

Chapter 21

Environmental Ethics

21.1 Homework

Readings : Momaday, Rolston

Study Questions – give a short answer to the following questions:

- On Momaday
 1. How do you understand the idea that “the Native American ethic with respect to the physical world is a matter of reciprocal appropriation”? Why does Momaday say that it suggests a paradox?
 2. How do you understand the notion of appropriateness as explained by Momaday?
 3. Momaday usually explains himself through the telling of stories, not definitions and argument. Which idea(s) does this method mirror in the Native American Tradition as described in the text?
- On Rolston
 1. Why does Rolston think that the rise of environmental ethics implies questioning the old distinction between is and ought?
 2. How does Rolston criticize the view that we have moral duty toward sentient beings only?
 3. According to Rolston, how much weight should have humans, animals, plants, species and ecosystems in our moral assessments? Is there a hierarchy between these?

21.2 The Problem: Does Nature have Value?

Examples – Do you think the following activities are wrong? Why? Why not?

- Kill wolves/bears which are killing sheep?

- Exterminate rats, spiders, mosquitoes in your house / weeds in your yard?
- Destroy the rainforest
- Drive-through sequoia for entertainment
- Burn out of butterflies in hummocks for money

The naturalistic fallacy :

- Distinction between IS and OUGHT, between *descriptive* accounts of what is, and *normative* accounts of what ought to be.
- The naturalistic fallacy consists in trying to ground a normative account – a theory about what ought to be done – on a descriptive account – about the way things are. The problem is that one cannot derive what ought to be done from what is, simply because what is has no intrinsic value. To put it bluntly: it is not because things are the way they are that they also ought to be this way.
- Examples:
 1. “This is good for you because it is natural” – nature does not seem to be good or bad by itself. Certainly, being natural is no guarantee of goodness: diseases, viruses, death are all natural...
 2. “We ought to let nature follow its course” – If that’s true, why do you ever call the doctor? Why do we try to bring clean water to dying kids in the desert?

→ *The point is: nature, by itself, does not seem to have any value. As humans, we can choose to give some value to nature , but in order to do so, we need to provide a justification better than: “it is natural” (one could appeal to religious reasons for example: nature is God’s creation, which is only one type of justification). .*

21.3 Anthropocentric Environmental Ethics

Human-centered approaches – Literaly, anthropocentric means human (anthropos) - centered.

- As the name suggests, anthropocentric environmental ethics justifies our duties to the environment solely in focussing on humans.

Definition 30 *Anthropocentric environmental ethics is the view on environmental ethics which justifies our moral duties towards the environment in terms of the benefits for present and future human beings.*

- The most common standpoint here is the *utilitarian* one. Humanity’s survival depends on the environment. We need clean air, clean water etc. Given that these resources are limited, it is our moral duty to preserve them.

- In particular, we have a duty towards the future generations. Indeed, remember that utilitarianism judges an action in terms of the welfare of *everybody concerned*. Now, clearly, our kids and grandkids' should be part of our consideration of how we treat the environment.

- Typically, anthropocentric environmental ethics is concerned with preservation of the resources that are important for humanity as a whole.

An Example for Climate change – Stern report, released 10/30/2006

Stern is a reputed British economist who delivered a 700 page report to the British government about climate change and global warming.

His argument is that we are two options:

1. Either we spend 1 to 2% of our gross domestic product (GDP) on climate change now
2. Or, we should expect a grave economy crisis, and have our GDP lowered by 20% in a few decades

His conclusion: the best benefit for humanity is to avoid an economic disaster, which justifies that we ought to take serious action against climate change.

→ *In anthropocentric approaches, nothing is said about our duty to respect and protect nature and the environment because of their intrinsic value. There is no intrinsic value of nature and the environment. Rather, the argument is utilitarian in spirit: the justification for action is in terms of the benefits for humanity.*

The Problem :

According to anthropocentric environmental ethics, nature and the environment have value *only is so far as they are beneficial to humans*. They have no value in themselves. This implies that:

- if there is no benefit or harm for humans, there is no value – example of deep fishing
- if humanity benefits from destruction of the environment, then destruction is justified – drilling in the West, killing wolves and bears because they kill sheep

In our examples: The rainforest should be protected. The giant sequoia, the butterflies in Africa, the rats and weeds, and the bears and wolves should not, for the sake of the benefits for humanity.

→ *Many of the public discussions and public decisions are still following exactly this scheme. That said, recent trends of environmental ethics all criticize human-centered, or anthropocentric approaches precisely for being too human-centered: what does justify the idea that the welfare of human beings be our exclusive concern when making moral decisions?*

21.4 Expanded Utilitarianism

Singer's expansion of the circle – You remember Peter Singer (we talk about him when we studied World Hunger and Animal Rights)

- Singer reject speciesism, i.e. the idea that our species should be given moral consideration while not the other species
- He extends the right to moral consideration to *all sentient beings*, because sentient beings have *interests*, can feel pain, pleasure, happiness or dismay.
- This implies that our ought to take into account the interests and welfare of all sentient beings concerned when making a moral decision
- This of course has implication for environmental ethics: we need to take into consideration the benefits not for humanity only, but for all sentient beings concerned instead.
- In our examples: the rainforest should be protected (not only for us), the butterflies should not be killed, the rats and spiders, the bears and wolves are not immediately threatened (weighing the pros and cons is necessary here).

That said, the weed and sequoia do not have our moral consideration.

Problems : Rolston criticizes expanded utilitarianism on three levels:

1. Against the focus on sentience: the sequoia should be protected – it has a right to life by itself, which should be respected.
2. Against Equality: Rolston claims there is need for discriminatory ethics, in the light of the true valuational differences between species that count morally (430). 300 bighorns died of pinkeye. Considered better for the species not to cure them.
3. Against the focus on suffering: The Problem of the bison in Yellowstone in the ice: consideration of suffering is not enough: “To treat wild animals with compassion learned in culture does not appreciate their wildness” (430)

The point is less to treat animals humanely than to treat them naturally. The dangers associated with wildlife is part of the natural life of the bison.

—→ *Expanded Utilitarianism suggests that we extend our moral consideration to all sentient being. Rolston claims that this move is both too small and profoundly misguided. He argues that (1) the circle of moral consideration should be further expanded (see next section), and (2) that the utilitarian framework, with its equality and concern for pain only, is inadequate for environmental ethics.*

What does he propose instead?

21.5 Giving Nature Absolute Value – Deep Ecology

Rolston: “We need an account of how nature carries value, and an ethics that appropriately respects those values.”

Expanding the circle – Rolston: the circle must be expanded not only to animals but also to:

1. *Any living beings* – because they are evaluative systems
 - Claim: living beings have ends, goals, and thrive to achieve it – the acorn becomes an oak.
 - Rolston claims that this amounts to being an evaluative system:

“The organism has something it is conserving, something for which it is standing: its life. Organisms have their own standards, fit into their niche though they must.” (433)
 - Of course, the acorn is not a moral agent. The acorn does not make choices, does not have free will. But this is besides the point.
 - The point is that, as moral agents, we should take into account the amoral norms of all evaluative systems:
 - Any evaluative system has a (amoral) good of its kind
 - Unless proven otherwise, this good is good in the moral sense as well
2. *Species* – biological identity and self-defense
 - Rolston claims that a species has a goal (a telos), and that this goal has to be taken into account in our morality:

“Processes of value that we earlier found in an organic individual reappear at the specific level: defending a particular form of life, pursuing a pathway through the world, resisting death (extinction), regeneration maintaining a normative identity over time, creative resilience discovering survival skills.” (436)
3. *Ecosystems* – a system that shapes the form of life of its members (439):
 - Rolston hopes to develop a notion of community which is not mere aggregation: the community is more than that.
 - Rolston claims that the ecosystem has a retro-effect on its members. This effect has a direction, is goal-oriented. Hence, says Rolston, the ecosystem has to be taken into account in our morality.

“Duties arise in an encounter with the system that projects and protect these members components in biotic community” (440)

Around the naturalistic fallacy – Here is how Rolston suggests he can get around the criticism of naturalistic fallacy:

- He admits that neither animals, nor plants, nor species, nor ecosystems have a value in and of themselves,
- That said, he claims that this does not prevent them from *being value-able*, i.e. from being *able* to receive value.
- He admits that humans are the only one able to *give* value.
- That said, he claims that this does not implies that value *depends* on humans.

This last point might be a little tricky. Let's try to understand:

- Analogy: only humans can show that mathematical theorems are true, this does not mean that the truth of mathematical theorems depends on humans

Mathematical theorems are true independently of humans and nature is valuable independently of humans, even if in both cases, only humans, equipped with rational and moral abilities, can discover this truth or this value.

- Rolston claims that for nature, we discover the ought as soon as we discover the is.

The value of nature: what is is what ought to be :

Rolston appeals to a *conservative environmental ethics*: because we attribute value to nature for what it is, we are morally compelled to preserve it as it is.

The problems with Deep Ecology – This is probably not sufficient as a foundation of ethics. Several difficulties arise.

1. What to respect? – How to decide which is to be acted upon, which is to be left to its natural fate?

- There are some “easy” cases: grizzlies saved vs bison let alone? – because men are responsible for a too rapid extinction.

- But there are case that are much more tricky:

- Consider Rolston's argument for letting the bison die: wildlife equals danger equals possibility of death. Consider now what Rolston says about species: in this case, he considers that species must be protected no matter what. Could not we have to same argument about a species as we had about the bison? Isn't it natural for a wild species to go extinct? Why should not we respect a species' wildness?

So: which aspect of nature ought we to respect? Just life? Wilderness? Diversity?

2. How can we “preserve nature the way it is” –

1- Does it even make sense, that we ought to intervene in order to let nature be what it is? Is not there a plain contradiction here?

2- Nature is dynamic: some changes are natural, and it is not clear which one we ought to let go, and which one we ought to stop

3. The problem of hierarchization :

Rolston p. 435 “I doubt whether the good of humans who wish more water for development, both for industry and for bluegrass lawns, warrants endangering species of butterflies and cranes”

What about constructing a dam so that a village gets water for survival?

What about attempts at destroying bacteria? viruses?

Between species and individuals: let individuals suffer and die for the sake of the species?

4. Infinitely complex relationships – Consider the case of forest fires: aspen, conifers, elks, eagles and beavers.

It is not clear how to assess the moral value of the possible actions, given the entangled web of relationships.

Conclusion on Deep Ecology :

We can summarize the main tenets of deep ecology:

1. Biocentrism and/or ecocentrism: deep ecology rejects Anthropocentrism, advocates biocentrism or ecocentrism, i.e. life and ecosystems should be given value for what they are
2. Conservatism: Our moral duty consists in *preserving the environment as it is*. What is ought to be.

It seems important that we find a way to justify the protection of the environment which is not human-centered. This seems like a good trend in environmental ethics. As it stands, it faces a great deal of difficulties. As we have seen above, it is really unclear how the decisions are to be made: the idea that we should take action in order to preserve nature as it is is not sufficient as a guideline. Refinement is needed: off to work!

If you are interested and more to know more about environmental ethics:

- you can read the article on Environmental Ethics in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (free online)
- you can take a entire class on environmental ethics here at the University of Montana
- note that we even have a master in philosophy with an emphasis on environmental philosophy!