



9 | Contemporary environmental ethics

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This extract is from the first half of a paper outlining four debates surfacing 'intrinsic value of nature' as being an important matter in environmental ethics. Whereas 'conversation' (as understood in Reading 8) can leave space for 'creative responsibility', debates are centred more around competition between two opposing (human) positions. As Andrew Light acknowledges, whilst these debates can at times be debilitating, they might also be mobilized for a better course of action towards a more publicly engaged model of applied philosophy. In the second half of the paper, Light goes on to present a model based upon environmental pragmatism. The general attributes of environmental pragmatism are discussed a little more critically in Reading 13. But issues around valuing nature are nevertheless important to appreciate in pursuing any model or endeavour of environmental responsibility.

§ Since the inception of environmental ethics in the early 1970s, the principal question that has occupied the time of most philosophers working in the field is how the value of nature could best be described such that nature is directly morally considerable, in and of itself, rather than only indirectly morally considerable, because it is appreciated or needed by humans. Nature might be indirectly morally considerable because it is the source of things that humans need, such as natural resources used to provide the foundations for building and sustaining human communities. Nature might be directly morally considerable if it possesses some kind of value (for example, some kind of intrinsic value or inherent worth) demonstrable through a subjective or objective metaethical position. If nature is the sort of thing that is directly morally considerable, then our duties – for example, to preserve some natural park from development – would not be contingent on articulating some value that the park has for humans but would instead be grounded in a claim that the park has some kind of value that necessarily warrants our protection (for example, because it is a wild place or because it is the home of endangered species) without needing further appeal. [...]



The metaethical debates of environmental ethics

There are many ways to parse out the various metaethical and metaphysical schools of thought that have shaped the development of contemporary environmental ethics. My preference is to track this development in terms of a series of debates, with the first and most important one involving the rejection of anthropocentrism. Tim Hayward defines ethical anthropocentrism as the view that prioritizes those attitudes, values, or practices that give 'exclusive or arbitrarily preferential consideration to human interests as opposed to the interests of other beings' or the environment (1997, 51). [...]

[T]he notion of what anthropocentrism meant, and in consequence what overcoming anthropocentrism entailed, often relied on very narrow, straw-man definitions of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism was equated with forms of valuation that easily, or even necessarily, led to nature's destruction (rather than anthropocentric values, such as aesthetic values, which might count as reasons to preserve nature). Therefore, a corollary assumption of this dogma has been that even a limited endorsement of anthropocentric forms of valuation of nature would necessarily give credence to those anthropocentric values that prefer development over preservation.

[...] [T]he first divide among environmental ethicists is between those who accept the rejection of anthropocentrism as a necessary prerequisite for establishing a unique field of environmental ethics and those who do not accept this position, arguing that 'weaker' forms of anthropocentrism (for example, those that admit humanly based values to nature other than mere resource value) are sufficient to generate an adequate ethic of the environment (see Norton 1984). But even the general picture of this divide is more complicated. If environmental ethics was to start with a rejection of anthropocentrism, then the next step was to come up with a description of the value of nonhumans, or the nonhuman natural world, in nonanthropocentric terms. The preferred description of this form of value has generally been as some form of intrinsic value, thought to mean that nonhumans or ecosystems possessed some sort of value in and of themselves (as opposed to only possessing instrumental value to the achievement of human ends). Nonanthropocentrists have long argued that anthropocentrism cannot justify a basis for the intrinsic value of nature and so should be rejected (see Callicott 1996). [...]

[T]he debate between anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists in environmental ethics has long been entwined with debates over the validity of ascribing intrinsic value either to nonhuman animals or to species or ecosystems.



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If we are to persist with some form of nonanthropocentrism, the next relevant question becomes how to define the scope and limits of our descriptions of the intrinsic (or at least noninstrumental) value of nature. [...] [A] new debate very quickly emerged between 'individualists' and 'holists,' or 'sentientists' and 'holists,' which wound up largely excluding animal liberationists [such as Peter Singer 1974] from the domain of environmental ethics.

Individualists are those who argue that the extension of moral consideration beyond humans should be limited to other individuals, namely, those individuals who could be argued to have interests, or in the case of sentientists, were sentient, such as other animals. Primarily these arguments, no matter what their normative foundations (for example, consequentialist, nonconsequentialist, or virtue based), result in moral arguments for vegetarianism and against industrial animal agriculture, arguments questioning scientific experimentation on animals (especially of the more frivolous variety, such as for testing cosmetics), and sometimes arguments against hunting.

Holists argue in contrast that individualism or sentientism is inadequate for an environmental ethic because it fails to offer directly reasons for the moral consideration of ecosystems, wilderness, and endangered species – all top priorities for the environmental movement. Because conservationists and environmental scientists evaluate the workings of nature at the ecosystemic level (without much worry about the welfare of individuals so long as a species is not in danger), an ethic covering the same ground should also try to describe the value of nature and the priorities for preservation at the same level sometimes without regard for the welfare of individuals. At times, it is argued, the ends of individualism and holism conflict, as in the case of therapeutic hunting, where holists have maintained that killing individual members of a nonendangered species is justified whenever the numbers of that species produce a threat to endangered species or fragile ecosystems.

The debate between individualists and holists has evolved similarly to the debates between anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists. For example, sentientists argue that there is no clear defensible grounds for describing the noninstrumental value of nature per se without appeal to things in nature that can be considered to have interests, such as animals. Thus, trees, rocks, and whole ecosystems cannot be directly morally considerable, even though it is arguably the case that the health and welfare of whole systems and of endangered species could be covered indirectly by some combination of concern for the interests of nonhumans and of future human generations. Other individualists, most notably Tom



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Regan (1983), one of the leading deontologists working on animal rights, have gone on to press harder still, arguing that holism entails a form of 'environmental fascism,' whereby the strong likelihood is raised that the welfare of individuals will often, if not always, be sacrificed to the needs of the greater biotic good

Somewhat in between these two camps are biocentric individualists, such as Paul Taylor and Gary Varner, who have pushed the boundaries of individualism beyond sentientism, arguing for a coherent individualism extended to cover the value of the capacity for flourishing of nonsentient organisms. For Taylor there is broadly speaking a sense in which all natural entities flourish, and so what is good or bad for them is a matter of what is good or bad for this flourishing, a claim that is not dependent on human interests. This expansion of individualism in part helps to bridge the gap between holists and individualists, even though biocentric individualists are adamant that holism in itself must be rejected. Not all interests among all living individual things are granted equal status on such views, with various arguments put forward for which some interests count more than others (for example, the interests of individuals capable of desires might be considered more important than those of individuals not capable of desires).

Nonetheless, despite such compromising positions, holists, such as J. Baird Callicott (especially Callicott 1980) and Holmes Rolston III, have prevailed in staking a claim for environmental ethics in some form of holism, most forcefully by recourse to the argument that many forms of individualism encounter problems in their plausible extension to species and ecosystems. [...]

Among holists there are still further debates, though not so much over the proper scope of environmental ethics. These debates largely cut along the lines of whether a case for the noninstrumental or intrinsic value of nature can best be made on subjectivist or on objectivist grounds. Leading subjectivists include Robert Elliot (1997) and Callicott, the latter best known for developing a Humean, and what he refers to as a 'communitarian,' line of reasoning out of the work of the forester and conservationist Aldo Leopold. Leopold is best known for his 1949 posthumously published memoir, *A Sand County Almanac*, in which he developed a holist 'land ethic' (see Callicott 1989 and 1999).

For Callicott, while value for him is subjective (as value is always a verb and can only be engaged in by those beings with the capacity to value, namely, humans, though perhaps some nonhumans as well), there are things in the world that can be subjectively considered to be intrinsically valuable (valued by a valuer for their own sake) through an



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evolutionary extension of what counts as inclusively important among a community of valuers. In the past what has been considered valuable for us has been restricted to other members of the human community (which has progressed from the empathetic bonds of the family to the clan to the tribe to the town, and so forth); the next progression of this evolution should be to consideration of nonhumans and ecosystems as similarly valuable. In Leopold's words, the next evolution of ethics should be to human-land relations. For Callicott, sorting out conflicts in value among competing demands from different communities that warrant our attention (for example, duties to our immediate families versus duties to ecosystems) requires adopting two second-order principles, ranking as higher our obligations to more intimate communities (such as our families in many cases) and to 'stronger interests' (such as duties to the preservation of endangered species).

In contrast, Rolston (see Rolston 1988, 1989, and 1994) argues that intrinsic values in nature are objective properties of the world. He does not claim that individual animals are unimportant (though he does not have strong qualms against the production and consumption of other animals; indeed, he even claims that meat eating is necessary to maintain our identity as a species). Rolston takes a position that is, initially at least, compatible with some form of individualism, arguing, similarly to Taylor, that every living organism has a *telos* from which we may derive a baseline form of intrinsic value. But different characteristics, such as the capacity for conscious reflection, add value to each organism. Along with this scheme of value he also offers arguments for the intrinsic value of species as well as ecosystems. For Rolston, there is a conceptual confusion involved in the claim that we could value individual organisms without valuing the larger wholes that produced them through evolutionary processes.

A further debate, brought on by the scope of holism, has evolved over the question of whether preservation of the environment should be grounded in a monistic foundation or whether a coherent ethical view of it can tolerate pluralism. Monists in environmental ethics generally argue that a single scheme of valuation is required to anchor our various duties and obligations in an environmental ethic (see, for example, Callicott 1990). This would mean that one ethical framework would have to cover the range of diverse objects of moral concern included under holism: other humans, other animals, living organisms, ecosystems, species, and perhaps even Earth itself. Such a view would have the advantage of generating a cleaner methodology for resolving disputes over conflicting obligations to and among these objects – itself a very worrisome problem,



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as an environmental ethic has a mandate covering many more competing claims for moral consideration than a traditional ethic.

Pluralists counter that it cannot be the case that we could have one ethical theory that covered this range of objects, either because the sources of value in nature are too diverse to account for in any single theory or because the multitude of contexts in which we find ourselves in different kinds of ethical relationships with both humans and nature demand a plurality of approaches for fulfilling our moral obligations (see, for example, Brennan 1988 and 1992). Accordingly, for Andrew Brennan, there is 'no one set of principles concerning just one form of value that provides ultimate government for our actions' (1992, 6). Such claims lead Callicott to charge pluralists with moral relativism.

While less a dogma than nonanthropocentrism and holism, argument over moral monism continues to push the evolution of the field, particularly over the issue of the relationship between theory and practice in environmental ethics. The debate over pluralism raises the question of how appeals concerning the welfare of the environment cohere with other issues in moral philosophy in particular situations. Many, if not most, cases of potential harm to the value of ecosystems are also cases of moral harm to human communities, which can be objected to for independent anthropocentric moral reasons. The literature on 'environmental justice,' the concern that minority communities often bear a disproportionate burden of environmental harms, such as exposure to toxic waste, is based on linking concerns about human health and well-being to environmental protection (see Schlosberg 1999). A truly pluralist environmental ethic would not be terribly concerned with whether the claims of harm to the interests of a minority community by the siting of a toxic-waste dump could or could not be based on the same scheme of value that would describe the harm done to the ecosystem by the dump. A pluralist ethic would be open to describing the harm to the ecosystem and to the human community in different though compatible terms for purposes of forming a broader coalition for fighting the dump (see Light 2002).

To conclude this section, a key set of debates – anthropocentrism versus nonanthropocentrism, individualism versus holism, subjective versus objective holism, and monism versus pluralism – have largely shaped the development of contemporary environmental ethics. At a minimum, the field is most clearly defined, though not always adequately defended, through its rejection of anthropocentrism and its commitment to holism. But the portrayal here of the varieties of this exchange has been far from complete. Consistent with the connection to broader questions in social and moral philosophy raised by the monism–pluralism debate,



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an extensive literature has developed connecting environmental ethics to feminism (for an overview of ecofeminism see Davion 2001), as have more restricted literatures on humanism (Brennan 1988), virtue theory (O'Neill 1993; Welchman 1999), pragmatism (Light and Katz 1996), communitarianism (de-Shalit 2000), and more nuanced understandings of human self-interest (Hayward 1998). All of these alternative directions in the field have presented new challenges in metaethics and normative ethics, but they have also done something more. In their own ways they have all moved beyond the more abstract questions of the metaethical debates concerning nonanthropocentric intrinsic value in nature to provide, in John O'Neill's words, 'more specific reason-giving concepts and corresponding claims about the ways in which natural objects are a source of wonder, the sense of proportion they invoke in us of our place within a wider history' (2001, 174). [...]

Nonanthropocentrism and environmental policy

With this variety of views in the field, how should environmental ethics proceed? One answer would be that it will simply proceed, whether it should or not, as a new set of debates between the more traditional nonanthropocentric views and the biocentric, anthropocentric, or other alternative views briefly mentioned at the end of the previous section. Many anthropocentric environmental ethicists seem determined to do just that (see Norton 1995 and Callicott 1996). There is, however, an alternative: in addition to continuing the tradition of most environmental ethics as philosophical sparring among philosophers, we could turn our attention to the question of how the work of environmental ethicists could be made more useful in taking on the environmental problems to which environmental ethics is addressed as those problems are undertaken in policy terms. The problems with contemporary environmental ethics are arguably more practical than philosophical, or at least their resolution in more practical terms is more important than their resolution in philosophical terms at the present time. For even though there are several dissenters from the dominant traditions in environmental ethics, the more important consideration is the fact that the world of natural-resource management (in which environmental ethicists should hope to have some influence, in the same way that medical ethicists have worked for influence over the medical professions) takes a predominantly anthropocentric approach to assessing natural value, as do most other humans. [...] Environmental ethics appears more concerned with overcoming human interests than redirecting them toward environmental concerns. As a consequence, a nonanthropocentric form of ethics has



limited appeal to such an audience, even if it were true that this literature provides the best reasons for why nature has value (de-Shalit 2000). And not to appeal to such an audience arguably means that we are not having an effect either on the formation of better environmental policies or on the project of engendering public support for them. As such, I would argue, environmental ethics is not living up to its promise as a field of philosophy attempting to help resolve environmental problems. It is instead evolving mostly as a field of intramural philosophical debate. [...]

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