

MORAL THEOLOGY, I

- Topic: "The Ecology of Virtues: Wild Implications from a Catholic Environmental Virtue Ethic"
- Convener: David Cloutier, Mount St. Mary's University
- Presenter: Nancy M. Rourke, Canisius College
- Respondent: Tobias Winright, Saint Louis University

Nancy Rourke argued that a Catholic environmental virtue ethic will require a rethinking of some aspects of traditional virtue ethics. In particular, Rourke commended two steps, drawing on literature in philosophical ethics: first, an environmental virtue ethics must understand prudence as attunement, and secondly, must understand a person's character analogously to participation in an ecosystem, rather than as a hierarchy of virtues in an isolated individual. Rourke explained how attunement (which she defined as a habit of attentiveness to environments along with a willingness to be changed by one's environments) is indispensable to all areas of applied Catholic virtue ethics. Attunement was developed only in terms of natural environments, but with analogies from music as well. This understanding of prudence may raise problems for other areas of moral theology (because the idea of integrity will require clarification) and for systematic theology (because theological anthropologies will need to consider more seriously what Holmes Rolston III calls our emplacedness). It is needed nevertheless. In particular, Rourke questioned the "hierarchical ordering" characteristic of traditional virtue theories, and its tendency to privilege internal order, control, and stability. Instead, she explained that an ecological virtue ethic would be able to give an account of how the environment "seeps into" our character. She concluded that Catholic virtue ethics as a whole can only benefit from efforts to face and think through these problems of emplacedness and biotic relationality.

In his response, Tobias Winright commended Rourke for her attention to how "who we are is connected to where we are." He suggested that Rourke's emphasis on attunement would lead to environmental virtue that was not just exercise "in the wild," but in all places. He pointed out that the notion of receptivity in Catholic theology might provide a helpful bridge between the philosophical literature and Catholic thought. Finally, he asked if hierarchy among the virtues was actually the problem Rourke claimed it was, and concluded by thanking her for pushing forward questions in this emerging area of the tradition.

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