Environmental justice is the environmental dimension of social justice. The environmental justice movement emerged to challenge the unfair distribution of toxic, hazardous and dangerous waste facilities, which were disproportionately located in low income communities of color. This movement is a distinct expression of environmentalism, emphasizing the protection of human communities more than wild nature. It is environmental protection where people live, work and play.

Environmental justice draws more from civil rights, labor and community organizing efforts than conventional environmentalism. As a result, this movement devotes itself to the unfair distribution of environmental risks, and efforts to prevent pollution from impacting low income communities. It complements traditional environmentalism by making the poor and marginalized the object of special concern. Its power lies in its appeal to a fundamental ethic of fairness. Members of this movement argue that it is unjust for politically marginalized, low income communities of color to suffer such a heavy burden of polluting activities.

The first steps toward environmental justice were taken by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, the very week he was assassinated. He had traveled to Memphis to express solidarity with Black sanitation (garbage) workers, who were striking for equal pay and better working conditions. During subsequent years, community members and researchers began noticing patterns. Negative environmental impacts disproportionately impact low income people and communities of color.

The term “environmental justice” was first articulated in a religious context by report of the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice, Toxic Wastes and Race. The environmental justice movement grew out of previous U.S. social movements for justice (civil rights, labor rights, and community organizing movements). A vision for an alternative environmental grew as scholars began to describe the common patterns of environmental harm suffered by inner city African Americans, Native Americans on reservations, and rural Mexican Americans (especially farmworkers and their rural communities).

The movement for environmental justice has been strongest when community-based organizations have partnered with university researchers. Local groups have more complete knowledge of neighborhood environmental issues, but academics have contributed by bringing their scientific, analytical, and legal
expertise to bear on local problems. Many of the civil rights churches contributed their resources to this movement, understanding environmental justice as one expression of their social engagement. Recently theologians have developed the term eco-justice to reflect a universal religious aspiration for right relationship between humans and the earth, with special concern expressed specifically for vulnerable people and the earth’s creatures at risk of greed and destructive human activities.

After an initial burst of enthusiasm, the environmental justice movement has struggled to attract the interest of new members. To challenge the general lack of public concern for the environmental well-being of low income communities, we can use ethics and ethical language to sustain our commitment to justice for our neighbors and to invite others to join with them in solidarity.

Virtue ethics can be particularly helpful for this kind of movement because they nurture the formation of character, the lasting habits of the heart and mind necessary to sustain a struggle for justice. Developing personal and community virtues can provide a framework for sustained engagement with the ethical life, in this case, with the commitment to being an environmentally just person. They provide the ethics language that can serve as the basis promoting justice, even with persons who completely disagree with our view of environment.

The term “virtue” can be traced back to the Greeks philosophers. During the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas developed this branch of ethics within his broad theological vision. A century ago, “virtue” was often used rather narrowly to refer to sexual morality. Virtue ethics are presently a field of increased scholarly and popular interest. By proposing virtue ethics, we can invite audiences to think about ethics less as a matter of conforming to external principles. Concern for the ethical outside of ourselves is important, but we might be made more persuasive if we can blend this with considerations of personal and community character. Virtue ethics addresses the deeper sense of the human person. Virtue ethics focuses less on what is “out there,” and more on what kind of person one must become in order to live the good life. Fundamentally, virtue is a matter of the formation of character, of lasting habits, that can help a person undertake a life’s journey toward justice.

A “habit” is a useful word for describing the practice of virtue. A virtue is a good habit, whether of mind or heart. It is a power, an internal characteristic to act well. It is combining a sense of the will, or the mind. It is a fusion of these things, to act on behalf of value. The person of virtue is a person of character, perpetual, habitual characteristic of the good. So a person is not someone who would occasionally do the right thing, but rather consistently, out of a matter of habit. Virtuous persons have the character of being just. How do we get these virtues?
In the tradition of virtue ethics, taking good actions will allow one to develop good practices. We can make ourselves want to do the right thing more if we begin to practice the right way of behaving. As that happens, we develop a habit of a greater desire for the good.

We can acquire virtue by our actions, and a virtuous person will act in a virtuous manner. It is not enough to think of ourselves as persons occasionally concerned about justice. Virtue ethicists would say, we want to be just all the time. A narrative, or a story we tell about the world and our role in it, plays a strong role in virtue ethics. We all tend to think of our practices in terms of narratives, as explaining how we live out virtues in our lives. Then virtue ethics makes the additional step: in our stories we assume notions of character, what kinds of virtues that are going to achieve success in the stories in our lives.

Thomas Aquinas understood there to be four primary Christian virtues: justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude. Regardless of one’s own faith commitment, these can be a sound basis for engaging with the environmental justice movement. What follows is a discussion of these “classic” virtues in light of the struggle for environmental justice.

Justice for Aquinas means giving to each person, and each its creature, its due, in other words, what it needs to life a full life. As Aquinas would see it, the created world does impose upon us a sense of obligation. To what do we owe the natural world? How do we make decisions about resources that accord each his, her, or its due? This is a particularly appropriate virtue to develop as we consider the hundreds of millions of people who lack the environmental resource necessary to live a life of dignity. It is equally relevant to considering the toxic waste that contaminates poor communities. We need the virtue of justice today to help move away from just charity, from mere pity for those who are suffering. The virtue of justice requires a response from us, requires us to act justly. How do we reform social institutions so that it does not force people into situations where their dignity is compromised? The expression of this virtue in practical terms is often described as solidarity, or taking on the concerns of the other as one’s own.

Prudence is the intellectual habit that wisely assesses the connection of what means must you adopt to accomplish the end at which you are aiming. Another word for this might be wisdom. Prudence and environmental ethics invites us to consider these means, to have the capacity to make wise judgments in complex trade off. This is a critical habit to develop for those seeking a more sustainable world. Sustainability means meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. It always requires a balance between competing needs, and thus making wise choices. Another word for prudence is far-sightedness. This would suggest that we take
precautionary action now, and assume the responsibility for environmental protection over time, rather than push problems off on future generations.

Temperance can best be understood self control. This virtue exists in tension with our culture’s environmental appetite and level of consumption. The United States has the world’s greatest level of consumption per person, and people around the globe have destroyed forests, fisheries, and ecosystems to support our way of life. Many industrial processes to create consumer goods generate or dump large quantities of toxic chemicals, and these have a much greater chance of harming disadvantaged communities than wealthy ones. As old fashioned as “temperance” sounds, this virtue is a highly relevant ethic that can be used to moderate consumption. One relatively simple way to express solidarity with those suffering environmental injustice can be to reduce one’s consumption, especially of materials that require the use of toxic chemicals for their production. Voluntary simplicity is an expression of the virtue of temperance.

Fortitude, or bravery, is more commonly described as courage. The vocation of working for environmental justice – or any environmental initiative -- challenges us to develop a habit of hope. The information scientists report about the state of the world can be truly frightening, and this can in turn paralyze us with fear. We can readily feel that we are powerless to make a positive change. Virtue ethics challenge us to move beyond our negative feelings and focus on what kind of person we want to be, what kind of character will help us live out our commitments. This kind of hope, rooted in our habit of mind and heart, is precisely what we need to bring to situations where environmental injustices are being perpetrated. Courage can give us the perseverance to struggle for justice in the face of discouragement.

How do we form other people in other kinds of virtues? Especially those who do not agree with our environmental values? It is not enough to simply throw ideas or values at other people. Virtues can provide the basis for engaging those who think differently, who do not perceive issues of environmental degradation in the same way. The virtues described above are not restricted to Catholic ethicists, but in various forms, have broad appeal.

Virtue ethics is inclined toward action. Virtue ethics suggests that ideas alone do not suffice for ethics. The person who has virtue feels a responsibility to act, and that one’s character is strengthened by expressing, however tentatively, virtue in action. The ethical life to be consistent requires action, requires engagement; it demands commitment, and virtues can guide us on this journey.