactly the duty of respect for nature consists in, it seems clear that where there is such a duty, human domination violates it (this much Kant would have agreed with). So if it is true that humans dominate nature, then it seems safe to say that humans would violate a duty of respect for nature (were there such a duty, and everything else being equal). ...

Rather than being governed by its own laws and internal relations, nature is increasingly affected by human action. Humans, like other forms of life, influence their environments and affect the nature that gave rise to them, but what makes the present human relationship with nature one of domination is the degree and extremity of the human influence on nature. At some point the causal influence is so thorough-going that it can be said to constitute domination.² ... Anthropogenic climate change violates the duty of respect for nature because it is a central expression of the human domination of nature. ...

¹ I am greatly indebted to Paul Taylor's early and important work on this topic; however, it will become clear that my conception of respect for nature is significantly different from his. See Taylor (1989).

² For more on these themes, see Jamieson (2008, pp. 166–168) and Jamieson (2002, 190–196).

The numbers cited above show the substantive nature of human domination. The human domination is also expressed attitudinally in the ways that we think about nature and feel about our relations with it. It is not too much to say that as a civilization we treat the Earth and its fundamental systems as if they were toys that we can treat carelessly, as if their functions could easily be replaced by a minor exercise of human ingenuity. It is as if we have scaled up slash-and-burn agriculture to a planetary scale.³ Seen in this way, our collective behaviour towards nature seems to be a paradigm of disrespect.

Thus far I have discussed why we might think that we are violating a duty of respect for nature on condition that we have such a duty. But what can be said in favour of the view that we have such a duty in the first place? ...

One ground for supposing that there is a duty of respect for nature is prudential. We do better by our own lights when we respect nature. ...

A second reason for respecting nature is that it provides a background condition for our lives having meaning. While it would be implausible to think that it is a necessary or sufficient condition for all lives having meaning, it does seem to be a very important condition in many cultures at many times. It is easy to think of examples of the contribution of nature to life's meaning from history, literature or contemporary culture. Blake's idea of England as a 'green and pleasant land' is important both in literature and in English history. The cherry orchard in Chekhov's play of the same name defines the life of everyone in the community. Think of the role landscape plays in the cultures of indigenous peoples. For that matter think of how the 'flatirons' define Boulder, Colorado.

An analogy may help to bring the point out more clearly. Representational painting is not the only kind of valuable painting, but it is one very important kind of valuable painting. Indeed, it may be the mother from which other forms of valuable painting emerged. Representational painting exploits the contrast between foreground and background. What is in the foreground gains its meaning from its contrast with the background. What I want to suggest is that nature provides the background against which we live our lives, thus providing us with an important source of meaning. This, it might be claimed, is sufficient for supposing that we have a duty to respect nature. For when we fail to respect nature, we lose an important source of meaning in our lives.

A third reason for respecting nature is from a concern for psychological integrity and wholeness. As Kant (and later Freud) observed, respecting the other is central to knowing who we are and to respecting ourselves. Indeed, the failure to respect the other can be seen as a form of narcissism. ...⁴

³ I owe this image to Jeremy Waldron (personal communication).

⁴ Respecting the otherness of nature can break in at least two different directions: one towards seeing nature as a partner, the other towards aestheticizing nature and seeing it as the object of the experience of the sublime. I say a little more about this in Jamieson (2007a) and in Jamieson (2008).

Much more would have to be said to make any of these views plausible or to say what a duty of respect for nature would come to. What I hope to have accomplished in this section is to show that it may be plausible to suppose that there is such a duty, that such a duty need not be based on a morally extravagant view such as biocentrism or ecocentrism, and that such a duty may be relevant to our climate destabilizing behaviour.

Excerpted from "The Moral and Political Challenges of Climate Change" (2007)

Climate Change and Character

... Here I can give only a brief sketch of some fragments of ... what might be called "the green virtues." Before sketching these virtues, however, it is important to acknowledge the complex relationships that exist between our character as individuals and the societies into which we are born. Institutional structures deeply affect what kind of people we will be, but what kind of people we are also has profound effects on the nature of our society. We cannot opt for changing ourselves rather than changing the world or the world instead of ourselves: in an important sense of the expression, we are the world. We cannot opt for changing ourselves rather than changing the world or the world instead of ourselves: in an important sense of the expression, we are the world.

Humility is a widely shared moral ideal that is not often connected to a love of nature or the importance of living lightly on the Earth. Yet indifference to nature is likely to reflect the self-importance or lack of self-acceptance that is characteristic of a lack of humility. A person who has proper humility would be horrified at the prospect of changing Earth's fundamental systems, and would act in such a way as to minimize the impact of their behavior.

Temperance is an ancient virtue that is typically associated with weakness of will. However, conceived more broadly, temperance relates to self-restraint and moderation. A temperate person does not overconsume; he "lives simply, so that others may simply live."⁵

Finally, we can imagine a virtue that we might call **mindfulness**. Behavior that is rote and unthinking, as is the case with much of our environmentally destructive behavior, is the enemy of mindfulness. A mindful person would appreciate the consequences of her actions that are remote in time and space. She would see herself as taking on the moral weight of production and disposal when she purchases an article of clothing (for example). She would make herself responsible for the cultivation of the cotton, the impacts of the dyeing process, the energy costs of the transport, and so on. Mindful people would not thoughtlessly emit climate changing gases. ...

⁵ This expression is attributed to Gandhi. See <http://www.dropsoul.com/mystic-quotes.php>.

This connection between the state of our souls and the fate of the Earth was clearly seen by Walt Whitman, the sage poetic observer of American democracy, when he wrote: “I swear the Earth shall surely be complete to him or her who shall be complete.”

This should give us heart. We must begin from where we are—changing ourselves, changing our leaders, and changing our institutions—but from here we can change the world. Biking instead of driving or choosing the veggie burger rather than the hamburger may seem like small choices, and it may seem that such small choices by such little people barely matter. But ironically, they may be the only thing that matters. For large changes are caused and constituted by small choices.⁶ And in the end, however things turn out, it is how we live that gives meaning and significance to our lives.

⁶ Beef production is extremely energy and water intensive, and cows are a major source of methane emissions. A molecule of methane has more than 20 times the global warming potential as a carbon dioxide molecule.