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SIMPLICITY AS A NEW ENVIRONMENTAL VIRTUE

by

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**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for graduation with**

UNIVERSITY HONORS

with a major in

Statistics

in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics

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Spring 2020

Abstract

This paper argues for the addition of a new environmentally focused virtue, simplicity, to the virtue ethical framework developed by Aristotle. First, relevant background from Aristotle's virtue ethics are developed including the crucial, "doctrine of the mean", a balance between excess and deficiency of a specified character trait. The tenets of the new virtue simplicity are developed with practical examples based on Aristotle's method of developing a virtue of character. Simplicity is proposed as a desire to take the appropriate amount from the natural world and an acceptance of one's circumstances. Those possessing simplicity will not fall victim to the pervasive "keeping up with the Joneses" mentality. Examples are given of historical figures the author believes to have possessed simplicity. People like Philip Cafaro, Henry David Thoreau, and even Warren Buffett are discussed as potential "mentors" for our own journeys into simplicity. Finally, an expansion on the intertwined nature of simplicity with the cardinal virtues of justice, wisdom, piety, temperance, and courage is given satisfying Aristotle's "unity of the virtues" requirement.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my capstone mentor, Dr. Justin Clark, for his countless hours of mentorship and encouragement of my academic pursuits. Also, thank you to the USU Philosophy department, and department honors advisor Dr. Charlie Huenemann, for creating a culture of intellectual rigour and excellence that has carried me through my undergraduate career. Finally, thank you to the USU Honors Program for their constant support and encouragement of pursuing a well-rounded education.

Word Count: 5792

Simplicity as a New Environmental Virtue

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the new environmental virtue of simplicity and discuss how simplicity can help us live a good and happy life on planet earth. After introducing simplicity and giving a detailed definition of the virtue, I will discuss why simplicity is so relevant to the issues we are dealing with in this day and age. In order to effectively do this though there is some necessary background knowledge to discuss concerning virtue ethics and virtues in general¹.

A virtue of character according to Aristotle exists between two extremes of feeling, emotions or desires, known as vices. This is called Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Virtues like courage are described as virtues because to be courageous one must develop a tendency to feel neither too much nor too little of the vices rashness and cowardice. The difficult part of Aristotle's virtue ethics is defining where that mean lies for each virtuous trait. In order to be labeled as courageous according to Aristotle one must engage in both a mental and practical activity. Not only must one act in a courageous manner but one must also know what level of fear is correct for their natural tendencies². We all know someone that is just naturally skittish and we also know that "thrill-seeker" we write off as a dead man walking. Obviously these two agents have very different tendencies and the virtue of courageousness will look differently for

¹ At the most basic level a virtue is a character trait that helps one live a good and happy life. This good and happy life, termed eudaimonia, is what the ancients thought to be the overall goal of human beings. I find Aristotle's interpretation of virtue to be the most compelling so I will introduce Aristotle's theory and discuss the virtue of simplicity within that particular context but the reader should be aware that virtue ethics is quite flexible and there are several compelling interpretations within virtue ethics beyond Aristotle's.

² This knowledge is acquired through an intellectual virtue called phronesis which is roughly translated to "prudence". Phronesis is the ability to evaluate the correct state (hexis) for a particular situation always bearing in mind one's natural tendencies.

each³. In order to be sufficiently virtuous one must have the self-awareness to accurately assess one's natural leanings and then find a mean or intermediate, "We must also examine what we ourselves drift into easily. For different people have different natural tendencies..." as Aristotle says⁴.

Simplicity as a virtue is certainly a limited use of external resources as Cafaro discusses in his articles "Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson" and "The Virtue of Simplicity"⁵⁶. However I believe simplicity to be more than just "a limited use of external goods and focus on the task at hand". My definition of simplicity as a virtue first identifies simplicity as an excellent state of desire⁷. A desire to neither take too much from the natural world or to take too little. An important aspect of Aristotle's virtue ethics is that having too few resources (time, money, food, etc.) in our lives makes it very difficult to devote time and effort to developing virtue. So we clearly need to use some natural resources in our lives but the key to simplicity is realizing that there is a limit to the world's resources and we should avoid taking excessively from the earth and harming the natural world⁸.

Accepting one's situation is a key aspect of simplicity. A person possessing this acceptance would not fall subject to the problematic mindset that "more is better" which is so pervasive in today's world. There are certainly things we should desire to get as much of as

³ Within ethics the term "agent" is frequently used and is considered a rational being making specific choices.

⁴Nicomachean Ethics, Book II, Chapter 9, 1109b, 1-5 (Hackett, Translated by Terence Irwin, 1999)

⁵ "Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson" P. Cafarro, (Spring 2001)

⁶ "The Virtue of Simplicity" P. Cafarro, J. Gambrel, (Springer 2009)

⁷ Cafarro focuses mostly on defining simplicity as a mean between two extremes while I focus mainly on simplicity as an excellence in our desiderative life.

⁸ "Taking excessively" is a somewhat ambiguous term but that is why we must develop the evaluative knowledge of phronesis to determine what amount of consumption is correct for our natural tendencies as well as our current situation. It should however be fairly obvious that many people in first world countries are desiring and taking far too much from the natural world.

possible: knowledge, compassion, and understanding come to mind. But when we talk about our material circumstances we often believe, “I just have to have this” when really we have all the things we need to achieve eudaimonia and flourish. Simplicity is controlling our desires to use and acquire resources in addition to an acceptance of our current position and status⁹. This control of one’s desires helps us relate to the natural world in an informed and respectful manner. Those individuals who possess the virtue of simplicity will realize the negative impact on the environment caused by this excessive pursuit of material gain most of us are engaged in. If you are in an arms race with your neighbors to see who can buy the nicest house, (boat, vacation cabin, big screen tv, pool, etc..) then not only will you be overusing resources by acquiring these extravagant toys but you will also be creating a massive carbon footprint and using more than your share of resources in everyday life¹⁰¹¹. As employees and employers engage in excessively wasteful practices such as: extravagant dinners to woo potential clients, miles and miles of gas to make business meetings and client appointments, fancy bottled waters to impress investors which never make it to the recycling bin, and using gigawatts of power usage keeping your offices lit through the night and into the wee hours of the morning as employees pour over spreadsheets and documents, *all wear on the natural world* we are a part of and it has been shown by scientists during the last decade that our overconsumption is and will continue to impact our environment adversely.

⁹ Aristotle believes a certain amount of external resource and circumstance is necessary to developing virtue and in cases of extreme poverty an attitude of acceptance would be inappropriate but the majority of those reading this essay are not in such a circumstance. Here again we see the value of possessing phronesis as a way to sort out what attitudes or actions are appropriate in different circumstances for different people.

¹⁰ Philip Cafaro and Joshua Colt Gambrel give an excellent argument for the necessity to live a simple life and limit carbon emissions in their article “The Virtue of Simplicity” (2009).

¹¹ Although simplicity is concerned mainly with overuse of limited natural resources to preserve the natural world and environment there are references to justice that inevitably leak into the arguments for simplicity. We will discuss the interplay between justice and simplicity later in this paper.

This pervasive attitude of “keeping up with the Joneses” harms not only the environment but can also harm agents themselves. An examination of the psychological well being of many we idolize as “great achievers” will show loneliness, depression, addiction, and overall dissatisfaction with their circumstances despite having more material distractions and resources than most of us could ever dream of possessing. This disconnect between human flourishing and material possessions was demonstrated in a recent study discussed in Daniel Kahneman's book, “Thinking: Fast and Slow” the study was an extensive analysis of the connection between psychological well-being and the amount of income one has. What the study found was that there was no net gain in happiness beyond a yearly household income of \$75,000¹². Kahneman says this about the cap on money leading to happiness, “This is surprising because higher income undoubtedly permits the purchase of many pleasures, including vacations in interesting places and opera tickets, as well as an improved living environment”¹³. Kahneman is able to explain this unintuitive result nicely, he says that while the extremely wealthy do in fact have greater options for things like extravagant vacations and expensive parties, these are often work related or involve working during the “vacation time”. Additionally, these people’s jobs are often so stressful and time consuming that they miss out on meaningful everyday activities like wonderful family dinners or outings with friends. In short, those with the money to enjoy the “finer things” in life rarely have the time to achieve greater happiness from them¹⁴. However, simplicity can play a major role in helping an individual unshackle themselves from convention and pursue a

¹² The “U-index” was used as a definition of happiness in this study. The U-index is based on subjective well-being reported by study subjects. The well-being reported was focused on day to day mood and emotional health. It should be noticed that emotional well-being, while an important aspect of a good and happy life is not the only factor in such a life.

¹³ “Thinking Fast and Slow” D. Kahneman, p. 397 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2011)

¹⁴ Here the *greater happiness* is referring to a life with components of self-acceptance, strong relationships, purpose, personal growth, autonomy, and environmental mastery.

life of flourishing rather than simply one of material satisfaction. By simplifying one's life and unsubscribing from the popular adage, "time is money" we free ourselves to pursue goals and activities that might not necessarily have an effect on the "bottom dollar" but are key parts of a good and happy life. Things like charity work, reading, and strengthening family relationships are what I have in mind but there is a much longer list of potential worthwhile activities the reader can develop for themselves. Phronesis will again play a key part in deciding what things are most worthwhile for a life of flourishing.

Now to touch briefly on the topic of environmental justice within the context of simplicity. Environmental justice is a topic concerned with examining the inequality of environmental consequences distributed throughout the world. When one looks at the negative effects of human overconsumption: floods, fires, mudslides, drought, desertification, global warming, these consequences are rarely affecting those most responsible for the environmental concerns. Third world and developing countries are much more susceptible to changes in the natural world because they, by necessity, have a much more intimate relationship with the environment. Because of this susceptibility the negative effects of climate change often hurt those who are contributing the least to climate change. Cynthia Moe Lobeda discusses the uneven use of natural resources between first and third world countries and said that, "a family of twelve in a developing country would hardly use as many resources as just one of my children"¹⁵. Now there is no easy fix for this disconnect between consumer and consequence but for those of us blessed to be living in a first world country developing simplicity would certainly help address the issue of environmental justice.

¹⁵Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "Love Thy Neighbor: Moral Courage and Hope for a Hurting World", April 2016

Simplicity has now been given a definition and defining characteristics. The next step is to determine why simplicity is worth developing. There may be those who wonder why there is a need to introduce a new virtue. Can't the other virtues, when correctly developed, "get the job done?" for lack of a better term¹⁶. If we were to propose this objection to Aristotle himself I would imagine Aristotle replying that his list of virtues was never meant to be exhaustive but rather to give a format for identification of virtues worth cultivating. Additionally, to believe that a short list of virtues could exist that would fully address all of the possible situations civilization would face throughout history is very unlikely. Since it is now clear that there may be other virtues worth developing than just those named by ancient philosophers we look to our current circumstances and try to find the biggest obstacles to achieving eudaimonia and living that "good and happy life" the ancients made central to their virtue ethical account. A recent poll throughout the world showed that besides nuclear demonstrations by North Korea, climate change was perceived as the biggest threat to national security. This clearly demonstrates a need to examine the current virtues and decide if they can do the job of helping address the climate change issues or if new virtues need to be introduced¹⁷. At this point I admit my own shortcomings, I do not fully grasp or pretend to grasp the nuances and possible benefits of each virtue on an ever expanding list in the virtue ethic literature. However, I wish to take the view of Rosalind Hursthouse and believe that since there is such a large issue today concerning attitudes towards the environment, there is a need for virtues specifically aimed at helping us develop the correct

¹⁶ This argument is easily addressed however by acknowledging that under that logic we should never have pursued further medical knowledge or agricultural prowess. Progress and continued discovery are some of the key attributes of humankind.

¹⁷ In addition to climate change being of such concern to humankind these issues of climate change and loss of biodiversity are relatively new problems and partly explains why an environmentally focused virtue like simplicity would not have been widely accepted yet.

relationship to the environment. This may be a redundant task and our time may be better used reexamining the current virtues through an environmental lens but I have found in my, albeit limited studies of virtue ethics, that many of the “tried and true” virtues seem to have an anthropocentric tint to them which can cause issues for applying these virtues to environmental concerns. So in this paper I chose to help develop a new, environmentally focused, virtue and after an examination of the virtue itself, examine the unity of the virtues and give some examples of how other well-known virtues can offer support when developing simplicity and also how simplicity can aid in the development of more “traditional virtues”.

Before we delve into the unity of the virtues however, I want to discuss the practical issues of developing a virtue. Obtaining a specific virtue according to Aristotle has a formula. First one must identify those individuals that already possess the virtue we are looking to develop. To identify these individuals we can sometimes look to those our fellow men admire but this should be done cautiously because Socrates showed us in Plato’s Dialogues that even though someone may have the reputation for a particular virtue it does not always mean they actually possess the virtue¹⁸. Reading biographies and historical accounts can often help us in our search for virtuous individuals to begin emulating but here again one must watch for merely the appearance of virtue. After identifying individuals already possessing the virtue we are interested in, the agent begins to practice the virtue, Aristotle believes that life gives more than enough opportunities to practice developing virtues so one does not need to go and seek these opportunities¹⁹. As one begins to practice a specific virtue phronesis comes back into the picture. Frequent self reflection is key, the agent must interpret their natural tendencies and recommit to

¹⁸ “The Dialogues of Plato”, Plato, (Bantam Classics, 1986).

¹⁹ It should be noted that practice is the way to develop a virtue of character while research and study helps in the development of phronesis.

more refined virtue when future opportunities for development arise. Also since Aristotle defines virtuous action as the action a virtuous person would do in a specific situation, continuing to learn more about those who possess our desired virtue will only help our progress, because learning about how virtuous people acted in different situations will help us be better prepared to act virtuously in similar situations. This continued practice and reflection will eventually lead to the agent achieving their desired virtue.

Now that we have the generic formula from Aristotle for developing virtue, let's apply this formula to simplicity. Identifying those possessing simplicity leads us to investigate the lives of those like Henry David Thoreau, as documented in his novel *Walden*, Philip Cafaro has an excellent book identifying key concepts from *Walden* and even touches briefly on Thoreau's definition of simplicity, although as discussed previously our definition of simplicity is different from Cafaro's. I would like to discuss an interesting phenomenon I observed when discussing those individuals who possess the virtue of simplicity with one of my professor's. We noticed that individuals living a simple life are generally admired by others for their devotion and actions. Gandhi comes to mind as well as Christ and monks who adopt a simple life in order to achieve inner peace and higher levels of understanding. One individual that I think shows the virtue of simplicity well is the ultra rich investor Warren Buffett²⁰. Having researched different interviews and discussions with Mr. Buffett I learned that investing, for him, isn't a materialistic pursuit like it is for so many others. It's rather an intellectual pursuit trying to understand the human condition and make accurate predictions of our human tendencies within an economic setting. Buffett's rewards for his intellectual endeavors are dollars in the bank rather than the

²⁰ Although this paper focuses mainly on the connections between simplicity and the cardinal virtues, examples of "simple" individuals like Mr. Buffett demonstrate a relation between simplicity and other virtues like compassion and generosity.

publications that we traditionally associate with intellectual pursuits. Another quality attribute of Mr. Buffett is the enormous amounts of money he has given to charities throughout his life. Mr. Buffett still lives in the small, homely house he first bought years ago with his wife and spends the first six hours of the day reading. Apart from impressive intellectual prowess I think Warren Buffett serves as an excellent example that a virtuous, simple life, and money are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the virtuous person is able to identify the important things in life and not attribute their self worth and actions solely to the possession and acquisition of material gain. There are many more examples of those people who are environmentally conscious and lead a simple life meriting admiration from others. A few other potential examples for study are environmental activists like Rachel Carson, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold. These three individuals are especially applicable when studying simplicity because they lived a meaningful life despite having a very small carbon footprint. Another excellent example of a simple life still leading to eudaimonia would be the life of Socrates and other ancient philosophers.

Once one learns about individuals who lived a non-materialistic, content life but still pursued intellectual and moral development to the greatest extent possible, we can begin to practice simplicity. I offer one hypothetical situation just to illustrate how the process would look generally for developing simplicity although there are nearly infinite possible situations available for development. Imagine the following scenario: you have recently received a sizable raise at your job, to celebrate you go out to a nice dinner with your partner. During the meal the topic of what to do with the extra money comes up. Your partner suggests using the money for a downpayment on a larger house or even buying a new car. You recognize that although both of these options could be comfortably covered with the new income you think of what the “simple”

person would do, having recently read about Warren Buffett, arguably the most successful businessman ever who still lives in his small first house, you realize that simplicity would not be using the money for either of those uses. A key distinction here though is that to truly possess the virtue of simplicity, you should not only come to the conclusion that you do not need a bigger house or a new car but you should feel at peace with the decision. As Aristotle mentions in his *Nicomachean ethics*, “But we must take someone’s pleasure or pain following on his actions to be a sign of his state. For if someone who abstains from bodily pleasures enjoys the abstinence itself, he is temperate; if he is grieved by it, he is intemperate.”²¹. One should also not forget to frequently reflect on our reactions and mindsets in situations involving simplicity to evaluate our progress and make commitments for future situations. If we are taking pleasure in living simply then that is a good indicator that we are on the right track to developing simplicity as a virtue.

Before moving on to the next section of our formula for simplicity I would like to discuss a distinction between individuals we may come across who possess simplicity. As discussed earlier simplicity is first and foremost an environmental virtue, it is having the correct relationship with the natural world. Simplicity is a state of desires where one does not want to take excessively from the earth and works to develop stewardship over the earth. It is true that simplicity has wonderful benefits for self development in addition to this relationship with the world. However we should not forget that simplicity is dealing with the natural world. This is the main difference between simplicity and temperance which is traditionally thought of in terms of personal control and limiting bodily desires to maintain the correct relationship with oneself. So when we look at individuals possessing simplicity we should be careful to distinguish those

²¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II Chapter 3, 1104b, 5-10, Aristotle (Hackett 1999)

whose first goal is environmentally concerned with those that live a simple life as a byproduct of possessing other virtues as we will discuss later.

Now that a sufficiently detailed definition and formula for development has been given for simplicity we can examine several more examples of why simplicity matters. If the goal of virtue ethics is to help us live meaningful, fulfilling, flourishing lives then how does simplicity contribute to that? To do this effectively and efficiently I will show that simplicity fits the “unity of virtues” requirement, meaning that simplicity not only helps one better develop other key virtues but the other key virtues are also able to help agents better develop simplicity²². I will examine each of the cardinal virtues, justice, wisdom, piety, temperance, and courage, individually and give a few brief examples of how simplicity is unified, or fits in, with each of these.

Justice will be examined first. In Tom Hill’s article “Ideals of Human Excellence” Hill proposes that there might not be anything inherently wrong with not being environmentally conscious, it might be possible to be a completely ethical and virtuous person with no regard for the environment but we see from examination of those unconcerned with the environment that they are not beacons of excellence, rather they are often perceived as shallow, materialistic, and selfish²³. So even though it may be possible theoretically to be virtuous and not care for the environment having a concern for the natural world and appreciation for it allows us to be more admirable²⁴. Justice is often interpreted as the virtue of having the correct relationship with those

²² It should be noted that although Aristotle seemed to believe that all of the virtues were linked the “unity of virtues thesis” is a topic of debate among contemporary virtue ethicists.

²³ Hill T. *Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments*. Environmental Ethics 5 (3):211-224 (1983).

²⁴ Although Hill’s article may provide external motivation to begin developing environmental stewardship it should be noted that appearance of virtue is not a worthy goal by itself. The goal is to realize the intrinsic rewards that come from developing virtue. Practically, it may be necessary to have external motivation for

around us and since unfortunately we are biologically wired to place so much stock in impressions, developing simplicity and environmental empathy would be beneficial for our relationships with others. Additionally, justice doesn't just take into account those immediately surrounding us, it also should factor in future generations and those across the world. With these factors introduced the virtue of simplicity absolutely helps us achieve justice since our actions and lifestyles today will be affecting generations to come as well as those in other parts of the world as I addressed during my brief discussion on environmental justice. Gandhi, who was mentioned earlier in this paper as someone worthy of emulation for simplicity, can now be examined in terms of justice. Seeing justice as having the correct relationship with others shows that Gandhi did in fact live a simple life, one of limited external resources which put him in the correct relationship with the natural world. But classifying Gandhi in the same category for simplicity as environmentalists like John Muir, Rachel Carson, and Aldo Leopold would be incorrect. Gandhi's main mission in life was in pursuit of justice and simplicity was a side effect. This natural connection between a life of justice and a life of simplicity supports Aristotle's inseparability argument which we explore in this paper. We laud Gandhi for his political action however I wonder if we would have the same amount of respect and awe for Gandhi if he did not also live a life of simplicity and limited resources. I think Gandhi is so impressive to us because we can see evidence of multiple virtues in the life he lived. Simplicity, justice, courage, temperance, and piety were all clearly shown by his actions.

Apart from the benefit of being recognized as a virtuous person, again remembering that the appearance of virtue is different from possessing virtue, simplicity helps develop justice by

developing virtue but over time the goal is to realize the inner rewards and peace that come from being virtuous and living a life of flourishing.

increasing your ability to connect with a multitude of people. When one looks around the world, the social classes imposed by the amount of belongings one has and mindset of gain and greed are cause for great concern. Historically, when the 1% become much wealthier than the 99% social unrest ensues. Not because the 99% is being greedy but rather because eventually the 1% becomes so wealthy that there isn't enough money for the public to buy food, and basic necessities. A fine example of the dangers of excessiveness is shown through the French Revolution.

If we were to develop simplicity more in society it could solve many of the issues that arise because of arbitrary "wealth and rank" divisions. I can envision a simple person being incredibly wealthy or dirt poor. Despite these opposite conditions, both individuals would have a similar mindset concerning their amount of wealth and stance on other people. Since neither person would base their self worth on the money in their pocket they would be able to see each other as equals and aid each other as appropriate for their individual situations²⁵. So we see that simplicity can help one relate better with others.

For the sake of completeness addressing the cardinal virtues let us assume that god(s) or a powerful spiritual entity do in fact exist. Assuming this to be the case piety would then be defined by virtue ethics as having the character trait that results in the correct relationship with this spirit. In other words, having one's actions in line with what the gods would have us do, assuming of course that the god that exists values virtuous traits and actions, a necessary component of any god that would be worth worshipping.

²⁵ Here we can begin to see a connection between simplicity and the virtue of humility.

The value of simplicity is lauded in nearly every religious text available. Jesus himself lived a simple life, free of external lavishness but was incredibly rich in spirit, compassion, and godly power. The passage in the bible saying that a rich man trying to get to heaven is like fitting a camel through the eye of a needle comes to mind²⁶. I propose that it isn't the wealth itself that is the issue but rather the mindset that many wealthy people possess. Most wealthy individuals are trapped by the acquisitive mindset that is in direct opposition to fostering the virtue of simplicity. Even though it is possible to develop simplicity without subscribing to a belief in divine power it seems that piety does help one live a simple life as a welcome side effect of piety. One distinction needs to be made concerning piety when talking about an environmental outlook. There is a tradition within certain religions to believe that man was given the earth by god and thus has dominion over the earth and can use it however he sees fit. This is the wrong attitude to have when looking at simplicity and piety. Dominion should instead be replaced with stewardship. It is fine to see the earth as a gift from god however this gift should be treasured and protected to show our gratitude for the wonderful gift. Stewardship is the protection and cultivation of the earth through environmentally conscious and sustainable living practices while dominion leads to an attitude of pillage, plundering, and selfishness.

Examining wisdom now we turn to the world around us. Being wise will mean having the correct relationship with the surrounding world. Since justice examines the surrounding people in our world I interpret wisdom as addressing the correct relationship with the natural world. Our excessive exploitation of the environment is jeopardizing the wellbeing of future generations. Others have proposed developing virtues such as stewardship of the world and wonder for the

²⁶ Matthew 19:24

natural phenomena. Rosalind Hursthouse says this about wonder, “Could being rightly disposed with respect to wonder - being disposed to feel wonder the right way. towards the right objects, for the right reasons, to the right degree, on the right occasions. in the right manner. and to act accordingly-count as a virtue,”²⁷. While these traits are admirable and I believe should be developed to help quell the environmental storm coming I believe simplicity to be a more pressing virtue for development because of its close connection with other key virtues .

Those familiar with the issues of environmental justice will know that the vast majority of human caused environmental issues are caused, almost exclusively, by first world countries. Tragically the negative effects of climate change and overconsumption rarely affect these countries that are the major contributors to the problem. Instead countries ill equipped with the natural resources or money to handle natural disasters and climate change are saddled with the largest losses. A recent example is hurricane Maria which completely devastated Puerto Rico and was merely a tropical storm on the east coast of the US. Here is a perfect example of a country only the size of Connecticut suffering catastrophic economic and societal losses because of over consumption of first world countries like the US²⁸. I propose that developing the virtue of simplicity, practiced in more affluent countries, can help to quell the storms of consumption in these first world countries. When one possesses the virtue of simplicity, a lifestyle dedicated to “climbing the corporate ladder” and excessive monetary consumption loses its appeal. No longer does the desire to “get while the gettin's good” come. An agent who has developed simplicity will be wise and realize that this over acquisitiveness is largely responsible for the environmental

²⁷ “Environmental Virtue Ethics” R. Hursthouse, (Working Virtue, 2007)

²⁸ While it is true that climate change does not cause hurricanes themselves it is an accepted fact in scientific communities that climate change makes naturally occurring hurricanes worse because of the greater temperature differences of the ocean water and incoming cold fronts.

issues facing us today. Those wishing to excessively exploit nature in order to buy a bigger house or have more money in the bank than their neighbors lack the virtue of simplicity and play a great role in the denial of environmental crises approaching²⁹. Since the ancients believed wisdom unified all of the virtues I would like to examine this viewpoint for simplicity. When we look back to the definition of simplicity we find it to be an environmentally focused virtue with fringe benefits for personal well-being. Simplicity then would essentially be wisdom applied to the earth.

In regards to courage, there is the obvious interpretation touched upon in the beginning of this paper, that courage is acting between the vices of rashness and cowardice. When broken down to the bare bones though we see that courage is simply having the correct relationship with the future. Now that we have defined this virtue as having the correct attitude towards the future, we will look at simplicity as a virtue and decide if simplicity offers any benefit when developing courage. I believe that simplicity can help one achieve the correct relationship with the future for the following reasons: a person possessing simplicity, especially the simplicity introduced in this paper, is focused on creating a world and future of environmental prosperity. There is also the ever popular lyrics, “more money more problems” and silly as the saying is I think there is some truth to it. Simplifying one’s life limits the amount of variables in one’s life for issues to occur in. An agent living a simple life would be more optimistic for the future since there are less potential causes of concern in their life. The future will be full of environmentally based issues

²⁹ Another interesting example showing the disconnect between simplicity as a virtue and environmental justice is big game hunting. These individuals that engage in big game hunting surely cannot be counted as virtuous because they choose to wreak havoc on the natural world and ecosystems simply to pass the time with buddies or find a new rug for their winter home. Additionally these big game hunters don’t just hurt the animal kingdom with their lavish wastefulness, they are damaging whole ecosystems including the people living in these ecosystems. Thus we see a lack of simplicity again leading to environmental injustice.

like climate change and limited resources. The future looks bleak and frightening to many keeping pace with environmental studies. Can simplicity help us face the uncertain future with courage? I believe the answer to be a firm yes. If we see simplicity as a balanced desiderative life concerning the natural world, then our own personal actions will help neutralize some negative consequences of environmental overuse (reducing our personal carbon footprint will be a drop in the bucket towards environmental stewardship). By modeling simplicity in our own personal lives we will begin to influence our close friends and relatives by demonstrating that a life of flourishing is possible with a limited carbon footprint. Finally, possessing the virtue of simplicity will help us identify others who have simplicity and those are the individuals we can support politically and socially so that over time simplicity becomes a part of society and lasting change is made possible. Knowing that simplicity and our individual actions have the potential to create lasting change can help us face the uncertain future with confidence and hope rather than despair.

In this paper we developed a definition for the virtue of simplicity and discussed why simplicity matters. We then looked at how one can possess simplicity and still achieve eudaimonia. Finally we looked at the connections between simplicity and other virtues such as justice, courage, and wisdom.

Word Count: 652

Reflective Writing

Definitions are absolutely essential to philosophical discussion. Philosophy requires a precision that is only possible through an explicit, common, vocabulary. So, understandably, the first task to conquer in creating a thesis in ethical philosophy required developing a loose definition for my virtue and then combing the literature to ensure my idea had not already been developed. Although simplicity had already been discussed in other academic papers I believed the current work to be incomplete for an Aristotelian virtue. I believe the requirement of original work to be an extremely rewarding one and completely in line with the motto, “Dare to know.” It was daunting to try and think of an idea that hadn’t been covered in the more than two thousand years of philosophical history but my mentor was an invaluable resource when I came across literature already discussing simplicity. Dr. Clark helped explain the process of fine tuning that will often happen in academic publications and suggested finding a way to focus on the virtue ethical approach to simplicity and adding to the current definitions, specifically an acceptance of one’s circumstances, rather than just the current approach to simplicity, a limited use of natural resources.

As I reflect on how I came up with the topic for my honors capstone I keep a journal of impactful quotes, ideas, and literature that I come across. Based on a recommendation from a friend I had read *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau and found the book to be life-changing. Something about a successful man choosing to forgo certain amenities for a more streamlined existence spoke to me. I had this book in the forefront of my mind throughout my work on this project and wanted to find a philosophical marriage between Aristotle and Thoreau. I think this

would be my first piece of advice to future honors students, believe that inspiration can come from anywhere and have some way to capture these moments of inspiration.

Due to my unique educational path my capstone work came in the middle of my undergraduate career. I had bounced around in many majors and struggled to find direction, at first due to a lackluster devotion to academia, and then, thanks to my first philosophy course, an interest in any and all types of knowledge. This capstone was my first major college product and prepared me excellently for the deep, reflective thinking that is required for upper division mathematics and statistics courses.

Another piece of advice I can give to future students, keep an open mind and try to take courses that aren't in your wheelhouse. With the right attitude these experiences can help you better develop as a unique mind capable of finding connections that others could not. This will make your area of interest more meaningful and will make you a desirable collaborator because of your ability to converse intelligently across disciplines.

Writing my capstone was relatively painless. As I worked with my mentor I realized the importance of listening to and implementing his suggestions. This streamlined our development process and created, in our opinion, a fine piece of academic work. There's no need to make the capstone process harder than it already is. You have a mentor for a reason and their expertise is available to guide you toward a quality piece.

After working with my mentor I realized the value in conversation with professors. I rarely missed an office hour going forward, developing close relationships with many of the amazing faculty at USU and received an extensive amount of help with the difficult coursework.

The honors experience signifies an ability to expand your horizons and become greater than you are presently. The honors capstone has been just one of the countless experiences I

have had with this program that have made me not only a better academic, but a better human being. I will forever be grateful for my time in the USU Honors Program.

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Professional Author Biography

Justin graduates from Utah State University in Spring 2020. His major in statistics and minors in biology and mathematics are just a small part of his educational endeavors. With significant upper division coursework in psychology, philosophy, chemistry, and secondary education Justin has striven to become a modern day Renaissance man. Justin will begin employment as a biostatistician after graduation and looks forward to embodying the honors motto, “Sapere aude” long after he has left USU.