

Harvesting Ethics: The Virtues of Sustainable Gardening

by

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Introduction

There are ample reasons to fear the effects of global climate change: glaciation, soil desertification, atmospheric imbalance, water scarcity, and food deserts are some serious examples that shine light on the level of global change (Lindwall, 2022). But we individuals can make proactive changes that both limit our contributions to climate change as well as a re-centering us in a holistic and generally healthier lifestyle, informed not by consumerism, but a deeper appreciation for the natural. Sustainable gardening has the power to demonstrate and inform a new kind of environmental ethic such as this. Such a project makes good the values that come from gardening, such as increased health benefits, a reduction in waste, and a meaningful connection with the rest of the natural world. My project is about empowering meaningful personal action in this uncertain environmental age by practicing virtues that lead to an overall better quality of life.

Consumerism is the steam engine of climate change. With the technological advancements of the last three or so centuries, energy demands have skyrocketed, retail markets have exploded, luxury items have become common place, and there is a tool you can purchase that will help to fix just about anything (Phillips, 2024). The average American will live longer, is more comfortable in regard to amenities, and has access to more opportunity than ever before (Roser, 2016). Even the sky stopped being the limit thanks to various space programs, which now are government-sanctioned *and* privatized. We have generated so much waste that it has spilled out into and is caught in Earth's orbit (O'Callaghan, 2024). But these advancements have come at a significant cost. Mining, fracking, hydroelectricity, solar power, wind-generated power, and geothermal are all required to power this new technological and consumeristic driven lifestyle.

But not all it lost. So long as tomorrow continues to come, we can work to adapt to the changing world. Sustainable gardening is one multifaceted solution toward our personal response to climate change. Not only can gardening reduce food insecurity on an individual level, but it can be practiced almost anywhere (Clark, 2019). There are hundreds of different techniques that are available online for gardening in different spaces and climates. Personal gardens reduce dependency on the grocery store model of food procurement that has taken a predominant hold in this country and provides access to higher quality, nutrient dense foods. But beyond its practical applications of food production, gardening is also a great way to reduce harmful wastes such as plastics, food waste, yard waste, and other brown materials (like the brown paper that comes in Amazon packages), some of which can be turned into compost (Jwalton, 2020).

The connection with the natural is one of the most important benefits of gardening. The lack of connection with our food, for the average American, has been normalized to a large degree. Lost with the grocery store model was the importance of knowing about the food that we put in our bodies. In the times when we were hunters and gatherers, it was imperative to know the local flora and fauna because that would most certainly mean the difference between life and death (Naithani, 2021). But now, it seems quite feasible to trust the food that you can purchase at the area grocer. Unfortunately, that trust has been manipulated and the shelves have been filled with processed and manufactured foods that hold little or no nutritional value (Ver Ploeg, 2016). Salts and sugars have corrupted the taste buds and altered our way of life. Regular access to whole foods that you had the pride in growing yourself, being in relationship with what is natural, will leave you not only in better health physically, but in better health emotionally too (Thompson, 2018).

The aim of this project is simple: to do my part of help mitigate the effects of climate change, and further, provide a set of ethics suitable to these changes: I created a one-hour course that synthesizes the basics of sustainable gardening and an introduction to environmental ethics. I believe that one of the most valuable assets we have in preserving the soil, air, and water is by adapting how we *conceptualize* it and how we *work with* it. The ethics of the project are largely informed by the work of philosopher Henry David Thoreau, Indigenous Kinship ethics and Traditional Ecological Knowledge taught by a host of experts including Robin Wall Kimmerer. Also informative to this project was the time I spent at Chief Dull Knife College in Lame Deer, Montana, where I completed my internship assisting American Indian students learning to conduct field research on the waters of the Tongue River Reservoir in southeast Montana.

The benefits of gardening that I will focus on in this project can be subdivided into three categories: nutrition and health with an emphasis on personal food security, a significant reduction in the amount of waste that we produce, and a meaningful connection to the natural world. Personal gardens provide direct access to nutrient rich foods that are not always available or affordable at the local supermarket. Even in small spaces, food can be grown for personal consumption, food that you know have not been treated with pesticides or herbicides, or other kinds of harmful chemicals that have been shown to be dangerous for human consumption (WHO, 2022). Additionally, growing food rather than purchasing it reduces the amount of waste that is produced by your home. As so many products on the grocery store shelf come in packaging, you can avoid this waste by producing your own food (Fundal, 2021). An additional benefit is that a majority of the green waste that is a result of gardening can be used in compost or ecologically recycled in other ways, turning waste into nutrient-dense soil.

Most importantly, I believe that gardening can put us in closer relation to the natural world, which has an accompanying host of benefits. Benefits include improved attention, lower stress, better mood, reduced risk of psychiatric disorders and even upticks in empathy and cooperation (Weir, 2020). As Thoreau boasted of his *Walden* experiment, “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (Thoreau, 81, 2004). Thoreau, like myself, was convinced that the natural world was essential to human health and welfare, so much so that he felt compelled to crow like a rooster to wake those around him to the fact. This project is a crowing of my own, a crowing to wake up my neighbors to an alternative way of living in a changing world.

Background and Context

The philosophy of gardening, at least in Western cultures, is a fairly new undertaking as far as environmental ethics are concerned. In 2006, David Cooper offered one of the first major contribution to the field with *A Philosophy of Gardens* in 2006. Prior to Cooper, Stephanie Ross wrote *What Gardens Mean* in 1998. Ross’ work primarily focused on the aesthetic component of gardening and what that means for our perception. While Cooper worked to answer what gardens mean and what their purpose is, he also sought to understand how we ought to conceptualize gardens in reference to both nature and art.

Cooper’s work in establishing a philosophy of gardening was important and influential for three primary reasons. First, this subject has been generally neglected by Western moral philosophy, whereas Indigenous ethical systems and Eastern philosophies have long found value in the topic. Second, as it has in Eastern philosophy, gardening demonstrates that the subject of aesthetics is not restricted to the fine arts. Third, unlike the concept of wilderness which

commands that man leave no trace of his presence, gardening *creates a relationship* between the gardener and the natural world, where traces of your presence means a happy, flourishing garden.

The good life, a concept derived from Aristotle, is achieved by living virtuously and finding balance in all things – he called it eudaimonia. He argued that true happiness is found, not in mere pleasure or possession of goods, or even fame, but in the deep satisfaction earned from developing personal virtues – where our actions lead to habits and a lifestyle that is worth living. Virtues such as wisdom and justice, when practiced moderately, can lead to a fulfilled and meaningful life (Fowers, et al, 2024).

I agree with Aristotle that by living modestly and virtuously we can truly achieve a good life. Specifically, I believe that the proper virtues practiced through gardening are capable of producing a good life, which I believe is about relationships, both with others and ourselves. While Aristotle studied a long list of virtues, in this project I intend to focus on five: stewardship, reciprocity, justice, respect, and wisdom. I have correlated each of these virtues to the layer of a sustainable gardening box.

The first and bottom layer put into the box are sticks and twigs, representing the virtue of *stewardship*. Stewardship represents the idea that humans have a responsibility to care for the natural world, focusing on sustainable resource use and minimizing harm to nature (Bennett, 2018). The topic of stewardship can be neatly discussed within the context of gardening because it demonstrates nature’s brilliant capacity for putting its waste back to use for the mutual benefit of the ecosystem.

The next layer to be added is the brown material, where lawn clippings, old dry leaves, and even the brown paper from Amazon packages can be added in. This section is a focus on the discussion of *reciprocity*. Reciprocity is about sustaining respectful and mutually-beneficial

relationships (Kimmerer, 2013). I have incorporated the idea of reciprocity within this section of the bed build because it is a beautiful visual metaphor for the give and take that happens in a sustainable relationship with the world (Kimmerer, 2013). Sustainable gardening practices also involve using gardening techniques that emphasize the importance of minimizing harm to the environment and promoting the long-term health and vitality of the ecosystem (Kimmerer, 2013).

Once the brown materials have been added, it is time for the compost material. During this layer of the build, I incorporated a conversation about *environmental justice*. I chose environmental justice as an important virtue correlating to this section of the bed for two reasons. First, it demonstrates a valuable way to reduce waste and promote sustainability, which also correlates with the ways in which waste directly effects disproportionately marginalized communities (Maynard, 2021). Secondly, composting can help to promote food justice by providing a nutrient-rich soil additive for community gardens and urban agriculture projects that are locally produced (EPA).

Next added to the garden box was soil, accompanied by a conversation about *respect*, which is fundamental to both gardening and ethics. Associating respect with the soil involves recognizing its importance and value to both the human and natural world. Soil is the foundation upon which ecosystems and agricultural systems are built, and it provides a range of ecosystem services, such as nutrient cycling, water storage, and carbon sequestration (Mantel, 2024). Sustainable relationships with the natural world such as gardening are reliant upon both soil and respect, and encapsulates how respect and sustainable gardening are peas in a pod.

Finally, with the box filled, it is time to add the seed. The seed opens the conversation to the importance of the virtue of *wisdom* in sustainable gardening. Wisdom is a virtue that, like

gardening, is cultivated, nurtured, and grown. Wisdom also represents the acknowledgement of the interdependent, reciprocal relationship that sustainable gardening is all about. Moreover, like wisdom, the seed that is planted and tended with care will grow to nourish one's body and spirit. If cared for properly, both sustainable gardens and wisdom can serve to feed the self in substantial ways.

Sustainability, generally speaking, is “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Browne, 2024). Examples of sustainable practices range from gardening at home to shopping and sharing local foods with your surrounding communities, recycling and minimizing consumeristic habits, from composting to permaculture (McGrath, 2024). There are a plethora of abundant and viable options for achieving a more sustainable lifestyle. And as you can see from this list here, many of them overlap or work congruently with gardening as a sustainable practice.

Most importantly, as we face global climate change that will effect both soil and water, factory farming no longer seems like a viable option for feeding families. While we cannot straight away just quit the grocery store model, promoting the conversation about the ways in which gardening can not only help combat global climate change, but also provide more reliable access to quality whole foods out of your own backyard or neighborhood garden, seems significantly important. Food insecurity is already an issue in the United States; according to the USDA Economic Research Report No. (ERR-325), 12.8% of homes were impacted by food insecurity in 2022. While that may not seem, on the surface, to be a large part of the population, it actually means that 42,660,807 individuals suffered from food insecurity.

Theoretical Application: Thoreau

When contemplating the principles of sustainability, the influence of Henry David Thoreau's philosophy, best demonstrated in his pinnacle work *Walden*, is palpable. Thoreau's insights offer a timeless reminder of the value found in co-existing more holistically with one's environment. Thoreau's philosophy, rooted in the interconnectedness of all living things and a reverence for the natural world, provides a theoretical foundation that has allowed for the continued cultivation of sustainable ecological practices. He opted against treating the land in isolation, as monocultural agricultural practices do, instead engaging with the biotic community of the Walden Pond watershed (Meine, 35, 2017). His insights into the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world, as well as his emphasis on aligning with one's environment, continue to inspire individuals and communities striving for sustainability today.

This section explores the lasting influence of Thoreau's legacy on modern sustainability initiatives, displaying philosophical principles deeply rooted in intentional living and co-existence with nature. First, I will elaborate the key principles which were informative to Thoreau's philosophy, namely simplicity, preservation of the wild, and co-existence. Then, through an examination of his cultivation of a bean field, I will demonstrate how Thoreau embodied these principles in his daily life, offering a tangible example of his philosophy in action. Finally, this section considers the prevailing paradigm of land management practices and how regenerative farming, exemplified by practices observed on a Montana ranch, is working to challenge and reshape traditional norms, showcasing the enduring influence of Thoreau's philosophy on sustainability.

Thoreau's core tenets are centered on the fundamental concept of simplicity. For him, simplicity was not merely a lifestyle choice but a profound philosophical stance, emphasizing the

liberation found in reducing life to its essential elements. Simplicity was integral to Thoreau's philosophy, serving as a pathway to liberation from societal constraints. Simplicity embodied his conviction that true wealth and fulfillment arise not from material possessions, but from a life unencumbered by the trappings of modern society. "Our life is frittered away by detail...Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" (Thoreau, 89, 2004). Embracing simplicity, Thoreau sought to strip away distractions and excesses, facilitating a deeper connection with both himself and the natural world.

Furthermore, Thoreau deeply appreciated the significance of wildness in shaping the human experience. He recognized that the untamed landscapes offer not only physical sustenance but also spiritual nourishment. "I love the wild not less than the good...I like sometimes to take rank hold on life and spend my day more as the animals do" (Thoreau, 202, 2004). In nature, Thoreau found solace, inspiration, and a profound sense of belonging, leading him to advocate for its preservation as vital for the holistic well-being of individuals and society. "Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness" (Thoreau, 306, 2004).

Thoreau's advocacy for simplicity and wildness underscores his broader philosophy of co-existence with the natural world. By embracing simplicity, Thoreau believed individuals could shed societal distractions and connect more deeply with their surroundings (Thoreau, 89, 2004). Simplicity, therefore, serves as a pathway to cultivating a harmonious relationship with nature, allowing for a clearer appreciation of its value for our well-being. Similarly, Thoreau's reverence for wildness highlights the importance of preserving untamed landscapes as integral to the human experience. Through his immersion in nature, Thoreau recognized the reciprocal exchange between humanity and the environment, demonstrating the preservation of wild spaces

as essential for maintaining balance and vitality within both individuals and society. Thus, simplicity and wildness intertwine in Thoreau's philosophy, reinforcing his call for co-existence and mutual respect between humans and the natural world. “A lake is the earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature” (Thoreau, 180, 2004).

Thoreau's principles served as a thought-provoking presentation of stewardship. Throughout his time at Walden Pond, Thoreau demonstrated a deep sense of stewardship by actively engaging with the land and adopting practices that minimized his ecological impact. One of the clearest examples of Thoreau's stewardship was his deliberate cultivation of a small plot of land surrounding his cabin: he cultivated a bean field, embodying his commitment to sustainable living and environmental coexistence. His meticulous attention to the ecosystem around him through observation created a model of ecological mindfulness.

Thoreau's approach to gardening bridged the gap between the wild and the cultivated. “Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field. They were beans cheerfully returning to their wild and primitive state that I cultivated” (Thoreau, 153, 2004). The experience of working outdoors, seemingly both with and against the land simultaneously, was as valuable for Thoreau as his observations. He did not just want to harvest beans – he wanted to *know them* (Thoreau, 156, 2004). He spent his days doing the labor of finding a balance between tame and wild, learning when to hoe or let grow, co-existing as a part of the greater ecosystem.

In contrast to Thoreau's ethos of stewardship, the prevailing modern economic paradigm often fosters extractive practices, where natural resources are exploited for profit without adequate consideration of long-term consequences on surrounding landscapes and communities.

Industrial agriculture, for example, relies heavily on chemical inputs and monoculture farming practices that degrade soil health, deplete water resources, and contribute to biodiversity loss (National Geographic Society, 2023). But Thoreau keenly foresaw the deterioration of landscapes and agricultural practices. “By avarice and selfishness, and a grovelling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives. He knows Nature but as a robber” (Thoreau, 160, 2004). It was evident even at this historical distance to see the trajectory of the market influence on the American landscape.

In today's land management practices, such as those listed above, Thoreau's principles of stewardship are reshaping norms. This shift is evident on a Montana ranch where sustainability is challenging tradition. I recently experienced his legacy at work on a regenerative cattle farm just outside of Yellowstone National Park, where the balance between wild and managed is a constant challenge. On the border of the park, where the cows share rangeland with grizzly bears, rancher Malou Anderson-Ramirez has adopted the principle of co-existence. She works with the National Park Service to relocate problem bears that extinguish too many cows. If a bear causes too much damage, it is relocated to a different area of the park rather than being euthanized. Malou accepts that the landscape is not hers alone to control, but rather that her land is just one part of a much larger ecosystem within which she must coexist.

Malou is also a member of the Western Sustainability Exchange. This collective is working to preserve natural ecosystems as well as their ranching heritage through regenerative farming. The Meet-the-Staff page boasts that “Malou enjoys working in community-building and land-based practices. Helping people and communities reconnect to themselves through restoring landscapes, coexisting with wildlife, and creating strong and thriving communities for both

human and the more-than-human” (Western Sustainability Exchange, 2024). Malou's land management practices echo the principles of stewardship that Thoreau wrote about at Walden Pond, prioritizing biodiversity and the preservation of ecological integrity. Malou is taking action to ensure the health and vitality of ecosystems for generations to come, setting yet another strong example of what sustainability can look like.

Thoreau's emphasis on stewardship and coexistence stands as a powerful source of inspiration for individuals and communities grappling with the complexities of modern environmental challenges, tangible in groups such as Western Sustainability Exchange. His recognition of the interconnectedness of all living beings and his steadfast dedication to aligning *with* nature helped establish the framework for preservation and conservation, which has helped guide sustainability efforts. Through Thoreau's perspective, we are reminded not only of our role as stewards of the Earth but also of our connection to the web of life, inviting us to cultivate a deeper sense of reverence, responsibility, and reciprocity in our interactions with the natural world. As we confront urgent environmental issues, Thoreau's philosophy offers guidance, illuminating a path towards a more sustainable, equitable, and integrated future for all beings.

Theoretical Application: Issues in the Anthropocene

The concept of the Anthropocene stands as a testament to humanity's unprecedented influence on the Earth's systems. The term Anthropocene encapsulates the recognition that human activities have become a dominant force shaping the planet's trajectory, marking a new epoch in geological time. Originating from the Greek word "anthropos," meaning human, and "cene," signifying new, the Anthropocene signifies a profound shift in our understanding of humanity's relationship with the world. This section explains the origins and significance of the

Anthropocene, tracing its development and discussing its implications for environmental thinking. By examining the ways in which human activities have altered the Earth's systems, we can gain insights into the challenges and opportunities of navigating the complex dynamics of the Anthropocene era.

In 2000, Paul Crutzen presented a new hypothesis: “that human beings can change the Earth in such profound and lasting ways that they usher in a new chapter, in its history—the geological epoch of human beings” (Schwaegerl, 2021). This groundbreaking assertion marked a pivotal moment in scientific discourse, challenging traditional conceptions of humanity's relationship with the environment. Crutzen's hypothesis laid the groundwork for the emergence of the Anthropocene concept, which acknowledges the profound impact of human activities on the Earth's geological and ecological systems. By proposing the idea of a distinct geological epoch defined by human influence, Crutzen provoked a paradigm shift in environmental thinking, prompting scholars and policymakers alike to reconsider humanity's role within the broader context of planetary processes.

The Anthropocene distinction raises a plethora of pressing environmental questions that challenge traditional notions of human-nature relations. At its core, the Anthropocene prompts inquiries into the extent and consequences of human-induced alterations to Earth's systems. Key questions include assessing the boundaries of human influence on the environment and determining the capacity of ecosystems to absorb and adapt to anthropogenic pressures. Furthermore, the Anthropocene compels us to grapple with ethical dilemmas surrounding resource exploitation, environmental justice, and intergenerational equity in the face of rapid global change. Moreover, it prompts inquiries into the effectiveness of technological solutions and policy interventions in mitigating environmental degradation and fostering sustainability in

the Anthropocene era. Ultimately, understanding and addressing these complex environmental questions are essential for navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by the Anthropocene epoch.

The emergence of these questions was pivotal in catalyzing the paradigm shift that ensued, resulting in a divergence of perspectives and essentially splitting environmental discussions on the Anthropocene into two distinctive groups: those advocating for technology as the solution for environmental change and those arguing that technology itself precipitated the onset of the Anthropocene. Advocates for the former, including influential ecomodernists like Yasha Rohwer, David Keith, and Emma Marris, champion research into technological solutions to mitigate humanity's impact on the biosphere. Conversely, proponents of the latter view, such as Holmes Rolston III, Paul Kingsnorth, and Eileen Crist, emphasize the role of technology in driving environmental degradation. Central to the tension between these views is the conception of the relationship between humans and nature, with each side of the discussion delineating our relationship with technology.

The variety of technologies proposed or supported by some thinkers is vast. Technologies include synthetic biologies and gene drives, climate engineering, and de-extinction initiatives. Ecomodernists advocate for maximizing technological efficiency across various aspects of human life, such as agriculture, energy production, housing, and transportation. Their aim is to minimize the utilization of natural resources and the land footprint required to sustain human activities. This concept, termed decoupling, entails disassociating resource consumption from economic growth. By achieving this decoupling, ecomodernists envision a significant conservation victory: freeing up substantial land from the burdens of supporting modern industrial human life. “Whether it’s a local indigenous community or a foreign corporation that

benefits, it is the continued dependence of humans on natural environments that is the problem for the conservation of nature” (Asafu-Adjaye et. al., 17, 2015).

While decoupling holds promise, not all technological interventions are straightforward solutions, particularly in the context of climate change. Addressing climate challenges demands nuanced strategies beyond decoupling alone. David Keith assesses various technological mitigations aimed at combating escalating warming. He suggests that while these measures may become essential as a last resort, they require careful consideration and scrutiny. “There is no easy path to a stable and legitimate governance process for a cheap, high-leverage technology in an unstable world” (Keith, 2021). As Keith points out, navigating the governance of powerful technologies in an unstable world poses complex challenges, highlighting the need for comprehensive evaluation and ethical deliberation.

Yet, other ecomodernists express optimism that significant technological interventions can not only enhance efficiency and minimize human impact but also alleviate suffering. Yasha Rohwer suggests that some of these technological solutions can actually reduce suffering and make conservation a more compassionate process. He advocates for “compassionate conservation;” “win-win” solutions where species or populations can be saved without causing excessive harm to sentient individuals, essentially eliminating killing in conservation (Rohwer, 243, 2020). He considers an example in which mice could be injected with a gene drive that prohibits the birth of female mice. Rather than drop in poisons that cause severe harm both to the intended species but also others unintentionally, a gene drive could make it so that only males are born, which would lead to the eradication of the invasive species seemingly without causing significant harm (Rohwer, 250, 2020). “CRISPR technology allows us to delete, add, or

rearrange the genetic elements of organisms DNA. Furthermore, not only can the CRISPR system make precise edits but these technologies are cheap” (Rohwer, 250, 2020).

In a collaborative effort involving nearly 20 contributors, *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* articulates a persuasive argument for embracing the Anthropocene epoch and its technologies:

As scholars, scientists, campaigners, and citizens, we write with the conviction that knowledge and technology, applied with wisdom, might allow for a good, or even great, Anthropocene. A good Anthropocene demands that humans use their growing social, economic and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world. (Asafu-Adjaye et. al., 6, 2015)

The manifesto's call to harness human ingenuity for societal well-being, climate stability, and environmental preservation goes beyond mere rhetoric; it's a call for action in the Anthropocene. By advocating for the judicious use of humanity's social, economic, and technological capacities, the manifesto underscores the need for practical solutions grounded in real-world application. This entails not just the development of new technologies, but also the implementation of policies and practices that foster resilience and sustainability. In essence, the manifesto challenges us to move beyond theoretical debates and embrace tangible actions that can lead to a good Anthropocene. This vision underscores the authors' unwavering commitment to leveraging human agency as a force for constructive change in the Anthropocene.

Conversely, proponents of the latter view, including Holmes Rolston III, Paul Kingsnorth, and Eileen Crist, adopt a critical stance towards increased technological intervention in biological and ecological systems, highlighting its complicity in exacerbating environmental degradation. They argue that the relentless pursuit of technological advancement has led to the

exploitation and degradation of natural resources, and that there may be simple solutions already at hand for substantially combatting climate change. “Microsoft computer scientist and author Jarod Lanier has estimated that if everyone in the world deleted all their social media accounts, it would make a major contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Internet data storage facilities currently emit roughly the same amount as the entire global aviation industry” (Kingsnorth, 2019). For them, the Anthropocene is not just a testament to human ingenuity, but also a cautionary tale about the unintended consequences of unchecked technological growth. Central to the tension between these opposing views is the conception of the relationship between humans and nature.

In the Anthropocene, Bill McKibben's ominous proclamation about the end of nature resonates. His stark warning signals a paradigm shift, challenging our traditional conception of nature as an entity distinct and independent from human influence. McKibben's assertion forces us to confront the unsettling reality that nowhere on Earth remains untouched by human impact. “We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us” (McKibben, 58, 2022). If nature is defined by its autonomy from human intervention, then indeed, the boundaries between the natural and the human-made have blurred to the point of near-erasure.

While acknowledging the undeniable imprint of human activity on the planet, some argue that significant swathes of the world still retain a semblance of independence. Critics challenge the notion that humanity's pervasive influence has rendered nature entirely subservient to its will. Steven Vogel offered this counterargument, proposing that the very notion of a rigid division between human and nature is fundamentally flawed. “...the view of nature as something that needs to be protected because of its independence from human beings may itself be a central part

of the environmental problem we face today. The conceptual framework out of which that view arises, I suggest, is at some deep level the culprit of the contemporary crises of the environment” (Vogel, 31, 2016). From this perspective, the Anthropocene signifies not the obliteration of nature's autonomy but rather a call to reassess and redefine humanity's relationship with the natural world.

In the Anthropocene, characterized by profound human influence on the planet’s systems, sustainable gardening emerges as a beacon of hope and practicality. As natural habitats diminish, sustainable gardening offers a tangible means for individuals to reconnect with natural processes and mitigate their environmental footprint. By prioritizing techniques such as permaculture, companion planting, and soil regeneration, sustainable gardens not only produce nutritious food but also foster biodiversity and enhance ecosystem resilience. In an era marked by climate uncertainty and ecological degradation, these gardens serve as microcosms of sustainability, demonstrating how thoughtful land management and resource stewardship can coexist with human needs.

Theoretical Application: Environmental Philosophy

The course in environmental philosophy not only provided a thorough examination of foundational concepts but also encouraged critical reflection on contemporary environmental issues. Through engaging discussions and readings, I was exposed to the complexities of environmental ethics and justice, considering the ethical implications of human actions on ecosystems and future generations. Overall, the course fostered a comprehensive understanding of the philosophical frameworks informing environmental thought and action in today's world. The groundwork for this understanding was established by examining a diverse range of topics,

each offering distinct viewpoints on the intricate relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Humans hold diverse relationships with nature influenced by varying values and cultural perspectives, with some regarding it as a mere resource, assessed through a cost/benefit analysis, reflecting anthropocentric ideologies prioritizing human interests. Others adopt a biocentric approach, recognizing the intrinsic value of all living beings and advocating for their protection and preservation. Ecofeminism explores the intersections of gender oppression and environmental degradation, advocating for the liberation of both women and nature from patriarchal domination. And yet others questioned whether the natural environment hold a special value, intrinsic to the nature of what it is.

Given the breadth and diversity of environmental thought, this section will focus on three specific insights that emerged during the course. First, I will outline the blind spot created by the dualistic notion of humans as separate from nature and its ensuing implications. Following that, I will evaluate the moral considerations proposed by environmental virtue ethics. Finally, I will delve into Indigenous kinship ethics, examining how the marginalization of this ethical framework has influenced environmental philosophical discourse and how its inclusion could enrich our comprehension of humanity's relationship with the natural world. To conclude, I will elaborate the ways in which these three topics fundamentally changed and informed my own environmental philosophy, and how those changes in thought informed my civic engagement project.

The Urban Blind Spot

One of the central discussions in environmental philosophy revolves around the relationship between humans and their environment. Particularly interesting was Andrew Light's work, "The Urban Blind Spot in Environmental Ethics." In this text, Light addresses the "anti-urban bias" prevalent in environmental ethics: "Is the city really the source of all environmental ills, covered only by a thin veneer of cultural accomplishment? Or is it in fact one of the most important front lines on the environmental front, a terrain of environmental values and environmental issues which will be the true test of the ecological acumen and social pluralism of the environmental community?" (Light, 2). To understand the larger problem that Light is addressing, one must first understand what the anti-urban blind spot encompasses.

The bias that Light refers to pertains to the valuation of cities in environmental discourse. "By and large, cities are considered sources of environmental disvalue: a landscape either to be mined for examples to be avoided or ignored all together as a product of human intentions – an artifact rather than part of nature and so outside of the appropriate boundaries of the discipline" (Light, 2). Light takes issue with this bias for a connected pair of reasons. First, he addresses the narrowness of breadth explored by environmental philosophy. "[E]specially in North America, environmental philosophy has been dominated by a concern with more abstract questions of value theory, primarily focused on the issue of whether nature has 'intrinsic value,' or some other form of non-instrumental value" (Light, 3). This response to popular discourse is drawing attention to the fact that much of environmental philosophy has been focused on finding a non-instrumental value in nature, which would neatly distance the value being derived for anthropocentric reasons (Light, 3).

And that, for Light, leads to the second part of the blind spot problem – where we lack a system for humans to value the product of their work as well as understand themselves as a part of the greater environment; nonanthropocentrism has left a huge gap for ethically tending to urban landscapes and their ecological issues. “Why would the field of environmental ethics so narrowly define itself so as to not be applicable to all environments? The answer is that for the vast majority of environmental ethicists, the embrace of nonanthropocentric foundations for an environmental ethics has entailed a necessary rejection of anthropocentric forms of value, and I would argue, consequently, of anthropogenically created landscapes” (Light, 4).

The core concept driving the anti-urban bias and nonanthropocentrism movement in environmental philosophy stems from the notion of the potential loss if nature were not inherently valued. “...if any particular society did not hold ideals that could be symbolized in nature and wildlife (for example, if it happened to value plastic trees more than real ones), then there would be *no reason* for that society to preserve nature or protect wildlife” (Light, 8). The concern that human-centric motives for manipulating the environment could lead to potentially dire consequences is not ungrounded. But on the other hand, lacking an ethical system that is capable of theoretically tackling human landscapes is equally important. For Light, the absence of an ethical framework capable of addressing human-inhabited landscapes is equally significant.

According to the 2020 census, 80% of Americans live in urban areas. And, according to Light, ignoring this fact is a “crucial mistake,” arguing for at least three ecological reasons that urban environmentalism is just as important as the protection of wilderness (which gained serious traction in large part because of Holmes Rolston III). First, in light of population pressures, there exists a direct trade-off between preserving non-urban areas and enhancing the livability of urban spaces. Consequently, cities must serve as potential homes for experiences

that ethicists, critical of geographical dualism, deem vital. Second, cities inherently foster economies of scale, resulting in lower energy consumption compared to rural regions or areas sustaining human populations alongside wilderness. And third, anyone concerned with the sustainability of larger biotic systems must prioritize the sustainability of urban environments due to their substantial impact on these systems, stemming from their high population densities.

Light's work on the urban blind spot in environmental ethics sheds light on a crucial aspect of contemporary environmental discourse. By addressing the anti-urban bias, Light challenges the narrow focus of traditional environmental philosophy and emphasizes the importance of considering urban landscapes in ecological discussions. His critique underscores the need for an ethical framework that encompasses human-inhabited environments and acknowledges the interconnectedness between humans and their surroundings. As urbanization continues to shape our world, understanding and addressing the environmental challenges of cities is paramount. By acknowledging the ecological significance of urban areas and incorporating urban environmentalism into broader environmental discussions, we can strive for a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to environmental stewardship, encompassing human ecosystems as integral components of the broader landscape.

Environmental Virtue Ethics

Philip Cafaro echoes Andrew Light's concerns about the limited scope of environmental philosophy, albeit with a different rationale than Light's. Cafaro highlights the lack of exploration from a virtue ethics perspective, which emphasizes human excellence and flourishing. Navigating the same nonanthropocentric framework that beset Light, Cafaro sought an ethic that “incorporates a respect for nature, conceived ‘human interests’ broadly, and presents environmental protection as being in our *enlightened* self-interest” (Cafaro, 4, 2001). Cafaro's

perspective adds depth to the field by advocating for a virtue ethics approach that intertwines human flourishing with a broader respect for nature.

Cafaro grounded his reason in two main points. The first was that “in the absence of an environmental virtue ethics, environmental ethics itself is incomplete and unbalanced...An ethics which concentrates exclusively on rights and responsibilities, and judges our actions solely on whether they violate or uphold moral duty, ignores further, crucial ethical questions: what is the best life for a person and how can I go about living it? What is a good society and how can we move closer to achieving it?” (Cafaro, 4, 2001). By posing these inquiries, a broader context of environmental philosophy can be analyzed, free from the constraints of the human-nature dualism that has reigned dominant over the field. Second, Cafaro argued that “in defending wild nature and asserting its intrinsic value, environmentalists are necessarily proscriptive. Yet the writings of the great naturalists, and our own experiences, tell a story of joyful interrelation with nature” (Cafaro, 4-5, 2001). Further analysis of each of these points is instrumental in grasping Cafaro’s broader argument for virtue ethics.

Cafaro's first justification for an environmental virtue ethic lies in his perception of the constraints within environmental ethics, compelling him to reach beyond moral duty to consider human flourishing. To illustrate the narrowness he observed within the field, Cafaro shifted his focus from philosophers to naturalist writers, such as Henry Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson (Cafaro, 5, 2001). From Thoreau, he captured the virtue of simplicity. “Simplicity will be an important virtue for any environmental virtue ethics, for the obvious reason that living simply decreases our impact on other living things; but Thoreau, along with many environmentalists, also claims that living simply will improve our own lives” (Cafaro, 7, 2001). Cafaro's reflection on Thoreau's advocacy for simplicity not only resonated with his broader philosophical stance

but also reinforced the notion that living harmoniously with nature, through simplicity, is conducive to both environmental sustainability and personal well-being.

Cafaro gained further insight from Leopold. “Reading the many dramas written in the animal tracks on his farm, or wading half a day in a marsh for a closer view of a family of grebes, he [Leopold] exhibits the peculiar virtues of the naturalist: patience, eagerness, physical endurance, persistence, a keen perception, skill in making fine distinctions, precise description. Such activities make us happier and better people, he suggests. They allow us to pursue knowledge and enrich our experience, without diminishing nature” (Cafaro, 8, 2001). Cafaro found Leopold's focus on the virtues inherent in naturalist activities to be profoundly enlightening. Leopold's belief that these pursuits not only deepen our comprehension of nature but also foster personal flourishing resonated profoundly with Cafaro's overarching philosophical stance.

Rachel Carson is often thought of as the founder of the modern environmental movement after the publication of her book *Silent Springs*, which addressed the use and abuse of agricultural and industrial chemicals (Cafaro, 10, 2001). “Ethically, its plea for restraint rests on the triple foundation of human health considerations, the moral considerability of nonhuman beings, and the value to humans of preserving wild nature” (Cafaro, 10, 2001). Carson, like Thoreau and Leopold, conceived of personal self-interest as connected to the well-being of wild nature. “Carson’s clear message is that life’s complexity and interconnections are cause for appreciation and celebration, if also for restraint” (Cafaro, 12, 2001). Like Thoreau and Leopold, Carson contended that knowledge, and thereby human flourishing, was not something that was merely learned – it was gained through lived experience.

What Cafaro took from these three naturalist writers is that there are good reasons to continue to develop an environmental virtue ethic. He argued that, based on the virtues expressed by Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson, an environmental virtue ethic would need to include a certain moral attitude. First, one should desire to put economic life in its proper place, which is support for human flourishing without endless acquisition and consumption. Second, a commitment to the sciences, but also an appreciation of their limitations. Third, the attitude must ultimately remain nonanthropocentric, extending moral considerability to the natural world. Fourth, an environmental virtue ethicist would maintain a keen appreciation for the wild and support its protection. And fifth, a foundation belief that life is good for all who have it, human and nonhuman alike (Cafaro, 13-16, 2001).

While Cafaro admits that it is not a fully developed theory, he maintains that what can be gained from an environmental virtue ethics remains fruitful. The path forward would require answering some rather important questions, such as: whether it is possible to specify objective, unchanging standards for human excellence; can virtues be unified or can they be in conflict; should we strive for a unitary account of human virtue; is wild nature necessary for human flourishing in the way that Cafaro suggested above (Cafaro, 17, 2001)? While these questions are valuable, that a strong case for environmental virtue ethics remains. "...for a strong case can be made that greater attention to our true happiness would do as much to protect the environment as the acceptance of the intrinsic value of wild nature for which so many environmental ethicists have argued" (Cafaro, 17, 2001).

Cafaro's exploration of environmental virtue ethics illuminates the multifaceted relationship between human flourishing and environmental preservation. Echoing concerns voiced by Andrew Light regarding the narrow focus of environmental philosophy, Cafaro offers

a distinct rationale rooted in the integration of virtue ethics. By investigating the works of naturalist writers such as Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson, he uncovers a comprehensive compilation of virtues essential for an environmental virtue ethic. From Thoreau's advocacy for simplicity to Leopold's emphasis on the virtues of the naturalist and Carson's plea for restraint, each writer contributed to the foundation of Cafaro's philosophical stance. Through their insights, Cafaro emphasizes the importance of incorporating moral attitudes that prioritize human flourishing while recognizing the intrinsic value of the natural world – and the way that the two are interdependent. Although environmental virtue ethics is still in its formative stages, Cafaro contends that its development holds great promise for addressing pressing environmental challenges. As he aptly states, a stronger focus on cultivating true human happiness may ultimately serve as a powerful catalyst for environmental protection, underscoring the enduring relevance and significance of environmental virtue ethics in our contemporary discourse.

Indigenous Perspectives

In environmental philosophy, Indigenous perspectives occupy a distinctive space, offering invaluable insights rooted in deep connections to the natural world. Indigenous philosophies recognize the inherent interconnectedness between humans, ecosystems, and all beings, emphasizing holistic approaches to understanding and interacting with the environment. These perspectives are often grounded in centuries-old traditions, shaped by knowledge systems that have sustained diverse cultures in harmony with their surroundings for generations. In contrast to dominant Western paradigms that often prioritize human-centric views and exploitation of natural resources, Indigenous philosophies advocate for stewardship, reciprocity, and respect towards the Earth. By incorporating Indigenous perspectives within environmental

discourse, we not only enrich our understanding of ecological issues but also foster a more inclusive and sustainable approach to addressing the complex challenges facing our planet.

The literature examined in this section of the course sheds light on the challenges and opportunities inherent in incorporating Indigenous perspectives into environmental philosophy. In our exploration of Daniel Wildcat's *Indigenizing the Future: Why We Must Think Spatially in the Twenty-First Century*, confronted was the issue of historical erasure, which manifests in both conceptual and cultural dimensions. However, Wildcat also suggests that integrating Indigenous worldviews could serve as a significant step towards enhancing the metaphysical framework of the Western worldview. Furthermore, Kyle Whyte's chapter, "Why Does Anything Need to be Called Wild?," examines the conceptual differences between Indigenous worldviews and the predominant Western worldview, particularly emphasizing their contrasting relationships with and valuations of the natural world. I'll consider Wildcat's contributions first.

Through a lens finely tuned to the nuances of Indigenous thought, Wildcat underscores the transformative potential that lies in embracing spatial thinking, which he drew upon from Indigenous philosopher Vine Deloria Jr. Wildcat argues, building on Deloria's philosophy, that we ought to work toward understanding collective human histories spatially. "As people around the world are forced to, enticed to, or 'freely' choose to adopt an increasingly homogenous commodity culture, what is lost are diverse local cultures situated in places, landscapes, and ecosystems they call home" (Wildcat, 419, 2005). Indeed, there exist cultures whose historical narrative is intricately woven into the very fabric of their connection to land, where the notion of place transcends mere geography to become an inseparable facet of their identity and heritage.

These ideas contribute to the building hope, hope for a future that integrates Indigenous knowledge systems in the broader Western worldview. "Deloria had in mind a much more

complex integration or consilience, one that operated on several levels of experience and thought what might be called different spheres of life, without reducing the world to materialist mechanisms” (Wildcat, 420, 2005). What is being posited here is that there is not one scientifically reducible worldview, where the world is describable in a single descriptive language. Knowledge of the world, in the Indigenous worldview, must be an emergent property of life systems and environments (Wildcat, 420, 2005). These perspectives fuel the flame of optimism, envisioning a future where Indigenous knowledge systems seamlessly interlace with the broader Western worldview, echoing Deloria's vision of a multifaceted integration that transcends reductionist paradigms and acknowledges the emergent properties of life systems and environments.

Kyle Whyte also explicated the difference between worldviews, delineating the different ways in which different cultures interact with the natural world. “Numerous Indigenous peoples of what’s currently called the US never really used anything like wild concepts to describe their relationships with land, water, plants, animals, and ecosystems. They were more concerned with respecting and enacting specific relationships of interdependence within ecosystems and with nonhuman beings, flows, and entities” (Whyte, 72). Whyte's elucidation of the unique ways Indigenous cultures connect with their surroundings not only amplifies the discourse initiated by Wildcat and Deloria but also emphasizes the necessity of recognizing and honoring the diverse perspectives that can enrich our relations with the world around us.

Whyte has a further insight, one that is profound regarding both history and conceptual understandings. “In the case of the US, colonists from Europe and settlers invented wild concepts. Colonists and settlers came up with wild concepts to describe ecosystems and environments that they didn’t know anything about...They had no empirical ecological

knowledge of North America” (Whyte, 73). Whyte's observation unveils a pivotal aspect of both historical context and conceptual frameworks. He elucidates how European colonists and settlers in the US devised the notion of "wild" to encapsulate unfamiliar ecosystems, a construct born out of their empirical ecological ignorance of North America. This revelation starkly contrasts with the Indigenous ethos deeply entrenched in reciprocal relationships with the environment, underscoring the divergent paths of understanding between cultures.

In the practice of sustainable gardening, the principles of environmental philosophy find practical application. From exploring various philosophical perspectives such as anthropocentrism to biocentrism, ecofeminism to Indigenous kinship ethics, sustainable gardening becomes a terrain where these ideas intersect. In this context, the human-nature dualism perpetuated by the urban blind spot is confronted, emphasizing the need to overcome this artificial division by integrating sustainable gardening practices into urban infrastructure. Virtue ethics infuse our gardening practices with moral considerations, urging us to embody virtues like wisdom and humility in our stewardship of the Earth. Additionally, by welcoming Indigenous kinship ethics, we tap into a wisdom that has long been marginalized, weaving a holistic worldview into sustainable gardening endeavors, rooted in reverence for all beings and the interconnectedness of ecosystems. Through sustainable gardening, nourishment for the body is cultivated alongside a deepening understanding of ethical responsibilities to the planet and future generations, contributing to the texture of environmental philosophy.

Actions Taken

Gardening, as a practice, is all about taking actions. In the quest to promote sustainable living and environmental stewardship, my civic engagement project took a practical approach by organizing a sustainable gardening event. This initiative aimed to engage the community through hands-on experience and education about environmental ethics. In coordinating this event, I sought to empower local residents with the knowledge and tools necessary to cultivate their gardens sustainably, thus contributing to a greener, more sustainable future. The following details the actions taken to bring this vision to life, from the initial community outreach to the successful execution of the event.

My project began with community outreach. I knew that to create an event centered around sustainable gardening, that I would need access to quality dirt, a vessel to plant the seeds in, and of course the seeds themselves. The first action I took was to open up lines of communication about the dirt and a venue. My first contact about the dirt was the only one I had to make. I connected with Jason Duffin at Garden City Compost, and he loved the idea of my project and agreed to help immediately. He asked lots of questions and we communicated regularly during the planning of the event. When he was unavailable, his office assistant Sara was always there to help.

With the dirt secured, I began looking for a venue to host my event; that, unfortunately, did not go as smoothly as the acquisition of dirt did. I am personally very connected to the Frenchtown community: I work there, my nieces and nephews go to school there – it is my community. It was in that spirit that I started reaching out to different farms in Frenchtown. It was my hope that by partnering together, I could secure a venue for my event while also promoting a local farm. I first spoke with Forsythe farms, which is a very quaint you-pick berry

and lavender farm. The owners were interested in the project, but did not have an indoor space in the instance that it rained (which, it did). She referred me to County Rail Farms, just down the road from my work. I had been to their farm before and the philosophy seemed to be grounded in community. However, they ended up being very unresponsive, and when we did finally connect, it proved to be a poor fit.

I decided to reach out to another connection, Vicki Watson, who is very active in the sustainability movement happening on campus. She responded to me immediately, we had a great meeting, and have kept in touch about the project since. Vicki was very instrumental to this project in two ways: she got me set up to volunteer at the annual Seed Swap at the Missoula Public Library and made a great recommendation for a venue. The Seed Swap was an amazing opportunity to engage with locals about my project while freeing up Vicki to volunteer at another event. Approximately half of the participants that attended the event were connections that I made at this volunteering event. Vicki also suggested that I connect with the Peas Farm as a possible venue, which I did, and it worked out wonderfully. I connected with Caroline Stevens, who regularly does work with the university and was more than happy to lend me some space for the project.

With the dirt, venue, and local support dialed in, I began working on the finer details. I connected with Old Dominion Freight Line, who graciously donated the pallets that built the sustainable planters. I attempted to work with the Mansfield Seed Library to procure seed for the event, but unfortunately we struggled to connect in person. Alex and Simon were very eager to help out, but it seemed that they were always available when I was not, and vice versa. So, I decided to use seeds from my personal library at home, which I actually ended up being pleased

with. I also tried to partner with UM Maintenance to ask about leaves and lawn clippings that they have collected, but unfortunately, never did get a response.

Accomplishments & Challenges

Gardening is a task that offers abundant rewards alongside a few notable challenges, and this project was no exception. Among the greatest accomplishments of the event was the incredible sense of community that was cultivated among the participants. The enthusiasm and collaboration displayed by everyone involved not only enriched the experience but also fostered lasting connections. However, one of the primary challenges I encountered was managing time effectively, which proved to be a crucial aspect of coordinating the event successfully. Balancing the diverse activities and ensuring each participant's engagement required careful planning and adaptability.

Community is vital to human well-being, providing a sense of belonging and a network of support. Gardening, in particular, is an exceptional activity for cultivating community, as it brings individuals together around a shared passion for food. Through communal gardening projects, people from diverse backgrounds collaborate on a tangible task, fostering interpersonal connections and mutual understanding. As participants share knowledge, tools, and tasks, they build trust and friendships, strengthening the social fabric of the community. Moreover, the collective effort required in gardening, from planning to harvesting, creates a common purpose and shared achievements. These communal spaces become more than just places to grow plants; they transform into hubs of social interaction, learning, and support, enriching the community's resilience and collective spirit.

It was something similar to what was described above that I witnessed at my event. As I prepared to deliver each subsection of ethics that I had generated, I found that my voice was being drowned out – because the people at my event were working together, laughing, helping each other out. It was in that moment that I realized I had accomplished something much more special than an academic presentation; I had cultivated community. Fear and uncertainty were informative to the beginning of my project. As soil desertification and water scarcity become more prevalent in the changing climate, I went into this project focused on that aspect. And those parts *are* still important to me. But I believe that if we can talk with each other, engage as a community across political lines, religious ideologies, and even own insecurities – *that* is how we respond in a meaningful way to climate change. Food is a communal language, something that each and everyone one of us depends upon for our survival. As such, it also seems the most fertile ground for promoting community engagement and conversation.

But of course, there were struggles too. It rained the day of the event, driving us under a small canopy that was also pallet storage, which ate up a significant amount of space. That really changed how I had planned to set up, which at first I was rather upset about. But looking back, I can see that because the tables had to be set up in a rather goofy way, it actually ended up driving participant engagement. The real struggle that I ended up having was time management. There was coordination of picking up soil, getting all of the necessary materials to the event, writing about the event, the contacts that needed to be made. All of this, in conjunction with my normal classes and job was very challenging to manage. I could have spent an entire semester just working on this project. But at the end of the day, it ended up coming together beautifully and in a way that positively affected the community – and that is what really matters.

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