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Self-Realization in Deep Ecology: Is it an Epistemic Virtue?

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of self-realization, the basic norm of deep ecology, and argues that it can be understood as an epistemic virtue. In the tradition of the deep ecology movement, self-realization has been portrayed as a lifelong process through which one can expand one's identity and realize a deep connection with all human and non-human entities of nature. However, the moral status of self-realization remains controversial. Existing literature on deep ecology has largely focused on whether self-realization is morally neutral or inherently moral. However, it overlooks the epistemic dimension of self-realization. In order to address this gap, this paper draws insights from virtue epistemology. Using such insights, it conducts a conceptual and critical analysis of the existing literature to determine whether the norm of self-realization can be considered as a character-based epistemic virtue. Through this analysis, this paper argues that self-realization qualifies as an epistemic virtue. In addition, this paper demonstrates that the virtue of self-realization promotes the cultivation of other epistemic virtues and the eradication of ecological ignorance.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the environment of our planet is going through a severe crisis. This crisis is disrupting the harmony among different components of our ecosystems. Such disruptions ultimately threaten the existence of living beings on this planet. Although this crisis is often considered a moral crisis, its inherent nature and extent are not confined to the domain of morality. This crisis is closely connected with serious epistemic challenges as well. As a result, the ongoing crisis is sustained not only by our deliberate immoral actions but also by our ignorance of the close interconnectedness and deep interdependence among different components of nature. As a result, in order to formulate appropriate measures to combat this crisis, we need to cultivate dispositions that help us comprehend the true nature of our relationship with other components of the natural world.

Since the crisis is intensifying alarmingly, researchers across disciplines are focusing on minimizing its adverse impact. In doing so, philosophers have advanced various theories and suggested different remedies. Among them, deep ecologists point out the anthropocentric worldview as the root cause of the crisis and urge human beings to reject this problematic ego-centric worldview. They suggest that one can achieve this goal through the norm of *self-realization*.

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Deep ecologists place self-realization at the center of their philosophical framework. They have characterized self-realization as an ongoing process of expanding one's sense of self through identifying oneself with other components of the natural world. Throughout this process, an individual becomes aware of the profound interdependence among different components of our ecosystems. By doing so, self-realization helps an individual to overcome ecological ignorance and attain ecological wisdom.

Though the norm of self-realization remains at the center of the framework of deep ecology, its moral status remains disputed. Naess (1986) portrays self-realization as morally neutral. In contrast, Reitan (1996) argues that self-realization cannot be considered as morally neutral. In response, Humphrey (1999) criticizes Reitan's view and argues that self-realization is morally neutral since it is ontologically prior to moral laws. Talukder (2018) supports Naess's view on the moral neutrality of self-realization. In addition, he argues that, though self-realization is morally neutral, the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia provides sufficient ground for it to be qualified as a virtue.

In analyzing the notion of self-realization, most scholars have portrayed it primarily as an ontological, moral, or spiritual idea. The dominant debate about the status of self-realization has revolved around whether self-realization is morally neutral or inherently moral. However, in the existing literature, an analysis of the epistemic dimension of self-realization has been neglected. In particular, there is a lack of philosophical analysis investigating the epistemic status of self-realization within a virtue epistemological framework to determine whether it can be understood as a character-based epistemic virtue.

In this paper, I have addressed this gap by advancing the thesis that self-realization can be understood as an epistemic virtue. In this sense, self-realization is not merely a moral, ontological, or spiritual idea but an intellectual disposition that promotes the acquisition of a comprehensive ecological understanding. At the same time, it promotes the development of other epistemic virtues such as epistemic humility, ecological wisdom, and epistemic generosity. By framing self-realization as an epistemic virtue, this paper not only offers a new interpretation of the ultimate norms of deep ecology but also contributes to the existing literature by extending the application of virtue epistemology to environmental philosophy. It is worth mentioning that, throughout this paper, the words *epistemic* and *intellectual* have been used interchangeably.

2. Methodology

The primary research method of this study is literature review and conceptual analysis. As a result, this research is qualitative in nature. Since the primary objective of this paper is to determine whether the deep ecological notion of self-realization can be considered as an epistemic virtue or not, it concentrates on the conceptual nature, normative status, and epistemic function of self-realization and other related concepts. The aim of this study cannot be achieved through empirical

investigation, such as interviews, surveys, or fieldwork. As a result, it prioritizes conceptual analysis over other available methods.

In order to achieve its goal, this study proceeds in three steps. At first, it examines the key literature of deep ecology to determine the features and functions of self-realization. Then it draws on major contributions in virtue epistemology to portray the characteristics of epistemic virtues and vices. Finally, it undertakes a comparative conceptual evaluation to map the features of self-realization with the characteristics of epistemic virtues to determine whether self-realization can be considered as an epistemic virtue or not.

3. Deep ecology movement

In the 1970s, Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the term deep ecology and contrasted it with the existing shallow ecology movements. In his writings, he refers to the conventional mainstream environmental movements as the shallow ecology movement. The shallow ecology movements "fight against pollution and resource depletion," in ways that are compatible with the betterment of "the health and affluence of people in the developed countries" (Naess, 1973, p. 95). Examples of shallow ecology movements include the efforts to reduce environmental pollution to minimize the harm to human health or to conserve particular species for their economic value. Naess argues that the shallow ecology movements rely on the anthropocentric worldview. As a result, it considers nature as a resource for human use (Naess, 1973). In contrast to the shallow ecology movements, the deep ecology movement relies on ecocentric and holistic principles and acknowledges the equal intrinsic values of all life forms regardless of their utility to human beings.

In the shallow ecology worldview, our environmental crisis is perceived as an external or technical issue that can be addressed through appropriate conservation measures and better management of natural resources. However, deep ecologists dive deeper and point out deep philosophical and societal problems as the leading causes of the crisis. For instance, they argue that conceiving human beings as superior beings who deserve exclusive dominance over other entities of the natural world is one of the root causes of the current crisis.

In order to overcome this crisis, the deep ecologists urge a profound and radical transformation of our worldview regarding our relationship with other components of the natural world. How can such a transformation take place? Deep ecologists suggest that such profound transformation can take place through self-realization, which is considered the central norm of their philosophical framework (Talukder, 2018).

4. Self-realization in deep ecology:

In order to respond to the ecological crisis, environmental philosophers and ethicists formulate different sorts of moral rules. In contrast, Naess opposes moralizing and urges achieving self-realization through identifying ourselves with other components of the natural world. The norm of self-realization plays an important

role in distinguishing between anthropocentric and ecocentric worldviews. In the anthropocentric worldview, human beings are considered superior to other components of nature, who are "the center of the universe or the ends of creation" (Callicott & Frodeman, 2009, p. 58). However, the norm of self-realization rejects hierarchies among different parts of nature. As a result, self-realization "is neither a purely ecological nor a logical conception. It is an ecosophy of equilibrium and harmony" (Talukder, 2018, p. 14).

In order to characterize self-realization, deep ecologists distinguish between the individual self (with lower case s) and the universal Self (with capital S). In the history of philosophy, the universal self is also known as the absolute, the atman, etc. in different philosophical traditions. Deep ecologists urge that the individual self should achieve the universal Self by diminishing the ego and realizing the maxim "all life is fundamentally one" (Rothenberg, 1986, p. 8). Hence, self-realization is constituted by two principles: "the diminishing of ego and the integrity between the human and non-human world" (Talukder, 2018, p. 12).

In the writing of Arne Naess, we do not find any specific definition of self-realization since Naess deliberately refrains from defining it. In order to support his position, Naess argues that the maxim 'all life is fundamentally one' is better to be felt rather than explained since attempts to make its meaning precise can potentially diminish its inspirational power (Reed & Rothenberg, 1993). However, in order to avoid misunderstanding, Rothenberg mentions three features of self-realization: firstly, self-realization connects the individual self to the universal Self. However, it does not refer to the dissolution of the individual self into the universal Self. As a result, during connecting the individual self to the universal Self, it preserves individual uniqueness and diversity. Secondly, self-realization involves transcending oneself to realize one's unity with other parts of nature. As a result, the personal interest of an individual becomes inseparable from the interests of other parts of nature. Consequently, the concept of altruism becomes redundant. Finally, instead of denoting a passive final destination, self-realization refers to a continuous active process. It is a way of life that serves as a guide and helps us in directing our actions towards a broader and interconnected goal (Rothenberg, 1986).

5. The moral status of self-realization:

Deep ecologists claim that through the process of self-realization, an individual can extend their self and identify themselves as deeply connected to other living beings in the natural world. In doing so, an individual has to go through the following stages:

"T0 - self-realization

T1 - ego-realization

T2 - self-realization (with lower case s)

T3 - Self-realization (with capital S)"

(Naess, 1989, p. 84-85)

Throughout these transformational stages, one can transform one's self from the egoistic self (T0) to the universal Self (T3), where T3 is considered the ultimate goal. Naess argues that this transformational process of the self does not require any moral norms; instead, it requires inclination (Naess, 1989).

The concept of morality varies across different philosophical traditions. For example, the standard for moral evaluation varies among the Stoics, the Utilitarians, the Marxists, the Perfectionists, the Intuitionists, and so on. However, in conceiving morality, Naess (1986, 1993) was deeply influenced by Kantian distinction between moral action and beautiful actions. As a result, he urges on acting "beautifully, but neither morally nor immorally" (Naess, 1986, p. 226). This perception leads Naess to concentrate on outlining "a system of inclination rather than an ethics of ecological thinking" (Talukder, 2018, p. 20). He considers moral action as something that conflicts with our inclination. As a result, in portraying the relationship among moral action, moral law, and inclination, he writes, "Moral actions are motivated by acceptance of a moral law, and manifest themselves clearly when acting against inclination" (Naess, 1989, p. 95).

Kant perceives morality as performing duties for duty's sake, motivated by the goodwill of a moral agent. He conceives inclination as incompatible with morality since it derives from intense feelings instead of goodwill. As a result, he writes, "For the maxim lacks the moral import, namely, that such actions be done from duty, not from inclination" (Kant, 1999, p. 26). In the same vein, Naess understands morality as the performance of duties inspired by moral laws. As a result, he conceives inclination as free from morality and argues that a beautiful act should not be performed by duty but by inclination.

Eric H. Reitan (1996) disagrees with the characterization of self-realization as a nonmoral phenomenon. He argues that deep ecologists deduced their conclusion based on a narrow understanding of Kantian morality. As a result, their understanding of morality ignores "certain other critically important traditions; in particular, it overlooks the Aristotelian tradition of virtue-based ethics" (Reitan, 1996, p. 413). Reitan argues that, if the deep ecologists widen the scope of their understanding of Aristotelian and Kantian ethics, they would find the norm of self-realization as a foundation for moral action.

Reitan mentions that the narrow reading of Kantian ethics by the deep ecologists has overlooked the Kantian notion of respect. He considers the Kantian notion of respect similar to the deep ecologists' notion of identification, since both involve inclinations. As a result, following the Kantian conception of respect, Reitan claims self-realization can be considered as a moral term. In response, Humphrey (1999) disagrees with Reitan and supports the moral neutrality of self-realization. He argues that Reitan's analysis is problematic since it fails to recognize the difference between the Kantian concept of respect and the deep ecologists' notion of self-realization in terms of ontological priority to moral laws. Kant emphasizes paying respect to (1) 'the moral law' and (2) 'rational agents'. Humphrey (1999) argues that in the first case, "the moral law has to exist before respect can be given

to it," as a result, "moral law is ontologically prior to respect for such law" (p. 77). On the other hand, Humphrey argues, "self-realization ontologically prior to the derivation of any moral law" (p.78). As a result, self-realization remains morally neutral. Like Humphrey, Talukder (2018) supports the moral neutrality of self-realization. However, he argues that despite being morally neutral, self-realization can still be considered a virtue. It is worth mentioning that Reitan (1996) describes the ecological Self as a Self "which has acquired a certain kind of virtue" (p.424). He has not mentioned the name of that virtue. However, since the distinctive thing that an ecological Self can acquire is self-realization, it can be inferred that Reitan probably acknowledges self-realization as a virtue.

6. Virtue

Virtue is one of the central concepts in moral philosophy and virtue epistemology. In general, the concept of virtue has been widely understood as a stable trait of character. It is commonly held that possession of virtues can motivate a moral or epistemic agent to act in a morally or intellectually excellent manner. Besides, stability and rationality have been identified as crucial characteristics of virtue. As a result, momentary impulsive actions cannot be considered virtuous.

Aristotle (1984), in Nicomachean Ethics, portrays virtue as a golden mean between two extremes. For example, the virtue of courage refers to the golden mean between recklessness and cowardice. Other virtues can be described in the same manner. Aristotle distinguishes between epistemic virtues and moral virtues. He acknowledges that both types of virtues are essential for achieving eudaimonia. However, in terms of their nature, function, and process of acquisition, they demonstrate significant differences. For example, possession of epistemic virtues requires a significant amount of time and experience, since people, in general, enhance their intellect through studying and being taught. In contrast, moral virtues are cultivated through practice and habit. A person becomes morally good not just by learning about them but through repeatedly performing good actions (Aristotle, 1984).

Self-realization may not qualify as a moral virtue, since it does not depend on moral norms. However, it still relies on a comprehensive knowledge of our interconnection with other parts of nature. Deep ecologists claim that when we understand this interconnection and identify ourselves with other components of nature, such an identification "elicits intense empathy" towards others (Naess, 1986, p. 217). As a result, an individual spontaneously feels the pain of others as his own pain. For instance, if he sees a flea fall into a jar of acid and the dreadfully expressive movements of the dying flea, he may not be able to save its life; however, he still naturally feels "a painful sense of compassion and empathy" for it (Naess, 1986, p. 227). However, we can easily feel the pain if we suffer an injury to our feet because they are naturally connected to our brains through a direct neural network. As a result, we do not need any extra effort to feel that pain. This process happens to us naturally and spontaneously. However, other entities of nature are not directly connected to our brain via any neural networks. As a result, we need to put effort

into knowing and understanding the nature of our relation to other components of the world. In that case, how can we gain a comprehensive knowledge about our ecosystems, which can lead us to feel spontaneous compassion and empathy towards others? I will argue that possession of epistemic virtues can help us in doing so.

7. Epistemic virtues

Epistemic virtues are the excellences that enhance the ability of an epistemic agent to be an excellent knower. Aristotle (1984), in Nicomachean Ethics, defined *epistemic virtues* as the "virtue of which the soul possesses truth by way of affirmation or denial" (p. 87). In the same vein, most of the scholars commonly characterize epistemic virtues as "characteristics that promote intellectual flourishing, or which make for an excellent cognizer" (Turri *et al*., 2021, p. 3).

Epistemic virtues are studied in virtue epistemology. Inspiration for virtue epistemology can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, particularly in the work of Plato and Aristotle (Zagzebski, 1996). Along with Plato and Aristotle, the inspiration for virtue epistemology has also been identified in the philosophy of Aquinas (Zagzebski, 1996, p. 213), Descartes (1968), Nietzsche (Alfano, 2013), Locke (1996), Hume (1748), and so forth. Hints of virtue epistemology are also available in Islamic Philosophy (Adamson, 2015; Black, 2011). Contemporary virtue epistemology began with the work of Ernest Sosa (1980), who delineated intellectual virtues as cognitive faculty-based virtues such as reason, introspection, vision, hearing, and memory. Subsequently, Lorraine Code (1987) outlines the character-based version of intellectual virtue.

Virtue epistemologists have been divided into different groups from different perspectives. Firstly, based on the characterization of intellectual virtue, they have been divided into two groups, namely virtue reliabilists and virtue responsibilists (Axtell, 1997). Virtue reliabilists such as Ernest Sosa (1980), John Greco (2000), and Alvin Goldman (1993) emphasize faculty-based intellectual virtues, including reason, intuition, memory, and perception. On the other hand, virtue responsibilists such as Lorraine Code (1987), James Montmarquet (1992), Linda Zagzebski (1996), Christopher Hookway (2000, 2003), and Jonathan Kvanvig (1992) emphasize traits or character-based intellectual virtues, such as epistemic humility, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, epistemic generosity, and so forth. However, such classification has faced robust criticisms as the distinction is unhelpful, and both character virtues and faculty virtues are very much related to one another (Fleisher, 2017; Turri *et al*., 2021). Baehr (2006) also discourages the virtue reliabilist's attitude to ignore trait or character-based virtues.

Though there are disagreements about the types of epistemic virtue, virtue epistemologists commonly consider epistemic virtues as one of the essential prerequisites for the flourishing of our intellectual life. They argue that the betterment of our intellectual life intensely relies on our belief formation process. These processes rely on how we perceive the world. As a result, for the betterment of our intellectual life, we need to cultivate dispositions that can govern the way of

our perception in the right direction. Epistemic virtues are capable of doing so by shaping how we feel, think, and inquire by governing our cognitive emotions (Robert & Wood, 2007).

Epistemic virtues motivate epistemic agents to grow and nurture sincere love of truth and help them to achieve epistemic goods. At the same time, it helps epistemic agents in overcoming epistemic vices that act as a substantial barrier to comprehending the world as it is. In doing so, epistemic virtues shape the attitude of an epistemic agent in perceiving and interpreting the natural world. For example, let's consider the virtue of epistemic humility in this regard. The virtue of epistemic humility has been characterized as "a striking or unusual unconcern for social importance, and thus a kind of emotional insensitivity to the issues of status" (Roberts & Wood, 2007, p. 239). Epistemic vanity and epistemic arrogance have been identified as the vice counterparts of epistemic humility (Roberts & Wood, 2007). An epistemically vain person possesses an extreme obsession with his self-status, which can potentially lead him towards overestimating himself in comparison to other members of his ecosystem. Such an obsession can guide him towards a pathetic separation from other components of the natural world. The possession of epistemic arrogance even makes the situation worse. It has been defined as the "a disposition to ''infer'' some illicit entitlement from a supposition of one's superiority, and to think, act, and feel on the basis of that claim." (Roberts & Wood, 2007, p. 243). The possession of arrogance motivates a person to consider himself superior to others. This also catalyzes the separation process. The presence of epistemic vanity and arrogance underestimates the contribution of other components of the natural world. Consequently, it paves the way to formulate an anthropocentric attitude of considering non-human entities of nature as mere resources to be used in order to satisfy human needs. Such an anthropocentric attitude ignores the pain and suffering of others. Cultivating the virtue of epistemic humility can alter this attitude by eradicating the vice of epistemic arrogance and vanity. An epistemically humble person does not possess an obsession with high regard. He is aware of the limitations of his knowledge. As a result, he remains open to updating his beliefs. Such an openness makes it easier for him to acquire ecological knowledge about the deep interconnection among different components of nature and the importance of their contribution to the sustainability of our ecosystem. This attitude ultimately makes an epistemic agent prepared to feel the pain and suffering of others.

8. Self-realization as an epistemic virtue

The possession of Epistemic virtues enables agents to achieve epistemic goods by governing the formation and regulation of their beliefs. Such virtues refer not only to the cognitive capacities of epistemic agents but also motivational and affective dispositions that determine how an epistemic agent perceives, inquires, and interprets the world. From this point of view, self-realization can be considered a character-based epistemic virtue, since it enables epistemic agents to recognize the true nature of their deep interconnectedness and interdependence with components of our ecosystems.

According to the deep ecologists, the process of self-realization involves an expansion of the self through our identification with other components of the natural world. Such identification begins with the transformation in how we perceive and know the world. As a result, self-realization is closely connected to our epistemic life, which helps us overcome the cognitive barriers that persuade us to perceive nature through an anthropocentric lens.

The transformation of our worldview through self-realization requires deep attentiveness to the complexity of our ecosystems, which leads us to a complete understanding of the vastness of the ecological reality and the significance of the contributions of every entity in our ecosystems. As a result, it helps an individual to overcome egocentric and anthropocentric biases. Moreover, self-realization helps to create epistemic awareness about the relationship of human beings to non-human entities of our ecosystem. Such awareness paves the way for achieving ecological wisdom. Additionally, possession of the virtue of self-realization makes an individual intellectually humble, curious, and empathetic towards the non-human entities of our ecosystems. This denotes the connection of the virtue of self-realization with epistemic humility, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, and other epistemic virtues.

In the aforementioned discussion, it is evident that the virtue of self-realization plays an overwhelming role in developing our epistemic attitude towards the natural world by directing our cognition and emotion towards the right direction. By doing so, it helps us to reach a deep and comprehensive environmental understanding. All of these characteristics and functions of self-realization provide sufficient grounds to consider it as an epistemic virtue.

As a character-based epistemic virtues self-realization does not remain as an isolated concept. Instead, it constructs a mediating link between the insights of virtue epistemology and ecological practice. The process of attaining self-realization promotes the cultivation of other epistemic virtues such as epistemic humility, attentiveness, open-mindedness, and epistemic justice. In doing so, it plays an active role in transforming the cognitive attitude of an epistemic agent by correcting his epistemic vices and erroneous anthropocentric beliefs. At the same time, it expands the horizon of moral attention by supplying reliable knowledge and beliefs during moral reasoning in formulating moral judgments about our responsibilities to the non-human world.

Moreover, the attainment of self-realization also helps to construct a true sense of identity. Consequently, an ecological self realizes its relational existence and deep connection with other components of its ecosystem. As a result, instead of an externally imposed moral duty, he takes care of them from internal motivation. In this way, the virtue of self-realization bridges the gap between abstract theory and its practice.

9. Conclusion

The deep ecology movement was initiated as a response to the growing concern of environmental degradation. It has brought a fundamental shift in current environmental thought. Pioneers of this movement claim that the existing shallow ecology movements will not be able to stop the vicious cycle of the current crisis by perceiving the crisis from anthropocentric viewpoints and treating non-human entities of nature as mere resources to be used for the betterment of human beings. As a result, they emphasize replacing the anthropocentric worldview with an ecocentric one. Such a transformation requires a profound transformation of our epistemic and emotional attitude towards the non-human entities of nature. Deep ecologists have identified self-realization as the central norm of such transformation. However, philosophers disagree about the moral status of self-realization. While Arne Naess has characterized it as morally neutral, others have disagreed, claiming that self-realization carries moral significance. Rather than asking whether self-realization is morally neutral or not, this paper argues that self-realization can be understood as an epistemic virtue, through which an individual achieves epistemic goods by gaining a complete understanding of the complex interdependence of ecosystems and of the role every entity plays within them. Such understanding intensifies the emotional and intellectual engagement of an epistemic with the non-human components of the natural world.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work. In addition, the ethical issues including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and, or falsification, double publication and, or submission, and redundancy have been completely witnessed by the authors.

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