As the various interlinked environmental crises we face have grown in both gravity and salience, cultural notions of ‘green’, environmentally conscious virtue have seen a corresponding growth in significance and scope. In this timely book, Sarah McFarland Taylor seeks to catalogue and understand the way in which practices of green virtue are represented in contemporary media. In particular, she is interested in a specific form of ‘green virtuous practice’: the titular ecopiety. Ecopiety, as Taylor understands it, is a practice of virtue ‘through daily, voluntary works of duty and obligation – from recycling drink containers and reducing packaging to taking shorter and purchasing green products’ (p. 3). Importantly, the term piety is employed here merely to capture the idea of devotion toward some object manifested in the performance of duties.

Taylor’s discussion of ecopiety and its media representations have two main themes. The first is the insufficiency of ecopiety, at least as we currently practice it. Taylor contends that ecopiety has become deeply interwoven with what she calls ‘consumopiety’, a form of virtue practised through making purchases of the right kind. The fusion of consumopiety and ecopiety is driven in large part by marketing and means that ‘doing ecopiety, to a large extent, has become a devotional practice performed in the “sacred buyosphere”’ (p. 5). For example, the Toyota Prius, as Taylor points out in the third chapter, has become a symbol of green virtue, so that merely buying and driving a Prius is seen as a performance of ecopiety. Another example Taylor offers is the ‘consumerisation’ of the practice of green burials. Originally conceived of as a simple, natural and eco-friendly alternative to standard burials, green burial has seen an influx of consumer accessories, such as the imported decomposable shrouds and the Smart Bios Urn.

Taylor provides two criticisms of ecopiety so conceived. The first is that, as ecopiety intertwines with consumopiety, it blinds consumers to the fact that, ‘the most eco-friendly products are the ones you don’t buy’ (p. 14). As Taylor points out, ‘the Prius may be a better car, but it’s still a car’ and it still runs on fossil fuels (p. 74). The other criticism is that, even ignoring consumopiety, ecopiety is far from the best method for saving the planet. Ecopiety, Taylor tells us, emphasises ‘individual, daily actions [and] small pious deeds’ as the solution to our various environmental crises (p. 98). We are told to buy local food, install low-flow showerheads and bike to work. While Taylor concedes that these individual actions may be commendable, she argues that what we really need is collective action and policy change. Individual pious deeds are at best grossly insufficient to meet our current challenges, and at worst they can...
‘obscure the kind of “heroic” structural changes … and collective action’ that are actually needed (p. 103).

The second theme of Ecopiety involves the way in which cultural narratives are presented and contested in media – which in this case are the narratives about green virtue and our moral relation to the environment. Taylor approvingly quotes Naomi Klein’s description of the current environmental crisis as a (or the) ‘story problem’ (p. 125). By this, she means that at least one large cause of our current predicament is the narrative about our relationship with nature that has become culturally dominant. So, a solution to this predicament must include a new narrative. This is what Taylor calls ‘restorying the earth’ (p. 23). We restory the earth via ‘media interventions’ – attempts to challenge, endorse, reinvent or change dominant narratives via both engagement with existing stories in media and the creation of new ones. Taylor is particularly interested in what she calls ‘talking back’, in which consumers of media engage with that media critically (pp. 38–9).

Taylor is quick to note that, while changes in media and technological advances have provided new spaces and avenues for consumers of media to engage with and intervene in narrative-making, there has also been ‘an intensification of corporate media ownership consolidation and conglomeration’ (p. 30). One of the strongest aspects of this book is that Taylor embraces neither a ‘Frankfurt School model’ in which media merely reproduce dominant ideology nor a model in which media are fully democratised conversation amongst citizens. Instead, she walks a line in between the two, showing how consumers of media are not merely passive in their consumption while readily acknowledging the presence of various forms of corporate co-option which occur.

Despite these strengths, there are also some elements of Ecopiety which I find fundamentally unsatisfying. At times, I think, Taylor makes too strong a distinction between individual and collective action in her dismissal of ecopiety. While I agree we will only solve our environmental crises with collective action, at times I think this point is made at the expense of overlooking the role of personal choices, particularly if they help build communities which can then be mobilised to enact political change or shifts in consumer demand. Ecopiety the book is often a little too unsubtle and dismissive when it comes to the value of personal and individual actions, and sometimes seems to disregard any discussion of the intrinsic value of action and consider it instead as nothing more than a pernicious aspect of neoliberal ideology.

Related to this, I was somewhat confused by Taylor’s proposed alternative to ecopiety: ‘ecoplay’, a framework of ‘play and delight’ rather than of ‘grim duty and obligation’ (p. 16). I agree that wonder at and delight in nature (as well as human community), as well as delight in the idea of a better future and the work required to make that future real, can and should play important roles in the shift to a more sustainable way of life. But some of Taylor’s examples here are odd. For instance, she suggests that we might try to make resisting
consumption into something fun and sexy, rather than spartan, via a puzzling discussion of media about sexy ‘vegetarian vampires’ who also resist the desire to consume. But the comparison she makes here are with attempts by the pro-abstinence movement to make sexual abstinence sexy. This is not particularly encouraging, given that abstinence-only education is generally regarded to be fairly ineffective, and attempts to reinvent it remain dubious.

Besides, policy work and movement-building are often hard and thankless, and facing our current crisis requires sacrifice. I do think Taylor is right to suggest that play and delight can help make this difficult work light and more engaging, but I doubt it can fully replace sentiments of duty. Duty has its own special force and ability to move people, and we should invoke the very real duties people have to the planet, to each other, and to future generations in order to shake them from complacency.

Despite these complaints, I think Ecopiety is a worthwhile book for anyone who is interested in the role of media and narrative in contemporary environmental discourse. Even activists and policymakers who wish to employ media for green ends stand to benefit from Ecopiety. Environmental ethicists, however, may find themselves a little frustrated by slightly unsubtle discussions of virtue and duty. Still, I think Ecopiety has the power to generate interesting discussions even among those ethicists.

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