
Mark Coeckelbergh’s *Environmental Skill* makes a timely appearance. Just when Pope Francis calls on all of humanity to cultivate ecological virtues, the author’s sixth monograph proposes that virtue cultivation is as down-to-earth as baking sand cakes on a beach. His argument is particularly relevant for scholars and laypersons who are frustrated by “the gap between what we believe we should do and what we (fail to) do” (p. 13).

In part one, Coeckelbergh analyzes the motivational problem and solutions from the perspective of ancient and modern moral psychology, as well as contemporary environmental psychology. Finding these wanting, he proposes a deeper, philosophical diagnosis in parts two and three. Coeckelbergh spots a pervasive preconception that humans are not “environmental beings,” in the Heideggerian sense of “beings-in-the-world” (pp. 95, 184). This latent, dualistic belief sets us up for living accordingly. Most environmentalists fare no better. Both Enlightenment environmentalism and its Romanticist pendant are heir to the “modern” pattern of dualistic thinking, which Coeckelbergh traces to Socrates and Plato. Only the aesthetics of Arnold Berleant, who emphasizes “a human-environment continuity,” meets the author’s unqualified approval (pp. 87–91). Most environmental theories, principles, laws, or nudges are destined to fail.

Instead, Coeckelbergh agrees with psychology’s finding that we need to get moving if we want to be more motivated. By physically engaging our environments, we begin to create conditions of possibility for “human-environmental flourishing” (p. 196). However, direct experience is not enough, for we want to avoid moving like elephants in a china shop. This is where the notion of environmental skill comes in, i.e., virtue cultivation with a twist (parts three and four). Helpful engagement with our environments requires learning how to open up, to receive and respond as artists do. Drawing on Dewey and Hume, Coeckelbergh argues that relationality is the distinguishing characteristic of living in our particular environments in a way that “produces” flourishing. Focusing on how well we are relating, on how “environmental” we are as agents, is key to appropriate environmental action.

That is easier said than done. Coeckelbergh warns that we inevitably run into our “detached, alienated modern attitude” on the road of artistic experimentation (p. 200). Whether appearing in our language, in social structures, or in technologies, this pernicious habit spells the ultimate threat of death: to cease relating. The larger part of *Environmental Skill* is devoted to showing where the problem of modernity hides out. The romantic naturalist’s search for authentic identity turns out to be as alienating as the rationalist manager’s attempt to exercise control over a “standing reserve” of natural resources. Thus, changing into non-modern, relational ways of being and doing turns out to be very difficult (pp. 83, 86, 96, 157, 160, 164, 168, 201). Coeckelbergh counsels us to prepare for a slow process of moral growing.
This requires much patience and non-controlling Gelassenheit, and there is no blueprint, or yardstick, or guarantee for progress (p. 117).

As an environmental virtue ethicist, I strongly agree with Coeckelbergh that the skill-dimension of cultivating environmental virtues deserves more attention. However, how helpful and how accurate is it to present this as a frustrating and harried exercise, like baking cakes on a soggy sand bank while the tide is rising? Moreover, the scant references to possible recipes lack best practice narratives and come with many reservations (less than ten percent of the book is devoted to examples of environmental skill, most on pp. 157–71 involving health, food, animal relations, energy, and climate change). We need not get our hopes up that many environmental couch potatoes will want to try getting sand between their toes in such a worried way.

I prefer to think that Coeckelbergh’s pen is darker than his message. Surely some environmental skill examples can be shared without a litany of reservations? Permaculture practice and biomimetic industrial design come to mind as ways of being environmental. Moreover, the argument needs stories to off-balance the perpetuum mobile of critical thinking, especially if it is going to be suitable for teaching purposes. Conversion stories would be particularly helpful. To use a phrase from Martin Luther, what happens to a closed heart, a modern cor curvum in se, when it finally opens up to its environment? Does it dance like a cow meeting her meadow on the first day of spring?

I also think that Coeckelbergh’s collegial environment is brighter than it appears in Environmental Skill. Especially ecofeminists and social ecologists have already done much to unmask (hierarchical) dualisms in rationalist and romantic traditions. Why does Coeckelbergh not engage with, say, Val Plumwood’s critique of Platonic dualism? Ecofeminist work on embodied, embedded relationality also deserves to be considered in further explorations of environmental skill. As for ancient colleagues, maligned Socrates and Plato appear much less “modern” when the Sitz im Leben of their arguments is taken into account. The hands-on and handed-on tradition of magical practice that is latent in their arguments may well prove to be fertile ground for growing environmental skill (cf. Peter Kingsley, Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition [Oxford: Clarendon, 1995]).

Overall, Coeckelbergh’s Environmental Skill issues a helpful reminder to be aware of an overly autistic, obsessively controlling tendency in Western philosophical and everyday cultures. Such a distancing pattern and its ideological scaffolding prevent environmental action. Just as autistic children can benefit from the right kind of physical engagement, all “moderns” can benefit from virtue cultivation qua embodied, situated, relational practice.

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