

Heeson Bai, David Chang, and Charles Scott (eds)

A Book of Ecological Virtues: Living Well in the Anthropocene

Regina, Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2020

ISBN 978-0-889-77756-9 (PB) \$39.95. 301pp.

This volume is an anthology of writings that address from a variety of perspectives, traditions, and pathways the question of how we should change our lives, now that we are in the Anthropocene, to minimise suffering and maximise well-being for all. As the subtitle of the volume indicates, the question addressed is ‘What does living well, and suffering well, look like in the Anthropocene?’ To answer these questions the editors put together a collection of essays, stories, poems and scholarly articles that draw on wisdom sources that include native peoples, Daoist, Christian, Buddhist traditions, personal reflections of encounters with the natural world, and contemporary environmental virtue ethics writings. The goal of the editors was to include ‘authors of a broad spectrum of traditions and disciplines of theory and practice – this in accordance with the first-order principle of diversity. These authors represent diversity in academic disciplines, epistemic and methodological orientations, philosophical affiliations, as well as aesthetic visions and writing styles’ (p.xii). The book is published by the University of Regina Press, and reflects a wide range of mostly Canadian writers, providing welcome perspectives not usually presented in academic journals in the U.S.

Along with an Introduction by the editors that briefly describes the structure and content of each work, the text is divided into five sections. The editors point out that each author in the collection speaks on what makes for lives well examined and well lived, and they all draw upon a range of experiences academic and personal to support their views. The editors hope that readers will read and feel in each essay a sense of soul, as well as taking from the collection a recognition that eco-virtues arise from both *praxis* and *phronesis*.

‘Part One: The Call From and To Earth’ invites the reader to consider what it means to practise eco-virtues with articles that develop the notion of ecosystem services, with an emphasis on the reciprocity of giving to and receiving from the natural world and the virtues that accompany these actions. The second article builds on the idea of reciprocity by arguing that such interactions allow us to be more fully present with the non-human Other, and provide a portal to a transcendent part of human existence. ‘Part Two: Morality and Mortality’ spells out what virtues are necessary for us today facing environmental catastrophes. An interesting article in this section ‘Thanatopsis: Death Literacy for the Living’ reminds us that any consideration of living well must also involve thinking about a good death, that a ‘death literacy’ must inform a full set of ecological virtues. This consideration of death is often missing from many discussion of eco-virtues. By developing such a literacy, the authors contend that we will be better able to express courage and love necessary for understanding

REVIEWS

ecological dynamics. 'Part Three: Insights from the Contemplative Wisdom Traditions' takes the reader into a discussion of eco-virtues through the Daoist, Catholic and Buddhist traditions. Each tradition offers a reorientation of being in the world away from consumerist cultures that focus on those parts of the world of instrumental value. The Buddhist tradition is used to advocate the need for an 'eco-sattva' who combines contemplation with action to promote a more sustainable world. 'Part Four: Philosophies of Virtue Ethics' will be of interest to those more philosophic readers of this journal, as it provides two philosophical examinations of virtue in ecology. The first argues for an ethic of sustainable wellbeing: that being alive as a human must be connected with sustainable socio-ecological systems. The second paper returns to the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia*, arguing that the answer to the question of 'why should we cultivate eco-virtues?' can be found in our own flourishing as human beings. 'Part V: Embodied Creature Connections to Others and Place' provides four different accounts of embodied and embedded practices of virtue. One author argues that we need to accept we are animals with imperfections and suffering in the world in a virtuous way that requires composure and acceptance of the particularities of our lives. Another author, in responding to an encounter with a mountain argues for a life of 'struggle ...[an] unremitting vigilance against the infiltration of deleterious power, [and the] injustices that subvert agency and ethical integrity' (p.xv). Such a life is a fitting and worthy response to the encounter with the mountain. Another piece by several authors provides accounts of informal educations that taught them of 'local virtues' provided by families necessary for just and sustainable communities. The final, most distinctive, section involves a conversation in prose and poetry between two authors that encourages a careful and artful attending to our particular places. Poetry is used to illustrate how we learn to slow down and hear others speak of a changed reality of loving, responsible being. Poetry is the language, they hold, that allows one to speak our world in all its complexity.

All in all, the anthology is not a traditional collection of academic papers on the topic of environmental virtue ethics. What makes the collective distinctive is its diversity of voices, experiences and approaches. In this way the anthology seeks a wider audience than more traditional philosophical collections. One other thing that makes the collection different from many similar writings, in the United States at least, is the use of the words 'ecology' or 'ecological' as synonyms for what many in the US would call 'environmental'. I find this terminology confusing at least, and any ecologist who approaches the text hoping to find a discussion of the virtues of an ecologist practicing her craft will be disappointed. I do recognise that this terminology is well established in British and Commonwealth environmental literature, so I can view this as a minor quibble that does not take away from the value of the collection.

GEOFFREY FRASZ
College of Southern Nevada