

The Ethics of Nature

Celia E. Deane-Drummond

Chester College of Higher Education



The Ethics of Nature

NEW DIMENSIONS TO RELIGIOUS ETHICS

Series Editors: Frank G. Kirkpatrick and Susan Frank Parsons

Trinity College, Hartford, US, and Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge, UK

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Preface

In consideration of how are we to treat the natural world, we are faced with a number of possibilities. The first is that the context in which we live is one dominated by scientific knowledge. There is no escaping the rise of all kinds of modern biological techniques that become currency for popular debates via the media. At the same time, this new biology has precedents in Darwinian evolutionary science that has come to be accepted almost as uncontroversial fact, rather than hypothesis. Yet Darwinian science has also yielded the concept of ecology, one that has overgrown its biological limitations and become a political concept, but one ironically now turned against the perceived environmental damage wrought by science and technology.

The ethics of 'nature' has commonly been interpreted narrowly in terms of environmental concern, with a shift towards endearing value not just to the human species, but also to non-human nature. Indeed, what 'nature' is has been defined variously as either that over and against humans, or inclusive of human beings, with a variety of perceptions emerging at different stages in history.¹ Important though these discussions are, they rarely integrate a scientific understanding of biology with philosophical and ethical demands of the natural world. The paucity of the scientific discussion may arise from a common hostility towards science by those interested in environmental ethics, it becomes a source of blame for current problems, so its discoveries in and of themselves are barely worth detailed consideration. On the other hand, those engaging in debates in science and religion have sought to revise their understanding of God to fit into current scientific evolutionary theories, where this time ethical concern moves to the background. The challenge of a Christian ethics of nature is not just how to delineate the nature and task of what is an appropriate Christian ethic, but also how to take into account the scientific understanding of what nature might be. Of course, a full account of all the various biological sciences is beyond the scope of this book, yet it is my contention that ethical reconstruction that ignores relevant aspects of science runs

the risk of evacuating any means of challenging the way science might progress in the future. For the power of science needs to be met on its own terms, rather than dismissed as irrelevant.

The scope of an ethics of nature depends partly on what is understood by the term 'natural'. Does it mean that which is of instrumental use for human culture? Or is nature simply everything that exists, including human beings? Or again is nature that which is opposed to artefact, products of human imagination and ingenuity? Ever since Darwin the continuity between humanity and the natural world has received a much greater emphasis, though modern scientific methodology requires human detachment from its objects, in this case the natural world. Yet, ironically perhaps, overall the tension implicit in Darwin's theory has not necessarily encouraged a more inclusive view of the natural, but rather an instrumental understanding of the natural, its particular usefulness for humanity. Such an instrumental view finds its expression in the most recent development in biology, genetic engineering. On the other hand, the implicitly inclusive view finds its expression in subjects such as ecology and ethology, though such inclusion is thwarted by the specialization of the sciences whereby human ecology is split off from the ecology of plant and animal communities. I suggest that the idea that we are apart from nature needs to be set in the context of awareness that we are part of nature as well. One cannot be considered without the other. Hence an ethics of nature needs to include not just how we treat the natural world around us, our particular environment, but also who we are as persons, our human nature. Furthermore, contrary to much popular thought, I suggest that it is in consideration of our human nature, particularly the virtues, that clues about relating to the natural world in an appropriate and responsible way can be sought.

From the perspective of Christian theology one of the most popular models for envisioning such a relationship with the natural order is not virtue, but stewardship. One of the difficulties of this idea is that stewardship is often associated with an impersonal attitude to nature; it becomes 'resources' to be managed for human good. While it is possible to counter this claim by situating the idea of stewardship in less anthropocentric terms, the difficulty remains that our basic attitudes to the natural world still go unchallenged. Stewardship implies an active verb, a doing, but where it does point to the character of the agents it too easily implies condescension towards non-human nature.² It is my suggestion that a refocusing on agents first is concomitant with right action, while still affirming the necessity to act. I also suggest that the combination of stillness and action, of appropriate reflection and concerted judgement, find their most cogent expression in the theology of Aquinas, in particular his understanding of the virtues and practical wisdom or prudence. Prudence was, for Aquinas, a reasoning activity. However, reason meant a 'passage to reality', not narrowly conceived as a form of scepticism characteristic of Descartes and his followers.³

A return to the classics and a recovery of virtue might seem strange to modern ears, especially in the light of the breakdown of the classical model of cosmology following the discoveries of modern science. Is the classical notion of goodness

tenable in the light of the pessimism or even pointlessness implicit in scientific understandings of the future? In fact, those who seek to reclaim theology in the light of the sciences normally do so by modifying their understanding of God so that it fits in with the latest scientific discoveries, or at least is commensurate with them. But classical theism was the presupposition of the early scientists, including key players such as Isaac Newton, as John Brooke has adeptly reminded us.⁴ Hence, to assume that we necessarily need to modify our understanding of God seems to me to rest on a false premise. Of course, some of the ways in which creation is understood need to be updated in the light of modern knowledge and more contemporary understanding of the social and political structures of society. However, I suggest in this book that a classical model of God and creation does not need to be discarded in its entirety, even though it may need some revision. Rather, the strength of the classic is in its ability to withstand the test of time in a way that other modern renderings of the relationship between God and the world, such as we find in process thought, cannot. This does not mean that theology is alien to science; instead, it insists that it does have a contribution to make, and in this sense it can recover its voice, rather than being marginalized as irrelevant.⁵

Of course, the sciences themselves are beginning to accept that their work does not just have practical significance, but also raises areas of ethical concern and consideration. It has grown into a field known as ‘bioethics’. Such attempts to find ethical principles, mostly by medical practitioners and scientists, have been summarily dismissed by Michael Banner. He is sharp in his critique that such ‘bioethics’ is completely new in its insights; moreover, he believes that any attempt to relate ethics to pseudoscientific principles is bound to fail. For:

According to this picture, the scientist generates a prediction by combining the facts (or initial conditions) with a theory. Here, in the case of ethics, if we believe this model, a similar procedure can be followed, with values doing the work of the theory, and the result being not a prediction but a prescription.⁶

Moreover, the problem is deeper than this in that there is a misconception of the facts on which values are supposed to work. Ideas, such as stewardship, are paraded in the literature, but how can we assume a sense of responsibility:

unless we have some account of, say, human flourishing, and furthermore, an account of the boundaries of human being? The ritual incantation of ‘beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, confidentiality and autonomy’ serves no purpose at this point. What we need in order to apply these values, let alone to understand why we should apply them, is an understanding of the reality which demands and constrains their application. Moral practice, in other words, presupposes metaphysics.⁷

Yet despite Banner’s critique of the ‘rich variety of intellectual confusion, unintelligibility and inadequacy, which, taken as a whole, is known as “bioethics”’,⁸ the fact that scientists are at least willing to consider ethical issues is surely a positive

development. If those trained in the humanities were to attempt to undertake scientific research, equally stinging critiques could be levelled at their early efforts.

I suggest that an ethics of nature that is divorced from all scientific knowledge is as problematic as the caricature of ethics undertaken by those biologists subject to Banner's critique outlined above.⁹ Furthermore, ethically such studies may not be as far off the mark as Banner suggests. For the incantation of 'beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, confidentiality and autonomy' is simply a secularized version of much older concepts of virtue that have their roots in the classical tradition. Of course, Banner does recognize this as characteristic of fragments of what was once a coherent moral discourse. I suggest that rather than criticism of the bearers of these fragments for their failure to recognize the roots of their moral concern, what is needed is a *reminder* of the source and fullness from which these fragments originated. It is, then, a recovery of the sense of history, but one that can also be shown to be thoroughly relevant to the contemporary moral problems that we face today.

One might ask: is such a return to a classical view possible in a post-Enlightened world? It is my suggestion in this book that not only is such a return possible, it is also feasible to realign such a view with an acknowledgement of the biological processes inherent in Darwin's theory of evolution. I choose these words carefully, for while Darwin's theory is the best available theory yet found to account for the variety of biological organisms, it is not necessarily the exclusive theory in a way that some biologists would have us believe. Indeed, I would strongly resist attempts to break the scope of Darwinianism beyond the boundaries of biological variation in order to account for differences in human culture in the way that sociobiology has attempted in more recent years.¹⁰ This book does not include a detailed discussion of human evolutionary origins in relation to ethics, though I do touch on Darwinian theory, since this is an inevitable context in which contemporary science has developed. A close examination of historical and contemporary factors implicit in Darwinian theory in relation to ethics would be the subject of a complete volume.¹¹ Instead, I explore different areas of concern for those interested in developing an ethic of nature.

In the first chapter I set out the ethical framework for the following discussion. I argue specifically for a recovery of a primacy of virtue ethics within a Christian framework, rather than other alternatives that rely exclusively on either deontology or consequentialism. I suggest that virtue ethics is consistent with Christian theology and that an understanding of the classical cardinal virtue of prudence, rooted in the theological virtues of charity, hope and faith and set in the context of the three other cardinal virtues of justice, fortitude and temperance, is relevant for ethical consideration of the natural world. I draw particularly on virtues as discussed in Thomas Aquinas, while recognizing the importance of natural law. In particular, I spell out his understanding of practical wisdom or prudence and show how it is of particular importance to an ethics of nature. Prudence, broadly speaking, is the means through which the good can be achieved, understood in terms of goodness as given by God. Prudence is practical wisdom in human affairs, but wisdom properly speaking is also right judgement about God. Indeed, an ethic of wisdom

does not need to deny natural law, but sees its proper place as the framework in which the virtues can grow and develop. I also suggest that the theological category that we need to recover in order to ground any ethical discussion is the idea of the world as *created*. Such a recovery might seem obvious, though rather than simply referring to the idea of fixed order and forms, the more common stereotypical rendering of scholastic thought, the idea of creation by contemplating God as Creator also opens up a deeper sense of the mystery of God and our ability to understand God's creation.

None the less, the search for wisdom has practical consequences for ethical deliberation on all aspects of the natural world. In the chapter 2 I deal specifically with the problems encountered by environmental issues. The somewhat stale philosophical debate between anthropocentric and biocentric views can be by-passed by asking another question altogether, namely what does it mean to act prudently and with justice in the context of environmental issues? Furthermore, I suggest that those who are more inclined to a biocentric view have read into ecological science their own particular political and social constructs. The view of ecology as stable systems needs to take account of more recent research that suggests the opposite. Once we remove the idea of an ordered stable system from ecology, the premise of much of the philosophical secular debate seems to evaporate. Yet this need not deny that ordering is in principle possible, but it is an ordering against a backcloth of fragility and instability.

In chapter 3 I consider the question of justice further by offering a critique of current thinking in animal ethics. I critique the work of Singer, Regan, Clark and Linzey. Christian reflection on animal ethics has been dominated particularly by the work of Andrew Linzey.¹² Of course, our understanding of animal ethics is dependent on our particular view of human persons, who we are *vis-à-vis* the animal world. I consider the clash between Aquinas's own instrumental ethical stance towards animals and his ontology, which seems to suggest the opposite, namely that animals and humans are closely related forms in a hierarchy of being. While Aquinas's understanding of the chain of being needs to be revised in the light of evolutionary biology, his affirmation of the worth of all creatures through a strong sense of the goodness of God manifest in creation softens this stance and allows a rather different animal ethics to emerge. I also suggest that consideration of the virtues is particularly relevant in the light of difficulties associated with current discussion in animal ethics.

In chapter 4 I examine issues associated with the ethics of biotechnology, in particular how far technology as such has served to shape the way we think about nature and the natural, in particular that associated with agricultural biotechnology. Are there alternative ways of reflecting on biotechnology that take into account the ethical difficulties associated with technological culture?

Next I explore the issue of cloning, but with a particular emphasis on the ethical issues related to animal cloning. Theological discussion of cloning has alighted on reproductive cloning in a way that by-passes other important questions for an ethics of nature, namely the ethics of cloning animals. I also include a discussion of

the uses of human cloning for therapeutic purposes and stem cell research, since it illustrates clearly trends in our perception of human nature. How might a virtue ethic inform such discussions?

Cloning raises broader questions about the nature of our involvement with the technological world, who we are as persons and in particular whether psychology and associated neurobiology has challenged the possibility of moral agency that a virtue ethics, and indeed all ethics, assumes. I make such a move not because I wish to redefine what biology means, but because once we focus on the nature of human personhood in a way that is inevitable in the construction of a virtue ethics, some account of what science is saying in relation to who we are as persons becomes significant. Furthermore, it seems to me that it helps to shed light on the dilemma that surfaces throughout the book, namely how far can we be said to be distinctive from other life forms? Given this understanding of human persons, what might be the Christian interpretation of ethics?

Are there alternative models of science that we could consider in the light of such developments? I discuss the possibilities inherent in Gaia in the light of earlier discussion. I then move to a chapter on feminist ethics of nature. Are there insights from feminist theology that need to be taken into account in any revision of an ethics of nature? How far does the feminist critique, especially that which develops an ethic of care, cohere with the proposed emphasis on charity and wisdom? Indeed, could such an emphasis be reconceived according to a feminist narrative? Finally, I conclude by drawing together the themes of the book in a chapter that highlights the thread of wisdom alluded to throughout the text. It is my hope that this book will be the start of an ongoing conversation between humanity and the natural world understood through wisdom, yet it is inherent in any approach that draws on wisdom that the task is always one that is partly unfinished, it is a start of a process that is yet to be completed in conversation with others. Aquinas was well aware that his dialectical method inevitably left further areas for development. In this sense I am conscious that this book is an unfinished conversation. I invite the reader to take up that conversation and take it further in whatever context might be relevant for thinking through the dynamics of how humanity relates to the natural world.

Notes

- 1 For a useful discussion of these see J. Habgood, *The Concept of Nature* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), pp. 1–22.
- 2 Jennifer Welchman has suggested that stewardship can be connected with particular virtues, namely benevolence and loyalty, but the way such virtues are framed reinforces the anthropocentric orientation of the term stewardship. J. Welchman, 'The virtues of stewardship', *Environmental Ethics*, 21 (1999), pp. 411–23.
- 3 For discussion see S. Hauerwas and C. Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

- 4 J. Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); J. Brooke and G. Cantor, *Reconstructing Nature: The Engagement of Science with Religion* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).
- 5 See C. Deane-Drummond, 'Wisdom, a voice for theology at the boundary with science', *Ecotheology*, 10 (2001), pp. 23–39.
- 6 M. Banner, 'The taboos of ethics', *Minerva*, 34 (1996), pp. 199–204, esp. p. 201.
- 7 Banner, 'The taboos of ethics', p. 202.
- 8 M. Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. x.
- 9 For a more positive theological interpretation of bioethics that includes a discussion of environmental values see N. Messer (ed.), *Theological Issues in Bioethics: An Introduction with Readings* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002).
- 10 There is an important distinction between cultural traits as having some biological precedents, which I accept, and more extreme versions that suggest that genes or even 'memes' account for variation in human culture.
- 11 Stephen Clark's excellent book, *Biology and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) is a good example of this.
- 12 See, for example, A. Linsey, *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994).

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Recovery of Virtue for an Ethics of Nature

In the opening chapter of *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre asks us to imagine that the natural sciences suffered a serious catastrophe. Scientists are blamed directly for environmental damage, riots occur, laboratories are burnt and books and instruments are destroyed.¹ Later there is an attempt to revive science, but all that are left are fragments, experiments detached from the theoretical and practical context that gave them significance. He suggests that a similar malaise is now part of the moral sphere as well, the legacy of modernity is that we have lost a sense of narrative, of being part of the community in which moral concern took shape and developed. Yet his analysis does not stop here; instead he enjoins us to return to an Aristotelian view, one that encourages a search after goodness through the virtues. Ironically, perhaps, he suggests that this particular view is not limited to its historical time; rather we are rationally entitled to have confidence in its epistemological and moral resources.

MacIntyre's book has been highly influential in fostering a stream of thought in philosophy known as virtue ethics.² Such a recovery of virtue entails a focus on the agent, rather than action; the character of persons, rather than the particular rules or principles to be followed. But why should Christian ethicists follow this trend in secular philosophy? In particular, why is it particularly suggestive for an ethics of nature, concerned as it is primarily with our treatment of the non-human world? Furthermore, how does it cohere with a scientific understanding of reality? In this chapter I argue that a case can be made for a reappropriation of virtue ethics, drawing particularly on the insights of Thomas Aquinas. I begin with a survey of different possible approaches to ethics from a Christian perspective in order to show points of convergence and divergence with the position I adopt. I explore a spectrum of possible starting points between kerygmatic statements of Christian faith and those that are more closely aligned with natural theology. A further question to consider in this context is the extent to which biological understanding of reality might or should inform ethical analysis. While some ethicists seeking a

more deontological approach – that is, one based on particular principles – have taken up the idea of natural law, those concerned with the ethics of nature have generally ignored Aquinas.³ This may be because he has been branded as one who advocated a particularly negative and instrumental view of animals as brute beasts, useful only so far as they serve the interests of humans.⁴ However, I argue that such a stereotypical view ignores the richness of his theological vision, rooted as it is in a theology of creation, one that is possible to cohere with evolutionary ideas about nature, rather than being hostile to it. Moreover, I suggest that not only is this fruitful for thinking about the different dimensions of biological being, but Aquinas's theology situates humanity in creation in a way that marries virtue ethics to theological reflection. A weaker kind of criticism is that Aquinas is too systematic to be taken seriously in ecological discourse about virtues.⁵ I argue, instead, that Aquinas's approach, drawing as it does on Aristotelian thinking, offers a philosophical theology that engages with contemporary discourse on virtue ethics, but also expresses such terms in language that can be appropriated within the Christian tradition. I also suggest that the primacy he gives to the four cardinal virtues of prudence (practical wisdom), justice, fortitude (courage) and temperance is an entirely appropriate focus for the virtues in order to develop an ethics of nature. In addition, I argue that wisdom has a priority in such considerations and that the teleological nature of a wisdom ethic developed along these lines not only gives an appropriate place for consequentialism, but also relativizes alternative consequentialist approaches that have been found wanting.

Christian Approaches to Ethics

It is the premise of this book that a Christian approach to ethics is justifiable and offers a distinctive contribution to moral reflection. How far the content of theology impinges on ethical reflection has been the subject of much heated debate, for both Catholic moral theologians and Protestant counterparts.⁶ On the one hand, there are those who argue that we need to begin with the kerygma of Christian faith, then move on to reflect on various secular alternatives in the light of such beliefs. Michael Banner is a good example of this method, drawing particularly on the theology of Karl Barth for his inspiration. He suggests that:

the task of Christian ethics is to understand the world and humankind in the light of the knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Scriptures, and proclaimed by the Creeds, and that Christian ethics may and must explicate this understanding in its significance for human action through a critical engagement with the concerns, claims and problems of other ethics.⁷

For him, we need to 'turn the world upside down' by referring first to the law of God, in other words, a standing apart from general conceptions about good and evil.⁸ Hence his approach evokes the rejection of natural theology, which under-

stands reflection on the natural world as a valid starting point, while seeking to relate to concerns of theology. Yet when one considers Banner's discussion of biotechnology, he is less consistent than one might expect, for he refers primarily to particular principles that are scattered in the legislation of the United Kingdom, rather than any specific language about God.⁹ His theological reasons for resisting an alternative secular ethical framework appear to take inspiration from the idea of the sabbath, a concept that he takes up and develops elsewhere.¹⁰ His idea of the sabbath is suggestive, rather than specific to his earlier premise of conducting all Christian ethics in a Christological key. It seems to me that this reflects a more general difficulty in translating a Barthian ideal of ethics into practical concern for the natural world. While Banner is critical of the shift towards biocentric value, he offers little on the theological challenge of environmental concern and seems more inclined to urge us simply to reconsider a version of Christian humanism.¹¹ This would be entirely consistent with the relative lack of attention to creation in Barthian theology, though it is fair to say that the distance between Barthian and natural law accounts of creation has been exaggerated.¹²

A rather different, but equally dogmatic, approach to Christian ethics is Esther Reed's *The Genesis of Ethics*.¹³ Her book allows for and indeed is built on the idea of the authority of God, expressed as divine grace. It differs from Banner's approach in that greater primacy is given to understanding God as author of all creation, locating Christian ethics in the context of the relationship between creator and created. She is therefore able to give greater priority to an ethics of nature compared with Banner's theology, which seems to render such consideration difficult. Reed urges us to consider not just the challenge of who Christ is in relation to ethics, but also the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, transforming our understanding of what it is to be persons. However, she does not develop the idea of virtue ethics in the way I am suggesting here. She recognizes, accurately in my view, the ethical difficulty of the classical Eastern tradition that views God's grace as infusing all living creatures. The questions that she raises are pertinent. For example, how far should there be a radical discontinuity between Christian ethics and other forms of ethics? Is the Eastern view still credible to the contemporary world? In other words, is it pretence to say that the entire world is restored in Christ when clearly it is not?

James Gustafson's approach is of interest in that, while he rejects dogmatic ethics as 'sectarian', he argues for a greater concern for nature in ethical reflection.¹⁴ He sees himself as following in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas, namely to draw on a *contemporary* understanding of the world as indications of how God is related to and ordering the world.¹⁵ Gustafson strongly objects to what he terms Aquinas's anthropocentrism, namely Aquinas is concerned to reflect on the well being of humanity first, in the context of the good of the whole universe. Gustafson sets out what he calls a *theocentric* ethic, whereby we are obliged to relate to all things in so far as they relate to God.¹⁶ This, he believes, corrects the anthropocentrism characteristic of traditional (including Thomistic) thought. It is understandable, given his particular goals, that he neither specifically uses the notion of human virtue that

Aquinas develops, nor sets his theology in the context of natural law or a teleological search for goodness. Yet Gustafson's ethic does not adequately clarify what relations of creatures to God are possible in Aquinas's understanding of the human good ordered to a universal good, which is integral to Aquinas's understanding of the human to which Gustafson objects. In this sense Aquinas's theory of goodness presents a challenge to Gustafson's moral theory, for Aquinas, unlike Gustafson, has found a persuasive way of ordering creatures to God and one another.¹⁷ How far Gustafson's ethics is really in the tradition of Aquinas seems to be somewhat tenuous, though in as much as he wants to take into account the discoveries of science it is to be welcomed.¹⁸

Other Catholic moral philosophers, particularly in the Grisez–Finnis school, have drawn on Aquinas's understanding of natural law as a basis for their ethics.¹⁹ Grisez developed his theology in response to the inadequacies of classical scholastic natural law theory, which viewed ethics simply as conformity to a built in pattern. Such an ethic stressed what we as humans should not do, based on the following of rigid rules, rather than what we need to do in order to flourish. His theory attempts to get round the difficulty of the so-called naturalistic fallacy, namely that we cannot philosophically derive an 'ought', what we should do, from an 'is', who we are.²⁰ He suggests that we can overcome this by arriving at basic human goods, which explain why we act in certain ways. Such goods are substantive, such as life itself, knowledge and aesthetic experience and excellence in work; or reflexive, such as harmony among individuals or within self. The goods *correspond* to different dimensions of human nature, rather than are *derivative from* them, and hence the naturalistic fallacy is avoided. They are *pre-moral* in that they give explanations for acting rather than a judgement on whether such action is right or not. The charge by Hauerwas that Grisez's ethics is not really Christian follows from his understanding that Christianity provides no new moral principles over and above philosophy.²¹ While the Christian commitment of Grisez is not really in doubt, even those commentators favourably disposed to Grisez admit to a 'creeping de-Christianization' of his ethics.²² Grisez's argument is that if human nature is not changed substantially by Christianity, then how can there be new principles? Yet the human condition is clearly challenged in a new way by Christianity, which leads to a distinctive Christian ethic. In any event, the Grisez–Finnis school argues that there are some actions that are never justified. An alternative is to adopt what is known as the proportionalist position, and urge Christian ethics to be more sensitive to circumstances than the Grisez school suggests, for sometimes action may be justified if it prevents greater evil. Yet the question then remains, against proportionalists: by what standard do we assess whether an action is good or not?

What are we to make of these different appropriations of Thomistic thought? Jean Porter believes that contemporary ethicists have 'seized on fragments of what was once a unified moral tradition as the basis for their interpretation of Christian ethics'.²³ Furthermore, the debate between the Grisez school and the proportionalists seems 'interminable'. Instead she urges that we need to return to a unified theory

of the past, but one that is rethought in our own contexts. Such a return is bold in the sense that our current context of postmodernity resists any 'grand narrative' accounts of how to do ethics. Yet the splitting up of Aquinas's thought so that it loses its theological base distorts his basic intentions.²⁴ Certainly Hauerwas rejects the new natural law theory on the basis that it does not take sufficient account of the virtues.²⁵ While the idea that Grisez theory is unrelated to virtue ethics is contestable, it is fair to say that philosophical parameters, rather than theological ones, seem to set his understanding of the good. This may be one reason why Banner is able to contrast in a stark way those Christian ethicists who align themselves to natural law and those who align themselves to Barth. For if natural law becomes just a secular vision of reality, 'what results is not dialogue at all but the absurd (and finally rather patronising) attempt to echo in advance the views of the other'.²⁶ However, Banner's critique relies on a *secularized* interpretation of natural law and a Protestant suspicion of its credibility as a starting point for theological reflection.

Christian ethics has drawn on the Bible itself as a basis for moral reflection. While this may be mediated through dogmatics, some theologians argue for a more direct relationship between biblical scholarship and ethical frameworks.²⁷ Certainly, debates about the way we treat the natural world have focused on the particular interpretation of the command to have dominion over the earth in Genesis 1.28. The much-cited work of Lynn White challenged Christians to reconsider whether they had been in some way responsible for the ecological crisis by fostering notions of human dominion understood as domination of the earth.²⁸ While biblical scholars have sharply refuted his interpretation of the Genesis text as domination, the issue remains as to how far Christian ethics can use biblical sources for particular ethical reflection outside the particular context intended for the passages to hand. In other words, the issue hinges on the question of hermeneutics.²⁹ The dilemma for Christian moral theologians is that the specific ethical requirements, such as we find in Pauline letters, are commonly rooted in particular cultural contexts. Yet is there another way that we can draw on biblical sources, while at the same time being sensitive to the historical and cultural distance? I suggest that one way that this is possible is through consideration of virtue ethics, for a focus on the character of human being has a timeless quality that transcends the specific and often outdated ethical demands that we find in the biblical witness. Such a consideration of virtue not only links with contemporary philosophy, it is also highly suggestive of a way to think about our place in the natural world.

Developing a Christian Virtue Ethic

In what sense is virtue ethics distinctive from other approaches? From a purely secular perspective it is possible to classify the most dominant forms of ethics as being either rule based, or deontological, following in the stream of philosophy inspired by Kant; or based on consideration of consequences, or utilitarianism,

following in the stream of philosophy inspired by J. S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham. I have discussed the debates within particular Christian deontological approaches above. In consideration of how to treat the natural world the consequentialist approach has been the most dominant, in terms of both environmental concern and consideration of new developments in genetics.³⁰ Virtue language may, of course, become sprinkled into the discussion, so that ‘ecological virtue language seems to turn up especially when authors assume a hortatory, personal and reflection-filled mode of writing. This most often happens in their concluding statements.’³¹ While there has been a strong tendency for Christian theologians to follow the secular debate and adjure consequentialist approaches, more recently theologians have questioned the fruitfulness of such an approach in consideration of new advances in biology.³² An alternative to deontological or consequentialist approaches is to consider the basis of ethics as having a prime focus on the virtues, even though, as I indicated at the start of this chapter, an interest in such an approach has only become fashionable relatively recently in current debates in philosophy. Virtue ethics, unlike the other approaches, asks us to consider not just the actions of the agent, but the agent himself or herself. It focuses on what sort of person we are, rather than what sorts of action we should perform. Actions, where they are considered, are in the light of who we are as persons, rather than detached from human character. The basic premise of a virtue ethic is that goodness is a fundamental consideration, rather than rights, duties or obligations. Furthermore, virtue ethicists also reject the idea that ethical conduct can be codified in particular rules.

There are, of course, difficulties that virtue ethicists encounter and that have to be overcome in arguing a case for a virtue ethic approach. Different virtues may be highlighted by different authors; indeed, MacIntyre insists that given virtues are situated in particular practices of particular communities in particular narratives.³³ How do we choose which virtues to select when virtues conflict? This is not a problem specific to virtue ethics, since it is possible for there to be mixed consequences to an action, or a clash between two rules in a rule-based ethic. For virtue ethicists, what is called for in a conflict of virtues is moral wisdom or discernment, so that with Rosalind Hursthouse, ‘the only virtue term we have which is guaranteed to operate as a virtue term – that is, to pick out something that always makes its possessor good – is “wisdom”’.³⁴ Hence we can be too clever, or too courageous, but never too wise. Wisdom, understood here as practical wisdom or prudence, also highlights the rational element in virtue ethics, though virtue ethicists argue that their approach also gives an appropriate place to the emotions in a way that deontological or consequentialist positions do not. None the less, one of the key ideas in virtue ethics is that it is not just about particular character traits or virtues as opposed to vices in the narrow sense; rather it is to do with developing a life that is centred on *flourishing* or living well. Human choices are involved in such decisions for the good; hence it is not simply a form of naturalism, or a grounding of human nature in who we are as biological beings. This needs to be qualified by the fact that Aristotelian concern for our biological nature is also an important constituent in considering the virtues. For:

no account of the goods, rules and virtues that are definitive of our moral life can be adequate that does not explain – or at least point us towards an explanation – how that form of life is possible for beings who are biologically constituted as we are, by providing us with an account of our development towards and into that form of life. That development has as its starting point our animal condition.³⁵

Hence, while a virtue ethic is not necessarily grounded in naturalism, it takes our biological nature sufficiently seriously to warrant close attention. MacIntyre also admits that while Thomas Aquinas draws heavily on Aristotle's account of the virtues, he develops it in particular ways and lays much more emphasis on human vulnerability and dependence.³⁶ There seems to be some debate among philosophers as to the status of virtue ethics *vis-à-vis* naturalism. Often virtue ethics is taken to be a form of ethical naturalism, as it is based on a human nature that has shared characteristics with the animals.³⁷ Yet virtue ethics cannot be a strict form of naturalism, since if so it would limit free choice and yield a falsely deterministic picture of human virtue. While some virtues may have a biological *component*, the criteria for an agent acting for the good cannot come simply from consideration of animal behaviour.

Virtue ethics is also generally characterized by a move away from a focus on particular ethical dilemmas or quandaries that highlight the difficulties in coming to a correct decision. Such quandaries, where they are considered, are qualified by a focus on the character of the agent. For example, in some circumstances it may be entirely appropriate for an agent to take either one or another course of action, where both actions are expressions of the good. More difficult scenarios are where either course of action is wrong, so the agent can hardly be said to acting out of virtue. What is the appropriate action to take, for example, when there is a population explosion in rabbits that threatens to upset ecological diversity of an ecosystem? Doing nothing or culling the population could both be seen as regrettable.³⁸ In these circumstances a virtuous agent will act in pain and regret, rather than indifferently; though it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the agent is marred in some way by the situation that is forced upon them.³⁹

Such a secular analysis cries out for a theological interpretation of the virtues, for how do we deal with the brokenness that is the inevitable part of searching to gain virtue? Stephen Clark's provocative book *Biology and Christian Ethics* hints at such a development. While his book is not specifically couched in terms of virtue ethics, he develops strands that cohere with such an alternative. One of his concerns, for example, is the elimination of beauty from the moral sense when the theory of evolution becomes rarefied into a basis for ethics. In this scenario, 'values are projection, terrestrial life a cosmic accident, and all attempts to deny these claims are priestcraft'.⁴⁰ He challenges the idea that humanity is necessarily progressing towards the good, or the end of history, and, he suggests wryly, 'it may be that our civilisation has been a long detour, and supermen will be a lot like savages'.⁴¹ Yet he does suggest that the best life for humanity is one lived in accordance with virtue and, against those who argue for a pluralistic interpretation of value,

that most perfect virtue, in the end, is *wisdom*, and Aristotle is as convinced as any Platonist that there is one single strategy for life, by which we may transcend humanity. He did not applaud plurality: on the contrary, it is wicked people who are plural in themselves, and virtue is defined by having a single goal – the beautiful.⁴²

He suggests, significantly, that Darwinian theory of evolution alone does not give us a coherent theory of value, since ‘If there really are no forms of beauty, no constraints at all on what can happen or the way it grows, then there are no real values.’⁴³ I endorse such a critique of using Darwinian theory as a basis for ethics, and in this I part company with writers such as John Haught, who come perilously close to this position.⁴⁴ Clark also suggests that science itself is dependent on a prior conviction that there is a rational order that can be discerned in the universe, and such a belief is historically dependent on orthodox theism. I am closer to Haught than Clark in believing that contemporary evolutionary science is as much concerned with contingency as with order, though I suggest that a virtue approach is flexible enough to deal with this contingency without falling into the trap that Clark seems to highlight, namely a diffuse relativism.

While Stephen Clark has suggested that ‘orthodox theism’ can be set alongside philosophical reflection, how might Christian ethics become more *specifically* associated with virtue ethics? Is there any basis at all for suggesting that consideration of the virtues is commensurate with Christian theology? Is it possible that the divine law concept of ethics has been more prevalent than a virtue ethic approach in the Judaeo-Christian tradition?⁴⁵ More extreme is the view that Christianity is to blame for replacing an ethic centred on the virtues with one focused on an ethics of duty.⁴⁶ Self-denial, rather than self-fulfilment, seems, for some, to be the central kerygma of Christian ethical teaching. Other theologians, following Stanley Hauerwas, simply assume that virtue ethics is Christian.⁴⁷

Joseph Kotva argues that virtue theory is not necessarily *required* by Christian theology, but ‘makes good sense from a Christian perspective’.⁴⁸ I agree with his suggestion that virtue theory requires some modification in order to be compatible with Christian thought. For example, concepts such as forgiveness, reconciliation and the need for God’s grace are essential components of a Christian ethic. Kotva argues that Christian ethicists have tended to view Christ in an abstract way, reducing a rich understanding of his humanity to a rule or principle, such as the law of love.⁴⁹ How do we know what love really means without setting it in the context of the story of Christ’s life and work?⁵⁰ Christian anthropology calls for a deeper understanding of what it is to be human, one not simply conditioned by external forces, which governs a rule-based ethic. I will argue later that rules have their place, as in the discussion of natural law, but they need to be thought of as a means to gaining greater freedom, one that is only possible through the development of virtues. A Christian life is one that is transformed by relationship with God and in fellowship with Christ, so that the self is transformed through observation and imitation of the life of Christ viewed as a whole.

Furthermore, both virtue theory and Christian theology situate decisions in a community context. From a biblical perspective the beatitudes depict the good life as a life lived out of correct internal dispositions of character. Those who are humble before God, who desire God's justice and who live from a position of integrity receive special praise.⁵¹ The idea that external action flows from internal dispositions of character is a thread running through Matthew's gospel; for example, Matt. 3.8, 10; 7.15–20, 12.33. The blessings and warnings are designed to encourage certain behaviour, rather than set out a fixed set of rules to follow. Moreover, like virtue ethics, perfection is the goal of the Christian life, and like virtue ethics, Jesus is the master who displays the kind of character towards which his disciples are called to aspire.⁵² The interest in narrative in virtue ethics is also thoroughly consistent with the Bible understood in narrative form.⁵³ While Kotva admits that Pauline ethics cannot be considered a virtue ethic in the strict sense, there are lines of continuity; for example, 'the appeal to models or examples, an interest in internal qualities, an outlook that is both individual and communal, and the need for quality or skill of discernment'.⁵⁴ Particularly significant is his identification of Paul's advocacy of a shared search for wisdom:

Paul continually exhibits and calls for a kind of discriminatory wisdom or skilful judgement that seeks in a particular situation to 'discern the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Rom. 12.2). This discerning judgement is not limited to individuals, but involves the community's shared search.⁵⁵

Another common thread to virtue ethics and Paul's epistles is that of transformation of the character: the need for admonition derives from the discrepancy between what we are and what we are called to become. Christian virtues are not as much a narcissistic concentration on the self, as a way of developing the capacity to reach out to God and others in love.⁵⁶

The Primacy of Prudence (Practical Wisdom) in the Four Cardinal Virtues

Given that we can argue a case for Christian ethics to be a (albeit) modified version of virtue ethics, what particular virtues are appropriate to consider? While many ethicists have resisted any hierarchy of the virtues, I suggest that the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance developed by Thomas Aquinas give a good starting point for reflection on the ethics of nature.⁵⁷ The theological virtues of love, faith and hope are the foundation of the other virtues, though in the moral virtues prudence takes priority, in that like love it can also be described as the 'mother' of other virtues. Prudence, in particular, is at the heart of Aquinas's reflection on moral virtue, for it is implicit in his own method of dialectical questioning, considering all the options available before arriving at a reasoned decision that informs a particular way of life, a life of virtue. While drawing on