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The Need for a Common Response to Eco-fascism

As the original defense of the fossil fuel industry and climate denial become less effective and prevalent, we will likely see a conservative shift to even more unsettling approaches to addressing the climate crisis, like eco-fascism or eco-nationalism. Naomi Klein has adapted her work to address this possibility as current events and actions of people on the far-right supported theories about this concern. Her work as a leading public climate scientist focused on the politics of climate change will heavily influence my position. The need for developing a response to eco-fascism and climate virtue ethics exists regardless of how the far-right moves on the issue. To do this, it is paramount that climate activists and conservationists have a common understanding of the flaws of these beliefs and a coherent alternative, such as virtue ethics that respects the intrinsic value of human life and nature for generations to come.

Some important background information necessary to establish the need for this common climate virtue ethic is the definition of eco-fascism and nationalism, an explanation of its appeal, and evidence of its rise. In the 1995 paper "The Threat of Ecofascism," Michael Zimmerman provides us with a definition of eco-fascism that is still useful today. He begins by breaking down the specifically "fascist" elements of the ideology as an appeal to some mythological history that appeals to a race or group of people in its promise to restore whatever status appeals to them. He defines eco-fascism as "in addition to portraying ecological despoliation as a threat to the racial integrity of the people, an eco-fascist movement would have to urge that society be...reorganized in terms of an authoritarian, collectivist leadership principle based on

masculinist-martial values” (Zimmerman 209). Even in 1995, philosophers like Zimmerman were concerned about the potential rise of this ideology. But in recent years, it has only become more prevalent with anxieties about our changing climate and general fascist sentiments expanding. This concern specifically caught Klein's attention in the wake of the 2019 mass shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand. One person claimed 51 lives that day due to his obsession and anxieties about "white genocide." Klein explains

"...The killer was not driven by environmental concern—his motivation was unadulterated racist hate—but the ecological breakdown was one of the forces that seemed to be stoking that hatred. I fear that unless something significant changes in how our societies rise to the ecological crisis, we are going to see this kind of white power eco-fascism emerge with much greater frequency as a ferocious rationalization for refusing to live up to our collective climate responsibilities" (Klein 66).

This concern explains the urgency of this project and the atmosphere in which to formulate this ethic.

As evidenced by the rise of this movement, there is a clear need for environmentalists generally to be on the same page about how we ought to discuss and respond to eco-fascism. To ensure that this effort is not purely reactionary and ineffectual in the long term, I suggest developing universal virtue ethics that feature explanations of the faulty thinking in eco-fascism. This thinking includes the most common pitfalls, such as citing overpopulation as the cause of this crisis. I allude to a need for a virtue ethic over any other sort of ethic because of its resiliency to ever-changing climate science. Virtue ethics' ability to speak to the ideological predisposition of people at risk of eco-fascism reflects its durability. Thomas E. Hill, Jr., in his article, "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments," presents virtue

ethics that promote a love of nature resulting from the internalization of values such as "humility, gratitude, and sensitivity to others" (Hill 25). Not to say that Hill's virtue ethics need to be the entirety of the public environmental ethic, but it is a solid place to begin.

Possible counters to this argument in favor of developing a common environmental virtue ethic are that virtue ethics historically have been and still can be insensitive to individual beliefs, whether they stem from cultural or personal experiences. In turn, the intrinsic value of nature can be an uninfluential and unreliable reason to sustain natural resources. Lynn Maguire and James Justus cover this concern in their article "Why Intrinsic Value is a Poor Basis for Conservation Decisions." Maguire and Justus explain that intrinsic value can often be a beneficial tool in philosophical discussions and justifications. But when it comes to the buying power of the virtue, little to no effect will likely be felt. Maguire and Justus cite a specific example in this paragraph: "when the protection of species and ecosystems conflicts with economic development or with immediate human needs, intrinsic value is even less likely to be an effective basis for conservation" (Maguire and Justus 910). Monetary incentives and barriers are also frequent challenges to the effectiveness of intrinsic value in decision making. A virtue ethic already has a limited effect influencing people who did not grow up with that ethic. Furthermore, one that relies on intrinsic value, especially that of nature, is likely to be even more limited in its scope to influence progressive changes in addressing the climate crisis.

I have two responses to legitimate limitations for anyone centering specific virtue ethics in their climate activism. First, within Hill's virtue ethic, there is no significant emphasis (if any) placed on the intrinsic nature value. He develops an argument supporting a nature value rooted in humility and our respect for others. As he argues, when one respects their position in the universe and the people around them, they are also likely going to have a certain reverence for

the environment that allows them to exist. Second, virtue ethics alone will not be enough of an ideological perspective for environmentalists to address the climate crisis. I think virtue ethics serve a vital role in addressing the faulty logic and sentiments behind popular eco-fascist ideas. Virtue ethics creates a base for further ideological development among climate activists rooted in shared values and is flexible to the needs of the movement.

In conclusion, I maintain the importance of developing this school of thought for climate activists to recognize the urgency of developing this ethic and becoming proficient in explaining and practicing it. The climate crisis itself has been brewing for the last century; the specific concern about the rise of eco-fascism is somewhat newer but similarly gaining relevancy at an alarming rate. I argue that supporters need to address the eco-fascistic rise and its violence to address the climate crisis moving forward. Though there are hurdles to overcome, such as the role of intrinsic value in this ethic, it is worthwhile to address eco-fascism. Virtue ethics serve as a set of values to guide and bring people together now and for future generations. Scholars like Naomi Klein and Thomas Hill, Jr. have begun the work for us, but there is much more work to do. The ideological debate associated with the climate crisis is as significant as the scientific research and development within the movement. Because of the role we've given it in determining policy, it is required of us to treat it with just as much care.

Works Cited

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