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Thoreau's Virtue Ethics in Walden

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INTRODUCTION

The past few years have seen an explosion of interest in Henry Thoreau as scientist and natural philosopher. Bradley Dean has published scholarly editions of the late natural history works, first *Faith in a Seed* and now *Wild Fruits*. A number of excellent commentaries have appeared, including Laura Dassow Walls' *Seeing New Worlds* and Robert McGregor's *A Wider View of the Universe*. Why this increased interest? Our thanks must go to the scholars who have done the work of making Thoreau's texts available and interpreting them, but changes in science and public perceptions of science have also played a role. These include the rise to public prominence of ecology, in the past thirty years, as the science of connections; the more recent development of conservation biology, as a science focused on protecting and appreciating wild nature; and finally, the establishment of environmental history--some of the earliest and best of which focused on New England--as a discipline relating ecological to social and political changes. Our belief that these disciplines are part of a complete science improves Thoreau's scientific credentials and allows us to appreciate aspects of his writings that earlier generations found more obscure. Our sense that science--knowledge of the natural world--must itself be completed by aesthetic, ethical and spiritual components, in a "natural philosophy," makes consideration of Thoreau as a natural philosopher a real possibility.

The time has come for a similar reappraisal of Thoreau as moralist and ethical philosopher. Here two changes within academic philosophy should pave the way for taking Thoreau's contributions more seriously. First, the rise of environmental ethics. From the writings of a few scattered pioneers in the 1970s, this discipline has grown to include hundreds of philosophers working to specify, generally and in detail, a better human relationship to the rest of nature. Second, the recent rise of "virtue ethics" as an alternative or supplement to mainstream Kantianism and utilitarianism. While these latter theories focus on

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specifying our duties towards others, virtue ethics specifies ideals of personal excellence and flourishing; again, hundreds of academic philosophers are now working from this perspective. In these ways, the issues Thoreau's writings address have finally been recognized as real philosophical issues. Because he wrestled with fundamental problems and linked particular ethical judgments to a plausible general framework, philosophers can recognize Thoreau as one of their own. Because he lived his ethical truths and demanded that we live ours, professional philosophers and general readers are equally challenged by his words.

I believe Thoreau's achievements in ethical philosophy equal his achievements in natural philosophy. But Thoreau was even farther ahead of his time in ethics than in science, and a proper appreciation of his ethical philosophy is still to come. While "Resistance to Civil Government" has received a good deal of critical philosophical commentary, the rest of his ethical and political writings have not. No comprehensive philosophical account of his ethics exists.¹ This article seeks to spur the serious appraisal of Thoreau as ethical philosopher by situating him as a pioneering virtue ethicist and assessing his contribution to this evolving tradition. In a follow-up piece, I hope to treat Thoreau's environmental ethics. Further areas deserving critical study include the genesis of Thoreau's ethical thought, its place within Transcendentalism and wider contemporary ethical debates, the impact of eastern philosophy and scripture upon Thoreau, and the relation between Thoreau's ethical and political thought. If this article convinces more readers to join me in exploring these and other aspects of Thoreau's ethics, I will consider it a success.

WALDEN'S VIRTUE ETHICS

"My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there," Thoreau writes early in *Walden*, "but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles" (19-20).² Surely "private business" refers to his writing, on which Thoreau worked diligently during his stay at the pond. But literary creation is his specific task; as a human being, his general task is to live well. That is, or should be, everyone's business: "private" not because it is best pursued alone, but because no one else can take the job on for us. "Economy," *Walden's* first chapter, repeatedly reminds us that conventional economic activity, and the complexity and busyness of everyday life, can take us away from our real business (our proper "task"--21, our "chief end"--8, 91). True economy means keeping our proper ends in view and choosing effective means to achieve them.³

Further on Thoreau writes, in a key passage:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did

not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life . . . to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (90-91)

Walden describes a life of personal development and enriched experience, centered on the pursuit of knowledge of self and nature. It advocates ethical, intellectual and creative striving. This passage tells us that deliberation--thinking through our options and actively choosing the best ones, rather than falling into the easiest ones--is a key to success. Life is glorious, Thoreau insists, and so the stakes are high. For we may come to the end of our lives and find that we have not lived; we may waste our lives on inessential trivialities; or, like the penitential brahmins in *Walden's* third paragraph, we may lead lives which deform our human nature and allow our natural human faculties to atrophy.

Whether or not a general account of human flourishing is possible--and *Walden* several times suggests that it is not (16, 71, 326)--each of us can know which paths are better for us personally and act on that knowledge. The possibility of improvement through our own efforts should cheer us: "I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor" (90). The possibility that my life can become more fully *my* life--my actions consciously and therefore freely chosen, my experiences consciously and therefore deeply experienced--should likewise cheer me, beyond the further hope that the choices will be better and the experiences more pleasurable. Thoreau alternately harangues his readers for our inertia and failure to demand more from life, and entices us onward with fair possibilities, noble ideals, and accounts of his own successes: Thoreau snug and secure in his well-built cabin, facing winter's blasts; Thoreau floating on the calm summer waters of Walden Pond, fishing pole in hand, a symbol of personal equilibrium and harmony with his surroundings. As long as we are alive we should strive to live well. Anything less is a premature "resignation" from life's pleasures and possibilities, which devalues life and devalues us.

In current terms *Walden* is a work in "virtue ethics": that half of ethics which focuses less on our duties towards others and more on personal flourishing and excellence.⁴ For this reason, it is hard for many modern readers to see it as a work of ethics at all. For we moderns tend to define ethics as the discipline which specifies proper interpersonal relations, or even more narrowly, our strict obligations towards one another. So it is not surprising that modern philosophers have neglected *Walden* as an ethical work and focused, when they've attended to Thoreau at all, on "Resistance to Civil Government," with its emphasis on political obligations and basic human rights.

In contrast to the moderns, ancient philosophers typically took a broader view of ethics. Plato and Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca, asked both "What are my duties to others?" and "What is the good life and how can I go

about living it?" They saw the attempt to define personal flourishing as central to ethics, not as a selfish distraction from it. It is thus no accident that Thoreau repeatedly invokes the ancient moralists in *Walden*--not only Greek and Roman, but Indian and Chinese--while largely ignoring modern moral philosophers.

Who should we follow here: the ancients or the moderns? I find the ancient view more convincing. Our decisions about what jobs to take, whom to befriend, or how to spend our time and money, all involve value judgments. Like our judgments about how we should treat other people, they involve distinguishing different courses of action and pronouncing some better than others--if only implicitly, through our choosing one course of action over another. But better in relation to what? The answer would seem to be better in relation to furthering our own (and others') happiness, success, flourishing, excellence, or personal achievement, however we define these. So in a sense we are all committed to some ethical judgments here. The ancients' philosophical hope was that we could, through deliberation, improve these judgments.

To call something an ethical question, though, both says that it involves value judgments *and* asserts its importance. It is precisely the sense that these personal decisions are important--that they help make us who we are, and that this matters--which Thoreau works so hard to instill in his readers. Self-development is the challenge and opportunity presented, by life, to all, "the teamster on the highway" driving for "Squire Make-a-stir" and the Irish immigrant John Field, no less than Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau. The humblest reader of *Walden* cannot escape the injunction: "However mean your life is, meet it and live it" (328). Similarly, no detail of his own life is beneath Thoreau's attention and discussion in *Walden*, for his simplest activities may provide valuable instruction and occasions for personal growth. Thoreau repeatedly asserts, and demonstrates, that unsuspected possibilities lie hidden in ordinary life.

In the past twenty years academic philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Taylor and Martha Nussbaum have returned to this neglected half of ethics, often through the study of the ancient Greek philosophers.⁵ This process of philosophical restoration has involved recovering the ancients' conception of virtue as personal excellence; recovering an ethical space for the pursuit of excellence; and recovering a broad account of excellence, which acknowledges the full spectrum of human interests and activities. As I show below, *Walden* anticipated these recovery projects.

RECOVERING THE CONCEPT OF VIRTUE

Thoreau went to Walden Pond to become a better person, defining this broadly to include increased knowledge, an enriched experience, character development and greater personal integrity, and creative achievement. Significantly, in describing his own goals and prescribing goals for his readers, he often speaks of cultivating "virtue" and "the virtues" (80, 164, 172, 218,

315). But what does he mean by this? In particular, does he refer to our modern conception of virtue or to the ancient conception? In the modern sense, a virtuous person is a morally good person: someone who treats others well and does his duty. “The virtues,” on this view, are character traits or stable dispositions to act morally, such as temperance, humility, generosity, or benevolence. Virtue here is synonymous with moral excellence. In the ancient view, virtue equals excellence in a more comprehensive sense. “The virtues” are all those qualities the possession of which makes a person a good person, and more likely to succeed in characteristic human endeavors. So in addition to moral excellence, ancient virtue (Greek *arete*, Roman *virtus*) includes intellectual, physical, aesthetic and spiritual excellences. Intelligence, physical strength, or artistic creativity all may be accounted virtues, in this view.⁶

It seems to be the pursuit of this more comprehensive excellence that Thoreau enjoins. He deliberately quotes older sources and archaic uses of ‘virtue’ in *Walden*, which emphasize this distinction and suggest his sympathy with the earlier view. For example, in “The Bean-Field” Thoreau quotes seventeenth-century horticulturist John Evelyn’s assertion that “the earth . . . especially if fresh, has a certain magnetism in it, by which it attracts the salt, power, or virtue (call it either) which gives it life, and is the logic of all the labor and stir we keep about it, to sustain us” (162). Clearly a field cannot act morally! For Evelyn, as for Thoreau, ‘virtue’ implies power, that force through which a field or a man may flourish and bring forth their proper “fruits.” Thoreau quotes a similar archaic use of ‘virtue’ by Cato the Elder (243).

Virtue is thus essentially active for Thoreau; as he had written earlier, “even virtue is no longer such if it be stagnant.”⁷ In a modern view, the virtues are valuable largely because they limit our self-assertion and keep us from doing what we should not do. The modest person will not brag about his achievements, the honest person will not lie for personal advantage, the just person will not take more than his fair share. The ancient view instead stresses that cultivating the virtues is key to our self-development. They allow us to do what we should do and become better people: the brave person will face death nobly and prevail in battle (at least ideally), the generous person will garner honor through sharing his wealth, the intelligent person will learn more about himself and the world around him.

In this view the virtues are less ends-in-themselves (“virtue is its own reward,” *we* say) than the necessary means to achieve our goals. Hence Thoreau’s repeated injunction to strive for worthwhile ends, and his suggestion that virtue, by itself, is not virtue, or is not complete virtue:

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men . . . our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. (91)

How long shall we sit in our porticoes practising idle and musty virtues, which any work would make impertinent? (331)

Virtue is not merely an internal matter of character or conscience, as it is for Kant and most modern ethicists, but an external matter of actual achievement out in the world.⁸

This ancient conception of virtue is also at work in the “complemental verses” from the Cavalier poet Thomas Carew with which Thoreau ends “Economy.” As so often, Thoreau’s words are slyly suggestive: the verses are hardly “complimentary” to those who refuse to recognize higher goals in life, but the ethic of aspiration they express may well “complement” our more conventional ethic of social obligation:

Thou dost presume too much, poor needy wretch,
To claim a station in the firmament,
Because thy humble cottage, or thy tub,
Nurses some lazy or pedantic virtue . . . (80)

Carew contrasts “lazy or pedantic virtues,” which are presumably easy to achieve and which allow us to live in “dull society” with others, with “fair blooming virtues,” whose neglect “Degradeth nature, and benumbeth sense, / And, Gorgon-like, turns active men to stone” (80). As examples, Carew rejects “necessitated temperance” and “forc’d falsely exalted passive fortitude” as virtues, because these qualities are life-denying; also, perhaps, because we may take them on through fear, insensibility, or laziness. Carew’s adjectival qualifications suggest he might recognize a genuine temperance or fortitude, in the service of action and life. Certainly Thoreau would. For elsewhere he reminds us that temperance can keep us from pursuing unnecessary and frivolous goals, while true fortitude is not mere passive acceptance of our lot, “forced” on us by circumstances, but is rather itself a force, enabling us to act in adversity.

The conventional social virtues become degraded through an acceptance of “mediocrity,” while rarer, more difficult to achieve virtues are ignored altogether. “But we advance,” Carew says:

Such virtues only as admit excess,
Brave, bounteous acts, regal magnificence,
All-seeing prudence, magnanimity
That knows no bound, and that heroic virtue
For which antiquity hath left no name,
But patterns only, such as Hercules,
Achilles, Theseus. (80)

Already in "The Service," Thoreau had rejected any pseudo-Aristotelian account of virtue as a mean of effort or achievement: "their mean is no better than meanness, nor their medium than mediocrity."⁹ Here he quotes Carew to challenge the complacency which seeks to specify some point beyond which we need not strive: either because we have no strict duty to do so, or because we are already sufficiently virtuous. Magnificence--the bestowal of great gifts on others--and magnanimity--literally "great-souledness," the superior development of one's whole personality--are almost by definition impossible for most people to achieve. But that does not make them any less virtues for Carew or Thoreau. We might guess that the inhabitant of the cabin by Walden Pond would interpret magnificence and magnanimity quite differently than the Cavalier poet, but this emphasizes all the more what these aristocrats do share: a demanding and open-ended conception of virtue.

The idea of rare, "heroic virtue" transcending words might seem errant romanticism. Nothing is more embarrassing to many modern Thoreauvians than their hero's emphasis on heroism. Yet Thoreau believes that an appreciation of exceptional human achievement completes ethics. No matter what valued quality we are looking at--intelligence, generosity, bravery--the least amount is valuable, while each of us should strive to increase our share of it. "Our whole life is startlingly moral," Thoreau writes. "There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice" (218). Indeed, since "effort is the prerogative of virtue," those with the greatest accomplishments will strive even harder than others.¹⁰ Hercules, Achilles and Theseus are semi-divine, achieving greatness through heaven-sent abilities, or being rewarded for their achievements with divine immortality. Similarly, *we* might believe Albert Einstein or Mother Teresa, paragons of intelligence and compassion, transcend human limits and live on beyond death in their achievements. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle felt compelled to round out his account of human excellence by recognizing "bestiality" and "divine virtue," the conditions which fell below and rose above mere human vice and virtue.¹¹ He left it an open question how often humans beings achieve these states. Just so, Thoreau makes a place for such extremes of vice and virtue. And with Carew, he rejects the apotheosis of mediocrity: "Thou dost presume too much, poor needy wretch, /To claim a station in the firmament" (80). This is not to demean people of modest abilities, but rather to rebuke sloth and remind us to appreciate rare forms of excellence.

This conception of virtue makes sense. Yet it is apt to rub modern readers the wrong way, because it is essentially inegalitarian, stating forthrightly that some people are better than others. Even worse, it suggests that we may be better or worse not solely through our own efforts, but according to the vagaries of heredity, upbringing, or other fortuitous circumstances. For after all, few of us have the intelligence or creativity of a Thoreau, no matter how hard we strive. Hence we may be tempted to limit our conception of virtue to what is within all (almost all?) people's power. We may be tempted to say that people who treat others with respect, or at least avoid treating others with disrespect, or

at least sincerely try to do this and repent of their failures, are sufficiently virtuous--*this* is what is really important. If we are religious, we may hope that these morally virtuous people will be rewarded with immortality, that "station in the firmament" which Carew and Thoreau have heretically denied them.

In this way we would return to our modern conception of virtue--mistakenly, I believe. For such a retreat undermines our ability to judge, and hence appreciate, such rare successes as Thoreau achieved at Walden and in *Walden*. Instead, we should retain a broad and challenging conception of human excellence and acknowledge life's essential unfairness. Some people are better than others, and not necessarily through their own efforts. This realization may challenge us in two ways: first, to mitigate life's unfairness for others, and second, to cultivate our own personal excellence. How to balance these challenges is a nice problem; Thoreau gives several answers to it, including the laconic "we may waive just so much care of ourselves as we honestly bestow elsewhere" (11). In any case, the injunction to strive! holds true for all of us, regardless of our particular endowments:

Shall a man go and hang himself because he belongs to the race of pygmies, and not be the biggest pygmy that he can? Let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made. (326)

RECOVERING THE PURSUIT OF VIRTUE

Thoreau recognizes that besides recovering the concept of virtue, we must recover an ethical space for virtue's pursuit. "Economy" sets up a framework for this pursuit: put economic life in its proper, subordinate place; elevate, or at least consciously adopt, your most general ends in life; select the best means to achieve them; strive! Yet we cannot strive, and Thoreau cannot report the results of his own strivings, without affirming our right to do so. His introductory chapter thus concludes by addressing this issue (72-80).

Walden describes a project of self-development and self-improvement. But this project was apparently somewhat at odds with the ethical sensibilities of Thoreau's neighbors:

But all this is very selfish, I have heard some of my townsmen say. I confess that I have hitherto indulged very little in philanthropic enterprises. I have made some sacrifices to a sense of duty, and among others have sacrificed this pleasure also. (72)

Challenging conventional morality (and modern moral philosophy), Thoreau asserts that we have not merely a right, but a duty, to pursue self-development. Philanthropic activities may be a shirking of this duty; routine acts of kindness to others may be easier to undertake than difficult projects of self-improvement. To suggest that we might have to sacrifice the *pleasure* of philanthropy in order

to fulfill a *duty* of self-development, challenges the modern equation of selflessness and dutifulness. To suggest that we at least sometimes perform benevolent, philanthropic actions out of *pleasurable indulgence* combines the Kantian reminders that duty commands (we are not, in fact, free to choose whether to indulge in it) and that duty rightly overrides the claims of pleasure, with an admonition not to accept conventional accounts of our duties. Thus unlike Nietzsche and some of his followers, who deny moral obligation, Thoreau affirms such obligation but contests its content.

Thoreau goes on to suggest that individuals may contribute more to the common good through self-development and personal achievement than through charitable efforts:

What *good* I do, in the common sense of that word, must be aside from my main path, and for the most part wholly unintended. Men say, practically, Begin where you are and such as you are, without aiming mainly to become of more worth, and with kindness aforethought go about doing good. If I were to preach at all in this strain, I should say rather, set about being good. (73)

In taking the time to investigate nature, reflect on his experiences and compose *Walden*, Thoreau arguably contributed more to humanity than he could have in several lifetimes of visiting the sick and giving money to the poor of his native town. But we miss Thoreau's point if we focus on his own exceptional achievement. Even a person of average abilities who takes the time to fully experience life and carefully observe nature improves himself or herself. Since society is made up of individuals, such personal improvement improves society. And this person may, like Thoreau, go on to teach his neighbors about the nature around and within them, benefiting the larger community a second time. He might do all this without ever feeling it was his duty to do so and without it ever being his duty to do so. The common good rests partly on the development of personal excellence and its free propagation and not solely on benevolence and adherence to duty.

Thoreau says he would preach self-development rather than charity, but this is not to preach against charity. Philanthropic acts are often useful, and sometimes even obligatory. But they do not fully define the good life. For we may legitimately demand more from each other, not asking for a double dose of charity or perfect "justice as fairness"¹² but rather for a different sort of tonic altogether:

A man is not a good *man* to me because he will feed me if I should be starving, or warm me if I should be freezing, or pull me out of a ditch if I should ever fall into one. I can find you a Newfoundland dog that will do as much. Philanthropy is not love for one's fellow-man in the broadest sense . . . comparatively speaking, what are a hundred

[philanthropists] to *us*, if their philanthropy do not help *us* in our best estate, when we are most worthy to be helped? (74)

Here, once again, is the insistence on a legitimate self-interest. Also, the reminder that beyond those standard duties which we owe each other, there exists the pursuit of excellence: the progress from our hitherto “best estate” to one yet higher. To appreciate it, we must supplement our “common sense,” Christian understanding of human goodness with the ancients’ sense of goodness as personal excellence. The pursuit of excellence, like the pursuit of justice, exalts human nature. This pursuit, too, can be an object of our cooperation. The fact that such cooperation can be enjoyable and that we may experience it as fulfilling rather than self-abnegating should not blind us to its ethical import.

Philanthropy “in the broadest sense” includes friendship as well as justice, Emerson and Thoreau talking philosophy, as well as Emerson lecturing against slavery or Thoreau putting an escaped slave on a train for the Canadian border. But society, in Thoreau’s time and ours, fails to recognize this. As Thoreau complains:

Philanthropy is almost the only virtue which is sufficiently appreciated by mankind. Nay, it is greatly overrated . . . I once heard a reverend lecturer on England, a man of learning and intelligence, after enumerating her scientific, literary, and political worthies, Shakespeare, Bacon, Cromwell, Milton, Newton, and others, speak next of her Christian heroes, whom, as if his profession required it of him, he elevated to a place far above all the rest, as the greatest of the great. They were Penn, Howard, and Mrs. Fry [philanthropists and penal reformers]. Everyone must feel the falsehood and cant [Kant?] of this. The last were not England’s best men and women; only, perhaps, her best philanthropists. (76)

Both Christianity and modern secular ethics insist that we need not be particularly intelligent or accomplished to be morally good and that moral goodness is definitive of human goodness (or infinitely more important than other kinds of human goodness, which comes to the same thing). Common moral thought seconds this, adding that we need not be particularly imaginative, artistic, or physically fit, or have achieved much in our lives or careers, to count as good people.¹³ All such abilities and successes are distinct from *moral* goodness and distinctly secondary to it. Taken far enough, this viewpoint blinds one to much of human virtue and achievement, and undermines the incentive to pursue excellence.

Many readers in this democratic age are likely to question the need or the possibility of specifying a country’s “best men and women.” It is difficult to imagine finding consensus on the “greatest of the great” in a large, complex

society, given the many pursuits in which individuals may excel. More fundamentally, most moderns share a commitment to equal basic rights and responsibilities for all human beings. Modern moral theories typically ground this moral equality in some form of substantive or factual equality: we are all ensouled, we are all rational, we are all parties to an implicit contract, we are all sensitive beings who can suffer harm. These theories imply that those areas where humans are in fact unequal are *inessential*.

But Thoreau is right to contest this. For any ethics of aspiration will be essentially inegalitarian and will need heroes--exemplars of great virtue--to spur us on and show what is possible (this is not the same as asserting that all people have a duty to be heroes).¹⁴ As the above quotation shows, modern ethics puts forward its own candidates for superiority and heroism, paragons of selflessness and service to others, which a fuller understanding of human virtue will supplement or even contest. Most important, virtue ethics sets up a framework for judging our actions, characters and achievements which implicitly applies to all of us, and even ranks us to some degree. If I take intelligence, courage, justice, compassion, generosity and integrity as the virtues constitutive of human excellence, then I cannot help but judge myself inferior to someone who has *all* of them to a greater extent than myself, or superior to someone whom I outshine in the same way. However I define the good life, I cannot well deny that some people live much better lives than I do, and some much worse. While there are limits to how clearly and in what detail we may specify *the* definitions of human virtue or flourishing, we all make these judgments to some degree, agreeing on many obvious judgments and disagreeing on more difficult ones.

None of this argues that we do not have important, other-directed moral duties. By most accounts Thoreau was a good neighbor, a conscientious family member, and a valued if sometimes difficult friend. He was as harsh as any of his contemporaries in his condemnation of such basic injustices as slavery and imperialism; Thoreau was, after all, the author of "Resistance to Civil Government" and a leading defender of John Brown. In arguing for justice for the wronged slave or Indian he appeals to our common humanity and condemns the prejudice and greed which lead us to deny it. "I wish my countrymen to consider," he writes in "Slavery in Massachusetts," "that whatever the human law may be, neither an individual nor a nation can ever commit the least act of injustice against the obscurest individual, without having to pay the penalty for it."¹⁵ Immanuel Kant or St. Thomas Aquinas could not have laid down the moral law any more clearly or emphatically.

Still, when Thoreau turns to consider his life and his neighbors' lives as free human beings, he insists on emphasizing those higher capabilities that the term 'humanity' implies. He demands that each of us live up to these capabilities--and not merely render bearable the existence of others. "Do not stay to be an overseer of the poor," he writes, "but endeavor to become one of the worthies of the world" (79). This quotation implies, reasonably, that we must sometimes choose between helping others achieve a basic well-being and

the pursuit of personal excellence. It may appear, less reasonably, to assert the absolute superiority of the latter course. Yet in the end I believe Thoreau is striving for a balance between these two aspects of our ethical lives. Above all, he desires that this balance occur at a high level: one which demands much from "wealthy" and "poor" alike.

Thoreau's high expectations and the moralistic hectoring which accompany them seem elitist to many of his readers. They seem the very opposite to me. "Instead of noblemen [as in Europe] let us have noble villages of men," Thoreau writes, and *Walden* finds the potential for excellence in immigrants' and freedmen's shanties, as much as in the townhouses of the bourgeoisie (110, 203-9, 257-8). This democratic demandingness seems a healthy combination of modern egalitarianism and the ancient pursuit of excellence. Articulating such a true "philanthropy" is the major task facing contemporary ethical philosophy, I believe, and one which each of us faces in our own lives.

RECOVERING FULL HUMAN VIRTUE

Thoreau reappropriated an ancient conception of ethics because it helped make sense of his project of self-improvement. Similarly, he reappropriated the ancients' broad conception of the virtues, and even outdid them in comprehensiveness. Rather than praising only moral excellence, Thoreau commends the following qualities as virtues in *Walden*:

integrity, wisdom, trust, hardiness, simplicity, independence, magnanimity, sensibility to beauty, prudence, honesty, faith, industry, charity, philanthropy, courage, liberality, magnificence, imagination, innocence, purity, enterprise, nobility, punctuality, contentment, alertness, confidence, serenity, adventurousness, tirelessness, sympathy, love, hospitality, humility, justice, generosity, hopefulness, cleanliness, beauty, self-respect, resolution, temperance, chastity, austerity, heroism, tenderness, civility, cheerfulness, conviviality, clear-headedness, patience, compassion, vigor, dignity, rectitude, fidelity, piety, and sincerity. (passim)

It is, of course, too simple to say that Thoreau calls these qualities virtues, since sometimes he refers to a trait as a virtue in one place and a vice in another. For example, humility is a virtue when shown in gratitude for nature's gifts (166), but a vice when it undermines self-respect and personal striving (50). Industry is a virtue when applied consciously to noble ends (20), but a vice when mindlessly pursued (70). Furthermore, listing these qualities tells us nothing about their relative importance, how they might be combined in a balanced character, or how such apparently contradictory virtues as humility and

magnificence might be reconciled. Still, the list does give some sense of Thoreau's ideal of human excellence.

To the Christian virtues Thoreau adds the virtues of the ancients and the romantics. Moral virtues are certainly well represented. These include both character traits which further interpersonal harmony--such as sympathy, benevolence and generosity--and what one philosopher has called the "executive" virtues--qualities such as prudence, resolution and integrity, which allow us to act responsibly and effectively. But Thoreau also follows the ancients, praising physical virtues such as beauty, strength and hardiness, and intellectual virtues such as imagination, wisdom and clear-headedness. And he draws on the romantic tradition by including virtues associated with aesthetic appreciation and creativity, such as sensibility to beauty. Thoreau recognizes widespread or easily attainable virtues such as cheerfulness and cleanliness along with rare, difficult to achieve virtues such as magnanimity and wisdom.

This broad conception of the virtues validates Thoreau's own talents and predilections, of course, but it also arguably asserts a more plausible conception of human excellence than is put forward (explicitly or implicitly) within most modern moral theories. Since dutiful and benevolent actions do not exhaust our important activities, human excellence must involve more than moral excellence. Modern ethics gives us credit when we are excellent moral beings, but Thoreau's ethics gives us credit when we are excellent human beings. Since we *are* human beings, Thoreau's broader conception of virtue should prevail.

In some ways, this list might overemphasize the commonality between Thoreau's ideal and modern ethics, particularly regarding the relative importance of intellectual and moral virtue. As Richard Taylor notes, modern usage allows 'goodness' and 'stupidity' to be predicated of one and the same person.¹⁶ Most modern ethicists accept this, but Thoreau does not. While he commends the moral virtues, he devotes approximately equal space to praising the intellectual virtues. Even more revealing, his table of vices includes stupidity, laziness and insensibility. He is as likely to praise industry, patience and honesty as *intellectual* virtues leading to increased knowledge, as he is to praise them as *moral* virtues leading to proper conduct towards others (20, 269, 327). He is more likely to put "executive" virtues such as enterprise and resolution in service to his own projects than in service to conventional philanthropy. All this places Thoreau closer to the broader, worldly view of human excellence given in Aristotle and farther from the narrower, moralistic view advocated by Kant.¹⁷

Furthermore, Thoreau manifests ambivalence, at best, towards the key Christian virtues of charity, compassion and humility. Charity is often misguided, he believes, failing to elevate the giver or benefit the receiver (75-76). It cannot substitute for a searching attempt to understand human degradation and its causes, and may simply perpetuate this degradation. In itself, compassion may be fruitless or debilitating: "all disease and failure helps

make me sad and does me evil, however much sympathy it may have with me or I with it" (78). We must take care that our sympathy for the weak does not weaken us, and perhaps leave us resentful of the strong and dismissive of all worldly success. Charity and compassion are not ends in themselves for Thoreau, as they are for the Christian moralist. They are only good to the extent that they further human life.

Similarly, Thoreau is as likely to count "humility" a vice as a virtue, depending on whether it motivates greater appreciation, striving and achievement (328, 331). We should remain humble in the face of our shortcomings and grateful to God or nature for the free gift of sustenance. But we should also take pride in our accomplishments, Thoreau believes, telling us twice that he intends "to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up" (frontispiece, 84). Nowhere does Thoreau strike a more jarring note, for many readers, than in his pride. Indeed, *Walden* may force us to specify more clearly the difference between pride and arrogance.

In the Christian view pride is a vice, since human beings are infinitely inferior to God and essentially equal to one another. We often go wrong in our interpersonal dealings precisely through a desire to assert our superiority over others. Contrarily, the ancients tended to view pride as a necessary part of a good life. Since self-knowledge and striving to live well defined the good life, if one lived well, one knew it and commended oneself for it. Humility was therefore at best a just judgment of one's own mediocrity, at worst a failure to understand true human excellence and whether one had achieved it or not.¹⁸ Thoreau clearly endorses the ancient view, perhaps because he sees a connection between valuing pride and taking human accomplishments seriously. This is our life, yet "most men [most Christians] are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God" (91). Thoreau suffers from no such uncertainty. Life is glorious, both human life with its many possibilities, and that wild life surrounding us in all its beauty and complexity. "One world at a time," he advises--this world.¹⁹

While Thoreau de-emphasized or reinterpreted these important Christian virtues, he emphasized less traditional virtues such as simplicity, integrity and independence. Thoreau's simplicity clearly is not simplicity of thought or experience, which he seeks to complicate and enrich. It refers rather to limiting our use of external goods, combined with focusing on the task at hand. Such simplicity allows us to understand the effects of our actions and better order our lives:

Our life is frittered away by detail . . . Simplicity simplicity, simplicity!
I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail. (91)

The hope is that by acting consciously and focusing more narrowly on our true ends, we may achieve “simplicity of life and elevation of purpose,” the former making the latter possible (92). Indeed, Thoreau sometimes seems to assert a necessary correlation between simple means and higher goals, on the one hand, and complex means and vulgarity, on the other.²⁰

Simplicity allows focus. More than that, it *forces* us to confront our means and our ends. Thoreau presents himself in *Walden* as self-assured and wise. But he went to the pond at twenty-seven years of age with big hopes and uncertain prospects, unsure of himself and his vocation as a writer, largely a failure in the eyes of his neighbors. Like many young people he felt pulled in different directions, and he simplified his life in order to fairly try several pursuits which had been calling to him insistently. Simplification allowed him to pursue the disciplined work of writing, free from a variety of distractions. It allowed him to put to the test what he himself recognized as the romantic ideal of living close to nature. Thoreau came back from the pond convinced of the value of simplicity for such demanding pursuits and experiments.

Thoreau sees a strong correlation between simplicity and the other virtues, as shown in this passage specifying the proper ends of a life of study:

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust.
(15)

The pairing of the virtues of simplicity and independence, a recurring theme, makes sense. If I live simply, I need not mortgage my time to any bank or employer, and can spend it as I wish (63). Elsewhere Thoreau pairs simplicity and honesty: speaking simply allows me to focus on the sense and truth of my words (46). Simplicity, to borrow a concept from ecology, is a “keystone” virtue. It plays an important role in stabilizing and focusing our lives, and allows the development of a rich character manifesting diverse virtues.

Integrity is another key virtue for Thoreau, often mentioned in *Walden* (6, 23, 326-327). Thoreau’s integrity encompasses both the modern moralist’s injunction “Treat others respectfully!” and the ancient moralist’s “Order your life so as to further your true human end!” Thoreau’s reform essays give numerous examples of immoral actions and institutions, from slavery (“Resistance to Civil Government”) to grave-robbing (“Life Without Principle”). In these instances, unprincipled offenders sacrifice the rights and dignity of others. *Walden* focuses instead on our offenses against ourselves:

The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly . . . the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day. (6)

In response, Thoreau asks us to consciously choose our life-goals and integrate all aspects of our lives towards their achievement. At best we may “meet with a success unexpected in common hours” (323), as the most mundane or trivial activities--hoeing beans, fishing--transform themselves into sacraments or teach us vital lessons. At worst, we will have given our goals and ideals a fair try. For both self-regarding and other-regarding actions, integrity is often undermined by greed, misplaced expediency, or some other failure in our personal economy. Integrity is furthered when we live “according to principle.”

Independence or freedom is also a key virtue for Thoreau, and perhaps the most frequently mentioned virtue in *Walden*. Thoreau moved to the pond, as he twice tells us, on the Fourth of July (45, 84). He describes freedom in both negative and positive terms. Negatively, Thoreau cultivates a freedom *from* economic demands (12, 33), social requirements (167-168) and various sorts of fear (fear of ridicule, fear of failure, fear of death). Positively, Thoreau’s freedom is a freedom *to* develop his particular talents (70-71), think his own thoughts (57), create his own artistic work (17-19) and generally live his own life. Negative freedom does not appear to be an end in itself, for Thoreau. It finds value and completion in positive freedom: the full flourishing and expression of individual personality.

Rather than specify a simple definition of freedom, Thoreau seeks to complicate our understanding of it. Freedom includes not just the absence of direct physical coercion, but also having the time to explore our surroundings and the right to walk the local landscape without being arrested for trespassing. Freedom includes independent thought: the imagination to question common assumptions and the tenacity to follow our inquiries wherever they lead. Freedom includes the economist’s freedom to work wherever and purchase whatever we choose, and the moralist’s freedom to reflect on our economic lives and reorder them to better support our ideals. Freedom in its broader senses is obviously a task which demands a lot from us. Common-sense to the contrary, we may mistakenly believe we are free: “there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south” (7).

Thoreau’s account suggests interesting questions concerning the nature and value of freedom. How much independence do we want in our lives? How much did Thoreau want in his? He moved back to town, after all, and understood himself first and last to be responding to it. Some degree of independence seems necessary for genuine thinking and for making our lives our own. Yet Thoreau’s experiment might tell us more about the possible varieties of independence and community than about the absolute value of independence. Dwelling apart from people awakened Thoreau to possibilities for friendship and connection to the rest of nature, he reports in “Solitude.” It allowed him to see “the extent of his relations” and to sense his dependence on a benevolent nature or God. “As long as possible live free and uncommitted” (84), he enjoins, but *Walden* shows him thoroughly committed to the pond and

his wild neighbors, not through ownership but through knowledge and love. Thoreau's positive freedom--the flourishing and expression of his true nature--seems to demand this commitment.

By emphasizing these favored virtues and reinterpreting the traditional Christian virtues, Thoreau shifts our account of human excellence in three important ways. First, as previously stated, he broadens that account to include the full range of human excellence--physical, intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic excellence, in addition to moral excellence. Second, he emphasizes the ethically open-ended nature of our lives, since simplicity, integrity and independence may be put in service to a wide variety of goals and life-paths. Virtue leads not to conformity but to diversity (real diversity of thought and action, not the currently fashionable skin-deep variety). Third, by reminding us of our duties to ourselves, Thoreau adds an ethics of aspiration to our more conventional social ethics. Morality is more than "a certain set of rules, called etiquette and politeness, to make [our] frequent meeting tolerable" (136), nor is it just "hospitality" (152), the charitable maintenance of as many tons of human flesh as possible.²¹ Ethics involves ideals, achievements and personal satisfaction as well as restraint, renunciation and personal limitation. Taken together, these shifts represent a serious challenge to conventional moral thought and modern moral philosophy.

ROMANTIC VIRTUE

This article links Thoreau to ancient philosophy, both because he explicitly placed himself within the ancient virtue ethics tradition and because we can better understand his ethics in relation to it. But Thoreau borrowed from various ethical traditions, ancient and modern, and a full understanding of his ethics must recognize this. To take an important example, the romantic concept of *Bildung*--self-culture or self-development--is central to Thoreau's ethics, as it was to Emerson and most of the Transcendentalists.²² *Bildung* involves fully cultivating all our human capabilities, particularly our intellectual and aesthetic capabilities. Organic growth is a key metaphor for personal development in *Walden*--"Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?" (15)--with the theme of self-culture becoming fully explicit in "The Bean-Field":

I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil, even with less toil . . . (163-164)

Of course, ancient virtue ethics treated self-development, education and related issues. But romantic *Bildung* provides new emphases: on individuality, authenticity and creativity, for example.

One important aspect of *Bildung* upon which Thoreau fastens is the need to enrich and diversify our experience:

It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. (90)

The last, qualifying clause is meant seriously; appreciating and enriching our experience is a *moral* imperative for Thoreau. It makes us more fully human. Knowledge and self-development depend upon it (61, 91, 214, 323). More simply, enriching our experience leads to more interesting, enjoyable lives. The fact that our *actions* remain important keeps this ethical position from degenerating into mere aestheticism. The passage continues:

To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. (90)

In service to this goal, Thoreau repeatedly advocates trying new activities and pursuing a diversity of experiences (3, 208, 324). Just as often, he shows us how to get more out of our ordinary experiences: by carefully attending to them, thoroughly reflecting on them, patiently improving them (246, 329).²³ *Walden* is filled with descriptions of common activities: reading, fishing, hoeing beans, laying a course of bricks, watching a sunset. Yet as Thoreau experiments with these simple activities, they become charged with possibility: means, now, to connection and knowledge; paths inward through the self and outward into nature; even sacraments, tying us closer to our native earth in love and gratitude. If Leonard Neufeldt is right to view *Walden* as a "transcendentalist self-help manual," then finding the great, unsuspected possibilities hidden in ordinary life is the goal that it offers to help us achieve.²⁴

This leads Thoreau to emphasize those virtues which aid us in enriching our experience. For example, *Walden* praises and exhibits the proper virtues of the naturalist: patience, stillness, alertness, attentiveness, physical endurance, keen hearing, keen eyesight, careful observation, precise description, careful measurement, the ability to make fine distinctions, etc. These qualities are usually ignored by philosophers and moralists, yet they are genuine virtues, since their presence improves our lives and makes us better people. As we cultivate these virtues, we deepen our knowledge and appreciation of the landscape around us. If we fail to do so, *it* remains dull and *we* remain bored and ignorant. Thoreau insists that when this happens, as it so often does, the failure is in us, not in the world: "the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it" (85). Fortunately, even though these capabilities vary widely among individuals, the naturalist's virtues can be cultivated and greatly

improved in almost all of us, as anyone who takes the time to birdwatch or botanize may discover for themselves.

Similarly, Thoreau emphasizes the virtues of the creative artist: imagination, empathy, creativity, boldness, discipline, alertness (again), hard work, patience (again), expressiveness, accuracy, invention, apt symbolism, dramatic ability, knowledge of specific traditions and techniques, etc. Like the naturalist's ability to observe, describe and understand nature, the artist's ability to imagine and create new realities enhances human experience, both his own and others'. Indeed, both acquiring knowledge and creating new works are divine acts for Thoreau, as they were for many of the romantics (99, 326-327).²⁵ It is no accident that the elaborate parable inspired by the *Bhagavad-Gita* substitutes "an *artist* of Kouroo" for the warrior Arjuna as its hero. The aesthetic and creative virtues are genuine virtues for Thoreau, as important as conventional moral virtues.

Another important aspect of Thoreau's romanticism is his concern for authenticity and diversity. "If [a man] has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me," he writes, somewhat cryptically, in the book's second paragraph (4). By *Walden's* "Conclusion" we know what he means, yet he is still demanding that we leave the beaten track, step to the music we hear, "however measured or far away," "meet and live" the lives we are actually leading (323, 326, 328). In between, he tells us that "there are as many ways [to live] as there can be drawn radii from one centre" (11), and that despite his moralizing, he "does not mean to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures" (16). Above all he is not looking for followers, for:

I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account . . . I desire that there be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead.
(71)

As disgusted as Thoreau is with many of his neighbors' choices in life, he is more disgusted to think that they have not really been chosen. Human greatness lies in our ability to live according to *our own* principles and to freely choose our commitments. Today we are so familiar with these ideas--we have been so thoroughly trained in them by Rousseau, Kant, Emerson, Nietzsche, the existentialists, and other romantics--that we are apt to forget that they were ever new or controversial. The ancient philosophers had valued integrity--living a life of principle. But the ideas that ultimate principles might legitimately differ, that living the good life might mean very different paths for different types of people, or that ethics centers on freedom of choice, were absent or poorly accommodated within ancient ethics. Not so in *Walden*, where these ideas are fundamental. Authenticity and diversity are key virtues, in Thoreau's view. So are those qualities which further them, such as intelligence, independent

thinking, persistence (stubbornness!), confidence, commitment, self-reliance, self-knowledge, and integrity.

This emphasis lends a certain open-endedness and optimism to *Walden's* ethics, but also a certain uncertainty. "Man's capacities have never been measured," Thoreau crows, for all of us, "nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried" (10). And again: "What youthful philosophers and experimentalists we are! There is not one of my readers who has yet lived a whole human life" (331). We may discover new possibilities in life. Old ways may be replaced by new ways, to our advantage, *and there may be no end to the process*. "There is more day to dawn" (a simple yet awesome gift has been given us, to be able to remake ourselves and improve our lives). "The sun is but a morning star" (just as we may transcend our current lives, Nature, the source of our being, may transcend itself) (333).

This complicates ethical justification generally, since Nature cannot serve as the unchanging foundation for any ethical theory. It renders particular ethical judgments uncertain, since there is no unchanging Nature, human or otherwise, to which we may appeal for guidance. Yet Thoreau is right to embrace an experimental, open-ended ethics. The railroad and the telegraph taught him, and a further century and a half of technological and social transformation have taught us, that our modern world is a world of radical change. Darwin and his followers have forever undermined belief in an unchanging human nature, even in our deep pre-history (recall Thoreau's immediate, wholehearted embrace of Darwin's *Origin of Species*).²⁶ No purely naturalistic or universalistic ethical philosophy will work for us now, yet no alternative compels rational assent. How to combine an optimistic experimentalism with robust, convincing justifications of our ethical judgments, thereby providing some guidance for aspiring human beings, might be the central theoretical problem in contemporary ethical philosophy.²⁷ This theoretical problem is also a practical problem. Perhaps it has increased the value of tolerance, flexibility, confidence, imagination, and all those virtues which enable us to press on in the face of uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

Thoreau recovered valuable ancient perspectives and anticipated important trends in contemporary ethical philosophy. I hope I have shown, however, that his ethics holds more than historical or scholarly interest. I think it has much to contribute to important, current ethical questions, and will conclude by briefly mentioning two of them.

The key question of how to mesh an ethics of personal aspiration with an ethics of interpersonal duty remains largely unexplored by contemporary philosophers. This is a real question in many people's lives. It is also a difficult question! I believe Thoreau may help us to answer it, in part because unlike most modern philosophers, he has actually written about both these aspects of

ethical life: interpersonal duty in the anti-slavery and reform articles, personal aspiration in *Walden* (with overlap, to be sure). Do these writings provide a common grounding for duty and aspiration, in a respect for human nature and human potential? Do they suggest a reasonable adjudication between the legitimate moral claims of others and our right to live our own lives?

Similarly, the need for a more generous, non-anthropocentric ethical philosophy has become critical, as the increasing demands of ever more people stress earth's life-support systems and crowd out the other species with whom we share the planet. Over the past twenty-five years, academic philosophers have begun to argue that non-human nature has intrinsic value--a value independent of its value to us.²⁸ This supports an environmental ethics of respect and restraint. But again, limitations and duties to others are not the whole of ethics. *Walden* suggests the rudiments of an environmental virtue ethics which sees human excellence and nature's excellence as necessarily intertwined. We cannot flourish without a healthy, diverse, and partly wild environment, to take us outside ourselves and open up possibilities for physical, spiritual, moral, aesthetic and scientific development. This allows environmental appeals to our *enlightened* self-interest. Can such a philosophy challenge conventional, ignoble ideals of happiness and the good life, and show that "plain living and high thinking" really is a better way than "gross feeding" (215)?²⁹ Can it point the way beyond our initial reaction to environmental degradation--contrite self-abnegation--and towards a positive human presence within nature; restrained, yet justified, and even joyous?

I do not want to suggest that the final answers to all our ethical questions will be found in *Walden*, or even in the body of Thoreau's published and unpublished writings. To say so would contradict one of *Walden's* central messages. We will have to find, and live, the answers to these questions ourselves. Times have changed and Thoreau's experiments cannot take the place of new ones. But *Walden* suggests the proper method and spirit for undertaking such experiments. It starts us off with the right questions and, perhaps, anticipates some of the right answers.

Notes

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- 1 Perhaps the best secondary work on Thoreau's ethics in Leonard Neufeldt, *The Economist: Henry Thoreau & Enterprise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), which is also the best work on Thoreau's economic views. Neufeldt sees Thoreau promoting "an enterprise of self-culture in a culture of enterprise." His analysis of Thoreau's subversive, re-moralizing of economic terms is particularly acute, as is his reading of *Walden* as a "transcendentalist self-help manual." Bob Pepperman Taylor, *America's Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), provides a comprehensive study of Thoreau's political philosophy. While enlightening at many points, it suffers from its author's lack of sympathy for Thoreau's projects of self-culture and natural

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- history study. Taylor sees these as selfish escapes from political engagement, the real business of life. Thoreau clearly disagreed. A stimulating post-modernist study, Jane Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994) came to hand after I had completed this article. Bennett has much of interest to say about Thoreau's meta-ethics, techniques of self-cultivation, and relationships to other philosophers and writers.
- 2 All in-text citations are to Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).
- 3 For Thoreau on morality as economy see Neufeldt, *The Economist*, and Philip Cafaro, "Thoreau and the Place of Economy," in Michael Benedikt (Ed.), *Center: Architecture and Design in America* 11 (Austin, TX: The Center for American Architecture and Design, 1999), 39-47.
- 4 The best short introduction to virtue ethics is Richard Taylor, *Virtue Ethics* (Interlaken, NY: Linden Books, 1991). See also Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Eds.), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 5 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Richard Taylor, *Virtue Ethics*; Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 6 The modern revival of virtue ethics has largely grown out of the study of Aristotle. In addition to recovering his sense of 'arete' as personal excellence, modern scholars have worked to recover the proper meaning of his 'eudaimonia.' This term is usually translated by our subjective and trivial 'happiness,' but it has strong overtones of objective flourishing and well-being. Interestingly, Thoreau uses the terms 'flourishing,' 'living well,' and pursuing his 'chief end' to describe his overall goal: words and phrases used by recent scholars to translate and resurrect the proper ancient Greek understanding of 'eudaimonia.' "Living well": *Walden*, 51, and J.L. Akrill, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," in Amelie Rorty (Ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 17. "Flourishing": *Walden*, 79, and Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," in Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Eds.), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 243. "Chief end": *Walden*, 9, 90-91, and Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46.
- 7 Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 132.
- 8 For the modern, internalist conception of virtue see Immanuel Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of The Metaphysic of Morals* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964).
- 9 Thoreau, "The Service," *Reform Papers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 5.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 11 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book seven, chapter one.

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- 12 The phrase comes from John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), the most influential work of political philosophy published in the second half of the twentieth century.
- 13 This can be seen easily enough in our use of the phrases “good man,” “good woman,” “good person.” It sounds funny to us to say of someone that “he was moral, but not really good.” But it would not sound funny to say of someone, “he is a good man, but not very intelligent,” or “he is a good man, but he hasn’t accomplished much in his life.”
- 14 Still, perhaps Thoreau’s extreme demandingness is not a necessary part of virtue ethics. We may recognize virtue, yet deny that people have a duty to strive to achieve it. Or, we may hold an ethics which treats virtue as central, but deny that people differ much in achieving it, or that striving is the proper means to achieve it. The Greek Cynics and ancient Taoists seem to fit these latter patterns, which represent perennial alternatives within virtue ethics. The alert reader of *Walden* will find Thoreau engaging these alternatives (129).
- 15 Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” *Reform Papers*, 96.
- 16 Richard Taylor, “Ancient Wisdom and Modern Folly,” in Peter French et al. (Eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume XIII, Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 55-6.
- 17 On the other hand, Thoreau sympathetically presents an example of simple, non-intellectual goodness in Alek Therien, the carefree wood chopper of “Visitors” (144-150). Therien is humble, industrious, kind and considerate of others: “he thoroughly believed in honesty and the like virtues” (150). His life shows many interesting parallels to Thoreau’s: in its simplicity and outdoor setting; in his enjoyment of life’s basic experiences; in his connection to the creatures of the forest. Yet Therien shows no self-knowledge or desire for self-knowledge: “At another time, hearing Plato’s definition of a man,—a biped without feathers,—and that one exhibited a cock plucked and called it Plato’s man, he thought it an important difference that the *knees* bent the wrong way” (149). The example suggests that Therien lives his life as if this or something similar really were the most important difference between an animal and a man, rather than our ability to reason, and thus to strive morally and intellectually. It further suggests that such a life is slavish (the reference to bent knees perhaps refers back to Therien’s “innocent and ineffectual” Catholic religious training--147). Thoreau cannot help but see such a life as childish or sub-human, mere animality or existence. Yet Thoreau also admires Therien, quoting an approving townsman who saw him as “a prince in disguise” (148). Of all the characters who appear in *Walden* only Thoreau and Walden Pond itself are treated in greater detail. This suggests some important and unfathomed ethical import in Therien’s life and example. “It would have suggested many things to a philosopher to have dealings with him” (148).

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- Again it should be noted that ancient virtue ethics had counter views to the mainstream injunction to strive for personal excellence. Ancient Taoists apparently believed that people overemphasized differences in individual human virtue. Everyone had a basic goodness which striving could only confuse and conceal. Similarly, the ancient Greek Cynics advocated lives of simplicity, naturalness and lack of striving. Therien does not strive or question, yet he exhibits the sort of natural goodness and acceptance that the Taoists and Cynics would have equated with virtue. Thoreau entertains both the ideas that Therien is sub-human and super-human. Clearly, Thoreau and Therien call the goodness of one another's lives into question; perhaps one life is superior to the other, perhaps they are each exhibiting their own proper virtue. Thoreau leaves us with these questions. This is a virtue of his account.
- 18 Readers interested in the ancient pagan view should consult Aristotle's discussion of magnanimity (Greek '*megalopsuchia*'), *Nicomachean Ethics*, book four, chapter three. Aristotle there defines magnanimity as a virtue specifying the proper attitude towards honor, stating that the magnanimous man "thinks himself worthy of great honors, and is worthy of them." The associated vices are overvaluation of oneself, on the one hand, and pusillanimity, thinking oneself worthy of little, on the other. Interestingly, Aristotle thinks that the latter vice is more usual than the former. One of *Walden's* most frequently cited virtues is magnanimity, which is also praised as "heroic virtue" (80). Thoreau puts the focus more squarely on great achievements, rather than taking pride in them, but he includes a proper pride within its scope.
- 19 The famous deathbed anecdote is told in a letter by Parker Pillsbury in Walter Harding (Ed.), *Thoreau as Seen by His Contemporaries* (New York: Dover, 1989), 101.
- 20 Leo Stoller sees simplicity as the key to understanding Thoreau's economic philosophy. See Stoller, "Thoreau's Doctrine of Simplicity," *New England Quarterly* 29 (December, 1956), 443-461.
- 21 These may be seen as caricatures of Kantianism and utilitarianism, respectively, our two main modern secular moral theories. Just as Carew's poem at the end of "Economy" helps rebut Kant (80), Hooper's verses at the end of "House-Warming" rebut Bentham:
- Well, we are safe and strong, for now we sit
Beside a hearth where no dim shadows flit,
Where nothing cheers nor saddens, but a fire
Warms feet and hands--nor does to more aspire;
By whose compact utilitarian heap
The present may sit down and go to sleep . . . (254-255)
- 22 See Robert Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 54-57; and Gustaaf Van Cromphout, *Emerson's Ethics* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 78-84.
- 23 Sometimes, too, by abandoning them: recall Thoreau's "singular experience" hoeing beans. He mines the experience for ecological and

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- historical knowledge, symbolic and metaphorical value, moral lessons, and more. Yet he drastically curtails this drudgery during his second year at the pond and abandons it altogether thereafter.
- 24 Neufeldt, *The Economist*, 99ff. Gustaaf Van Cromphout has an excellent discussion of this theme in *Emerson's Ethics*, 115-131.
- 25 These two key activities--observation, description and appreciation of what *is*; the poetic creation of new myths, new stories, new realities--support one another. Writing *Walden* enhances Thoreau's appreciation of Walden; the virtues of the naturalist supplement and enhance the virtues of the poet, when they are not one and the same. Such virtuous passages as the battle of the ants, the description of Walden in "The Ponds," and the thawing railroad cut in "Spring," aim to bring out this complementarity. Such romantic holism, much discussed in recent writings on Thoreau's science, is an ethical as well as an epistemological imperative, for Thoreau.
- 26 Henry Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings* (Washington: Island Press, 1993), 11-13.
- 27 Thoreau recognizes this problem and explores it in *Walden*. Consider the book's complex, dialectical treatments of "foundations" and "settlement," which seem to reach for something universal and unchanging in nature and ethics, yet finally undermine the attempt. Thoreau makes the search for foundations in nature central to his whole project (97-98)--and then tells us that we must put the foundations under our own idealistic projects, regardless of what others are doing or have done (324). He tells us that at a certain period in our lives it is natural to settle (81), shows us how to settle well in *Walden*--and concludes the book by pulling up stakes and heading off in other, unspecified directions. A similar dialectic can be seen in Thoreau's treatment of the complementary terms "faith" and "experience."
- 28 See Holmes Rolston, *Conserving Natural Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Not only does *Walden* anticipate such intrinsic value arguments, but in "The Bean-Field" and "Higher Laws," Thoreau works to specify exactly what duties and limits are set for us by nature's intrinsic value. See also Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 33-38.
- 29 The former phrase comes from David Shi, *Plain Living and High Thinking* (New York: New York University Press, 1985).