Epilogue: Environmental responsibility

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Imagine a world where all waste is sorted and recycled so that there is no need for landfill sites, where all energy is produced from renewable sources and generates minimal or zero pollution, where biodiversity is increasing rather than decreasing, where all holidays enhance the ecological systems they affect. All this sounds a little idealistic and perhaps utopian, even fanciful; but this is the kind of world that environmentally responsible behaviour would create. If only it was that easy. In practice there are different environmental issues that demand different responses, there are other needs that conflict with the objectives of environmentalists, there are other motives that are arguably just as legitimate that do not promote environmental responsibility.

The readings making up this collection are selected from a vast and growing body of literature addressing issues of environmental responsibility in our changing world. We have brought together some quite different perspectives concerning ethics, policy and action associated with caring for our environment and bearing accountability for harm and wrongdoing. Our endeavour has necessarily been partial, but our purpose in providing this text is to signpost a path towards an improved constructive engagement with environmental issues from a standpoint of environmental responsibility. Throughout this collection we have sought to provide a narrative that might be used as a learning framework for thinking responsibly and creatively about the challenges of sustainable development in the twenty-first century.

In its most simplistic formulation, our framework is structured around three questions of environmental responsibility: first, the issues of *what matters*, as expressed in Part 2 of this reader; second, the agency of responsibility or *who matters and in what sense*, as discussed in Part 3; and lastly, the justification for responsibility or *why* some issues matter more than others and *why* some stakeholder roles matter more than others, as reflected in the readings in Part 4. Raising these questions can help begin to counter often-expressed concerns about (i) complexity associated with many issues at stake; (ii) a need for engagement, through recognising agency and building personal and collective stakeholding associated with such issues; and (iii) constructing the overall rationale and political space for actively and fairly addressing them – the justification for environmental responsibility.

For guidance on how these questions of 'what', 'who' and 'why' might be addressed and, moreover, in an integral manner, we can draw on insights offered by traditions of philosophical ethics on how we ought to live, as applied to environmental issues.

Three ethical traditions– consequentialist, deontological and virtue-based ethics – are identified in Part 1 of this reader (see the readings from Holbrook, Elliot and Connelly respectively). In turn, these traditions suggest three moral imperatives – doing good, doing the right thing and being virtuous. However, one message arising from the Part 1 readings is that a focus on any one dimension of moral concern – the good outcome, the right course of action or the virtuous activity - can be pursued separately or in combination. For some these are separate pathways to environmental responsibility but for others they may be compatible. A similar message comes from other parts of the reader. Reducing what is in focus to just one dimension risks losing sight of the bigger picture that is needed in order for us to contextualise our environmental actions and judge whether we are acting responsibly. The framework for responsibility suggested in Figure 1 is one way of trying to ensure that questions of environmental responsibility are addressed in an integral manner. It can be regarded as a device for synthesising the questions and moral imperatives of environmental responsibility so as to bring out their respective interdependencies.

The framework provides one way of locating or situating particular ethically informed endeavours on issues of environmental concern, and how those endeavours might relate to each other. If, for example, air quality is deemed an issue of concern (what matters and doing what's good), then we might anticipate that concern will follow around the agents of pollution, such as the individual and collective users and developers of industry and transport (who matters and doing what's right). Furthermore, concern around these issues and agents might be justifiable on the basis of a general virtue of environmental responsibility (why it matters and doing what's virtuous) – for example, it might be argued that they are of concern because we care for and bear accountability towards human and non-human flourishing. In actually addressing the issue of poor air quality, a utilitarian in a consequentialist tradition may focus on calculating the costs and benefits associated with different policy initiatives, a deontologist may be concerned more with setting a standard of air quality that applies to all (perhaps regardless of the benefits of some air pollution causing activities), while a virtue-based approach might focus more on encouraging citizens to use less polluting fuel or companies to be more responsible for their emissions, or political actors to deliver the objective of clean air.
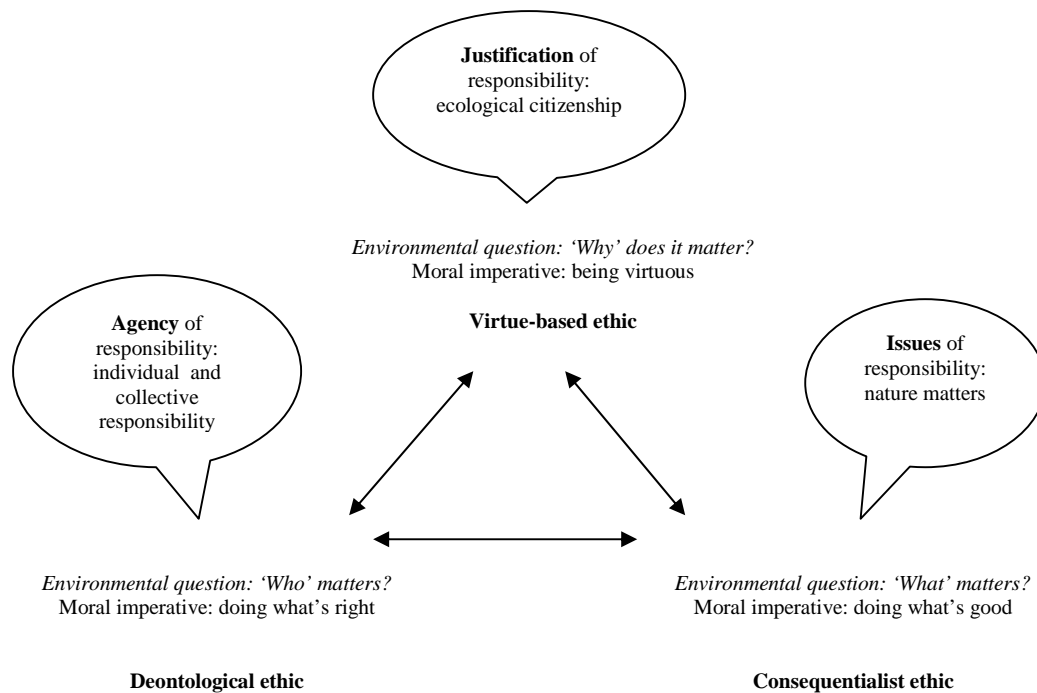
Figure 1 Environmental Endeavours: towards a framework for environmental responsibility

While the three corners of the triangle in Figure 1are founded upon ethical concerns related to readings in Part 1, each corner might loosely be aligned with the particular emphases of contributors' concerns in Parts 2, 3 and 4.

In part 2 the emphasis is on what issues matter: what is good (and what is harmful); what is of value? Such questions prompt a concern that is reflected in the readings regarding the direct perspective on nature and the duality between human and non-human worlds mediated through conceptual framing devices. Is responsibility served by the viewing of non-human nature as some pristine entity to be left alone or is it perhaps better served through a more hands-on managerial approach? Several contributors in this part suggest that what really matters for environmental responsibility are the implications of our distancing ourselves from nature, with communication (or 'conversing') with nature and about nature being a dominant theme.

Critical to our engagement with nature is the idea of continually developing value. So developing aesthetic values associated with the natural world, and capturing the value of interconnectedness, is important. The readings in Part 2 suggest how values may change, and new values emerge, through creative forms of framing.There is a need when framing the natural world to nurture new values that are a synthesis of, and an improvement upon, contrasting perspectives – between, say, science and arts, or

between professional planners and radical activists. Issues such as climate change, energy, transport, pollution, poverty alleviation, biodiversity, animal rights and environmental justice are all concerns regarding what matters in environmental responsibility. They are all dependent on the perspectives taken on what matters and the context (for example, local, regional, national and/or global levels) in which these perspectives are taken. The natural or biophysical environment will be a part of this, but may not be the prime matter of concern for everyone. The important point is that we continually revise and improve upon our frames of reference.

This concern for perspectives is one shared amongst the contributors to Part 3. The emphasis here shifts towards perceptions amongst humans and the duality between individual and collective responsibility. These readings raise the impoverished notion of dualism; for example, regarding environmental issues as matters of *either* individual *or* collective responsibility. Focusing on human choices regarding safeguarding the commons (such as air, water and land), contributors express the importance of developing stakeholdings rather than protecting (individual or collective) stakes, and challenge the trend towards individualisation. Ideas of meaningful social action, social learning and communities of practice in this part highlight the need for developing learning capacity amongst individuals and collectives in order to sustain environmental responsibility. Whilst a deontological ethic emphasises formal duties and rights (which can often lead to entrenched, static questions of whose duties and whose rights are involved), the readings in Part 3 raise possibilities of using existing formalised expressions of duties and rights in less formal and more creative ways, and of negotiating and developing new duties and rights.

The Part 4 readings engage more with the political realm around governance and legitimate political participation in matters associated with environmental responsibility. The readings here signal important new debates on how responsibility relates to environmental justice and ecological citizenship. Institutional forms of governance and protest vary between countries of the global North and those of the global South, and can change and develop depending on the wider cultural and ecological circumstances. However, the importance for meaningful civic engagement with environmental issues in different policy domains as much as in the context of activism and protest is a concern raised by many of the contributors. The Part 4 readings reflect a virtue-based approach, questioning the existing institutional frameworks of justification for why it is that some issues appear privileged more than others, and some ways of dealing with them are prioritised over others. Issues of justice arise in considering what and whose assumptions underpin these priorities. Environmental responsibility is a contested terrain open to competing definitions. The contributors in Part 4, like those in Parts 2 and 3, emphasise the importance of change and encouraging the potential for change. In Part 4, though, the focus of change and creativity is around institutional values and norms that permit or prohibit change; it seeks to allow ideas and 'facts' around environmental issues to be contested, and to allow contrasting perspectives to be expressed.

The air of doom and gloom often prevalent in discussion on environmental crises time and again prompts despair, fear and cynicism which can cloud more creative forms of engagement in being more responsible. As our contributors make clear in their different ways, environmental responsibility requires appropriate creative *space*.

Being environmentally responsible in a creative and inventive manner requires space for socio-ecological flourishing. So developing appropriate creative space might be seen as a driving force for synthesising the three traditions underpinning environmental responsibility illustrated in Figure 1.

So what types of space might be associated with each tradition?. First, in Part 2 concern is given to *ecological space*. Though this is commonly measured in quantitative terms – for example, a measure of 'area' (hectares of land) in ecological footprint or 'weight' (tonnes of carbon dioxide) in carbon footprint - the readings in Part 2 explore ecological space in more *qualitative* terms, focusing on the types of framing it involves. Scientific measurements provide one important type of framing, but other types of inventive framing might also be important in appreciating, re-evaluating and negotiating ecological space. Such space requires attention to ensuing changes in our obligations to the non-human natural world, which may in turn shape the development of new duties and rights. An important virtue here is environmental justice. Not justice in the familiar quantitative terms of providing the just distribution of environmental goods and bads, but rather in more qualitative terms, through appropriate framing devices that *do justice* to our ecological world. Such justice requires an appreciation and some understanding of the complexities of multiple interdependencies in the natural world, whilst keeping a simplicity of framing in order to communicate effectively with and about nature. The virtue of environmental justice in this sense warns against the extreme tendencies of, on the one hand, using over-simplistic models to understand the world (which often generates wilful ignorance of scientific information) and, on the other hand, being too despairing over the complexity of our ecological world. Nurturing purposeful simplicity through, for example, systems thinking, combined with respect in being both inclusive and pragmatic, provide good guiding principles for framing our ecological space.

Second, environmental responsibility requires appropriate *learning space*, particularly space for interaction and learning amongst individual human agents of responsibility and between individuals and collectives. As explored particularly in the Part 3 readings, such space is continually being negotiated through individual and collective action. The ideas of social learning and communities of practice raise the question of what this space ought to look like if it is to enable questioning, and either the fostering of new principles and rules or the use of existing principles and rules in a creative manner for environmental responsibility. Appropriate interaction between our understandings and practices is required, taking heed of the change in values that may arise from the consequences of previous actions. New understandings and practices can arise through this kind of learning. Here, a dominant virtue might be identified as practical wisdom, a virtue that warns against, on the one hand, self-righteousness, and on the other hand apathy. Practical wisdom thrives in a space where questions are continually being asked of the right approach to environmental responsibility, and innovative experimentation is encouraged to improve responsible practice.

A third type of space is that of *political space*. This represents the spheres – social (civil society) and individual (private lives) – in which ethical and political concerns can be contested. Ideas of ecological citizenship, presented particularly in the Part 4 readings, provide some signposting towards a more virtuous engagement with political space. Here humility might be seen as a particularly important virtue. Humility prompts the possibility of other virtues appropriate for different

circumstances in different institutional settings at different times, providing political space for exploring new values and new principles that might be necessary in emergent socio-political circumstances. Humility also warns against complacency and arrogance on one hand and cynicism on the other, which too often prevent meaningful ecological citizenship. However, there are many other virtues associated with environmental responsibility, and some are more relevant than others depending on the circumstances. In campaigning for environmental justice in authoritarian societies, for example, courage is perhaps seen as an equally important virtue. But virtues of environmental responsibility do not stand still. Like values and principles, they may change and develop in the course of our engagement with changing environmental issues.

Each part of this anthology thus provides a unique space that itself allows concerns of value, principle and virtue to be expressed, albeit with different emphases. But the collection is more than just the sum of its parts. Two quotations were used to open the introduction to this anthology. First, reference was made by Wangari Maathai to our 'special responsibility to the ecosystem of this planet' in order to sustain a flourishing of human and non-human worlds. She implicitly called on a virtue of hope and care in voicing concerns meaningfully rather than through tokenism or opportunism. Second, Sir Geoffrey Vickers prompted us to think more carefully about the precise ways in which we 'regulate our responsiveness so as to preserve the stability of the manifold systems on which we depend, and … make a collective world in which we individually can live'. These two concerns represent responsibility as a developmental attribute, a continually creative endeavour: first, *caring* for an environment comprising the natural world of life and life support, of which humans are an integral part; and second, ensuring *accountability* for any harm or wrong done to the environment. Together they provide the creative space required for continuing a dialogue; the essence of environmental responsibility.