



## Moral Courage, Environmental Style

Video Summary of “Courage as an Environmental Virtue” (Lightly Edited Transcript)

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**[SLIDE 1]** Hello, I’m Rachel Fredericks. My pronouns are she or they.

I’m working with Philosophers for Sustainability to encourage members of our profession to show leadership on climate change and environmental sustainability.

In this video, I’ll be talking about courage and environmental commitments. Specifically, **[SLIDE 2]** I’ll summarize an article I published in *Environmental Ethics* back in 2014, called “Courage as an Environmental Virtue.”

This video is for anyone who is curious about the topic or who has read or plans to read that article. **[SLIDE 3]** Anyone can access a free copy of it by searching for it on *PhilPapers* or by going straight to the URL that you can see on the slide.

Ready? Let’s dig in. **[SLIDE 4]**

Courage is a virtue, but there are various different theories about what virtues are. We aren’t going to get bogged down in all of that, but we should get on the same basic page. So, for our purposes, a virtue is, roughly, a form of excellence, it’s a character trait that is well-suited for flourishing, or just a good way of perceiving and thinking and feeling and acting. Something like that. (And in contrast, a vice is a bad way of being.)

**[SLIDE 5]** Now here are a bunch of examples of virtues. Virtue terms describe the kind of people that we want to be. So: “kind,” “honest,” “creative,” “loyal,” “funny,” and so on. And virtues are important in all sorts of contexts of life: in medicine, in politics, in engineering, in schools, in homes, and so on.

Now, I’m especially interested in environmental virtue ethics. So: studying and cultivating the virtues necessary to do well in our interactions and relationships with the natural world—so doing well toward and with all living beings and the very complex ecosystems that we humans are just one part of.

Now, *environmental* virtue ethicists tend to talk about some virtues much more than others. **[SLIDE 6]** They tend to mention care, compassion, humility, respect, and love way more than other virtues.

And whether or not someone has those particular virtues is largely (though not entirely) a matter of what *attitudes* they have—so of what goes on inside their minds (or



maybe in their hearts). And these specific virtues also focus our attention on being unified and minimizing conflict.

But the main reason why I'm interested environmental virtue ethics in the first place is because of the many big, complex, important environmental problems that need solving in the real world: most crucially, climate change, but also problems involving water pollution, biodiversity loss, soil erosion, etc. **[SLIDE 7]** To make progress on solving those big problems, we need a lot of action! And those actions are going to involve dealing with conflict—we aren't going to be able to just avoid conflict entirely.

So, I'm really interested in what *motivates* people to take action, despite whatever hurdles they might face.

Because most people in the US do *not* take the kinds of significant action that would reflect or express the significant environmental concerns that they generally say they have. **[SLIDE 8]** In many cases, there's a sort of disconnect between what people say about their attitudes, and then what they do via their actions.

**[SLIDE 9]** So consider some likely explanations for this disconnect. Many people have too much on their plates to act on *everything* that they are concerned about. Many people don't *know* how to act in line with their values. And many people don't think that they would be *effective* in acting as an individual. I think there is some truth to all of those claims.

But I don't think they fully explain the disconnect **[SLIDE 10]**. In some cases (and I'm not going to speculate about how many), I think part of what blocks people from acting on their expressed values is a lack of courage—so an unwillingness (or maybe even an inability) to take risks to support their environmental ideals and commitments.

And in articulating what I've called environmental moral courage, I build on an existing account of courage developed by Matthew Pinalto (I hope I'm saying his name correctly).

**[SLIDE 11]** Pinalto distinguishes between physical and moral courage, which may or may not occur together. Both involve facing some sort of danger or an obstacle. But what sets moral courage apart is that it requires that people be motivated by a moral commitment.

So, **[SLIDE 12]** when an adrenaline junkie climbs a mountain and perches on the edge of a cliff for kicks, they are definitely demonstrating physical courage (because their physical body is definitely in danger), but that's not moral courage, because they are just driven by having fun, and not by some kind of moral commitment.



In contrast **[SLIDE 13]**, *taking a moral stand* despite some possibility of punishment or danger, that's essential to demonstrating moral courage, on Pianalto's view.

For example, imagine someone who, for moral reasons, is committed to protecting people's right to safely access public spaces regardless of any disabilities that they may have. **[SLIDE 14]** This person might always wear an N95 mask in public to reduce the spread of COVID and other potentially deadly or disabling diseases. Wearing a mask might not put them in any kind of physical danger (quite the opposite), but given how many people want everyone to "go back to normal," the mask wearer may be risking *social* dangers by masking in public—strangers might harass them, friends might not want to be seen with them, family members might treat them differently, and so on.

In either type of case, a person might feel some degree of fear **[SLIDE 15]**—and with good reason, because they are taking some kind of physical or social risk. So, courage is not just lack of fear. It helps us do well dealing with fear—to feel neither too much nor too little fear and to act well despite our fear. People who feel too much fear or who give it too much weight in their decisions might be called cowards, but feeling too little fear or ignoring it in making decisions, that's also a problem—it makes people reckless.

What else? Moral courage requires more than just a subjective belief or feeling that one is doing what is good or right **[SLIDE 16]**. Being morally courageous also requires treating other people as people, not just as objects or obstacles that are in your way, who can be manipulated or used however you like. So, when fearless fanatics (or other people) treat others in objectively morally inappropriate ways, they lack truly moral courage. Figuring out how to recognize the humanity in everyone, not just the people who are easy to sympathize with, is a big challenge.

And that, in a nutshell, is Pianalto's view of moral courage.

So, **[SLIDE 17]** let's turn to the cases I'm interested in—those that involve a specifically environmental moral courage (which again, may or may not involve physical courage).

**[SLIDE 18]** What sets the environmental cases apart is that moral courage, environmental style, requires that you face the possibility of punishment or danger because you take a stand in support of a specifically environmental good or right, or against a specifically environmental harm or violation of a right. Environmental moral courage involves acting in recognition of value in the environment as a whole or in one or more natural entities in it.

So let's consider a few cases that I didn't write about, to help get your brain juices sort of flowing here.



First, imagine a soybean farmer in a conservative community, where people tend to resist change. This farmer might care deeply about the land and worry about things like soil erosion and water pollution and changing climate that they are observing on this land. Even if the farmer doesn't have younger relatives who want to farm the land, they still might feel a moral obligation to take good care of that land, maybe for its own sake or maybe for the sake of the various animals and plants who live there. So, the farmer might decide to forego monocropping and instead experiment with agrivoltaics [SLIDE 19]. These combine food production and solar energy generation in the same area. Doing this kind of project probably involves some risks for the farmer—some financial risks and some social risks. Their neighbors might think and say that agrivoltaics are foolish or maybe “just not how our community does things.” Farmers who anticipate those kinds of risks and they proceed anyway, they might be good examples of environmental moral courage, if they are acting for the right kind of reason and they still treat their neighbors and business partners and others impacted with all of the consideration, respect, and care that they all deserve.

Okay, now how about a more physically dangerous case? If, because of a moral commitment to their intrinsic value, you [SLIDE 20] get on a boat, go out to sea, and place yourself between some whales and the whalers who are trying to kill them, as some members of Sea Shepard do, that can involve both physical and environmental moral courage. These missions on the high seas are certainly physically dangerous (note in the picture there's water cannons that are pummeling the relatively small activists' boat). These missions can also be morally motivated and they can require the activists to accept a wide variety of social punishments. And again, if those activists treat others with the basic level of respect and concern that is morally required, they can count as environmentally morally courageous.

What cases do you think demonstrate environmental moral courage?

To wrap up [SLIDE 21], I'll just mention a few advantages that I think could accompany increasing recognition of courage as an environmental moral virtue. First, acknowledging this virtue can illuminate the high stakes of some environmental activism and advocacy. Without a deep understanding of the costs and risks and punishments that environmentalists face, we aren't going to be well-positioned to prevent and mitigate and otherwise deal with those costs and risks.

That understanding could also help us clarify the high stakes of *inaction*. And I don't *just* mean the giant looming disasters if we allow environmental problems to get worse. I also mean the more personal costs of inaction—the ways that not acting on our values compromises our integrity and alienates us from our own commitments.

Second, recognizing courage as an environmental virtue could help undermine some of the stereotypes about environmentalists that portray them as, well, “wussies.” To solve environmental problems, we need lots of people to identify and act as environmentalists. We don't just need people who fit the stereotypes—you know, the



granola-eating, tree-hugging, Kumbaya-singers. Unfortunately, environmentalism tends to be coded as something for people who are weak or feminine or queer. But courage tends to be coded as something for people who are strong and masculine and straight. So, linking courage and environmentalism could help subvert some of these stereotypes and benefit people of all sorts—among other things, it might give people more sort of “social permission” to get involved in environmental causes in different ways.

Third, historically courage has been tightly connected to military contexts. Some ancient Greeks believed that only men could have courage, and that courage could only be experienced or demonstrated in a glorious battle, not in any other context. Nowadays, people more likely to recognize various kinds of people in various situations as courageous. But I think that too many people are still too quick to associate courage with things like aggression, violence, weapons, war, and other things that I would want us to minimize.

I'd love to see people increasingly associating courage with acts that contribute to positive *social and environmental* changes. Whoever you are, whatever skills you have, you could be a part of those changes. **[SLIDE 22]** I hope you'll use your good brains to carefully consider whether I'm onto something with what I've said here, and if so, how you could demonstrate greater environmental moral courage now or in the near future, given the realities of your particular life.

And with that, I'll thank you for watching, and encourage you to check out the additional materials that will be posted along with this video! Have a good one.