UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM | THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Territorial intimacy, vulnerability and flourishing of the land: a new moral challenge

Claudia Navarini

Antonio Scoppettuolo

Laura Langone

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 13th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 9th – Saturday 11th January 2025.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

Claudia Navarini, Antonio Scoppettuolo, Laura Langone

Territorial intimacy, vulnerability and flourishing of the land: a new moral challenge

1 Introduction.

In this paper, we introduce the notion of *territorial intimacy* in relation to the place where we live, as an approach that simultaneously addresses the intrinsic value of landscapes, the relationship between landscapes and human communities, and human responsibility for valorizing the place. This concept implies the recognition of both the vulnerability and the importance of natural resources, within the variety of human cultures which diversely interact in - and with - the place in unique ways. For example, what should be preserved and what should be innovated in an ethical vision of the land? Considering that it seems neither viable nor advisable to keep the landscape totally untouched and human-free, a possible answer may be focusing on the notion of *flourishing*. This could consequently orient the attitude towards landscapes virtuously, by expanding the idea of *life* to comprehend the earth-as-our-home and any living existence, including human lives, that inhabit the place. We will therefore maintain that the acquisition of territorial intimacy is a moral task that implies a collective virtuous perspective.

The reference to the notion of vulnerability may be crucial here, since it can mediate between the undeniable evidence of the risk of global suffering or hurt and the universal aspiration to flourishing. In other words, the concept of vulnerability can help us to understand the deep connection that binds together the two seemingly opposite concepts of suffering and flourishing within a "land ethic".

Moreover, vulnerability allows for an expanded perception and meaning of "evil" and negativity, which goes beyond the boundaries of human and living beings. Therefore, another aim of our paper will be to use human flourishing as a metaphor for any flourishing, especially *land flourishing*.

In this respect, we believe that the original natural meaning of flourishing, which is applied metaphorically to human beings from the natural world, can be re-applied in a double-metaphorical way to the environment, as if it were a living being. This requires, we believe, not only a virtue-based responsibility, but a *phronetic* attitude which could be a plausible framework for Environmental Virtue Ethics (EVE).

As a matter of fact, to understand and live the link between environmental vulnerability and flourishing, we need to address the notion of good behaviour or proper action, which is particularly allowed by virtue. We will therefore refer to which virtues are needed in the environmental context, in order to show why we need just one, namely, practical wisdom.

2 The connection between suffering and flourishing via vulnerability.

We can easily admit that the narrowness of finitude, which is typical of all beings, is intimately connected with the many pains and sufferings that we and others experience, as well as with the disruptive and destructive forces that we encounter in the world. They make us aware of how limited we are and how many constraints we necessarily have, both physically and spiritually, as finite creatures. On the other hand, flourishing calls for the progressive development and possible improvement of our lives, both physically and, more importantly, spiritually. The tendency towards flourishing and happiness is very deeply rooted in our soul, as is our awareness of limitations, suffering and death. To try to find reasons for the coexistence of these two dimensions, we have only one way: to admit or hypothesise that suffering and flourishing are not radically alternative. That is, to accept a kind of positivity in - or in spite of - the negativity of suffering and, conversely, to accept a kind of negativity in the positivity of flourishing.

The notion of vulnerability seems to represent this ethically mixed value of positivity and negativity better than other notions, although in the history of thought it has mostly been associated as something negative. Of course, the connection between vulnerability and suffering is more intuitive, to the point that many scholars tend to overlap the two almost completely, interpreting vulnerability as a kind of suffering. However, vulnerability may also play an important role in flourishing. How might this be? Let us briefly consider the notion of vulnerability.

The term has been successfully used and explored in some philosophical traditions, including Alasdair MacIntyre, who introduces the notion of vulnerability in relation to suffering and distress at the very beginning of his *Dependent Rational Animal* (1999), by observing that

> [w]e human being are vulnerable to many kinds of afflictions and most of us are some time afflicted by serious ills. […] [O]ur lives are characteristically marked by longer or shorter periods on injuries, illness or other disablement and some among us are disable for their entire lives. (p. 3)

This statement leads MacIntyre to argue that our social survival, and even more so our flourishing, is radically dependent on other people, especially some other people (*particular others*), who actually

care for and protect us. In sum, our components of frailty, need and disability - past, present and future - make us constitutively dependent. But this structural dependence is not dysfunctional or frustrating, nor does it indicate relational weakness, degenerated forms of interaction, or a master-slave relationship. For him, vulnerability is the "normality" of human relational life, allowing for morality, virtue and flourishing.

Drawing on feminist care ethics, which originally developed the notion of vulnerability, MacIntyre affirms the constitutive ontological dimension of human interdependence and vulnerability[1]. He also underlines the constitutive relational importance of this concept and extends the category of vulnerable beings to animality, both human and non-human.

Similarly, Catriona MacKenzie and colleagues (2014), speaking of human beings, observe that

> human life is conditioned by vulnerability. By virtue of our embodiment, human beings have bodily and material needs; are exposed to physical illness, injury, disability, and death; and depend on the care of others for extended periods during our lives. As social and affective beings we are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to others in myriad ways: to loss and grief; to neglect, abuse, and lack of care; to rejection, ostracism, and humiliation. As sociopolitical beings, we are vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, oppression, political violence, and rights abuses. And we are vulnerable to the natural environment and to the impact on the environment of our own, individual and collective, actions and technologies. (p. 1)

3 Land flourishing

To take a step forward, let us now consider the application of this concept to the land, that is, to the environment as a whole, including living and non-living entities. Mateusz Tokarski – echoing Aldo Leopold – describes evil or suffering within the ecosystem as something natural, precisely because of the universal vulnerability of everything. As he says,

> saving an ecosystem might involve killing invasive species; survival of species as a whole might involve death of many of its members that, perhaps, are not fully fit, or perhaps were just unlucky. This is the case not just in ecosystems that have been impacted by humans—this is how nature

[1] We might wonder whether the name "vulnerability" adds anything new to other (well-established) terms such as frailty, weakness or finitude. Do we really need it? According to the feminist tradition, the concept of vulnerability is important because it adds a specifically relational dimension: the fact that someone can be harmed precisely because they are fragile. A person is as vulnerable as he or she is susceptible to a *vulnus*, or as he or she is likely to be struck at his or her weak point. With this in mind, feminist scholars have focused their reflections on the vulnerability of women, claiming that because of their historical and social disadvantage, women have been easy prey to abuse and deception.

> works, and it means that the wellbeing of the whole is not always equal to the wellbeing of its individual members. (p. 153)

Similarly, in Leopold's land ethic, the "beauty, stability and integrity" of the biotic community takes precedence over the well-being of individual members of that community, and individual losses and suffering are acceptable as long as they contribute to the flourishing of that community (Leopold, 1949). Leopold argues that disruption, openness to disturbance and vulnerability are actually necessary for what we find so valuable in nature - its variety of forms, its richness, its beauty.
In the same vain, Holmes Rolston explains the ambivalence of negativity and positivity in the natural environment by justifying individual deaths as contributing to the flourishing of the ecological whole of which they are a part. In Tokarski's reading, Rolston attempts to show that natural *disvalues*, once properly valued, can be seen as necessary elements of a larger, overall valuable system, and thus as necessary for the production of value (Rolston, 1992). But Tokarski ultimately disagrees with this assessment, arguing that - if this reading were so obvious - we would not feel this discomfort when confronted with negativity, evil, violence and vulnerability in nature in general.

Also, if we did not see suffering as an evil, as a perceived negativity, we could not explain the efforts we make to overcome it, and we should rather encourage the seeking of suffering, which is obviously unsustainable. It is true that suffering is not the direct object of choice and deliberation, but it is ultimately accepted in the light of something else, as a side-effect or means of achieving a good. Since living beings generally tend to preserve their lives and not to seek death, and since they inevitably tend to promote their own happiness and well-being, they cannot logically seek pain, suffering, and death or destruction as direct ends. Every human being is directed towards their own development and happiness, or, to be more precise, towards flourishing, broadly understood as an overall sense of fulfilment and self-realisation that involves multiple aspects of one's life, or as "striving towards excellence based on one's unique potential" (Ryff, 2008, p. 14).

This general definition immediately projects us towards an internalised notion of flourishing that transcends external conditions. We are aware that this point is still controversial, since the notion of human flourishing, directly linked to Aristotle's eudaimonia, has been addressed by several psychological and ethical theories, including virtue ethics, as an ideal situation of complete well-being and happiness, or, after VanderWeele, "a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good" (VanderWeele, 2017, p. 8149). In other words, according to an achievement-oriented approach, flourishing does not seem to be compatible with physical damage or harm, or with suffering and vulnerability whatsoever. However, taken so restrictively, flourishing would be inconsistent with any life condition, not only for the "sick life". If flourishing is a viable goal, it should be achieved despite

the unavoidable weakness of life, namely, it should appeal to an inner dimension that can positively translate bodily experience and find coping strategies. In other words, it is reasonable to admit that a flourishing life has a predominantly internal nature, which is compatible with thought times, at least as long as pain and suffering are not too intense (Fowers et al., 2017; Navarini, 2024).

Seen in this way, flourishing has to do with one's realisation, not as a result achieved once and for all, but as an ongoing process. This interpretation can also account for the possibility of languishing, as opposed to flourishing, and for the decline or interruption of a flourishing process. In summary, we suggest that flourishing means the progressive realisation of one's potential – but also of groups' potential – eventually accompanied by a range of emotions and thoughts, according to the nature of the beings and the individuals at stake.

This can also be applied to lands, using an expanded concept of soul, such as earth soul, spirit, purpose or *entelechia*.

4 Flourishing and vulnerability for humans and lands.

It should now be easy to see the relationship between vulnerability and flourishing. They share an important common aspect, which is the relationship with potentiality: potential harm, on the one hand, and realisation of potentials, on the other one. Also, they are deeply intertwined, confirming MacIntyre's perspective on this particular aspect.

Here again, by employing the term *land flourishing*, we take the idea from human flourishing and extend it to our lands: they resemble indeed living beings that tend to realise their potential, as organisms do. This is an idea that we can trace in part to the philosophy of Giordano Bruno, who describes the earth and the other planets as living bodies that feed and flourish (Bruno, 2017).

In addition, land flourishing immediately suggests the idea of responsibility. For a land to flourish, it is not enough to be uncontaminated and unspoiled, because flourishing, unlike mere growth, is not a spontaneous mechanism, but a purposeful process that often requires the commitment of people who appreciate and feel the place in which they live. This approach has a profound effect on the character of individuals and communities and can become a moral task, involving a collective virtuous perspective on the flourishing of the land.

We can say that the connection between vulnerability and flourishing has shown the constitutive coexistence (and ambivalence) of positivity and negativity in this world. As Tokarsky points out,

> the horror of nature can never be avoided—we cannot simply surround ourselves with beauty. In every instance of beauty we know there hide millennia of suffering and death. Nature might be

> beautiful, magnificent and awe-inspiring, but it is also tragic, and this tragedy is at the very core of existence, affecting those aspects of nature we seem to appreciate the most. […] The problem nature poses is, then, that there are both values and disvalues in the world. While values are clearly what we strive for and embrace, disvalues seem to be clearly the things we want to avoid. Thus, what needs to be shown is that values eclipse the disvalues. (p. 164)

And he gives his answer:

> Our relation to the world presented here is not primarily one of valuing it but rather understanding it and our place in it. What motivates our actions and care is not a desire to increase value but to deepen our understanding. While death, suffering, tragedy, or loss can hardly be defined as values, we can certainly see them as meaningful. […] In other words, the discomforts of the world are given, but our responses to them are not. (p. 167)

For him, vulnerability ultimately evokes not value, as flourishing does, but meaning, since suffering can be a meaningful disvalue.

To take his intuition further, we can add that the kind of response we can give - as "responsible" human beings - to vulnerability (to these discomforts) can be a virtuous one. In the search for the "golden mean", the virtuous person knows through experience and reason how much to decrease vulnerability and how much to increase flourishing in order to make them sustainable and integrated. To put it in the terms of our initial question, the virtuous person (and group) can know better what to preserve and what to innovate in the place they live. At the same time, the virtuous agent can reliably explore how vulnerability and flourishing of humans and non-humans influence each other. In other words, vulnerability and flourishing can be mediated by virtue.

5 Environmental Virtue Ethics revisited: the role of *phronesis*

However, here we encounter another metaethical problem: within EVE, the language of virtues tends to be detached from the ethical agenda. The two perspectives (VE and EE) are often dealt with in separate chapters. Surprisingly, one of the most action-oriented part of moral philosophy, namely, virtue ethics, seems to be "inactive" for environmental ethics. Why? Our suggestion is, virtue ethics – particularly when applied to environmental sensitivity – suffers from the fragmentation and multiplication of the list of virtues.

The "virtue list problem" has been addressed at some length within VE and sometimes has reinforced the radical criticism about the virtues. As several authors have highlighted, there is usually

an anarchist view of what an environmental virtue or vice is (van Wensveen, 1999; O'Madigan Gribble, 2017).

A tentative solution is given by the Aretai Model, by implementing the notion of *phronesis* at the very core of VE, and EVE as well. The Aretai group believes that *phronesis* can be identified with virtuousness as such, and that the various virtues are just names for practical wisdom across different contexts and situations. More precisely, De Caro et al. (forthcoming) claim that

> virtue consists entirely in the possession of practical wisdom, understood as a domain-general (though specifically ethical) expertise. In other words, it is crucial […] that practical wisdom is *the only virtue* that explains and allows virtuous behavior in different situations […]. Thus, our account entirely avoids relying on single ethical virtues, traditionally conceived of as conceptually, psychologically, and developmentally independent character traits. This means that we propose a monistic account of virtue, according to which it is only *phronesis* (as ethical expertise) that exists, while the single ethical virtues are merely manifestations of such competence.

This monistic approach, by assuming the priority of *phronesis*, suggests that the development of more general cognitive and practical capacities can shape natural inclinations and character traits even later in life, opening the door to a more optimistic view of individual moral change. Such moral change also allows for the progressive acquisition of *phronetic ecology*, as we will hold in the next paragraph.

As mentioned, the Aretai model states that practical wisdom should be considered a form of ethical competence that transcends specific situations. This involves the consistent demonstration of excellence in the ethical skills mentioned above in various circumstances that require comprehensive decisions about what should be done. We argue that an essential characteristic of practical wisdom lies in the capacities for sound judgment, thoughtful deliberation, and effective action in morally relevant situations. Importantly, this capacity requires consistency and reliability in a wide range of situations and contexts, even those that are unfamiliar and intricate. In essence, the ethical expertise should be transferable to a variety of situations. According to the Aretai model, therefore, the possession of practical wisdom constitutes virtuousness in its entirety, transcending the diversity of situations and enabling an understanding of virtuous conduct across diverse practical scenarios (De Caro et al., 2024).

Furthermore, De Caro and Vaccarezza (2020) have argued that acknowledging that an agent has performed a virtuous action requires, at least provisionally, ascribing them a significant amount of practical wisdom, according to the so-called "Principle of Phronetic Charity". This assignment is then subject to confirmation (or disconfirmation) through the observation of that agent's subsequent moral

actions. Navarini et al. (2021) have termed this process "phronetic abduction", describing it as an "Inference to the Best Moral Explanation" that occurs when encountering an instance of virtuous behavior in someone's relational life. In Peircean terms, observing an agent's virtuous action leads us to recognize that, since if someone is practically wise, they would behave in that manner, then that agent may be (provisionally) interpreted as wise. Attributing at least a minimal level of practical wisdom to our counterpart can thus be viewed as an abductive hypothesis[2]. This moral process is particularly necessary in environmental issues, which tend to involve multiple ethical dilemmas arising from heterogeneous needs: should we grow economically first? Should we preserve landscapes above all? Should we prioritise life over things? Should we prioritise people over things? We could hardly integrate so many different aspects/actions - or choose among them - without being practically wise, since no abstract principles or list of virtues can address all the problems.

6 A *Phronetic ecology*

That said, we can reinterpret EVE as environmental phronesis (Irr, 2023) or a *phronetic ecology*, namely, a practical wise attitude and behaviour in the ecological matters (Salovaara Janne, 2024). These attitudes and dispositions do not lead to the prefiguration of all environmental-ethical actions at a glance; but this is precisely the point of phronesis: it is a school of realism that trains the holder to have a true consideration of what is going on around us. What we really need in environmental challenges is not to list a series of actions to be taken, but "hypotheses of action" (Navarini, 2020) to adapt to the real world, often without knowing in advance what would be best, precisely as prudential judgments. In this respect, the trilogy of virtues suggested by the Belmont Report are surely useful, but not enough to educate people and cultures. The maximum we can do with principles is considering them as general ethical directions, that have to be situationally delineated.

Developing environmental wisdom and changing our practices may not be an easy task, but it is a worthwhile undertaking for the normative change needed for a better approach to our prosperity interrelationship with the nonhuman world. Since phronesis is not characterised by a set of recommended behaviours, but - among other things - by the acquisition of a particular moral

[2] The Aretai model refuses both "virtue atomism", which posits that moral virtues operate as ontologically distinct global character traits, and "virtue holism", which characterizes the "unity of virtue" thesis, according to which virtuousness must be conceived as the possession of all virtues simultaneously. Instead, the model advocates for *virtue molecularism*. Contrary to atomism, virtue molecularism dismisses the notion that a person can be deemed wise by only possessing one moral virtue. Contrary to holism, virtue molecularism contends that one can still be virtuous even if they only possess some virtues, so acknowledging the obvious empirical fact that no individual is virtuous in all aspects. In this light, phronesis can be expressed to varying degrees across different domains – not solely in one, nor necessarily in all of them – where it manifests as a specific moral virtue. In essence, virtues are situated instances of an agent's underlying practical wisdom and they come in clusters.

sensitivity that leads to an intuitive perception of the good, especially in familiar situations, a deep knowledge and love of the place-we-live is of paramount importance in understanding the right thing to do, all things considered. In this perspective, we believe that the concept of territorial intimacy can complement or better characterize the idea of environmental wisdom developed from the Aretai model. This kind of wisdom is based on a virtuous, deep and vital relationship that holds together and mediates between the flourishing of the home-earth and the flourishing of human existence. In the face of the need for flourishing, *extended life* represents a unified concept to be inspired by for every living system, also metaphorically conceived. We can describe this idea as "self-preservation" or "self-love" that do not depend on or function because of an external reason or cause but because of an intrinsic principle, as Giordano Bruno stated in *The Supper of Ashes* (Gisondi, 2023).

To flourish is to walk toward the vital best for which we are in the world. This affects any living being when they seek to overcome the limitations that prevent them from unfolding their prosperity. To proceed with life and following life is also a Nietzschean concept that we find in many texts. For the German thinker, life can be described as "a multiplicity of forces, united by the same nurturing process," and to this process correspond feeling, representing and thinking (Nietzsche, 1906, fragment 641). This concept could be deepened by combining the ethics of place developed by Nietzsche with the perspective of bioregionalism, which emphasises the importance of local culture, landscape and traditions (Langone, 2024).

If the world of living things (of which the human is also a part) is united by the same nurturing process, man in particular needs not only the primordial nourishment in order to flourish, but all that takes shape through their way of living in the world, namely by representing it and thinking it. For this reason, we believe that territorial intimacy can be achieved in a path of rapprochement between what the environment, the land, and the earth feel and what man represents and organizes in them and for them. Flourishing is indeed an intentional process that is also brought about by human efforts to enhance and exalt the full potential of the place where we live.

References

Bruno, G. (2022). *De la causa, principio et uno*, Aracne (Original work published 1584).

De Caro, M., Bina, F., Bonicalzi, S., Brunetti, R., Croce, M., Kerusausaite, S., Navarini, C., Ricci, E., Vaccarezza, M. S. (forthcoming), Virtue Monism and Mental Practice. Practical Wisdom as Cross-situational Ethical Expertise. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*.

De Caro, M., Navarini, C., Vaccarezza, M. S. (2024). Why Practical Wisdom Cannot be Eliminated. *Topoi*, *43*(3), 895-910.

De Caro, M., & Vaccarezza, M. S. (2020). Morality and Interpretation: the Principle of Phronetic Charity. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *23*(2), 295-307.

Fowers, B., Richardson, F., & Slife, B. (2017). *Frailty, suffering, and vice: Flourishing in the face of human limitations*, American Psychological Association.

Gisondi, G. (2023). I volti dell'essere. Philautia e vinculum amoris in Giordano Bruno. In G. Gisondi (Ed.), *Desmos, syndesmos, vinculum-nexus. Forme e crisi del legame tra antico e moderno* (pp.151-183). IISF Press.

Irr, C. (2023). *Phronesis*: shifting the concept of the political in the environmental humanities. *Textual Practice*, *37*(2), 205–220.

Langone, L. (2024). Nietzsche's Ethics of Place. In V. Lemm & A. Ulrich (Eds.), *Nietzsches Naturen* (pp. 55-68). De Gruyter.

Leopold, A. (1949). *A Sand County Almanac*. Oxford University Press

MacIntyre, A. (1999). *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtue*, Open Court Publishing.

Mackenzie, C., Rogers, W., & Dodds, S. (eds) (2014). *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, Oxford Academic.

Navarini, C. (2020). The Likelihood of Actions and the Neurobiology of Virtues: Veto and Consent Power. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *23*(2), 309-323.

Navarini, C. (2024). Suffering, care, and the good life: some ethical remarks. *Filosofia Morale/Moral Philosophy*, *5*(1), 71-84.

Navarini, C., Indraccolo, A., & Brunetti, R. (2021). Practical wisdom and generalization: A theoretical and empirical investigation on the effects of limited information. In M. De Caro, & M. S. Vaccarezza (Eds.), *Practical Wisdom: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (pp. 114-137). Taylor and Francis.

Nietzsche, F. (2017). *The Will to Power*, Penguin (Original work published 1906).

O'Madigan Gribble, M. (2017). Environmental Health Virtue Ethics. *The American Journal of Bioethics*, *17*(9), 33-35.

Rolston, H. I.I.I. (1992). Disvalues in nature. *The Monist*, *75*(2), 250–278.

Ryff, C.D. (2008). Know thyself and become what you are: eudaimonic approach to psychological well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *9*(1), pp. 13–39.

Salovaara, J. J. (2024). Phronesis in climate change and sustainability education and practice: Importance of the immeasurable goodness of a professional. *Sustainable Development*, *32*(6), 7330–7341.

Tokarski, M. (2019). *Hermeneutics of Human-Animal Relations in the Wake of Rewilding. The Ethical Guide to Ecological Discomforts*, Springer.

van Wensveen, L. (1999). *Dirty virtues: The emergence of ecological virtue ethics*, Humanity Books.

VanderWeele, T. J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *PNAS*, *114*(31), 8148–8156.

Willen, S. S. (2022). Flourishing and health in critical perspective: An invitation to interdisciplinary dialogue. *SSM Mental Health, 2,* Article 100045.