Towards Environmental Virtue Ethics

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"The environmental problematic is not only a crisis of participation and survival but also a crisis of culture and character."
— Robyn Eckersley

"Modern man does not experience him as a part of nature but as an outside force destined to dominate and conquer it. He even talks of a battle with nature, forgetting that, if he won the battle, he would find himself on the losing side."
— Ernst F. Schumacher

INTRODUCTION

Anthropogenic climate change may cause the extinction of thousands of animal species during the next 100 years (Cahill et al. 2013). This massive biodiversity loss is not the only large-scale impact that humans could witness in the near future. The current ecological crisis could also significantly deepen global political and social inequalities, bringing tangible effects on the size of the world population, food abundance, and the occurrence of extreme natural events. Moreover, an estimate of The World Health Organization suggested that climate change currently results in 150,000 deaths every year (Broome 2008). Climate-related questions seem to have enjoyed substantial attention in the political and popular debates only throughout the last decade, where we witnessed a significant rise in the global effort to tackle environmental issues[1]. This recent breakthrough might indicate environmentalism as a novelty, yet in the realm of academia humans' relationship with nature has been a central topic of discussion for many decades before the more recent revitalisation in the public debate.

In the philosophical arena, a significant interest for the non-human world appeared during the 1960s and 1970s, when environmental ethics started to become popular. The increasing concern with this field led it to acquire the status as an independent

[1] For instance, the non-governmental movement *Fridays for Future* organized in September 2019 the largest global climate strike in world history.

sub-discipline of philosophy, providing interesting inputs to other academic disciplines such as law, economics, sociology and geography. The first environmental philosophers such as Richard Routley, Arne Næss, and J. Baird Callicott urged, on common grounds, for a reconsideration of the intrinsic value of nature, an entity that was hitherto exclusively seen as an instrument at the service of human ends. Among them, Leopold famously asserted the need for a new *land ethic*, stating that: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (1949, 224-5). Theoretical inputs such as the latter were the result of a general dissatisfaction with how natural resources were usually regarded exclusively in economic and instrumental terms. An example of this can be found in the critical view that environmental ethics had of the strict utilitarian methodology employed by the mainstream neoclassical school of economics. In such a model, the systematic adoption of cost-benefit analysis[2] with regard to environmental goods was seen to neglect the possibility that environmental amenities could be valued in terms other than monetary[3].

While the first environmental philosophers strongly strived for the recognition of nature's intrinsic value, their ethical theories were still quite rudimentary. Hence, most of the philosophical discussion in the field came to be focused on the construction of an adequate ethical theory that could be coherently formulated in order to justify the preservation of stability, integrity and beauty of the natural world (Brennan and Lo 2016). The most credited normative ethical theories within the Western philosophical tradition have been deontology and consequentialism, established in the years of the Enlightenment by thinkers such as Kant and Bentham. They locate the evaluation of human action respectively in the conformity to universal moral norms (or laws) for deontology and in the goodness of the consequences they bring about for consequentialism. However, alongside these two approaches, a third one enjoyed substantial support developing historically from Aristotle and progressively

[2] Cost-Benefit Analysis (abbreviated CBA) is a systematic method that assesses the worth of a new policy program or decision. It is often employed in decision-making processes in the environmental field by comparing the costs of implementing the policy (usually, by asking how much those who would be worse-off are willing to be compensated) with its benefits (how much those who would like the policy are willing to 'pay' in order for it to be implemented).

[3] For an insightful discussion about environmental goods and cost-benefit analysis see Elizabeth Anderson, "Cost-benefit analysis, safety, and environmental quality" in her *Value in Ethics and Economics,* Harvard University Press, 1993.

influencing the Greek, Roman and Thomistic[4] intellectual worlds, that of *virtue ethics* (James 2015). After a period of decline due to the significant development and popularity of deontology and consequentialism, virtue ethics was revived after the publication of "Modern Moral Philosophy" by Anscombe in 1958. According to the virtue ethicist, the most appropriate way of thinking about morality has to start with the question of what it means to live a good human life – one that fosters and promotes certain traits of character (virtues), while avoiding certain others (vices) (James 2015).

One of the first promoters of applying the virtue ethical approach in terms of human environmental impact was Hursthouse. Traditional virtues and vices – she affirms – can be considered in a new context made of human relations to the natural world, acquiring a new dimension and application. In her writings, she stresses a form of environmental virtue ethics (hereafter abbreviated as EVE) that reconfigures traditional old virtues such as compassion, justice, patience and prudence (2007, 158). While she emphasised the *eudaimonistic* nature of virtue ethics, namely, that a character trait is a virtue insofar as it is conducive to the agent's flourishing, the most accredited version of EVE is that not only moral agents have final value but so do all other living things; implying that to be considered a virtue, a character trait needs to be conducive to (or constitutive of) not only the moral agent in question, but also the other human beings and the flourishing of non-human entities (Sandler 2016).

While virtue ethics is a very broad philosophical project that engages with a series of different issues and theoretical quandaries, the aim of the present work is to specifically assess whether this moral theory is better-equipped to face our contemporary ecological challenges compared to the alternative moral theories of deontology and consequentialism. This thesis will argue for the validity of a virtue ethical approach in the context of environmental degradation and, particularly, in tackling collective action problems (e.g. climate change). Compared to deontology and consequentialism, it will be argued, virtue ethics is able to make sense of the moral complexity involved in environmental issues. The reason behind this topic choice stems from an observation of the distinctive features that usually characterise contemporary environmental problems. The latter are global and collectively shared,

[4] Thomism is a philosophical school that developed from the works of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) during the Middle Ages.

necessarily involving a call for government intervention[5] and stressing the need for political and social theorists to actively engage with crucial philosophical questions about which principles should guide our understandings of the ecological crisis. Jointly with a shift in the political realm, a parallel transformation in the realm of our individual choices, for instance, in our role as consumers, is very much needed, especially if it is acknowledged that many of the political shifts at the institutional and structural level actually arise from individual and personal transformations. Hence, given its two-fold instance both at the institutional and individual level, the ethical question of why and how we should ensure environmental protection is inevitably of crucial importance not only from a philosophical point of view but also from a pragmatic one.

In the first chapter of this work I will outline what is the philosophical difficulty I am concerned with, namely, a specific kind of moral gap. The term 'moral gap' can be intended to describe a variety of instances where there is an incongruity or shortcoming that regards our morality. For instance, the distance between the moral demands on us and our natural capacities to abide them or the discrepancy between our moral beliefs and our practical actions are two among the many examples of 'moral gaps' that can be made. The focus of this dissertation will reside in a particular kind of moral gap: that between the collective actions of individuals and the resulting environmental harm they produce. To grasp the distinctive character of such moral gap it is useful to recall the definition of it provided by Sandler: "given that a person's contribution, although needed (albeit not necessary), is nearly inconsequential to addressing the problem and may require some cost from the standpoint of the person's own life, why should the person make the effort, particularly when it is uncertain whether others will do so?" (2010, 168). This kind of moral gap manifests itself in what Sandler called the *problem of inconsequentialism*, an issue that typically arises in collective action problems. Our everyday actions, taken separately, would not amount to any harm since they are often negligible and unintended. However, if conceived as collective they vastly produce harm, as it is in the case of anthropogenic climate

[5] While a completely free-market oriented scenario is often considered to be problematic in dealing with the so-called environmental externalities like pollution, philosophical anarchists such as Michael Huemer would reject this idea on the grounds that the government has no overall political authority over us. In this regard, I am going to assume that a *de facto* power of the government is necessary in dealing with public environmental goods where collective action problems arise.

change. This, as a result, opens "the possibility that the global environment may be destroyed; yet no one will be responsible" (Jamieson, 2012). Drawing from the works of Sandler (2007, 2010), I will argue that an appropriate environmental ethic should then make sense of and address the problem of inconsequentialism. In order to strengthen my claim, I will outline and criticise the major arguments that take the problem of inconsequentialism as the basis to affirm that individuals do not have any moral obligation to be concerned about their personal consumption choices in terms of their environmental impact (see Sinnott-Armstrong). Recalling the work of Glover (1975), I will show that such defence and justification for inaction is untenable in the case of collective environmental harm, thus, that the problem of inconsequentialism cannot be circumvented as they do.

In the second chapter, I will assess the strength of traditional and contemporary versions of the two major normative theories in environmental ethics (i.e. consequentialism and deontology) and their effectiveness when confronted with the problem of inconsequentialism as understood by Sandler. After assessing their validity in this respect, the third chapter will be devoted to exploring a different approach, that of virtue ethics. This chapter will be divided into four different sections. First, I will argue that a virtue ethics approach in environmental ethics is better equipped to recognise the moral significance of our harmful environmental actions than the strict consequentialist and deontological ones. Second, I will respond to the two most fundamental objections raised against EVE. The first regards the environmental nature of the theory, namely, the concern that it is too anthropocentric and egoistic to tackle environmental issues (see Holmes Rolston III "Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole" 2005). While I will admit that EVE is openly anthropocentric, this does not undermine its theoretical and normative strength, as also noted by James (2006). The second objection to EVE concerns its ethical nature and, in particular, the lack of action-guidingness. I will draw upon the works of Hursthouse and show that a virtue ethics approach can be normative in the same way that strict deontological or consequentialist are. Next, I will mention how a virtue ethics approach can be useful in tackling environmentally-related global challenges such as excessive consumerism and conspicuous consumption. Finally, I will recall the stages of my thesis and restate my argument on why environmental ethicists should be virtue ethicists.

Chapter One: The Problem of Inconsequentialism

1.1 *The Harm in Longitudinal Collective Actions*

My round-trip transatlantic flight, your everyday use of a car and a friend's meat-based diet are all small and insignificant actions, if taken separately. However, if combined together as a collective, they vastly produce harm by simultaneously contributing to anthropogenic climate change. Our longitudinal collective actions, namely, those that spread across time and space and that are often unintended and seemingly innocuous, are not unfamiliar concepts in academia. Game theory, a model to study strategic interactions between rational decision-makers, developed the famous concept of the Prisoners' Dilemma to explain that often individuals who act pursuing their self-interest fail to achieve the optimal outcome and end up in a worse state of affairs than if they had cooperated. Hardin's popular article "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968) famously expressed this concern with regard to the environmental impact brought about by human interference. He noticed that by acting in a self-interested manner we usually over-consume natural resources, eventually causing their depletion and thus creating a disadvantage for the whole community, including ourselves. The phenomenon described by Hardin, not surprisingly, highlights a clash between our individual and collective rationality. This is not exclusively a feature of single particular individuals' behaviour, but it can easily be extended also to the behaviour of modern nation-states[6]. The constant struggle to agree on a common framework of emissions' reduction targets can, in fact, be characterised as a tragedy of the commons as well. The inextricable dilemma between emission-based activities and the pursuit of economic growth that nation-states continuously face is certainly one of the major factors to explain the global difficulty in setting clear and forceful targets (Williston 2015).

Along these lines, Sandler defines the lack of a clear identifiable moral responsibility typical of longitudinal collective actions as the *problem of inconsequentialism*:

[6] This can be done but only by first assuming that one could identify a homogeneous pattern of 'behaviours' and a predominant identity that characterises a single nation as an entity whose intentions are expressed by their government officials.

> "Longitudinal collective action environmental problems are likely to be effectively addressed only by an enormous number of individuals each making a nearly insignificant contribution to resolving them. However, when a person's making such a contribution appears to require social, personal, or economic costs the problem of inconsequentialism arises: given that a person's contribution, although needed (albeit not necessary), is nearly inconsequential to addressing the problem and may require some cost from the standpoint of the person's own life, why should the person make the effort, particularly when it is uncertain (or even unlikely) whether others will do so?" (2010, 168)

He notices that a paradigmatic case of collective action problems is global climate change, where our singular individual actions are seen as too negligible and inconsequential to address the problem at a global, effective, level (2010, 168). In this way, the moral gap between our longitudinal actions and the resulting environmental harm they produce remains intact and unsolved. Jamieson (2012) captures the relevance of the problem by suggesting the disquieting prospect that this could create a scenario in which the global environment might be destroyed yet nobody is responsible for it. In the same fashion, Gardiner (2006) notes that the convergence of theoretical, global and intergenerational problems that typically characterise climate change turn the latter into what could be defined 'a perfect moral storm'. All these conjoint intuitions convey the idea that recognising the moral significance[7] of our scattered, individual and often unintended actions is a crucial component that environmental ethicists need to engage with.

Thus, providing justification for a shift in individual consumption habits which taken collectively are harming the environment (in other words, actively addressing the problem of inconsequentialism) is a central feature for environmental ethics. This concern is also reflected in what most environmental ethicists would define the *general adequacy condition*. According to the latter, an adequate environmental ethics needs to provide a theoretical basis that is committed to ensure sustainability i.e., the quality of meeting the present needs without compromising the future ones (Sandler 2007). This suggests that the link between theoretical and pragmatic considerations lies at the core of any philosophical project whose aim is to guide the

[7] By *moral significance* here I mean the possibility for our actions to be open to moral assessment.

relation between human beings and the natural world. However, this is not an issue that is exclusive to the environmental discourse. Young (2003), for instance, stresses how the lack of moral proximity between our individual actions and their contribution to structural injustices characterise multiple areas of interest such as global poverty or the exploitative conditions of workers in several developing countries. In her book "Responsibility for Justice" (2011) she presents the notion of structural injustices. By the latter, Young intends a state of affairs in which no one is directly responsible for a problematic situation[8] yet it is the background systematic condition that it is morally dubious (2003, 2). She notices that the so-called 'liability model', i.e. the traditional way of intending justice in terms of causal responsibility, is an inappropriate theoretical instrument to tackle structural injustices at a global level (2003, 10). What she proposes instead, inspired by the works of Hannah Arendt, is a *social connection model of responsibility* that draws the attention on individual singular contributions to the global problem. Young's insights on structural injustices, even though they are primarily concerned with cases of economic disadvantages and global poverty, can be suitable for environmental ethicists. In particular, they shed light on the moral significance of harm in longitudinal collective actions, a concern that is not exclusive of ecological challenges but whose relevance in the social and economic realms once again stresses its urgency.

1.2 *The "It Makes an Insignificant Difference" Argument*

The problem of inconsequentialism, as above-mentioned, is a clear moral difficulty within environmental ethics. Philosophers such as Sinnott-Armstrong and Johnson argued that, given its existence, individuals do not have any moral obligation to engage in actions aimed at minimising their emissions (or, in general, their environmental impact) when others are not all collectively doing the same and when they incur in personal costs which are morally relevant. If there is any obligation that individuals must comply with, then that would exclusively involve being politically active and supportive of the environmental cause by trying to change the dynamics of political

[8] Young offers a paradigmatic scenario where Sandy, a single American working mother, is struggling to find affordable housing after her apartment building has been sold to be converted into condominiums. Her condition, she admits, is one that can be easily associated with many people living in advanced industrial societies and one that many would see as a structural injustice.

decision-making processes[9] (Sinnott-Armstrong 2006, Johnson 2003). "It would be better to enjoy your Sunday gas-guzzling driving while working to change the law so as to make it illegal for you to enjoy your Sunday driving" – affirms Sinnott-Armstrong (2006). These kind of arguments all present a similar recurring feature: they appeal to the insignificancy of our individual emissions when compared to the tangible environmental harm that is responsible for climate change. Given this, they can be categorised under the definition of 'it makes an insignificant difference arguments'. This typology of arguments draws upon the notion of *marginal effects* (in this case, marginal harms) to assess the goodness or badness of an action in virtue of a *counterfactual causality mechanism*[10]. In this model, I only inflict harm if, by acting in a certain way, I cause suffering that would not have occurred had my action been refrained (Sandberg 2011).

This notion of harm is a very intuitive one which is present not only in our everyday moral practices of assigning individual responsibility but also in our legal frameworks (e.g. criminal, civil and tort law). If one fully endorses this notion in all contexts, it seems that the argument from inconsequentialism necessarily implies a justification for, in Sinnott-Armstrong terms', not worrying at all about my gas-guzzling Sunday driving. After all, the emissions resulting from my ride are an extremely negligible part compared to global ones and my possible choice of going for a walk instead would not really make any difference. However, the attempt to justify inaction is a misguided circumvention of the problem of inconsequentialism. There are two factors to illustrate why this is the case.

The first one appeals to the notion of disproportionality between the size of the problem and the effects that my small action (or inaction) could have on it. Glover (1975) noticed that the arguments that appeal to disproportionality are mostly at the basis of justifying inaction in debates about global poverty and overpopulation. If one refrains from having a child - it is argued - this surely will not stop overpopulation. The same goes with poverty, if I manage to save a single child, this will hardly have an impact on global poverty. While this is a very popular way of approaching large-scale

[9] While I do recognise the importance of collective efforts aimed at shifting the legal and political system for the environmental cause, my purpose here is not to neglect the immense impact and relevance that they have but to focus on the moral significance that individual actions (e.g., consumption habits) could have as well.

[10] This mechanism explains also what Young calls the 'liability model' of responsibility.

problems, Glover (1975) notices that it is often the result of *context illusions*. The enormous size of the problem often paralyses our imagination and actions, undermining any moral effort to actively engage with it. Yet the fact that there are many other people I cannot help (or save) does not make my helping them negligible or morally irrelevant, surely it does not if you are the starving child who has just been saved.

Along with the reference to contextual issues when framing the justification for inaction, the second factor that usefully sheds light on the problem of inconsequentialism is well illustrated by Glover's description of a hypothetical scenario:

> "Suppose a village contains one hundred unarmed tribesmen eating their lunch. One-hundred hungry armed bandits descend on the village and each bandit at gunpoint takes one tribesman's lunch and eats it. The bandits then go off, each one having done a discriminable amount of harm to a single tribesman. Next week, the bandits are tempted to do the same thing again but are troubled by new-found doubts about the morality of such a raid. [...] They then raid the village, tie up the tribesmen, and look at their lunch. As expected, each bowl of food contains one hundred baked beans. Instead of each bandit eating a single plateful as last week, each takes one bean from each plate. They leave after eating all the beans, pleased to have done no harm [...] to each person." (1975, 174-5)

In the hypothetical scenario described by Glover, one can identify two different moral intuitions that are at stake. On the one hand, the fact that each armed bandit took one single bean from each tribesman's lunch seems a very negligible harm compared to the collective hunger that the whole tribesmen community will suffer as a result from their lack of beans. On the other hand, the significance of the collective harm (in this case, their hunger) that was caused shows that there is still something wrong with the individual act of each tribesman. Thus, it is precisely in the clash of these two moral intuitions that the problem of inconsequentialism finds itself (Sandberg 2011). Dismissing such a clash by justifying overall inaction is not a plausible alternative for the moral philosophers who are at least concerned with taking into account and making sense of our moral intuitions. Hence, if the problem of inconsequentialism is acknowledged as a crucial issue, then an appropriate ethical theory should make sense

of it. In light of this, the next chapters will be devoted to exploring how the two major normative theories in the history of Western moral philosophy (i.e., consequentialism and deontology) have fared when confronted with it.

Chapter Two: Major Normative Theories in Environmental Ethics

2.1 *Consequentialism and Environmental Ethics*

One of the major normative ethical theories in the Western philosophical tradition is consequentialism. As the name itself suggests, consequentialism assesses the moral rightness of an action on the basis of the consequences it brings about as opposed to the evaluation of character or the conformity to an absolute moral duty. What then makes a consequence or a state of affairs, the best? Different consequentialist theories will provide a variety of answers to this question. The first and most traditional form of consequentialism is *classical utilitarianism*, which affirms that an act is right when it maximises overall utility, i.e., it finds the optimal balance between pleasure and pain (Hiller 2016). The father of this doctrine, Jeremy Bentham, famously asserted that utility is "that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness or to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered" (1789, 34). Almost two centuries after him, Peter Singer affirmed that utilitarianism "obliges us to maximize happiness or pleasure while leaving other actions impermissible" (1979, 127).

While the consequentialist ethical framework has been one of the dominant ones during the last two hundred years, its application to the questions of environmental nature has not been extensively discussed until fairly recently (Elliot 2001, 181). As previously mentioned, consequentialism entails multiple versions but, given its historical importance and influence, this section will be specifically devoted to first tackle the version of *act*-utilitarianism[11] and only subsequently a more recent refined variant proposed by Sandler. In particular, it will explore whether act-utilitarianism is able to address the problem of inconsequentialism as it appears in environmental ethics, leaving fundamental theoretical questions around the validity of the ethical theory as such aside. Drawing from classical utilitarians, act-utilitarians claim that an action is right insofar as it brings about the best consequences if one compares all the possible courses of action available to the individual agent (Sandler 2010, 170). In

[11] For instance, the majority of the models in environmental research employ rational choice theory, a model that originated from neoclassical economics and utility theory which frames human decision-making and behaviour in act-consequentialist terms (Tanner 2009, 479).

other words, the principle of utility is employed to evaluate individual actions on a case by case basis. Given this, unless your position is that of the CEO of an important and influential company or the president of a country, your action will have a considerably small effect on the environmental problems that arise through longitudinal collective actions (Sandler 2010, 171). In utilitarian terms, the costs of contributing to halt environmental damage outweigh the global benefits of doing so, not only in terms of economic costs but also regarding the effort to get informed and understand what is the environmental scenario in which we are living. The act-utilitarian model manifests itself in the trade-off mechanism between different states of affairs and values. In the field of environmental decision-making, for instance, a case of environmental despoliation could theoretically be compensated by an improvement in human-centred values. This explains the popularity and support for environmentally aggressive policies that are nonetheless expected to be beneficial inasmuch as they increase the well-being of individuals, providing them with enhanced job opportunities and larger material wealth (Elliot 2007, 182). To better explain the incongruency that an act-utilitarian account faces when confronted with collective action problems such as climate change it is useful to recall a thought-experiment provided by Kagan (2011, 108):

> "Imagine that I run a polluting factory and suppose now that my factory releases its toxins into the air through a smokestack where they are so scattered by the winds that when the toxins do come back down to the surface of the earth they are spread over a very wide area—indeed, spread so thin that no single individual ever breathes in more than a single molecule from my plant that makes no difference to anyone's health. Imagine, next, that there are thousands, or tens of thousands, of similarly polluting factories around the nation (or the world). Each scatters its toxins so widely that no single individual ever takes in more than a single molecule from any single plant. But because there are indeed thousands of such factories, many people do take in enough of the toxin to become ill. This is clearly a bad result, and we can certainly imagine that it is a bad enough result to outweigh whatever good is done by running the factories in this way (as opposed to some alternative way that would dispose of the toxins more safely). But for all that, it seems as though each factory owner can truthfully say to himself that it makes no difference whether or not he pollutes, for his decision puts at most one extra molecule of toxin in any given individual, and by hypothesis, a single molecule,

> more or less, simply doesn't make a difference to anyone's health. And this means that consequentialism cannot condemn my act. The results would not be better if I didn't pollute: they would be the same (or perhaps slightly worse, given the lost profit, say, from running the factory in a less polluting manner)."

The scenario described by Kagan conceptually recalls the *tribesmen lunch* thought-experiment provided by Glover that was presented in section 1.2. The actions of the armed bandit, in this case, are analogous to those of the factory owner who, according to this model, cannot be held responsible for the infinitesimal percentage of toxins that his factory releases. Given this, it seems that the act-utilitarian concept of looking for the best possible outcome might have application in some specific and circumscribed contexts, particularly, where spatial and temporal factors can be strictly identified. However, as mentioned in chapter one, the context of anthropogenic climate change is one that presents a high degree of causal and moral complexity. Gardiner (2006) usefully condenses such complexity into four major elements: the dispersion of agency and of effects, a temporal dispersion between the actions and their consequences and the embeddedness of environmental problems in the social fabric. Given such complexity, it is very unlikely that the act-utilitarian framework could have any application at all in the sphere of environmental issues such as climate change (Holland 2014, 116).

While it is true that a decision-making process occurring at the individual level through the mechanism of personal cost-benefit analysis hardly give reasons to tackle the problem of inconsequentialism, act-utilitarians could rebut this claim by pointing at a mistaken interpretation of the theory, as noticed by Sandler (2010). They could highlight that the best outcomes are not those contingent on the agent's perspective but on the overall actual consequences of the act itself (Sandler 2010, 171). In this line of reasoning, it is act-utilitarians that will have to demonstrate that while many of us would see high personal costs to act in an environmentally-friendly way, this is actually not the case from a practical point of view. That is, they might offer appeals to *agent benefit* by trying to show that tackling environmental harms is not as costly as they might initially think or that it can be beneficial in the future for the individual decision-maker. However, this is a quite hard convincing enterprise, especially for those of us who would regard their disutility in terms of restricted (or changed) materialistic

consumption as more significant than the benefit of feeling good about addressing the problem. Thus, it is overall difficult to see how they could easily shift in their perspective by appealing to personal long-run benefits (Sandler 2010, 171).

A further difficulty in the employment of an act-utilitarian perspective to tackle the problem of inconsequentialism is that such account is strictly a 'local' one not only in the way descripted above, where there are clear spatial and temporal circumscriptions, but there is also another expression of its 'context confinement' that is concerned with the behaviour of other agents. To evaluate an action in a contextualised manner means, in fact, to take into account the actions of other agents or the way in which they are more likely to act. This makes it the case that it is even more difficult to make sense of the problem of inconsequentialism given the fact that other agents might not contribute to it. The appeal of the 'it makes an insignificant difference' arguments is, in this case, problematically justified by a fundamental concern with the action of other agents. A way for act-utilitarianism to contain this difficulty consists in adding the proviso of *non-contingency*. The latter demands agents to act as to minimise their contributions to global environmental harm, and specifies that acting in this way should not be contingent on an agent's beliefs about the behaviour of others (Jamieson 2007, 167). However, if the evaluation of actions is not indexed into the actual or possible state of affairs the intuitive plausibility of act-utilitarianism seems heavily weakened. What makes act-utilitarianism appealing is that it is grounded exactly on the personal evaluation of actions in *that* specific space, time and context (Sandler 2010, 172). Hence, overall, act-utilitarianism is unsuited to tackle the problem of inconsequentialism in collective environmental harm and it is necessary to look at different versions of this ethical theory in order to do so.

One way out of the above-mentioned complications encountered by an act-utilitarian approach could consist in endorsing a more refined version of consequentialism that is said to be able to account for the problem of inconsequentialism. A famous proposal is the consequentialist virtue-oriented approach proposed by Sandler (2007) which maintains that an action is right insofar as it hits the targets of the operative virtues. In order to understand what he intends by this it is necessary to look at the theoretical bases that lie at the core of his formulation. The first one is the so-called *naturalistic assumption*, a premise to the philosophical enterprise that admits the biological

nature of human beings as an essential part of their constitution. We, exactly like other earthly organisms, are the product of the evolutionary process. We are composed of matter, subject to the laws of nature and necessarily dependant on the environment for our survival. Given this, our ethical questions and discussions have to be grounded in considerations of us as biological beings, given *this* particular world we are living in (Sandler 2007, 13-4). Secondly, most of the literature on virtue ethics has been predominantly *eudaimonistic*. In such an account, what makes a character trait a virtue is that it is conducive to human flourishing. Hursthouse (2001, 202) summarises the eudaimonistic account as follows:

> "A good social animal (of one of the more sophisticated species) is one that is well fitted or endowed with respect to its parts, its operations, its actions, and its desires and emotions; whether it is thus well fitted or endowed is determined by whether these four aspects well serve its individual survival, the continuance of its species, its characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and the good functioning of its social group—in the ways characteristic of the species."

Sandler's approach, instead, goes beyond this strict eudaimonistic one that focuses on human flourishing to include also noneudaimonistic ends to the picture. This endorsement creates space for a more pluralistic account of what makes a character trait a virtue, where eudaimonistic ends (those that are strictly related to the flourishing of the individual) stand aside non-eudaimonistic ones (which are agent-independent) (Swanton, 2003, 2). Sandler provides a detailed explanation of the *pluralistic* and *teleological* account he endorses:

> "A human being is ethically good (i.e., virtuous) insofar as she is well fitted with respect to her (i) emotions, (ii) desires, and (iii) actions (from reason and inclination); whether she is thus well fitted is determined by whether these aspects well serve (1) her survival, (2) the continuance of the species, (3) her characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, (4) the good functioning of her social group, (5) her autonomy, (6) the accumulation of knowledge, (7) a meaningful life, and (8) the realization of any noneudaimonistic ends (grounded in noneudaimonistic goods or values) in the way characteristic of human beings (i.e., in a way that can rightly be seen as good). This is the account of what makes a character trait a virtue that I endorse." (2007, 28)

His theory is a very plausible alternative to act-utilitarianism insofar as it maintains the necessity to look at different elements outside the outcomes of an action, namely, virtues and character dispositions. At first sight, Sandler's project seems to be a clear departure from the consequentialist tradition towards a virtue ethical one as it is clear by his statement that: "in virtue-oriented ethical theory, the primary evaluative concepts are the virtues" (Sandler 2007, 91). However, his attempt to express and justify the normative strength of virtue ethics (from which he extrapolates the concept of a 'virtue-oriented theory') theoretically coincides with the structure typical of rule-consequentialism, a doctrine that identifies the rightness of an action according to whether or not it follows a certain code of rules that was selected for its good consequences. Given this, his approach can be considered as an attempt to improve on the consequentialist tradition towards a more ecologically-inclusive one. While Sandler's framework is a very worthwhile path to undertake and a first step to shed light on the importance of the problem of inconsequentialism, its theoretical complexity casts doubts on the overall coherence of his project as an attempt to simultaneously be virtue-ethicist and consequentialist. My aim is then to find a more theoretically consistent theory that is able to make sense of the problem of inconsequentialism. The next chapter will hence discuss whether deontology is a valid option to do so.

2.2 *Deontology and Environmental Ethics*

A deontological ethics evaluates actions on the basis of their conformity to maxims or principles, conceptually leaving aside the consequences that an act might bring about. The principles that one should abide to are expressed in the form of moral duties or rules such as "do not kill" or "do not lie" (Brennan and Lo 2016). The justification for such duties stems from an appreciation of the *intrinsic value* of the agent or thing subject to moral evaluation. In the most historically prominent version of deontology, Kantianism, the agent who possesses intrinsic value, being it the self or other people, should be treated as an 'end' with inherent worth and not merely as a 'means' (Kant, 1785). In this way, the deontological language is enriched with definitions of permissibility, rights, obligations and responsibilities. "To put this colloquially: where

consequentialist views place priority on the good over the right, deontological views place priority on the right over the good" (Hale 2016, 216).

Given the preference for the concept of right actions rather than the best state of affairs, a deontological approach seems better equipped to adequately respond to the problem of inconsequentialism. The fact that my actions are inconsequential or minimally influential to bring about a change to the environmental problem is not really a determinant factor for how I should behave. However, in the case of longitudinal collective actions problems, a difficulty for the Kantian approach still arises. Since climate change and large-scale environmental damage are often the by-product results of hundreds of millions 'ordinary' polluting actions, their moral significance cannot be ascribed necessarily to that of means to reach a particular end.

In this regard, the economists Davies and Harrigan (2019) point out how the mechanism of collective unintended effects can also be very relevant in the realm of policy-making, where they identify this phenomenon with the name of 'Cobra Effect'[12]. Interestingly, they admit that actually "every human decision brings with it unintended consequences", and this is not far from what often happens in our environmental decision-making processes. For instance, the emissions of carbon dioxide to produce energy in a fossil fuel facility are not precisely the means to do so but rather a by-product of the process itself. If they did not occur or had their catastrophic effects on climate change being absent, the production process (and, in general, our consumptive actions) would still have the same intended ends and require the same means (Sandler 2010, 173). A Kantian ethics where intentions play a pivotal role in determining the rightness of an action has then serious difficulty in dealing with collective longitudinal environmental harm. Only in some limited cases where environmental damage is considered a means to accomplish a specific end (for instance, in the cases of deforestation or the treatment of animals in factory farming) a certain degree of responsiveness can be derived (Sandler 2010, 174).

[12] The choice of this terminology stems from the observation of unintended consequences as a result of a particular policy adopted in colonial India against the spread of cobras by the British government. They offered a bounty for every dead cobra. At first, it was a successful strategy but eventually people began to breed cobras for the income and as soon as the government eliminated the policy the breeders freed the massively increasing the wild cobra population.

A possible deontological response could be to affirm that there are in fact not perfect but *imperfect duties* to refrain from contributing to longitudinal environmental harm, that is, duties that we are not always required to discharge but that one can abide by in different ways or at different times. The most paradigmatic case is the duty to be benevolent which, for instance, could require you to give part of your income to a charity. Kant himself devoted a small part of "The Metaphysics of Morals" to the description of our imperfect duties towards non-human nature by claiming that:

> "A propensity to wanton destruction of what is beautiful in inanimate nature is opposed to a human being's duty to himself; for it weakens or uproots that feeling in him which, though not itself moral, is still a disposition of sensibility that greatly promotes or at least prepares the way for it. […] Even gratitude for the long service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household) belongs indirectly to man's duty with regard to these animals; considered as a direct duty, however, it is always *only* a duty of man to himself." (1797, *my italicisation*)

It is clear then that a Kantian imperfect duty towards nature is an indirect one that derives from the encompassing imperfect duty that we, as human beings, owe to ourselves in the circumscribed case in which we aim to become morally better. However, in this conceptualisation, the problematicness of longitudinal collective action problems is left intact. In fact, the kind of response triggered by an appeal to 'imperfect duty' would fail to provide an adequate degree of responsiveness as also noted by Frierson (2014):

> "If limiting greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions is an imperfect duty, then not only are the specific actions—driving the car less, limiting water use, avoiding GHG-intensive agricultural products, and so on—not directly required, but even limiting GHG emissions as such is required only indirectly. People have obligations not to ignore others' happiness. Insofar as limiting GHG emissions promotes such happiness, we should limit GHG emissions. But the 'should' here is very modest, akin to saying that we 'should' learn dance or advanced mathematics to develop our talents. We need not make others' well-being our supreme end, and there are many ways of showing that we value it. One may take SUV joyrides only if such rides are consistent with making others' welfare one's end. But it is all too easy, and all too common, to do just that. I take a couple friends who also love SUV joyriding, read Nature Conservancy magazine while filling the SUV with gas, and

> give a dollar to a panhandler along the way. No one could claim I've not made others' welfare my end. But these gestures, even if reflecting genuine ends and doing real good, are hardly sufficient to solve—or even meaningfully impact—problems caused by GHG emissions."

The difficulty in addressing collective environmental harm when employing the Kantian taxonomy of perfect vs. imperfect duties is not the only ethical obstacle that the theory presents. The complexity in formulating a strict duty to address environmental problems arises also because of the limited resources that a Kantian (and more broadly, a deontological) approach is equipped with in dealing with future generations. The latter are non-existent, thus, their welfare is conceptually very hard to take into account as an ethically relevant aspect of the environmental issue. Hence, if longitudinal collective environmental problems involve future generations and their welfare, a deontological ethical theory will have a hard time in seeking a meaningful formulation of their ethical dimensions (Sandler 2010, 175). Overall, a Kantian framework where intentions play a crucial role would neglect a substantial part of the scattered and harmful environmental practices which are often unintentional or by-product results of our acts and the consequent kind of imperfect duties that will result from its adoption would fail to actively address the problem of inconsequentialism. Moreover, future generations would be completely left out of the moral picture, further neglecting their ethical significance.

A possible, more contemporary response from deontologists would involve a particular version of it where animals or nature are considered as ends in themselves that possess moral standing and not merely as means. Korsgaard (2004) famously championed this view exposing a Kantian defence for the existence of direct obligations towards non-human animals. At the beginning of her argument, she admits that Kant (1997, *my italicisation*) himself regarded non-human animals merely as means:

> "Beings without reason, have only a relative worth, as means, and are therefore called things, whereas rational beings are called persons because their nature marks them out as an end in itself. […] The fourth and last step which reason took, thereby raising man completely above animal society, was his realisation that he is the true end of nature. When he first said to the sheep, "*the pelt which you wear*

> *was given to you by nature not for your own use, but for mine*" and took it from the sheep to wear it himself, he became aware of a prerogative which, by his nature, he enjoyed over all the animals; and he now no longer regarded them as fellow creatures, but as means and instruments to be used at will for the attainment of whatever ends he pleased."

Given this, as previously mentioned, the duties towards non-human animals can only take the form of *imperfect* ones, always relative to a more general concern with the other fellow creatures, i.e., human beings. This is because, as Wood (1998) suggests, Kant's ethical theory was typically *logocentric*, namely, its theoretical premises were centred on the assumption that only rational nature can be deemed to possess an absolute and unconditional value. However, it is precisely at this point that Korsgaard substantially departs from Kant as she argues that it is not the rational nature[13] of human beings that makes them end-in-themselves but rather their *animal* nature, intended as the capacity to have interests, strive to reach some ends[14] and to be self-regarding (2004, 102). This implies that if human beings are deemed of fundamental worth because of their animal (sentient) nature then, it follows that the other sentient beings should deserve the same treatment and be considered fundamentally valuable. Her philosophical enterprise is an attempt to include the importance of non-human entities within the traditional Kantian framework of perfect duties. Yet, if one is concerned with the problem of inconsequentialism, hence necessarily acknowledges an interest in the functioning of eco-systems and global climate change, Korsgaard option would seem to result limited. This is due to the purported restrictive application of the Kantian notion of end-in-themselves exclusively to *sentient* being, retreating in a sort of avoiding-pain and seeking-pleasure mechanism typical of a utilitarian morality rather than a deontological one. Despite this first impression, however, Korsgaard stresses that it is not only the sentient nature she is concerned with, but rather, her notion should be intended in a broader sense. This appears clear from her writing:

> "So when we say that something is good or bad for a living thing, say a plant, we mean something slightly different. Since the function of a plant [...] is to maintain

[13] In her interpretation, the rational nature is 'the capacity to think about and therefore assess the principles that govern our beliefs and actions' (2004, 86).
[14] For instance, survival or continuation of the species.

> itself, it is the plant's own needs, not our needs, that are affected by things that enable or interfere with its functioning. [...] We do not think of plants as perceiving and pursuing their good, and yet like animals they are essentially self-maintaining beings and in that sense are oriented toward their own good. And they exhibit a certain responsiveness to the environment, to light and moisture." (2004, 102-6)

By her words then, it is clear that her duty to non-human animals necessarily extends also to a duty towards plants, even if she admits that since animals have a higher developed sense of self than plants, they possess a relatively stronger sense of "good for themselves" compared to them (2004, 104). Yet while this is a clear development from a Kantian framework to a more ecologically-minded post-Kantian one, the difficult corollary of finding the use of plants as mere means to provide human sustenance a morally impermissible practice under Korsgaard's deontological framework seems difficult to accept, as also noted by Bock (2014, 83). Hence, while her duty-based approach is a worthwhile project that helps our understanding of the intricate relationship we have with non-human animals, it nonetheless encounter difficulties when taken as a unitary approach and applied to the realm of global environmental challenges.

2.3 *Concluding Remarks*

The first two sections of the second chapter presented an assessment of standard consequentialist and deontological formulations together with their contemporary more refined versions. In both the historical and recent varieties a number of complications have surfaced when attempting to formulate a clear and theoretically coherent attempt to address the complexity of global ecological challenges. To sum up, the standard act-utilitarian approach:

(1) focuses on individual trade-offs and personal cost-benefit analysis, failing to recognise the significance of other-than-outcomes considerations and lacking an evaluation of the attitude or perspectives of people;

(2) by being typically local and dependent on the context, it is greatly contingent on the behaviour of other agents as a fundamental factor for an action's moral

evaluation, a feature that is problematic given the interconnected nature of many environmental collective problems.

Moreover, a Kantian deontological approach to the problem of inconsequentialism:

(3) fails to make sense of environmentally harmful actions that are a by-product outcome of our production processes insofar as evaluation is based on the agent's intentions;

(4) provides a formulation of imperfect duties that is nonetheless insufficient to tackle the peculiarity and significance of collective environmental harms.

If then, we consider the more recent versions of consequentialist and deontological frameworks, despite their valuable contribution towards a more ecologically-inclusive outlook, their respective lack of internal coherence and inevitably demanding corollaries entailed weaken their overall plausibility (5). Given this, the next chapter will be devoted to the exploration of a third option, that of a virtue ethics approach. By engaging with its advantages and disadvantages, my aim is to provide a case for its appropriateness when confronted with the environmental realm.

Chapter Three: A Virtue Ethics Approach

3.1 *Virtue Ethics and the Environment*

The utilitarian and deontological approaches dominated the ethical discourse for more than two hundred years. Our contemporary narrative, including most environmental ethics, still relies heavily on these traditions, acquiring a kind of *duopoly*[15] on the ethical imagination of the average person and leaving little space for alternative approaches (Treanor 2014). Nonetheless, a third, less popular normative theory can be traced back to the Ancient Greek times, i.e., virtue ethics. Its distinctive feature is that the moral evaluation is explicated through the cultivation and promotion of human virtues, as opposed to the specification of duties or the trading-off of interests. According to the father of this approach, Aristotle, a virtue (*aretē* in ancient Greek), is a complex rational, emotional and social attitude or disposition of character, usually being an intermediate condition between two states: one involving excess, and the other deficiency (Kraut 2018). Following the Aristotelian legacy, for virtue ethicists the most appropriate way of thinking about morality had to start with the question of what it means to live a good human life. The latter, it is argued, is the one that exemplifies certain traits of character as virtues, while avoiding others considered vices (James 2015).

Since the publication of Frasz's article "Environmental Virtue Ethics: A New Direction for Environmental Ethics" in 1993, the idea that virtue ethics as a normative framework could be constructively applied to the field of environmental studies started to acquire support, creating space for the adoption of the term 'environmental virtue ethics' (EVE). Frasz himself asserted that:

> "I have turned to a different, more fruitful approach, one using insights from virtue ethics to the issues and problems of environmental ethics. While virtue ethics has a long classical tradition, its application to environmental ethics is new. Nevertheless, it is often reflected in the kind of questions asked at the start when ordinary people begin to think of ethical issues concerning the environment. When

[15] In economics, a *duopoly* is a situation in which only two companies control all the business in a particular industry (Cambridge English Dictionary: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/duopoly).

> philosophers start, their standard approach asks questions like "Do animals have rights?" or "Why is it wrong to wantonly destroy natural entities?" "Do they have intrinsic value?". This new approach asks questions such as *"What sort of person would wantonly destroy natural entities?"* or "What sort of personal qualities are needed for the humane treatment of nonhuman creatures?" (1993, 259-60, *my italicisation*)

As previously hinted, virtue ethics affirms that a character trait is a virtue to the extent that having and developing it is conducive to the good while a vice is correspondingly detrimental to the good, hence right actions, in this framework, are those that are virtuous (Sandler 2010, 176). This is, beyond doubt, a very rudimentary and unspecified definition of virtue ethics insofar as it lacks a description of what actually makes a character trait a virtue. Certainly, there are as much varieties of virtue ethics as there are answers to what makes a character trait a virtue. The EVE approach this thesis is concerned with starts from two theoretical bases that are equivalent to those adopted by Sandler in his virtue-oriented approach. Yet while Sandler, as suggested in section 2.1, is ultimately concerned with the normative strength of rules (and this is the reason behind the definition of his virtue-oriented approach as a form of rule-consequentialism) the virtue ethics approach I am interested in here is specifically focused on the normative strength of human character *per se*. The first theoretical basis is EVE's reliance on the so-called *naturalistic* assumption, a premise to the philosophical enterprise that presupposes the biological nature of human beings as a vital part of their constitution. Human beings are the product of the evolutionary process and like the other earthly organisms are composed of matter and subject to the laws of nature, thus necessarily dependant on the environment for survival. Given this, our ethical questions and discussions have to be grounded in considerations of us as biological beings, given *this* particular world we are living in (Sandler 2007, 13-4). Another foundational premise of EVE that is worth recalling is its *teleological* nature. The latter implies that there is a dynamic variety of realisations or ends to strive for by different individual organisms, including not only human beings but also non-human animal species or plants (Sandler 2007, 35). Overall, the virtue ethics approach this thesis is concerned with relies on the naturalistic and teleological nature as its fundamental bases.

The gradual development of EVE brought about the notion that considerations on what kind of people we are, what is our character, while seemingly 'old-fashioned and hardly relevant' are instead crucial to engage with the natural environment in a meaningful way (Sandler 2016, 224). In order to explain why this is so, I will argue that a virtue ethics approach is better equipped to tackle the problems that standard and contemporary formulations of deontology and consequentialism face when confronted with the complexity of the current environmental crisis.

Given the (1-4) difficulties encountered by act-utilitarian and Kantian approaches described in the second chapter:

(1) Act-utilitarianism focuses on individual trade-offs and personal cost-benefit analysis, failing to recognise the significance of other-than-outcomes considerations and lacking an evaluation of the attitude or perspectives of people.

(2) By being typically local and dependent on the context, the act-utilitarian framework is greatly contingent on the behaviour of other agents as a fundamental factor for an action's moral evaluation.

(3) Kantian moral theories fail to make sense of environmentally harmful actions that are a by-product outcome of our production processes.

(4) By having difficulties in involving the whole natural world as possessing intrinsic value, Kantian ethics provides a formulation of imperfect duties that is nonetheless insufficient to tackle the peculiarity and significance of collective environmental harms.

It follows that an environmental ethics that is capable of making sense of the problem of inconsequentialism should possess the following (1*i*-4*i*) features:

(1*i*) Actions should not be evaluated entirely on the basis of outcomes through the act-utilitarian mechanism of individual trade-offs and personal cost-benefit

analysis, taking into account that the agent's perspective can also be subject to evaluation.

(2*i*) Evaluation should not be too narrowly focused on the local context and can involve patterns of behaviour among people, communities that might spread across a long time-span. Moreover, the behaviour of other individuals should not be the fundamental factor that shapes moral evaluation.

(3*i*) Evaluation should be sensitive not only to environmentally harmful actions that are necessarily an intended outcome of our actions but should take into account the, often unintended, effects and by-products of our production system.

(4*i*) Evaluation of morality should be aimed at capturing the significance of collective environmental harms and strive for their recognition.

Moreover, as pointed out when assessing the more recent versions of consequentialism and deontology, respectively Sander's (2007) and Korsgaard's (2004), an appropriate environmental ethics should be theoretically coherent in order not to lose its fundamental intuitive strength and should not involve impractical corollaries (5*i*). In light of the (1*i*-5*i*) requirements, this section will be focused on investigating whether virtue ethics can be a valid option to accommodate for such theoretical conditions.

A virtue ethics approach is not limited to (or entirely based on) an assessment of the consequences of given actions yet it evaluates the attitudes and perspectives of people, hence the condition (1*i*) according to which actions should not be evaluated entirely on the basis of outcomes but rather considering the agent's perspective is satisfied. In a virtue ethics account actions are not evaluated as particular instant-by-instant choices in a localised and isolated manner, but the focus lies instead on observing patterns of behaviour throughout a person's life-time and among people and communities, accommodating for condition (2*i*) that required the moral theory to be capable of capturing beyond spatially and temporally circumscribed contexts. Moreover, condition (2*i*) also demanded that the behaviour of other individuals should not be the

fundamental factor that shapes moral evaluation. A virtue ethics approach results suitable to accommodate for this condition as actions are not fundamentally dependent on others' behaviour. This is due to the fact that the source of evaluation largely lies upon one's own behaviour, deeming other agents' as a contingent factor outside moral evaluation. In this way, the fact that many people do (or do not) act in an environmentally-conscious way, is not a justifiable reason why I should not do my best in preventing further environmental harm. Moreover, since virtue ethics is concerned with promoting the 'good' that results from virtuous character traits, considering the worth of the nonhuman world alongside the human one, also those harmful environmental consequences that are unintended will play a role in the evaluation process. In this way, condition (3*i*) which strived for a moral scheme aimed at capturing the significance of collective environmental harms, even when they are a by-product of our production processes, will be fulfilled. Condition (4*i*) aimed at capturing the significance of collective environmental harm and strive for their recognition. Virtue ethics is capable to do so by condemning the environmental vices associated with the problem of inconsequentialism (such as arrogance, consumerism, cruelty, indifference) and conversely promoting environmental virtues (care, adaptability, moderation, solidarity, openness). Moreover, EVE is a more internally-coherent model compared to the contemporary versions of deontology and consequentialism. This stems from its function as a tool for shaping human identity and behaviour that, while applying ancient virtue ethical language to the environmental realm in new and innovative ways, still fundamentally relies on its premodern tradition, strongly maintaining its moral intuitions. Also, its theoretical strength it is not entirely dependent on the notion of absolute duties (with the subsequent distinction between perfect and imperfect ones) avoiding the demanding corollaries that a post-Kantian deontological defence would involve. In virtue of these two characteristics EVE is also able to accommodate for condition (5*i*) which required an internally consistent theory without the prospect of excessive demandingness. Overall, since it can appropriately respond to the (1*i*-5*i*) criteria, EVE is a better-suited moral theory that is capable to actively face and address collective action environmental problems such as climate change.

In addition to this, it is worth mentioning another advantage that virtue ethics can provide to the environmental ethicist. This concerns the observation that from a

linguistic point of view, the language and terminology of virtue ethics is far more diverse, rich, and nuanced than the languages of duty and consequences, as van Wensveen (1997, 3) puts it:

> "I will not retort with an apology on the surprising relevance of established Western virtue traditions in an ecological age. Yet I will draw attention to a particular type of moral language that pervades the writings of those who seek to respond to the environmental crisis. In this mushrooming ecological literature, we are encouraged to care for our bioregions, to respect trees, to show compassion for the suffering of animals, to be humble and wise in the use of technology, to be frugal and creative in the use of limited resources, and to have hope in the face of impending global disaster. Conversely, we are warned to avoid the arrogance of anthropocentrism, to stop being cruel in our treatment of animals, to admit that we habitually project our fears onto nature, and to put a halt on our greed and the resulting manipulative exploitation of natural resources. What would be an appropriate name for this language? The term 'virtue language' (which includes vices as well) does seem appropriate."

This feature allows for a more informative evaluation of behaviours than what the standard deontological and consequentialist categories focused on rights, duties, principles and effects can offer. This is an important factor that is specifically suitable to environmental ethics, where the problem of inconsequentialism and insignificance of its collective ecological harm is usually backed up by the fact that our behaviours are not clearly categorizable within the existing moral language. The richness of a virtue-related vocabulary, instead, can provide fruitful elements to conceptualise the complexity involved in the human relationship with the natural environment itself, which is "a source of basic resources, knowledge, recreation, renewal and for some, spiritual experience, but at the same time a threat that is indifferent to us" (Sandler 2007). Although virtue ethical language is capable of capturing a far more vast and diverse range of human expressions and experiences, its usefulness is often difficult to appreciate as it suffers from widespread reluctance. The reason lies in the fact that often words like 'virtue' and 'vice' carry the stigma of sounding preachy and old-fashioned (van Wensveen 1997, 8). In a sense, they remind us of the typical moralistic attitude that was often found in the traditional Christian doctrine. The salience of a renewed environmental virtue language can be grasped, then, only if one is open to get

rid of the stigmatised notions of virtue language and see some truth in the words of the author Turner (1996), who in his book "The Abstract Wild" affirms that: "Old ways of seeing do not change because of evidence, they change because a new language captures the imagination". To reinforce this claim it is worth echoing once again the words of van Wensveen (1997, 18 *my italicisation*):

> "In our current situation, we are sorely in need of creativity as we face the many ecological challenges ahead and as we increasingly find ourselves perplexed by the difficulties involved in adapting traditional moral languages to the needs of our age. *One more language is one more chance*. It would border on irresponsibility not to pay attention to the virtue discourse that emerges from the environmental movement."

Overall, given the useful tools that a virtue ethics can provide to tackle collective environmental harm and the fruitful richness of its language, it is vital, for environmental ethicists to engage with it and consider it as a worthwhile path alongside the more popular, already taken ones.

3.2 *The Charge of Anthropocentrism*

Throughout section 3.1 the usefulness of a virtue ethics approach applied to the environmental discourse has been defended given its suitability to the challenges posed by the problem of inconsequentialism and the vocabular enrichment provided by virtue ethical language. However, one could object to such account in light of the supposed theoretical weakness of EVE itself. In particular, the following sections will be devoted to a discussion of the two most fundamental objections that can be raised against EVE. Section 3.2 will be focused on addressing the charge of anthropocentrism, a fundamental criticism insofar as it is related to the environmental nature of EVE itself. In succinct terms, this objection questions the environmental substance of the moral theory by asking: "Is EVE truly environmental?". Subsequently, section 3.3 will be concerned with the second fundamental charge that can be raised against EVE. The latter regards another substantial element, its ethical character. Specifically, it claims that virtue ethics is unable to provide action-guidingness, hence,

it is normatively weak. Similarly to the charge of anthropocentrism, it could be said that, in simple terms, this critique is asking: “Is EVE truly normative?”.

As previously mentioned, environmental virtue ethics is concerned with the application of the virtue-and-vice language to the moral dimension that is concerned with humans’ relation to the natural environment. The worry that characterises the charge of anthropocentrism is that the features and models to evaluate actions and dispositions, since they are primarily targeted on individuals’ flourishing, are excessively human-centred. If the only thing that possesses final value is the flourishing of the possessor of virtues while everything else is valuable only insofar as it contributes to such flourishing, it seems rather demanding to apply this framework to the environmental cause. The reason lies in the purported clash between virtue ethics and the traditional raison d'être of environmental philosophy, conceived as a rejection of the human-centred and instrumental vision of the natural world. What triggered this vision was the realisation that the human species greatly enjoyed (and, to some extent, continues to enjoy) an unjustified preference over the other kinds of animal species and, in some cases, also over non-sentient natural entities, a vision that is defined *speciesism*. In his “Animal Liberation” Singer (1990) conceptually equalises the immorality of speciesism to that of other (more commonly identified) kinds of discrimination such as sexism or racism, defining it as “a prejudice or bias in favour of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species”. The issue with such an account is not the recognition that humans have moral standing but rather the unjustified assumption that humans, and only humans, could possess it. This is exactly the worry that brought Rolston III to title his essay ‘EVE: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole’. In the latter, he pinpoints that:

> “The human excellence view, if the half-truth is taken for the whole, falls into concern with what a virtue-enhancing view of self is. But we fully flourish not with the excellence of an "own self" but in celebrating the display of excellences in the surrounding world, both there with us and there without us.” (2005, 61)

Rolston III’s critique is one that targets the foundational nature of EVE, claiming that it necessarily involves the kind of instrumental anthropocentrism that was, in fact, the object of criticism by the first wave of environmental philosophers. It is not difficult to

sympathise with his concern when one first notices that the fundamental object of evaluation for an EVE approach resides precisely in our human character. In fact, historically, EVE has been largely eudaimonistic in nature, i.e., its normative strength was specifically focused on human flourishing. Given the Aristotelic legacy of this concept, which was openly eudaimonistic, it could be easily affirmed that when aiming to act virtuously, an agent is only concerned with his or her own well-being. This kind of self-concern could easily degenerate in a sort of *ethical egoism* that, as hinted previously, is completely at odds with the real purpose of environmental ethics. However, the claim that EVE is, in a dangerous way, necessarily resulting in a problematic form of egoism presupposes a conception of its theoretical construct that is, at best, largely underdeveloped.

While it is true that many of the dispositions might be triggered by the willingness to become a better person, hence, a self-regarding motivation, this does not necessarily generate the kind of egoistic outcome expressed by Rolston III. Within a eudaimonistic ethical theory, the so-called other-regarding virtues are no less important than self-regarding ones. If benevolence – or instead any other-regarding kind of disposition – is a virtue, it follows that acting benevolently will usually be good for the benevolent agent. At the same time, to say that acting in a benevolent way might make one a better person is different than saying that one acts benevolently *in order to* become a better person. "The benevolent agent does not act solely from a concern to promote her own well-being; indeed, if she did so, she would not be genuinely benevolent" (James 2006). By the same token, one should not care for the environment and its natural entities with, in mind, the aim of gaining a mere personal benefit. Rather, the agent should be committed to respect and enjoy the non-human world itself, analogously to what occurs in the case of human friendship, where the concern for the welfare of the other should be sincere in order to be defined true affection (Sandler 2007, 51).

Per contra, Rolston III could object that since a reference to the agent's character still remains a relevant feature, it is rather impossible for an environmental virtue ethics to value nature for 'its own sake', in an objective manner that stands outside any attribution of meaning from human beings. "The wild other does not become valuable if and when it results in something valuable for me. It is valuable for what it is, whether I am around or not" (Rolston III 2005, 70). This is not an unusual concern in

environmental ethics, as demonstrated by the vast literature that has developed after the famous Sylvan's (1980) 'Last Man Argument'. The latter is a thought experiment where we are invited to imagine a world in collapse and where humanity is reduced to a single last person who then proceeds to eliminate, to the best of their abilities "every living thing, animal or plant". With the demise of the last person on earth (which, supposedly, occurs immediately before the wholesale destruction), there are no humans who could possibly be harmed by such an act and so, according to the "human chauvinist" Western ethical system[16] the act is permissible (Hyde and Weber 2019). Yet, the feeling that what he does is *wrong* triggers the need for a new environmental ethic that is capable of making sense of the wrongness in the last man's act. Along the lines of Sylvan's last man argument, Rolston III's aim is not only that of striving for a way to approach the environmental question that is clearly non-anthropocentric, but more precisely, he aims to find a paradigm that expresses the value of nature completely transcending the existence of humans themselves. In a way, the environmental ethical paradigm envisaged by him should be not only non-anthropocentric but also *non-anthropogenic*. Yet to search for a non-anthropogenic notion of value is, in James' (2006) words, 'nothing more than an idle wheel'. The reason for this lies in the inherent *relational* nature that is entailed in the concept of 'value' itself, considered an inevitable human creation. If the term 'value' is meaningful at all, it should necessarily assume the existence of an evaluating subject and, correspondingly, an evaluated object (Richards 2013, 43). Abstaining from a recognition of this kind would practically amount to the endorsement of a particular kind of non-relational concept of value that is strongly non-anthropocentric, called biocentrism or ecocentrism. Advocates of the latter affirm that intrinsic ecological values are there in the natural world independently of the fact that human beings will recognise them as such and act to preserve or respect them. The values, in this viewpoint, are part of the furniture of the universe and express their claims regardless of whether there is any audience, let alone an audience that is receptive to their claims (O'Neill 1997, 127).

[16] Sylvan (1973, 15) calls the principle of *basic human chauvinism* the one that affirms that "One should be able to do what he wishes, providing (1) that he does not harm others and (2) that he is not likely to harm himself irreparably".

This viewpoint, however, is not immune from theoretical complexities since endorsing it would amount to admit the plausibility of scenarios that would be regarded, by most people, quite uncanny. One of them could be the possibility that, for instance, the inherent worth of a wild flower or, even more drastically, of a deadly virus, could overstep the act of saving a human life. Given the problematic corollaries of a strictly ecocentric approach, it seems to be the case that the charge of anthropocentrism it is difficult to avoid not only for an EVE but rather for the whole enterprise of moral philosophy per se, including a deontological or consequentialist outlook. EVE, in this regard, is only formally anthropocentric inasmuch as it admits its inherent human-centredness without committing to a substantive egoistic claim regarding our relations with the non-human environment (James 2006). Thus, to the question of whether EVE is truly environmental, one could definitely provide a positive answer by claiming that its human-centredness is not a problematic feature that displays a theoretical deficiency but rather it is a general tendency inherently built-in our moral thinking.

3.3 *Can Environmental Virtue Ethics be Normative?*

The first objection to EVE, as examined in section 3.2, regarded its 'environmental' nature. Equally important, however, is the second fundamental charge that can be raised. This objection is concerned with its 'ethical' character, specifically, the claim that EVE is unable to give action-guiding principles hence inevitably weak from a normative point of view. The following section will then be focused on responding to the criticism: "Is EVE truly normative?".

The normative force in an ethical theory lies in its ability to provide action-guiding principles. In the case of EVE, the worry is that the guidance that the theory is able to offer is insufficient compared to that delivered by deontology or utilitarianism. In order to fully explore the normativity of EVE it is necessary to have a look at Hursthouse's (1996) writings, which are considered the starting point for an articulated defence of EVE. As previously mentioned, the criticism holds that there is no point in articulating the problem in virtue ethics' terms since it will certainly fail to clearly tell us what we should do in practical matters. I will argue, drawing upon Hursthouse, that this is not a problematic feature of virtue ethics since the EVE

framework can be normative in the same way that a deontological or consequentialist approaches are.

At first sight, given the focus on 'agents' rather than 'actions' typical of EVE, the concern with the lack of action-guidingness seems duly justified. It seems that the tools that EVE can provide are only concerned with 'Being' rather than 'Doing', leaving us hopeless in the face of the question of questions: 'What should I do now?'. Frasz (1993, 262) perfectly expresses this worry when he claims that: "We are not told specifically how to act but told instead to 'think like a mountain' (if we listen to Aldo Leopold) or to 'monkey-wrench' destructive projects (if we listen to Edward Abbey)." These prescriptions, while being certainly suggestive and metaphorical, fall short in providing an informative advice for our non-ideal real-world decisions. In this way, EVE is failing us precisely when we need it the most, as a form of guidance in our ever-complex contemporary world. This is especially evident in cases of environmental concern, where the enumeration of environmentally-friendly dispositions or virtues usually indicates the sort of good environmental behaviours one should adopt in very general terms but does not provide a clear and specific guidance and set of prescriptions in real-world circumstances and issues that are available to everyone at all the time (Sandler 2007, 97). Let us then explore the ethical theories that, instead, are said to provide useful guidance.

Utilitarianism, as mentioned in the first chapter, affirms that an action is right insofar as it produces the best consequences. But what counts as 'the best consequences'? A second step of specification about those 'best consequences' is surely needed before claiming that the theory can provide us with substantive moral guidance. For instance, it might be pointed out that the best consequences are those that maximise pleasure and minimise pain. By the same token, deontology claims that the rightness of an action lies in its accordance to a correct moral rule or principle. In the same way that utilitarianism needs a specification of what counts as the best consequences, deontology has to clarify what counts as the correct moral rule or principle. Only after the provision of this second premise, for instance, by identifying the right moral law in its capacity to be universalizable or in accordance with God's commands, action-guidance can be said to be granted. The same holds for a virtue ethical account, where an action is right 'when it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in those

circumstances' (Hursthouse 1996, 22). The need for a specification of who is actually a virtuous person and what might count as a virtue, is, also in this case, the crucial component that makes the ethical scheme truly normative. Thus, the principle of right action proposed by the virtue ethicist is functioning in exactly the same way as a utilitarian or deontological account, by providing an analogous sort of specification (Hursthouse 1996, 22-3). It is only after substantiating the content of virtues (for instance by enumerating them, similarly to the enumeration of deontological principles) and turning them into evaluative concepts that the moral considerability of different agents can then be determined.

Hursthouse, for instance, affirms that to evaluate the rightness of an action one has to look at what the virtuous person might do in the same context:

> "If I acknowledge that I am far from perfect, and I am quite unclear what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstance which I find myself, the obvious thing to do is to go and ask one, should this be possible. [...] This gives a straightforward explanation of an aspect of our moral life which should not be ignored, namely the fact that we do seek moral guidance from people who we think are morally better than ourselves. When I am looking for an excuse to do something I have a horrible suspicion is wrong, I ask my moral inferiors (or peers) 'Wouldn't you do such and such if you were in my shoes?'. But when I am anxious to do what is right, and do not see my way clear, I go to people I respect and admire – people who I think are kinder, more honest, more just, wiser, than I am myself – and ask them what they would do in my circumstances." (1996, 24)

To deny the evidence that often we seek help from virtuous people would be denying a very relevant epistemic reality. However, there are many cases in which the formula 'what the virtuous would do' does not really help us. First of all, we might lack the presence of virtuous people whom we admire that can help us in our everyday decisions. Secondly, even if we might allow for an ideal external observer that is all-knowledgeable and perfectly virtuous, it seems quite hard to follow a rule 'just because the virtuous person said so'. Also, the cases where our moral or personal character is completely different from that of the virtuous person might indicate that what is the best thing to do for a virtuous person is not always the best thing to do for me, a person who possesses a different character, experience and emotional sensitivity. Instead, the

situation should be contextualized and should take into account facts about the agent and the circumstances that might be neglected in a qualified-agent or impartial-observer principle, considering also the agent's character, resources and abilities. This is important in environmental decision-making, where it is clear that, for instance, the moral demand to purchase the latest eco-friendly but costly product is weakened if the choice is the result of a persistent low-income and difficult economic situation. The evidence from these moral difficulties should be enough to supplement Hursthouse's intuition on the role of moral models with further elements in order to identify a virtue ethical principle of right action. Hence, along with the influence of mentors and role models, also case studies, collaborative discourse and moral wisdom lie at the core of a good decision-making process triggered by virtue ethics concerns (Sandler 2007, 98). Yet, what exactly is the guide that virtue ethics can provide us with?

If we recognise that there is a virtue of 'charity', the corresponding v-rule would be spelt in the form of 'act charitably'. Hursthouse (1996, 25), defines *v-rules* the instantiations of different virtues into their respective prescriptions:

> "Not only does each virtue generate a prescription – act honestly, charitably, justly – but each vice a prohibition – do not act dishonestly, uncharitably, unjustly."

The same kind of virtue-substantiation appears when we apply the virtue-ethical principle of right action to the issues of environmental nature. In longitudinal collective action problems that, like climate change, could compromise the habitat and development of spatially or temporally distant people, the v-rule of 'sustainability' can come to help us in our decision-making. The latter is 'a disposition to avoid compromising the availability of basic environmental goods' (Sandler 2007, 98). This is a remarkable feature given the lack of opportunities and capacity for the disadvantaged people (geographically and temporally distant) to trigger a process of cultural and ethical transformation. On the other hand, the opposite to a virtue is a 'vice', intended as actions and dispositions where one fails to do the virtuous thing. Here the role of mentors, which was the benchmark of Hursthouse's approach, while being admittedly limited if taken as the whole story, is still retaining remarkable importance.

One could accept this kind of similarity between virtue ethics, deontology and utilitarianism in the way they substantiate their normative prescription, yet refuse to come to terms with the possibility that an EVE can give *enough* guidance in our everyday decision-making. In particular, one of the biggest concerns with a virtue ethics approach lies in the so-called 'conflict problem'. This is the question that arises when, while following the normative virtuous path, we are stuck with requirements that point at two completely opposite courses of action. However, while this critique is rightly pointed at a virtue-ethical approach, the other available normative theories are far from being immune from it. In virtue ethics, it is not a straightforward process to clearly identify which are the virtues I should develop in a certain situation, whether my action will successfully fulfil them, and what to do when they conflict. Yet these are the same difficulties encountered by a deontological account when trying to figure out which moral principle is the overarching one. In the latter, the possibility that, in concrete situations, two inviolable duties might conflict is not an unusual occurrence. 'Respect autonomy', for example, might often conflict with the prescription of 'prevent suffering'. Hence, the difficulty of a virtue ethics in providing clear and determinate guidance in non-ideal scenarios is not a feature exclusive to this ethical reasoning but rather a general characteristic that is well-known by traditional environmental ethicists. The only understandable criticism of this type might come from utilitarians, whose moral dilemmas' difficulty only resides in assessing cases where the 'greatest' good is said to be reached simultaneously for two different actions (Hursthouse 1996, 28). Yet overall, the aim to find a perfect practical algorithm for all moral agents, in all the instances where we are stuck with a decision-making dilemma is usually a quite demanding requirement. Of course, this is not theoretically equivalent as dismissing the importance of considerations about the normative strength of a moral theory but rather an observation that, given the moral fallible creatures that we are, an approach that can do justice to such feature can fruitfully bring important insights to the philosophical debate. Hence, the indeterminacy of v-rules needs not to be an insurmountable obstacle for a virtue-ethical approach, exactly like it is not for the deontological one (O'Neill 1997, 199). Contrary to the search for principles and rules that apply to everyone at the same degree, and through which it is always possible to determine the right course of action, virtue ethics acknowledges the limits of this approach and the reality of situational judgment, hence it resorts to provide resources and tools that assist agents to make good judgments. Thus, engaging in practical

decision-making under a virtue-ethical approach, while admittedly not an easy task, remains possible.

By substantiating the different characteristics of human virtues, an EVE approach is able to be normative in the same way that a deontological or utilitarian are. Central to the discussion is the importance of moral wisdom, which suggests that 'becoming virtuous' is a process that should start with an appropriate moral education. Moral knowledge, in this conception, is different than mathematical knowledge since it is difficult to be acquired solely by attending lectures (Hursthouse 1996, 29). For this reason, it often requires personal reflection, experience, and the development of sensitivity in recognising which and to what degree are certain virtues operative in a given moral quandary. A normative theory that is able to accommodate for this feature is, it has been argued, worth to stand as a valid normative framework along the traditional deontological and utilitarian ones.

3.4 *The Challenges of Consumerism*

Until this point, the virtue ethics approach has been argued to be useful in light of its capacity to give reasons to tackle the problem of inconsequentialism and minimise our ecological impact given the collective environmental harm that results from our scattered individual actions. In this last section, I will explore the applicability of a virtue ethics framework to the problem of consumerism, or more specifically, to the so-called phenomena of conspicuous consumption. The reason for doing so lies in the observation that considerations of the kind 'what sort of person do I want to be' are relevant factors that shape consumers' decision-making. In this regard, a virtue-ethical approach is able to grasp instances that a strict consequentialist or deontological approach would only partially consider.

The high-level of consumption patterns that, starting with the West, came to be a characterising aspect of the global scenario is undoubtedly a remarkable feature. Clearly, it is one of the factors that best represented the impressive rise in the standard of living for the global population, especially in terms of their material well-being. However, what I am concerned with here goes beyond the uncontroversial rise in the living standard of millions. My specific focus is instead the gradual change in the

evaluative disposition towards material items and their accumulation. In the global capitalist scenario, material accumulation is no doubt an aim that has been progressively valued at the same level (or, in some instances, at a higher level) than the valuation of people, relationships or accomplishments. The height of this cultural process lies in what has been defined 'Conspicuous Consumption', a term introduced by the Norwegian-American economist Veblen in his 1899 book "The Theory of the Leisure Class". The latter indicates a social phenomenon of material accumulation that is strictly linked to our personal sphere. The acquisition of new and expensive items came with an emotional and moral attachment to them. The underlying motivation behind this is the need to display a high degree of wealth and income as opposed to the fulfilment of the consumer's 'real' needs.

To this regard, De Geus (2003, 32-3) identifies some factors that have historically contributed to the current reputation of consumptive dispositions. According to him, the focus on the Lockean heritage typical of traditional liberalism, with its emphasis on individual private appropriation of natural resources and its assumption of an infinite and always-regenerative nature, was one of the underlying reasons behind the spread of a mass consumption culture and of conspicuous dispositions, thus, indirectly also contributing to the current problematic ecological state of affairs. This is because the implicit conception of the Good Life in the Lockean credo is expressed through material acquisition and private property, contributing to fuel a never-ending search for consumer goods (De Geus 2003, 34). This culture of excessive consumerism, however, can be seen as a double-edged sword insofar as it creates problematic consequences in two distinct but closely interrelated realms.

On the one hand the catastrophic effects on the environment are gradually becoming clearer thanks to the work of scientists and researchers worldwide. In 1996, for instance, the anthropologist Wilk warned that:

> "There are good reasons for concern about the environmental impacts of five to ten billion people consuming at the presently high levels of the developed countries of Europe, Japan, and North America. With high economic growth rates in many parts of the developing world, and the rapid spread of electronic media, advertising, and marketing, the next two decades are likely to see a major

> transformation in the consumption styles of the majority of the world's population. The global environmental consequences will be dramatic; comparable to the impact of the industrial revolution, which affected a much smaller part of the globe."

This is not surprising given the fact that massive material consumption is the first triggering factor that lies at the beginning of the production chain which requires a vast use of fossil fuels and water in order to produce energy, not to mention the impact of plastic packaging and the problem of waste disposal. Particularly interesting in this regard is the attempt to quantify the human impact on the environment in terms of the number of 'earths' that would be necessary to sustain the current Western consumptive lifestyle. In 2016, for instance, 4.97 earths were said to be needed if, globally, everyone would have the consumption habits of an average United States' citizens[17]. This is a figure that should be fundamental to consider in the discussion around the economic rise of newly-developed countries and the way of ensuring a rise in their citizens' welfare, stressing the significant role of new environmentally-friendly technologies.

On the other hand, alongside consideration about the environmental impact, excessive consumerism has consequences at the level of our personal and interpersonal development. As economists suggest with the notion of 'decreasing marginal utility', after an initial increase in consumption and material well-being, the kind of satisfaction gained by an additional unit of goods proportionally decreases. This 'utility-decrease', however, is often accompanied by a simultaneous persistent need for consumption that fosters perpetual discontent and inhibits the development of a healthy mental state, with repercussions on the overall personal and social well-being of individuals. While asserting the existence of a causal relationship between excessive consumerism and frustration is definitely not an easy task, given the fact that the causal link could run both ways[18]; identifying an underlying pattern between the two can be crucial in order to have a clearer picture of the phenomenon. The psychologist Kasser provides a scientific explanation of the way in which the contemporary culture

[17] Global Footprint Network: https://data.footprintnetwork.org/#/countryTrends?cn=231&type=earth
[18] For instance, one could have excessive consumptive dispositions as a result of precedent personal discomfort.

of consumerism influences our psychological health. In his research summary, he claims that:

> "Existing scientific research on the value of materialism yields clear and consistent findings. People who are highly focused on materialistic value have lower personal well-being and psychological health than those who believe that materialistic pursuits are relatively unimportant. These relationships have been documented in samples of people ranging from the wealthy to the poor, from teenagers to the elderly, and from Australians to South Koreans. Several investigators have reported similar results using a variety of ways of measuring materialism. The studies document that strong materialistic values are associated with a pervasive undermining of people's well-being, from low life satisfaction and happiness, to depression and anxiety, to physical problems such as headaches, and to personality disorders, narcissism, and antisocial behavior." (2002, 22)

Kasser's findings should not be interpreted as a dismissal of the clearly insurmountable role of material well-being in the life of human beings. We are creatures heavily dependent on the natural environment for survival and our needs are not only spiritual or moral but importantly material. Rather, his insights should be regarded as an important warning on the intricate relation between a kind of conspicuous and obsessive disposition towards materialism and its repercussions on human welfare.

Given this two-fold aspect of environmental and human degradation, the realm of consumerism has progressively acquired popularity in the academic debate, up to the point that disciplines such as 'consumer ethics' and 'ethical consumerism' started to become more and more prominent. The latter are concerned with investigating "the moral principles and standards that guide the behaviour of individuals or groups as they obtain, use and dispose of goods and services" (Muncy and Vitell 1992, 298). Most of the research in this field emphasizes how consumers have underlying deontological or consequentialist normative reasons for the consumptive choices they make. However, the role of different concerns more strictly related to a virtue ethical account such as *identity* and the sense of *self* recently became a relevant factor in explaining most of consumer behaviours, as noticed by Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma (2014, 511-12):

> "Consumers engage in identity projects by actively re-elaborating the symbolic meanings offered in the market to reaffirm their personal and social characteristics as well as to promote their identity and lifestyle goals. This is true not only for members of specific groups such as voluntary simplifiers, eco-Christians, kibbutz dwellers, the Pennsylvania Dutch Amish, downshifters, slow food movement followers, green activists and the like but also for non-affiliated individuals who, despite a pervasive consumer culture, use consumer goods to express their feelings and beliefs, build relationships, and create a sense of identity for themselves. [...] With its emphasis on character development, virtue ethics provides a developmental dynamic absent in both consequentialism and deontology."

Given the evidence that considerations of the kind 'what sort of person do I want to be' are determinant factors in consumers' decision-making attitudes, a virtue ethics approach is capable of grasping instances that a strict consequentialist or deontological approach would only partially consider. How can a virtue ethics do so? To answer this question, one has to look at the so-called 'green' virtues or virtues associated with the environmental field. Among them there are those of sustainability such as frugality and temperance, those of community like wonder and attentiveness and those of environmental activism such as cooperativeness and perseverance (Sandler 2007). A common feature they all possess is a strong nexus with the notion of *moderation*. The latter can be defined as "the proportionate use of resources that befits the standards imposed by the practice to which the consumption act refers and furthers the goods of the reference practice, that of the consumer's personal life narrative, and those of his/her community and moral tradition" (Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma 2014, 520). In the realm of consumption habits, the virtue of moderation can be said to stand in the middle of an attitude towards overconsumption at one end and the one towards underconsumption at the other. A disposition to be moderate and to consciously deliberate in our consumptive decisions is quite at odds with the need to raise profits that lies at the basis of current marketing and advertising strategies.

Virtues of temperance or moderation, while being far from our contemporary realities in Western industrialised democracies, are at the basis of a good strategy to ensure the

availability of environmental resources. This is due to their important role in exemplifying the need to ensure human (but not only human) survival without jeopardising the opportunities and needs of future generations. The prescription of these virtues needs to be contextualized in every individual life and cannot possibly require the kind of 'ascetic' disposition that are completely at odds with our society. However, they are exactly what is needed to tackle the problem of inconsequentialism and foster a transformation in the consumption habits of the citizens in Western industrialised countries. Not only different, 'more virtuous' consumptive dispositions[19] will foster human flourishing but, most importantly, they will be the source from where an ecologically-minded change in institutional and regulative setting can be possible and long-lasting. Moreover, the relevance of a virtue discourse has been increasingly acknowledged not only by moral philosophers but also (equally importantly) by the scientific world. For instance, in her publication on *Nature* (2007) the Professor of Science and Technology Studies Sheila Jasanoff encouraged the cultivation of virtues to tackle climate change when she affirmed that:

> "Policies based on humility might: redress inequality before finding out how the poor are hurt by climate change; value greenhouse gases differently depending on the nature of the activities that give rise to them; and uncover the sources of vulnerability in fishing communities before installing expensive tsunami detection systems. This call for humility is a plea for policy-makers to cultivate, and for universities to teach, modes of knowing that are often pushed aside in expanding scientific understanding and technological capacity. It is a request for research on what people value and why they value it. It is a prescription to supplement science with the analysis of those aspects of the human condition that science cannot easily illuminate."

Overall, the words of Professor Jasanoff about the importance of the virtue of 'humility' clearly indicate the need of a progressive convergence between technical, scientific solutions and moral, philosophical considerations in order to effectively tackle our ecological challenges.

[19] What I mean here with using the words 'more virtuous' does not necessarily entails an exclusive moderation in consumption, hence a willingness to live a more frugal and austere life, but also (and importantly) a concern with what are the most environmentally-friendly options in the market and how can innovative technologies support them.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been concerned with identifying which moral theory is best equipped to face our contemporary ecological challenges, in particular, collective action problems. The claim that a virtue ethical approach is better-equipped compared to deontology and consequentialism has been exposed. Virtue ethics, it has been argued, is better able to make sense of the moral complexity involved in environmental issues. In the first chapter, a particular kind of moral gap has been explored, the one between the collective actions of individuals and the resulting environmental harm they produce. The so-called *problem of inconsequentialism* has been examined as a particular issue of collective action problems, taking into consideration one of the most exemplificatory cases: i.e., anthropogenic climate change.

Subsequently, the need for an appropriate environmental ethics to make sense of and address the problem of inconsequentialism has been outlined, given the moral complexity involved in climate change and the failure of 'it makes an insignificant difference' arguments to do so. The second chapter was devoted to an assessment of the two major normative theories in environmental ethics, consequentialism and deontology. In particular, they were not considered and assessed in their normative strength as such but in relation to the environmental challenges posed by problem of inconsequentialism as understood by Sandler.

Traditional and contemporary versions of deontology and consequentialism turned out ill-suited to effectively tackle longitudinal collective action problems linked to the environmental sphere. Given this, in the third chapter, another approach to environmental ethics has been investigated: a virtue-ethical one. Its suitability in recognising the moral significance of our harmful environmental actions has been advanced. Consequently, the most fundamental objections raised against EVE have been exposed and counterargued; specifically, the criticisms that EVE is too anthropocentric and not sufficiently normative, i.e., that it gives no action-guiding principles. To these challenges, the idea that a virtue ethics is not problematically anthropocentric as it may first appear, and that it can be normative in the same way of strict deontological or consequentialist accounts has been contended. Finally, the last section provided an application of virtue ethics in tackling environmentally-related

global challenges such as excessive consumerism and conspicuous consumption. A virtue ethics approach cannot only give important tools to make sense and address of the problem of inconsequentialism but can importantly nullify it and ultimately erase it completely. Owing to this corollary is the observation that within a virtue-ethics account the thought that my small and insignificant action might be inconsequential to effectively address the harm does not persistently stops me from undertaking it. Hence, if one recognizes the importance of a collective response to global climate change, then a focus on moral education and the development of human virtues should be the societal change that is urgently needed.

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