

Chapter 10. Yes, Because Justice Demands It.

Carl Pope, “Ethics as if Tomorrow Mattered”

Because global warming is an issue on a global scale, it largely overwhelms the small-scale local context in which our ethics arose and were traditionally applied. The solution is to embrace the traditional values, link them to new scientific knowledge, and apply them in new and much more demanding ways. Those traditional virtues are piety (the contractual relation between past, present, and future), justice (the refusal to harm people in ways they have not consented to), and responsibility (accountability not only for intentions, but for the full consequence of our acts).

Reading Questions

1. This is a strongly worded essay from the executive director of the Sierra Club. If you were the director of the Sierra Club, with all its resources, what would you do first to meet the climate emergency? What would you do second?
2. Explain in your own words the point that Pope is making about market capitalism, in the passage on p. 298 that starts “Take what in other contexts . . .” and ends “. . . who will be losers.” Wow. Is he right? If so, then what?
3. Pope’s arguments call us to “moral courage” (p. 299). What is that?

Michael M. Crow, “Sustainability as a Founding Principle of the United States”

The U.S. Constitution, while empowering nakedly self-interested behavior, fails to protect the long-term interests of the whole. Consequently, we have come to a time when “the natural rights of man and national laws of economics collide with the natural systems of the Earth, to the ruinous long-term detriment of us all.” Along with liberty, justice, and equality, sustainability must be a core American value.

Reading Questions

1. What, according to Crow, is the fundamental failure of the U.S. Constitution?
2. The Constitution, he argues, justifies “selfish, or let us say at least nakedly self-interested, pursuits.” True?
3. Draft an amendment to the Constitution that corrects its omissions.

Steve Vanderheiden, “Climate Change and Intergenerational Responsibility”

A basic moral principle is that we are responsible for the bad outcomes that result from our voluntary acts. The voluntary acts of the world’s affluent people and countries are resulting in climate destabilization, with untold suffering and destruction of lives and ways of living. We thus have two kinds of responsibility. First, to the extent that we can, we must avoid acts that cause climate change. Second, we must remedy that injustice, righting such wrongs. To fail to honor those responsibilities is to forfeit our humanity.

Reading Questions

1. What two kinds of responsibility do we as individuals have as a result of our high rate of greenhouse gas emissions? Use your own life and decisions as an example—so, not “We have a responsibility,” but “I have a responsibility.”
2. What are the differences between mitigation, adaptation, and compensation? Which is most important right now?

Lauret Savoy, “Still an American Dilemma”

Structural racism and exclusion are embedded in discussions and decisions about climate change, as they are in so many other elements of American life. People of color, the poor, the disadvantaged, and the voiceless are directly and disproportionately “experiencing the impacts of contaminated environments or climate change as loss (of home, of food source, health, or livelihood)” (p. 315). Thus the environmental movement intersects the civil rights movement.

Reading Questions

1. Much of the violation of human rights comes “at a comfortable moral distance” (p. 313). What is a comfortable moral distance? Give an example from your life.
2. What is structural racism? Give an example.
3. The fact that the environmental movement intersects the civil rights movement suggests the possibility of a powerful alliance for change. How might that alliance be created? Why hasn’t it already become a powerful force?

Ismail Serageldin, “There Is a Tide”

In the past, people have confronted and defeated monstrous and unconscionable injustice, ending slavery, liberating colonies, recognizing universal human rights. Currently, we face equally monstrous injustices as a result of greed, lack of ethics, and destruction of the Earth. We have to become the new abolitionists, demanding of our leaders a more equitable and caring world.

Reading Questions

1. Ismail Serageldin is the director of the Library of Alexandria in Egypt. What might he know about the tides of civilization that we in a young country overlook? Would he be comforted or discomfited by that knowledge?
2. We must become the new abolitionists, he argues, most likely referring to the anti-slavery movement in America. What does the analogy suggest for how to go forward?

Peter Singer, “A Fair Deal”

There is a fair and practical way to allocate the right to emit greenhouse gases. Take the total capacity of the atmosphere to absorb greenhouse gases without harmful effects, then divide it by the number of people on Earth. That is an individual’s fair share. Allocate to each country an emissions quota equal to its population’s shares. Then create a market in which countries that want a higher quota can buy shares from countries that emit less. There is no moral justification for any person or country to take more than a fair share.

Reading Questions

1. Are there any good moral reasons to think that an equal allocation of emissions rights would not be fair?
2. The market in emissions rights would very quickly establish an unequal distribution, where the wealthy (again) gain more than their fair share. What could morally justify this?

Carl Safina, “The Moral Climate”

Failure to act quickly to prevent the worst effects of climate disruption is a moral failure—a shame, and especially a shame because the consequences will fall on those who did not make this choice. Our failure is based on a refusal to make changes, which we misunderstand as “sacrifice.” In fact, our greatest sacrifice is to continue to allow the greedy few to use us to their selfish benefit. As a result, we are sacrificing what we truly care about—our children, our future, a peaceful world, the richness of life on Earth—to enrich “those who disdain us.”

Reading Questions

1. Safina doesn’t pull any punches, does he? “Nearly every just cause is a struggle between the good of the many and the greed of a few” (p. 325). Can you think of an example? Another? How is action to slow climate change a struggle between the good of the many and the greed of a few?
2. If Safina is right about the nature of just causes, what does that suggest about the most effective way to advance the just cause of climate stabilization?
3. Make two lists, one through ten. What are the top ten things you would have to give up if you wanted to slow climate change? What are the top ten things you would have to give up if climate change continues to accelerate?
4. “Dysfunctional values married to catastrophic leadership” (p. 324) has led to our failures to address climate change, Safina claims. Is this an accurate description of the situation? If not, complete the sentence in a way you think is more valid: “_____ values married to _____ leadership . . .”
5. Despite the anger in Safina’s essay, his conclusion is hopeful: “But since [a] the problems are largely of our making, [b] we have the power to flip them. [c] We just need to create the needed resolve. [d] I know we can, and [e] I think we will” (p. 326). Discuss and assess each of these claims, a–e.

Ethics Background: What is justice?

In its origins, the word “justice” is rooted in notions of **equality**. In fact, it often seems intuitive that equal treatment is the basic requirement of justice; consider children who insist that all the children get exactly the same number of candies. Or consider Peter Singer’s argument that the just way to allocate shares of the atmosphere’s capacity to absorb carbon dioxide without undesirable consequence is to divide it equally among all the Earth’s humans.

But it quickly becomes clear that equal allocations are not always just. Students, for example, recognize that it’s not fair for all students get the same grade if they have not all done equal work and achieved equal accomplishment. We would not want people to be equally paid if they didn’t work equal hours, and so forth.

These complications lead to the more nuanced notion of **equity**. Equity is proportionate equality—a situation where shares of a good are assigned in relation to some quality. For example, student grades are said to be equitable if the grades are proportionate to the level of accomplishment in the student’s work. Equity can be represented by a proportion:

A’s share of a good: B’s share of a good :: A’s share of a quality: B’s share of a quality

The good is something that is being distributed (tax burden, bonus raises, income, incarceration, grades), and the quality is some fact about the person (wealth, exceptional work, doing a job, criminal conduct, test scores). Thus A’s grade is to B’s grade as A’s test scores are to B’s test scores.

John Rawls, a twentieth-century Harvard philosopher, argued that a just situation is one that would be established by a fair policy. A fair policy is one that would be chosen unanimously by rational people who did not know what position they would hold in that society, and so did not know whether they would be advantaged or disadvantaged by the policy. Under those conditions (behind what Rawls called the *veil of ignorance*), Rawls believed people would choose policies that (1) created an initial base level of equal distribution and (2), beyond that, allowed for unequal distribution if the inequality benefited all, and if the advantaged positions were open to all.

One might thus carry out Rawls’s thought experiment with the problem of distributing shares in the “carbon sink.” What would rational people do if they didn’t know their future position on Earth? They might be expected to decide that the ideally just system would distribute equal and minimal shares to all, meeting only the very most basic needs, and then allocate additional shares to those doing services for all—firefighters, for example, or college professors (joke).

Chapter 11. Yes, Because the World is Beautiful.

Bernd Heinrich, “Our Edens: Ecological Homes”

Our Edens are here on Earth, our homelands—the bird-graced, season-chased lands that resonate with our inner happiness. It is a sin, it is a folly, it is a home-wrecking stupidity to endanger the ecological balance of those homelands. Like all organisms, humans can expand their numbers and effect only to a point. After that, we disrupt the basis of our prospering. That is the terrifying point at which we find ourselves. Whether we react deliberately or wait for catastrophic change is a human choice.

Reading Questions

1. Heinrich says, “Our Edens are here on Earth, and only here. To suppose they might be else where is blasphemous” (p. 334). Write a description of your first memory of an Edenic place. Was it a tree in your backyard, a creek? If you went back there now, would you find it intact?
2. Do you agree that spending money to explore other planets, before we have invested fully in living sustainably on this one, is irresponsible?

John A. Vucetich, “Wolves, Ravens, and a New Purpose for Science”

Ethics has always told us that we must act with compassion and justice. There’s nothing much more that ethics can do. Can science help? Traditionally, science has been commandeered to help humans understand, and thus control and manage, the world—often to disastrous effect. But a study of wolves and moose on Isle Royale shows that science has a second purpose: to awaken us to the wonder of the world, and thus to awaken our senses of caring and responsibility.

Reading Questions

1. According to Vucetich, what are two different purposes of science? Which one is more important? What argument would support that claim?
2. Vucetich makes reference to a sense of wonder. What is a sense of wonder? Does everyone have one? If not, is it something that can be cultivated?
3. What is the moral significance of wonder?

Hank Lentfer, “Get Dirty, Get Dizzy”

Children can teach us what we have forgotten, especially in times that seem hopeless: “We activists need to understand that acts of caring are healing in themselves, and healing acts express the deepest care. Whether or not we can save the planet, we need to conserve its gifts” (p. 345). He concludes, “Impending chaos and need create untold opportunities for grace and service” (p. 345).

Reading Questions

1. Do you agree with little Linnea that humans alone are bad? To defend your view, you’ll need to be clear about what it means to be bad.
2. Lentfer is giving advice that will be of value to disheartened activists. Here are three. Be sure you fully understand each one, by giving examples and thinking about how this might be advice that you could use.
 - a. “Impending chaos and need create untold opportunities for grace and service.”
 - b. “We activists need to understand that acts of caring are healing in themselves.”
 - c. “Healing acts express the deepest care.”
3. If you ask Hank why he works so hard on conservation projects in his beloved Southeast Alaska, he will provide a surprising answer. Not because he can save feeding grounds for sandhill cranes (although he has). Not because he can prevent the extension of suburbs into wilderness (although he has). But because, he says, he finds his greatest joy in being part of a community of caring people, regardless of the results. Does this make sense?

Alison Hawthorne Deming, “The Feasting”

In a sparkling dance of living and dying, small mackerel leap onto a Cape Cod beach to avoid the fierce striped bass. It is an “ordinary catastrophe,” one of the intricate systems that power life’s continuing. As all of life faces the extraordinary catastrophe of climate change, let us hold in our minds the struggle of every being against annihilation. Let us live by the “doctrine of grief, to savor sadness as its own dark memo of instruction from the moral imagination” (p. 351).

Reading Questions

1. “Grief either swallows you whole or spits you out to feel compassion for the grief of others” (p. 350). What makes the difference? Why are some people destroyed by grief, and others remade? The terrible grief we feel at the loss of species, habitats, the hopes of children—how can we be remade by this sorrow, rather than destroyed?
2. “My intention is to live by the doctrine of grief, to savor sadness as its own dark memo of instruction from the moral imagination.” What does grief say in its lists of instructions? If you can answer this question, you can answer any.
3. The Canadian singer and songwriter Leonard Cohen said, in the *Los Angeles Times*, “We live with broken hearts in a broken world, but that’s no alibi for anything. We have to sing a broken-hearted halleluiah.”
 - a. Can you think of times when you have used a broken heart as an alibi?
 - b. What does he mean by a broken-hearted halleluiah?
 - c. When our hearts are broken by the loss of Earth’s song-makers—the frogs, the songbirds—how can we learn to sing?

Activity / Application: Take a hike

Get out of the classroom or the church basement. If it's raining or dark, all the better; share your warm clothes. Walk and notice. Just notice. What do you experience—see, smell, taste—that lifts your spirits? What do you experience (or fail to experience) that dismays you? Now come inside and write the evening's "memo[randum] of instruction for the moral imagination." Your memo might start any of these ways:

1. "I want to remember . . ."
2. "I am glad for . . ."
3. "Where are the . . ."
4. "The greatest gift of this walk was . . ."

Chapter 12. Yes, Because We Love the World.

J. Baird Callicott, “Changing Ethics for a Changing World”

Old ways of thinking about moral responsibility no longer work. They are too individualistic, too simple, for an interconnected, complex world in which causal effects span continents and generations. The times call for a paradigm shift along two fronts: toward an ethics rooted in moral feelings rather than abstract principles, and toward a worldview built of “species, not specimens”—the imbricated ecosystems and civilizations so deeply threatened by climate change.

Reading Questions

1. Callicott says, “Ethical individualism and reductionism, Jack-and-Jill ethics, leads . . . to problematic and paradoxical conclusions” (p. 360).
 - a. What are Jack-and-Jill ethics?
 - b. What is ethical individualism?
 - c. What are a couple of those problematic and paradoxical conclusions?
2. Callicott says, “To meet the challenge of global climate change, philosophers need to shift the subjects . . . to species . . . not specimens . . . and to the civilization that is the signal achievement of our own species. And they need to shift the moral sentiments into a more prominent place alongside reason” (p. 362).
 - a. What will it mean to shift the focus of our moral concern from individuals to species and civilizations?
 - b. What are the moral sentiments, and what role should they play in our moral decisions?

bell hooks, “Touching the Earth”

bell hooks recalls the historical way in which African American people lived close to nature, working the land and acting as fellow creatures of the Earth. She sees the “great migration” from the agrarian South to the industrialized North as the source of black people’s estrangement from nature and concludes that their healing will come from a restored connection to nature, because “when the Earth is sacred to us, our bodies can also be sacred to us” (p. 368).

Reading Questions

1. “When we love the Earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully” (p. 363). Tell a story from your life that shows that this claim is/is not true.
2. Reread the poem on p. 367. What is the significance of the poem for you—what does it teach, or what insights does it bring, or how does it make you feel?
3. This is an important passage: “there is also a tendency to see no correlation between the struggle for collective black self-recovery and ecological movements that seek to restore balance to the planet by changing our relationship to nature and to natural resources. . . . Many contemporary black folks see no value in supporting ecological movements” (p. 368). What *are* the correlations? How, then, can ecological movements support black self-recovery and vice versa?

Katie McShane, “Love, Grief, and Climate Change”

We cannot consider actions involving climate change as purely economic, for in such a narrow focus we overlook the importance of the natural world to our ability to flourish as human beings. With climate change we risk losing local knowledge about the natural environments we depend on, and we risk serious economic and political consequences, but above all we risk “profound sadness and disarray in human cultures” (p. 371) because our identities are closely linked with and shaped by the natural world around us.

Reading Questions

1. So what if species vanish, driven to extinction by human recklessness? Yes, we know there will be ecological consequences. But what are the spiritual consequences, and why does that matter?
2. What kind of future do *you* want for yourself and your descendants? List the values that would be preserved.

Stephen R. Kellert, “For the Love and Beauty of Nature”

“We can only be ethical in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love,” Aldo Leopold famously wrote in *A Sand County Almanac*. Thus technologies that separate us from the land are doubly dangerous—they undermine the stability of the land, even as they undermine the ethic of appreciation and love for the land that leads us to protect it. For this reason, sustainable design not only must do no harm to the land, but should also actively nurture a sense of connection to place and appreciation of its beauty and value.

Reading Questions

- Kellert writes, “There is, nonetheless, this cant of mind that regards emotional and valuational concerns about the human relationship to nature as impractical and romantic preoccupations lacking the realism of the only real motivators of action” (p. 376).
- a. What are the supposedly real motivators of action?
 - b. What is the moral importance of the emotional response to nature?

Bron Taylor, “Earth Religion and Radical Religious Reformation”

In order to continue our co-evolution with this world, we must release our maladaptive, long-standing religions and embrace the emergence of a global, civic Earth religion, a “deep green religion.” The basic moral test of the premises of that religion is whether an idea or practice promotes or erodes Earth’s biodiversity. These premises pass that test: we belong to the Earth; all living things are kin; life exists in complex, interdependent webs. Our greatest hope lies in this unfolding worldview, which invites humility, felt kinship, and caring.

Reading Questions

1. “Some things we know with reasonable certainty . . . : We belong to the world. . . . Living things are kin, related in a familial sense. . . . Life exists in complex, interdependent webs” (p. 381). Are you reasonably certain about these things? What is the source of your assurance?
2. We must establish “taboo-free zones where every premise is examined with an eye toward whether an idea or practice promotes or erodes Earth’s genetic and species variety” (p. 380). Here are some possible premises. How do they measure up against Taylor’s standard?
 - a. The well-being of a human is more important than the well-being of a fish.
 - b. Those who would destroy a habitat—say, a swamp—should pay to have another swamp built in another place.
 - c. All people have a right to bear children.

Wendell Berry, “A Promise Made in Love, Awe, and Fear”

Industrial technology advances and thrives on the denial and destruction of our necessary connection to nature. By contrast, love for particular things, places, creatures, and people will bring us back to “the sphere of human definition, meaning, and responsibility” (p. 388).

Reading Questions

1. What are the similarities between industrial technology and war? Are there significant differences?
2. What is the difference between abstract love and the kind of “particular love” that Wendell Berry is talking about? Is there abstract action?

Kathleen Dean Moore, “The Call to Forgiveness at the End of the Day”

Imagine the disappearance one by one of what you love most on Earth—the song of frogs, the delight of bat flight, the return of salmon, meadowlarks singing in the morning. Then imagine the children you love the most, who will live in this silent, empty world. Now imagine what you must do.

Reading Questions

1. “To love is to affirm the absolute worth of what you love and to pledge your life to its thriving—to protect it fiercely and faithfully, for all time” (p. 392). Or so Moore claims. Do you agree? Can you think of counterexamples?
2. Imagine yourself in 2025, looking back on the time between now and then. Write a story about something that happens during that time.

3. At a recent conference, a listener challenged Moore, saying, “If my daughter has never seen a meadowlark, its disappearance will not harm her.” Moore could only sputter. How would you have responded?
4. Will our children forgive us?

Activity / Application: Incorporating “sentimental” language into policy decisions:
Can love conquer all?

This is an exercise to determine whether the language of love can be used to make policy decisions, and, if so, how love might influence decisions. You will be assigned one perspective from which to respond to the following policy scenario in a mock city council meeting.

Scenario: an opportunity exists in your community to set aside 1,000 acres of land for conservation purposes. Though some of the land is classified as wetlands, therefore not buildable, the majority of the land is buildable. Though there would not be costs involved in the procurement of the land, the ongoing oversight and, more importantly, revenue forgone from future economic development make this a hotly contested issue.

Groups:

City Councilors

1. A female Democrat with an anti-growth background
2. A male Republican with moderate fiscal and social tendencies
3. A male Republican banker, very aware of finances, taxes, and revenue streams for the city
4. A male Democrat, seventy-eight years old, steeped in the tradition of the old ways
5. A male Democrat, retired engineer, strong environmental convictions
6. A male Republican, business owner, very conservative, strong emphasis on business
7. A woman Republican, moderate, can be swayed either way by strong arguments

For councilors: As you listen to the arguments, can you be swayed? Can you let go of the traditional quantifiable arguments in favor of the sentiment? Be prepared to vote based on your background (as outlined above) and how the arguments hit you.

Naysayers

Three or four speak as “naysayers,” working folks who have come to make sure the land stays available for building. Many of you have families and work hard to put food on the table.

Sentimental arguers

The rest of the class or club is broken into groups of three or four. You are the sentimental arguers. You must search for language that you can use to make the strongest arguments based on love for the environment. This is an exercise to see how and if we could incorporate “sentimental” language into our policy discussions.

All groups: Discuss what points you would make at the podium of this city council meeting. Be prepared to have one person speak for you. Be succinct and use language, rhetoric, or a strategy you think could truly sway the decision makers in this situation.