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Taking the Sting Out of Environmental Virtue Ethics

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Time is running out for us
But you just move the hands upon the clock

—Thom Yorke, “The Clock”

The headlines are dire. The end of the world is near. Our planet is headed for environmental destruction. Like many, you feel a duty to repair the damage we have done—even as you head out the door, bottled water in hand, hop in the car, stop at the filling station, drive to Lollapalooza, and catch Radiohead live in Grant Park.

If you see the contradiction—if, say, while driving to the show, you wonder about the car, the bottled water, the long, hot shower you took last night, and the acres of trash and tons of pollution that went into making all this possible—you might panic at the thought of your own hypocrisy. That’s what Radiohead seemed to do after they learned that their album *Hail to the Thief*—the CDs, the travelling of the band members, and especially the fans driving to the venues—put nearly eight tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. That’s roughly the amount 1,400 cars would emit in a year. To offset and reabsorb that amount, some fifty thousand trees would have to be planted and maintained for a hundred years (if there’s that much time left).

The band’s response, it turns out, was fairly progressive—not only environmentally, but also philosophically. For environmental ethics has lately become less preoccupied with specific environ-