Can the Act of Destroying Nature be Evil in Itself?

A Virtue Ethical Approach to the Last Man Thought Experiment
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Introduction

We need not say that today man's relation to the nonhuman world is immoral. It is enough to say that it lacks generosity, fortitude, and love.

(Naess 1980)

In this essay I will examine if a virtue ethical approach of environmental ethics can answer the question of whether the act of destroying nature can be evil in itself? The reason for me taking this approach to environmental ethics is that I believe that the virtue ethical approach can explain the intuitions that are a common reaction to the Last Man thought experiment.¹ The virtue ethical approach of environmental ethics is interesting to me because it gives compelling reasons to protect nature without providing a proof of nature’s intrinsic value. In order to discuss our moral obligations regarding actions affecting nature I will make use of the Last Man thought experiment. Introduced by Richard Routley in his essay "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" (Routley 1973)²; this thought experiment was presented to ignite a debate about nature’s intrinsic value. Taking a different approach, I will describe a particular aspect of virtue ethics that I see as promising in taking the discussions ignited by the arguments presented in that paper. I do not see this as a conflict with the approach of environmental ethics focusing on nature’s intrinsic value. On the contrary I see these as two ways which; combined can give even stronger reasons to provide practical political protection for the environment. In this essay I will also briefly discuss a concept of evil; which is related to my choice of using a virtue ethical approach of environmental ethics. The aim of this essay is to provide an answer that can explain the intuition that the Last Man’s actions are wrong, and doing so without needing to establish a proof for nature’s intrinsic value.

My interest in this topic grew from a sense of environmental conscience that I did not understand. I wanted to find new, simpler ways of understanding the complexity behind our

¹ The thought experiment was originally designed to show that anthropocentric ethical theories, such as Aristotelian virtue ethics, could not explain the intuitions that are a common reaction to the thought experiment. The term anthropocentric is problematic since it is used in many different ways. When used in this paper in reference to Aristotelian virtue ethics; the term describes an understanding of morality based explicitly on how to guide the life of a human being. I will discuss Aristotelian virtue ethics in detail in the chapter of Environmental Virtue Ethics.

² Richard Routley changed his name 1983 to Richard Sylvan. The article was published 1973 and is commonly cited in the name Richard Routley. (Peterson & Sandin 2013)
decision making concerning the environment; and about how we relate to our position in the world. My starting point was to try to understand how egoistic reasoning could give support for environmentally considerate politics. Since I could not understand and define egoism in a precise enough sense, I searched for other ways of explaining my intuitions about our relation to nature.

The Last Man Thought Experiment

"The last man (or person) surviving the collapse of the world system lays about him, eliminating, as far as he can, every living thing, animal or plant..."

(Routley 1973)

Presentation of the thought experiment

Below is the original version of the thought experiment that has later been widely modified and presented in different discussions:

"The last man (or person) surviving the collapse of the world system lays about him, eliminating, as far as he can, every living thing, animal or plant (but painlessly if you like, as at the best abattoirs). What he does is quite permissible according to basic chauvinism, but on environmental grounds what he does is wrong. Moreover one does not have to be committed to esoteric values to regard Mr. Last Man as behaving badly (the reason being, perhaps, that radical thinking and values have shifted in an environmental direction in advance of corresponding shifts in the formulation of fundamental evaluative principles)." (Routley 1973)

The main points of the argument are the same in most versions and can be reformulated as follows:

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3 Chauvinism is a concept that resembles the concept of anthropocentrism in contemporary environmental discussions.

4 This reformulation is part of a critical article treating the Last Man thought experiment. I will briefly present some of the critique below (my presentation will exclude the logic symbol version also presented in the article).
"(1) Last Man’s act of intentionally destroying nature is wrong: [...]  
(2) There is no other reason for the wrongness of this act. [...]  
(3) If (i) an act of intentionally destroying an object x is morally wrong,  
and (ii) there is no other reason for the wrongness of the act, then x is a  
bearer of (positive) non-instrumental value. [...]  

(4) Therefore: Nature has some non-instrumental value. [...]"

(Peterson & Sandin 2013, p125)

The experiment is designed to see if we intuitively support a moral status of nature. According to Routley who presented this thought experiment, western ethics are anthropocentric⁵ and this thought experiment shows that nature has some sort of final value.⁶ According to empirical studies, the Last Man’s actions are considered intuitively wrong by many (Samuelsson 2008, p10 foot note 12). Peterson & Sandin’s critique of this thought experiment is presented below. I support their critique. Nonetheless the thought experiment is used in this paper because of its status as an important thought experiment within environmental ethics. The version I use will be a modified version presented below.

Critique of the thought experiment

Peterson & Sandin critique premise (2) by claiming that we do not know what intuitions are triggered by the thought experiment. This critique is based on the idea that the thought experiment presents the problem of a masking effect (Peterson & Sandin 2013, p129). The masking effect can be produced when an example is so blunt that it gives rise to more reactions than intended. This leads to intuitive responses to the problem that may answer several questions which are not explicitly presented. Arguably, this creates the need to: either sharpen the argument until no masking effect occurs, or use another strategy other than the thought

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⁵ Chauvinistic was the term used in the article. Anthropocentric is the most common term describing this concept, but it is a problematic term which is discussed by Samuelsson in "Moral Status of Nature" (Samuelsson 2008, chap 2.4).

⁶ I use the term 'final value' in the same way as Peterson & Sandin uses it in the article I'm referring to: Final value is the opposite of instrumental value. A final value can be either intrinsic or extrinsic and an instrumental value can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. An object has extrinsic value when something outside the object gives the value, the object. An object has intrinsic value when the value is given to it by properties in the object itself. The standard view is that everything with intrinsic value also has final value (Peterson & Sandin 2013, pp125-126). There is an ongoing discussion whether a final value is necessarily intrinsic or if an intrinsic value necessarily has a final value.
experiment to communicate the idea. The masking effect is also known as the *sledgehammer effect* (Peterson & Sandin 2013, pp128-129). Maybe we react to something else connected to the thought experiment? Below is an approach presented that I will use when discussing the Last Man thought experiment, this approach is modified in order to reduce the *masking effect*.

**Motive focused approach of the Last Man thought experiment**

I do not believe that Routley intended a motive focused analysis of the Last Man when presenting the thought experiment. However, I do not think that a focus on motive alters it in a way that changes it’s basic premise. When Routley designed the thought experiment the environmental ethical debate was new and until that time no one had put forward a clearly formulated virtue ethical approach to environmental ethics. In the presentation of the thought experiment below I highlight the the variations I made by writing them in *italics*.

The Last Man is destroying nature. There are no humans other than the Last Man. We do not know why the Last Man is doing what he is doing.

(1) Last Man’s act of intentionally destroying nature is wrong.
(2) There is no other reason *outside the agent* for the wrongness of this act.
(3) If (i) an act of intentionally destroying an object x is morally wrong, and (ii) there is no other reason *outside the agent* for the wrongness of the act: then x is a bearer of (positive) non-instrumental value or *the Last Man is acting out of a vice*.

(4) Therefore: Nature has some non-instrumental value or *The Last Man is acting out of a vice*.

Note that I added *outside the agent* to Peterson & Sandin’s formulation but I do not see it as conflicting with Routley’s original version. This reformulation opens up the possibility of looking for motives which in themselves could be something undesirable. This is alluded to in points (3) and (4), which add the possibility that *the Last Man is acting out of vice*.

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7 The term 'vice' is a virtue ethical term of something that can be seen as the opposite of a virtue. I will discuss it in more detail in the chapters of The Concept of Evil and Environmental Virtue Ethics.
The reason I focus on the motives is that I believe that when discussing whether destroying nature is evil or not; the question of whether nature has intrinsic value or not becomes central. Excluding the discussion of nature’s intrinsic value and solely focusing on the motives the virtue ethical framework can provide reasons for or against performing certain actions without knowing the consequences. This does not mean that the consequences are irrelevant, but that they can be excluded from this discussion for now. When asking whether or not the consequences of the Last Man’s actions are negative, a different view on morality may be needed. This will not be discussed in this essay. Observe that this paper is not aiming to examine the thought experiment in itself but to use it as a starting point for discussion. Presenting an alternative solution to the popular thought experiment is not intended as an approval that the thought experiment can provide the truth. However, since many discussions in the field of environmental ethics relate to the thought experiment; it is a useful point of reference. The main question I ask in my essay is: "whether the act of destroying nature can be evil in itself". If I can show that the Last Man’s actions are indeed evil, and do so without referring to the moral patient (nature); this will indicate that his actions are evil in themselves. When claiming that the actions are evil in themselves I refer to a motive-based evaluation of an action. When solely focusing on the motive, the consequences may be morally irrelevant. I will continue my argument by characterizing a concept of evil and also a virtue ethical approach; which is presented below.

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8 Such as a consequentialist or deontological perspective or a combination of the two, or some other approach.
9 I make use of the terms moral patient and moral agent but do not discuss them in detail. The terms are problematic because the meaning of them differ and are under discussion (Ridge 2011). My somewhat crude definitions of them are: The Moral Agent is the person or animal or juridical entity (such as a company or nation) who is intentionally performing an action that is affecting someone or something - the Moral Patient. Who or what can be defined as a moral agent or patient is one of the main topics within the environmental ethics. If non-human natural entities are seen as having moral status in the same way as humans, many actions widely accepted today will be seen as wrongdoings. This is deeply discussed by Lars Samuelsson in the book The Moral Status of Nature and by other philosophers within the environmental ethics (Samuelsson 2008).
The Concept of Evil
"Evils are foreseeable intolerable harms by culpable wrongdoing”
(Cards 2002)

One of the most extensive modern philosophical works about evil is The Atrocity Paradigm by Claudia Card. In this work the concept of evil has a complex definition, but the components are historically derived from two types of theories: The Stoic Concept of Evil, where the perpetrator’s motive is used to define whether an act is evil or not. The other is the Utilitarian Concept of Evil, where the main focus is on the actual harm done; thus focusing mainly on the victim’s suffering. Card's concept contains elements of both, but since the main focus of this essay is virtue ethics, I will mainly discuss evil in a way that resembles the Stoic Concept of Evil (Cards 2002).

Bringing the concept of evil into this discussion makes a distinction between two types of acts. The type of acts can have identical consequences but what differs is the motive. For example: I kill a cat. If my motive for this action was that the cat was sick and in pain, such a motive could be labeled good. If my motive was that I did it because of recklessness, my motive could be labeled vicious. The consequence, that the cat dies, is the same regardless of my motives. I will use the term wrongdoings for acts that have negative consequences for the moral patient regardless of the underlying intention of the moral agent. This I separate from evil acts which are acts that are performed out of vice. The distinction is defined by something internal in the moral agent and cannot be understood by studying the moral patient. My essay is focusing on the moral agent. Inspired by Card’s theory, two key conditions that need to be satisfied in order to call an action evil are presented below:

(1) The moral agent has a motive that is vicious.
(2) The action may have a negative consequence for the moral patient.

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10 The term ‘vicious’ refers to motives which are not ‘virtuous’ I will discuss both terms in detail in the chapter of Environmental Virtue Ethics.
Condition (2) is not the central focus of virtue ethics and since this essay is examining a virtue ethical approach of environmental ethics my discussions will focus only on condition (1). Observe that my way of discussing ’evil’ implies that actions that have only positive consequences for the moral patient also may be called evil. This puts the emphasis solely on the moral agent’s motive. Focusing only on condition (1), and referring to virtue ethics can give a meaningful answer to the question of “whether the act of destroying nature can be evil in itself”.

The condition (2) is partly an empirical question, and one which is is hard to answer. When performing actions, almost all may potentially have negative consequences that the doer cannot foresee. This complexity of consequences is problematic because it may lead us into difficult situations. One example giving perspective of the complexity of the relation between condition (1) and condition (2) is the emission of greenhouse gasses. Before it was understood that they cause harm to the environment, the motives of the emissions may or may not have been evil. However, after receiving the knowledge that these actions cause harm, the moral understanding of the motive for still using them must be changed and thus the action must, in contemporary society, be deemed evil. To call the emmitters of green house gasses evil for causing emmissions prior to them having the knowledge of harmful consequences, does not seem just. The consequences of the actions remain unchanged, but the motive changes because of a change in knowledge. To call all emissioners of greenhouse gas evil is to call all of humanity evil; which brings an enlightening but sad perspective to this problem. It is necessary to add that many decisions regarding the continuation of these emmissions present a tragic choice between several evils. For example, one may believe that our current economic-structure would collapse if we stop using the dominant source of energy; thus leading to mass starvation. To be able to avoid this type of empirical discussion I will only discuss if the actions of the Last Man fulfill condition (1). This will leave empirical facts out of the discussion but I think it’s necessary to decrease the complexity to be able to increase our understanding of the problem.
Environmental Virtue Ethics

"We are conducting an examination, not so that we may know what virtue is, but so that we may become good, since otherwise there would be no benefit from it”

(Aristotle Nic. Eth. 1103b, Bartlett & Collins 2011, p54)

What is Virtue Ethics?

Virtue ethics is one of the three dominant approaches in normative ethics. It is an old approach of normative ethics, both in European and Chinese cultures (Hursthouse 2013, chap 1). The version of virtue ethics I will use is a rough form of Aristotelian inspired virtue ethics. To understand this approach it is necessary to understand three central concepts: eudaimonia, virtues and practical wisdom. I will give a brief explanation of these concepts. After explaining the basic concepts of Aristotelian virtue ethics I will present some approaches of environmental virtue ethics (EVE). At the end of this chapter I will characterize the approach of virtue ethics that I will use when discussing whether the act of destroying nature can be evil in itself.

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

"Eudaimonia, we can say for now, encompasses the excellence specific to human beings as human beings—what Aristotle famously calls 'virtue' (aretē). Such virtue, moreover, can be identified only in relation to the activity and hence the way of life that are best for human beings as such, as the kind of beings we are. For Aristotle, then, the question of how to be happy is the question of how to live well as a human being, and living well is inseparable from attaining the virtue or virtues that make possible the best activity.” (Bartlett and Collins 2011, p11)

Aristotelian virtue ethics is not focusing on single actions but on habits and how to live well as a human being. A person does not become virtuous by performing benevolent actions from time to time, it is a characteristic that is reflected in the daily act of living. In my essay I mainly discuss the motives of the actions of the Last Man, treating them as his habits, using a language and framework inspired by Aristotle.
**Eudaimonia - Why do something?**

This old Greek word can be roughly understood as long-term happiness, which comes from living in accordance to one’s nature; in order to live a meaningful and flourishing life. The term is sometimes translated to happiness and sometimes used as an un-translated technical term (Shields 2015, chap 12). I use it as an un-translated technical term so as not to confuse it with the emotion of happiness; which we can feel in response to an amusing event, or upon receipt of good news. *Eudaimonia* can be understood as the primary goal towards which all human activity strives for. *Eudaimonia* is a final value. In the recent translation of Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* by Bartlett and Collins the term *eudaimonia* is translated to *happiness*. They describe it as: "Meaning literally the condition of having a good daimon, the term is in our judgment best rendered as “happiness,” given Aristotle’s description and analysis of it in book 1.” (Bartlett and Collins 2011, p309). I still think the difference between the colloquial use of the word ’happiness’ and aristotle’s intended meaning is too great to be dismissed. The Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* is referring to more things than the pleasure of being satisfied or having the emotional experience of happiness. Understanding the difference between the colloquial use of ’happiness’ and the Aristotelian term ’eudaimonia’ is central to the understanding of virtue ethics.

**Virtue - What to do?**

Virtues are traits or qualities that are considered morally good. Living in accordance with virtues allow us to be in a state of *eudaimon*. The concepts of virtues are at first sight simple, but when trying to understand virtues more deeply, they become difficult to define. Thus there is need for a practical understanding of how to act in accordance with virtues. This knowledge is what Aristotle called *practical wisdom*. Generally speaking virtues are often described as abilities or traits we admire in people around us or in fiction. To be brave, wise, honest, just, etc. The opposite of the virtues are vices. Virtues and vices can be used as descriptions of a quality of the motive of a moral agent. But the term differs from motives in the way that they describe something more simple; and which could comprise a part of a motive. When living a virtuous life, the motives correspond with one’s virtues. Many times virtues can be seen as the middle-point between two extremes (Aristotle Nic. Eth. 1106b, Bartlett & Collins 2011, p61). The virtuous person acts courageously not by facing danger every time, but by knowing when it is
appropriate to face a danger and when it is not. The Aristotelian virtue of courage is a situation specific middle-point between the two extremes: cowardice and rashness\textsuperscript{11} (Kraut 2014, chap 5.1). Virtues are an important part of many religions’ guidelines for defining how members of the religion ought to act. To copy the actions of someone we respect can not be called virtuous if we do not ourselves have a virtuous motive. It is important to remember that theoretical knowledge about ethics is not in itself virtuous, it is the actions, the repetition of actions (habits) and the continuing ability to react virtuously across time and situation that makes a person virtuous. In the Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* translation by Robert C. Bartlett & Susan D. Collins is a presentation of the virtues Aristotle presented in *Nicomachean Ethics* (Bartlett & Collins 2011, pp330-331). I present them on next page:

\textsuperscript{11} The greek word ‘thrasutēs’ can be translated to rashness but is translated as recklessness in the list below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VICE</th>
<th>VIRTUE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Recklessness (thrasutēs)</td>
<td>Courage (andreia)</td>
<td>Cowardice (deilia)</td>
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<td>Licentiousness (akolasia)</td>
<td>Moderation (sōphrosunē)</td>
<td>Insensibility (anaisthēsia)</td>
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<td>Prodigality (asōtia)</td>
<td>Liberality (eleutheriotēs)</td>
<td>Stinginess (aneleutheria)</td>
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<td>Vulgarity and Crassness (apeirokalia &amp; banausia)</td>
<td>Magnificence (megaloprepeia)</td>
<td>Parsimony (mikoprepeia)</td>
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<td>Greatness of Soul (megalopsuchia)</td>
<td>Smallness of Soul (mikropsuchia)</td>
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<td>Gentleness (praotēs)</td>
<td>Unirascibility (aorgēsia)</td>
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<td>Truthfulness (alētheia)</td>
<td>Irony (eirōneia)</td>
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<td>Buffoonery and Crudity (bōmolochia &amp; phortikotēs)</td>
<td>Wittiness and Tact (eutrapelia &amp; epidexia)</td>
<td>Boorishness and Dourness (agroikia &amp; sklērotēs)</td>
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<td>Ambition (philotimia)</td>
<td>Lack of Ambition (aphilotimia &amp; sklērotēs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obsequiousness or Flattery (areskeia or kolakeia)</td>
<td>Friendliness (philia)</td>
<td>Surliness and Quarrelsomeness (duskolia &amp; duseristia)</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>Justice (dikaiosunē)</td>
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CAN THE ACT OF DESTROYING NATURE BE EVIL IN ITSELF?
Practical Wisdom - How to do?

Practical wisdom is needed to know when to do what in order to live virtuously. To be honest is not the same as always saying everything that comes into one’s mind, in the same way as a good surgeon does not always choose to operate when they see a person in pain. Developing our practical wisdom is necessary to increase our ability to live virtuously. Practical wisdom is practical in its nature and does not necessarily improve through theoretical study of virtues. According to Aristotle, practical wisdom is necessary for developing an understanding for well-being and how to live an eudaimon life. Aristotle sometimes refers to practical wisdom as a intellectual virtue (Kraut 2014, chap 6).

Aristotle wrote about natural virtues, which can be possessed by children or by whomever does not have knowledge possessed by the experienced person; he who has evolved his practical wisdom in order to act virtuously. These natural virtues can manifest itself in benevolent acts such as refraining from harming other beings or wanting to share food with poor people. Acts motivated by natural virtues come unconsciously and deeper knowledge of motive is lacking (Hursthouse 2013, chap 2).

Environmental Virtue Ethics

EVE refers to a disparate group of modern virtue ethical theories. The common ground for EVEs is that they are inspired by traditional approaches of virtue ethics but each adds or modifies traditional theories; allowing them to explicitly give support for environmentalist actions or lifestyles. One reason why I examine EVEs is that they present a new and growing approach within the environmental ethics. Another reason is that I believe the way virtue ethics explains morality gives a simple but enlightening perspective on topics which are often extremely complex. My approach to environmental virtue ethics will use the traditional Aristotelian terms and concepts instead of presenting new ones. One could say that my approach is not one of environmental virtue ethics, but rather an examination of how traditional virtue ethics can give enlightening perspectives on environmental moral issues. I will present some examples of interesting approaches of EVEs below and relate them to Aristotelian concepts and terms. In many cases they do not put forward new ideas, but instead propose more detailed specifications of old ideas. The focus of this essay is not to give an exhaustive comparison between these
theories and the Aristotelian theories. This comparison is touched on in order to contextualise my approach, thus allowing for a deeper understanding of how the virtue ethical approaches of environmental issues take form.

The EVE theories can be divided into two sub-groups: paradigmatic EVE and theoretical EVE (Hull 2005, p91). I will present one example of each type of theory.

Paradigmatic EVE is derived from environmental role models, for example by analyzing the language of environmentally conscious thinkers. This approach can be seen as a descriptive approach; reformulating what some people have seen as morally praiseworthy actions (Hull 2005, pp91-93). I will give a brief presentation of three virtues presented by Bill Shaw in “A Virtue Ethics Approach to Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic” and relate them to the Aristotelian concepts I presented above.

1. Respect (or ecological sensitivity)
Shaw puts focus on *telos* and claims that all beings with a *telos* needs to be treated with respect. In this virtue Shaw also claims that the human community needs to understand and respect the biotic communities of which the human community is a part. "After all, things with a telos are, literally, things with a purpose, things with intrinsic value. Respect for this intrinsic value cautions us that they are not merely for our play, but are placed here by nature for purposes that we may not even fully understand." (Shaw 1997, p64). The community is a central term within Shaw’s presentation of the virtue although he also puts a limit on how the community can treat the individual: "Thus, although the well-being of the community comes first, it does not mean that individual members of the community can be sacrificed for merely trivial ends.” (Shaw 1997, p64). This virtue is presented in a way that resembles how Aristotle refers to virtues, but it also includes a specification of what can be seen as moral patients, namely all beings with a *telos* or interest. It also presents a relation between the individual and the community.

12 *Telos* can briefly be described as interest or life goal.
2. Prudence

"The virtue of prudence embodies the age-old wisdom that enlightened, long-term well-being, rather than immediate preference gratification, is more likely to advance the good. [...] Prudence, being the midpoint between 'a mad rush into oblivion' and an 'intransigent do-nothingness', has particular relevance to the good of ecosystems." (Shaw 1997, p64). This virtue can be seen as guidance in decision making, to be thoughtful and to try to foresee the consequences of one’s actions. In the Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics (Bartlett & Collins 2011) the concept of practical wisdom is referred to as prudence. I understand Shaw’s virtue as a description of a concept similar to that of Aristotle. The difference is that Aristotle did not see it as a virtue in itself but as a "tool" to live virtuously. Shaw’s characterization also seems to include elements of the Aristotelian virtues courage and ambition.

3. Practical Judgement

"Practical wisdom or judgment is the third of my 'land virtues', and it should be understood as permeating the other two." (Shaw 1997, p65). This virtue resembles the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom explained above. Shaw characterizes it as a virtue even though it resembles a guideline on how to relate to the other virtues. I do not know how Shaw makes a distinction between his practical judgement and prudence. This is not central to my essay so I will leave it without further discussion.

The brief exposition above is an example of how a virtue ethical approach can derive virtues from a philosopher who did not use explicit virtue ethical language in his writings. Whether Shaw is giving a fair interpretation that Aldo Leopold would be satisfied with I do not know. I think these types of interpretations are interesting but also problematic because whoever makes the interpretation can use the status of another writer to boost his own ideas. I must add that a critic of my essay could claim that this is what I am doing regarding the virtue ethics of Aristotle. I read them in a way that can give support for environmentally considerate politics. There are other attempts such as Philip Cafaro’s essay: “Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethics.” (Cafaro 2001). Cafaro and Shaw’s writings differ from my approach since I interpret a thinker who was not explicitly an environmentalist. My reason to
read and interpret Aristotle is not, however, to present him as a environmentalist; but to be inspired by his system for explaining morality.

Theoretical EVEs are theories giving support to the reasons why certain actions or characteristics may be virtuous (Hull 2005, pp95-99). They often resemble other virtue ethical theories but add more virtues or conditions, which are connected to natural values or virtues that may lead to greater consideration of natural values. I will give a brief presentation of Louke van Wensveen’s argument of how ecosystem sustainability is a necessary prerequisite for the development of a virtue. I will also relate it to the Aristotelian concepts discussed above.

Premise: (1) "Ecosystem sustainability is a necessary condition for the cultivation of a virtue."

"The cultivation of a virtue involves a person’s ability to feel, think, and act in certain ways. Any feeling, thought, or action is made possible thanks to physical conditions that sustain the person as a living being. Many of these essential physical conditions—such as oxygen, water, food, and fiber—derive from ecosystems.” (Wensveen 2001, p233). This standpoint relates the physical prerequisites for human survival to the human actions of upholding our ideas and ideals. Without nature producing certain goods for us, we would not survive and our virtues would be worth nothing. Wensveen includes this knowledge about our survival as a criterion for the virtue. This viewpoint is similar to Aristotle’s concept of practical wisdom. Without this knowledge and without respecting it we would not be able to maintain (or even begin) living a virtuous life.

Premise: (2) "A genuine virtue includes the goal of ensuring necessary conditions for its cultivation."

"We can only meaningfully aim at something, however, if in the process of reaching for our goal we take care to ensure conditions that are essential for the very possibility of its realization.” (Wensveen 2001, p233). This standpoint argues that internalized in every meaningful goal there must be consideration about the fulfillment of the goal. I see this as similar to how Aristotle relates his key concepts eudaimonia, virtues and practical wisdom. The Eudaimonia is the goal,
Can the act of destroying nature be evil in itself?  

Virtues are guidelines of how to reach the goal and practical wisdom is the knowledge about how to live in accordance with virtues.

Conclusion: (3) ”A genuine virtue includes the goal of ensuring ecosystem sustainability.”

”One does not need to be a committed environmentalist in order to appreciate the criterion of ecosustainable virtue […] Both of its founding premises are independent of any ecological commitment one may or may not hold, because they are based on necessary conditions and internal consistency.” (Wensveen 2001, pp233-234) This conclusion suggests that everyone, regardless of being an environmentalist or not, should see the necessity of ecosystem sustainability by understanding this criterion for a genuine virtue. When relating this to Aristotelian virtue ethics I think it is a reasonable claim. The strong evidence that now exists, which shows us that our actions can harm nature in a way that can also have harmful consequences for us; must be relevant when forming motives for our actions. This approach is an anthropocentric approach of environmental virtue ethics.

This example of a theoretical approach of EVE provides strong inspiration for my approach.

**My Approach of Environmental Virtue Ethics**

I argue that a simple set of virtues and the concept of eudaimonia should be enough to motivate a respectful relationship with and towards nature. The Aristotelian virtue ethics is often labeled as an anthropocentric theory. A common standpoint within environmental ethics is that anthropocentric theories cannot give a satisfactory explanation of the Last Man thought experiment. A problem with such opposition is that the term anthropocentric can be used and interpreted in many different ways. In this paper it is used to refer to the fact that eudaimonia is a concept for an individual human’s benefit. Eudaimonia is the final value that this theory is focusing on how to achieve. In other words the sole final value explicitly treated in this essay is eudaimonia. I want to show that virtue ethics can give explanations to the intuitions connected to the Last Man thought experiment without relating to final values other than eudaimonia. By doing this I hope to show that virtue ethics can explain the compelling reasons to promote
environmentally considerate politics; even for individuals who do not accept the idea of final values outside of those that have benefits for humanity.

Above I have presented a list of Aristotle’s virtues. This is not to suggest that they are superior or more correct than virtues presented by other philosophers. However, Aristotle’s virtues have a profound relevance to the issues of today and to the issues of this paper; despite being almost 2500 years old. I will not discuss specific virtues in detail. In my approach of EVE I avoid listing specific virtues because they may or may not be relevant in the foreseeable future. Their inclusion is used to highlight how the structure of virtue ethics can give relevant answers when examining the Last Man thought experiment.

I propose that if the Last Man’s motives do not correspond to any of the virtues presented above, the Last Man may be performing evil acts.

My approach of EVE is primarily a basic theory of how the terms eudaimonia, virtues and practical wisdom correspond. An assumption is made that everyone wants (consciously or unconsciously) to be eudaimon and that this encourages action that can lead to this state. The virtues are not rules, but guidelines of how to live a life of eudaimonia, the practical wisdom comprises the skills required to sustain this lifestyle. I realise the risk of this being perceived as a paternalistic approach to ethics. The reason it is not, is that the ’How?’ (practical wisdom) and ’What?’ (virtues) are something everybody ought to learn themselves throughout their lives. The emphasis put on internal motivation in virtue ethics may be a strong protection against an external force making paternalistic decisions for the individual.
Can the act of destroying Nature be evil in itself?

*The Last Man is doing wrong because a good human life consists of respecting other beings.*

(Unknown)

This essay aims to answer the question *can the act of destroying nature be evil in itself.* If I can show that the Last Man is performing *evil acts* it will show that the act of destroying nature can indeed be evil. Note that this discussion is focused on the act itself and more precisely on the motive of the moral agent performing the act.

My characterization of evil discussed in the chapter *The Concept of Evil* is focused on the motive of the moral agent. This I called condition (1).

(1) The moral agent have a motive that is vicious.

There is a question that if answered would give us a clear answer to condition (1): "What is the Last Man’s motive?" Since the thought experiment itself does not explicitly reveal the Last Man’s motives I will discuss some possible answers. I hope this discussion can give enlightening perspectives on how to relate to actions where nature is the moral patient. I will at times refer to Aristotelian virtues or vices. My focus is not to impliment virtues or vices as motives for certain actions, but to explicitly show connections between Aristotelian virtue ethics and my discussion. Where a virtue or a vice is suggested as a motive, it is done so speculatively. The complexity of the psyche also implies that there may be several motives active at the same time. I put aside this problem for the purposes of this discussion, hypothesising instead a singular motive for action in each case.

**Vicious or virtuous motive**

The Last Man’s actions may reasonably be explained to be motivated by one or several *vices.* This may be an answer to why many have the intuition that the Last Man is doing something wrong. According to my concept of evil, if the moral agent knowingly act out of *vice,* the moral
agent is labeled evil. There is a possibility that the Last Man acts in accordance with some fact unknown to us, and maybe has a virtuous motive. If this is true his actions are not evil in my definition. A problem with the distinction of a virtuous motive is that a moral agent could act in accordance to what they believe is a virtuous motive, but may have unwittingly misconstrued the situation. A proper understanding may have led them to different action, and render their previous course as un-virtuous, even in their own opinion. According to my view this act may or may not be a wrongdoing, but certainly it is not an evil act. I see the virtue as something evaluated and re-evaluated continually in every moment; and not evaluated afterwards when a bigger picture of the consequences is gained. Therefore, the lack of a virtuous motive is not necessarily evil; but if having a virtuous motive it is necessarily not evil.

**Instrumental value of nature**

If the Last Man is in need of something to survive, such as material for building a house, it is one type of question. This question is mainly about how morally correct it is to take and if it is possible to make a sustainable extraction of the necessary resources. This is in my view a question of prioritizing and of keeping eco-systems in balance. This is thoroughly discussed and debated within many sciences as the question of sustainability. The question I'm asking in this essay is primarily focused on the seemingly pointless havoc the Last Man is causing according to the thought experiment.\(^\text{13}\) I do not see this as an instrumental use of nature; except in the case that the Last Man is getting a great deal of pleasure out of it. Another perspective for argument that can be derived from the idea of instrumentality is that it is vicious to destroy the possibility of using nature instrumentally. This can be understood as being motivated by the Aristotelian vices *recklessness* or *licentiousness*.

**Distorted Psyche**

The Last Man is alone in the world. This gives us reason to believe his actions are motivated by some judgement that is not what some would call normal. Louke van Wensveen presents 4 guidelines for knowing when a moral judgement should not be trusted: a repressed psyche, an

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\(^{13}\) This answer can then later give insight into the discussion of whether we relate to nature as a resource or as something worthy of its own respect. I've chosen a different entry-point because of a will to find new ways of how I ought to relate to nature.
alienated consciousness, a fetishized consciousness or a guilty conscience (Hull 2005, p97). If the Last Man's actions are understood in this way I do not see the actions as evil.

Aristotle uses the term *akrasia* when discussing the failing of acting in one's best way. These actions can be driven either by a lack of knowledge or a temporary altered state [such as if the agent is drunk] (Kraut 2014, chap 7). A translation of *akrasia* is lack of self-restraint. This is performance of an act despite knowing that it does not correspond to one’s virtues. The concept of *akrasia* captures the essence of Wensveen’s guidelines for knowing when a moral judgment should not be trusted. Aristotle claimed that actions could be performed even if the moral agent understands their acts are motivated by a vice. He further claimed that Socrates thought this situation did not exist and that it could be explained by the moral agent's ignorance.

“For Socrates used to battle against this argument in its entirety, on the grounds that no such thing as lack of self-restraint exists: nobody acts contrary to what is best while supposing that he is so acting; he acts instead through ignorance.”

(Aristotle Nic. Eth, 1146a, Bartlett & Collins 2011, p164)

This argument that Aristotle assigns to Socrates [that no one acts of out vice but performs vicious acts out of ignorance], is similar to an approach put forward by Hanna Arendt when analyzing the motives of responsible individuals who organized the Holocaust (Calder 2015, chap 2.3). If the Last Man does not have any strong motive and is merely carrying out an act, it could be said that his actions are monstrous but his motives, if any, are not. Perhaps he never reflected on the consequences of his actions. There is of course many differences between the Last Man thought experiment and the Holocaust. I partly support this line of thought since I think it is important to keep a distinction between actions performed due to a directly vicious motive and those carried out with a lack of motive. But it is possible to say that the Aristotelian vice *lack of ambition* is shown by individuals who do not fully research the consequences of their actions. When a *lack of ambition* is the motive behind actions with terrible consequences the actions may be evil according to my definition of evil. Defining what constitutes an appropriate level of
consideration as to the consequences of one’s own actions before they are committed is naturally extremely complex, and therefore problematic.

**Projection**

It could be that many readers of the Last Man thought experiment try to put themselves in his position; thereby projecting onto him their own world view. When the Last Man acts in a way that does not correspond to the readers own wish to act in a similar situation, they feel that the Last Man does something wrong. This can explain the intuition but does not give support for any moral theory. This could be used as a critique of my argument. I think it is hard for any philosophical theory to defend itself against this type of psychological argument. This has to be studied empirically, therefore I cannot give a response refuting this critique. In defense of the methodology of my essay I propose that this problem occurs in most, or maybe even all, ethical discussions; and especially when thought experiments relating to intuitions are used. Furthermore, I suggest that that one of the benefits of this type of thought experiment, and the discussion it engenders, is that it compells the reader to consider and reflect upon their own world views. I see this as an important part of my approach of normative ethics, to risk not providing an answer but to ignite a discussion that can create new perspectives of how to relate to the world.
Conclusion

Knowledge of the fact differs from knowledge of the reason for the fact.

(Aristotle, Posterior Analytics, I. 13, 78.a22)

In my essay I have examined whether the act of destroying nature can be evil in itself. By referring to the Last Man thought experiment I have shown how a virtue ethical approach can give answers explaining the intuitions provoked by the thought experiment. I have introduced a definition of evil acts and showed that the Last Man’s actions may be evil. This shows that virtue ethics can provide the same answer to the thought experiment as ecocentric or biocentric theories, i.e. that the last man’s acts are wrong. This gives cause to further develop the virtue ethical approach of environmental ethics.

When Routley asked if we are in need of a new, an environmental ethics,14 I do not consider that his thought experiment lends support to this development. The Aristotelian concepts of virtues, practical wisdom and eudaimonia can explain our intuitions when contemplating the Last Man thought experiment. They give reasons for the Last Man to not act in that destructive way without establishing a non-anthropocentric ethic. This conclusion shows only that Routley’s thought experiment misses its point and does not imply that there may not be other reasons to establish an non-anthropocentric environmental ethics. It does show that there are resources within traditional virtue ethics for supporting non-destructive behavior towards nature.

Bibliography

14 Asked by Routley in his essay (Routley 1973).

Aristotle. Posterior Analytics, (references according to the Bekker system)


