6 Respect for Nature

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. 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).

However, William Leiss thinks that humans cannot dominate nature since ‘properly speaking only other men can be the objects of domination’. This is because “as Hegel showed […] an essential feature of domination is the struggle for recognition of the master’s authority” (Leiss 1994, p. 122). I see no reason to read Hegel’s insightful remarks on the master/slave relation as an attempted analysis of the concept of domination simpliciter; and if it were such an attempt, I see no reason to think it successful. We can suppose that people are dominated by other people, even (perhaps especially) when they are not cognitively capable of recognizing the master’s authority. Leiss’s analysis strikes me as exemplifying the ubiquitous

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16 See, for example, Singer (2001).

17 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).
tendency of philosophers to over-intellectualize what is required for concept application.18

Why should we suppose that humans dominate nature? Vitousek and his colleagues provide evidence for the human domination of nature, but the question of what the domination consists in remains open. There is a tradition in environmental ethics that thinks of nature as autonomous, and (as is the case for humans) domination is thought to (roughly) consist in undermining autonomy through arbitrary interference.19 Some will cavil at the idea that nature can be thought of as autonomous, but consider the following. It is not entirely clear what autonomy means, even in the case of humans, but to some extent it seems to relate to being self-caused.20 If we think of nature as that which is distinct from humanity, then it is clear why Vitousek and his colleagues think that the facts that they report show that humans dominate nature. 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 through-going that it can be said to constitute domination.21

I will assume in what follows that no conclusive argument has been given that prevents us from saying, along with Vitousek and his colleagues, that we live on a human-dominated planet, and that if there is a duty of respect for nature, then human domination violates that duty.22 Anthropogenic climate change violates the duty of respect for nature because it is a central expression of the human domination of nature.

The human domination of nature is expressed both substantively and attitudinally. 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

18 There are other accounts of domination in the literature that are typically applied to humans dominating other humans, but, as far as I can see, they are not committed to the idea that only humans can be the subjects of domination. See, for example, Pettit (1997). Generally on the subject of domination I have benefited from John Nolt’s unpublished ‘Greenhouse Gas Emissions and the Domination of Posterity’.

19 See, for example, Katz (1997); the essays collected in Heyd (2005); and Turner (1996). What Turner means by ‘wildness’ is related to what I mean by ‘autonomy’. For reservations, see O’Neill et al. (2008, pp. 134–137).

20 Jerome Schneewind argues that autonomy is a relatively recent conceptual construction with its origins in Kant. See Schneewind (1997).

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

22 Those who find Leiss’s view convincing can view me as defending an analogue duty to respect for nature that is violated when the analogue to the human domination of nature that is now occurring obtains.
to a planetary scale. 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?

I believe that there is some intuitive plausibility to the idea that there is such a duty, but more needs to be said to properly motivate it. It can still be asked how the claim that there is such a duty could be justified. In what follows, I will tentatively explore three possible grounds for supposing that we have such a duty. What I say is speculative, not conclusive. Much more work would have to be done to build a convincing case for the existence of such a duty.

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. Versions of this argument are ubiquitous in the environmental literature and something like this view is implicit in such slogans as Barry Commoner’s ‘third law of ecology’ which states that ‘nature knows best’ (Commoner 1971), and Wallace Broecker’s analogy that emitting greenhouse gases is like poking a dragon with a sharp stick (Broecker 2004). Something like this view can also be seen as providing the foundation for the precautionary principle. In its crudest and most general form, it is in the background of the claim by Costanza and his colleagues that the minimum value of the services that ecosystems provide is between $16 and $54 trillion, and that their study ‘highlights the relative importance of ecosystem services and the potential impacts on our welfare of continuing to squander them’ (Costanza et al. 1997, p. 259). How plausible one finds this as a foundation of a duty to respect nature depends on one’s views about duties to others founded on prudence, as well as on one’s view about the substance of these claims. It is worth noting that many people would find little to object to here.

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

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23 I owe this image to Jeremy Waldron (personal communication).
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. One can imagine a kind of natural history that views the recognition of nature as an ‘other’, beyond our control, as at the root of self-identity and communal life.24

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.

7 Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the view that the risks of anthropogenic climate change impose practical responsibilities, some of which are prudential and some of which are ethical. I have claimed that while these views are plausible, they would require revising our conceptions of moral and political responsibility. I have also suggested that in addition to whatever duties are generated by these responsibilities, another duty—respect for nature—also seems engaged by the risk of climate change. This duty is not widely discussed and is under-theorized and defended. However, I suspect that unless a duty of respect for nature is widely recognized and acknowledged, there will be little hope of successfully addressing the problem of climate change.

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References


24 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).
Elsewhere, Dale Jamieson adds the following.¹

**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.”

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.

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