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FINDING A FUTURE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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In its roughly 40 year history, an ample number of gems of individual work in environmental ethics have emerged which have expanded our understanding of the moral responsibilities humans may have to non-human natural entities. But in that same time, with a few noteworthy exceptions, the field as a whole has largely failed to capture the attention of the broader philosophical world, and, more surprisingly, its counterpart non-philosophical disciplines such as natural resource management, forestry or ocean science.

This essay will identify two tendencies in the field that have led to this state of affairs and stand in the way of a more productive future for environmental ethics. The first tendency is the insistence that an adequate account of natural value requires the formulation of an entirely new form of ethics. The second tendency is found in the assumption that the proper aspiration of environmental ethics is nothing less than to fundamentally change human worldviews.

1. THEORETICAL OVERREACH

While the roots of environmental ethics as an academic discipline are much older, we can date its origins to the early 1970s when philosophers such as Arne Naess and Richard Routley (later Sylvan) published some of their first articles arguing that traditional conceptions of ethics and values in relation to the non-human natural environment were in need of radical rethinking (see Naess 1973 and Routley 1973)[1]. By "environment" here, they primarily meant non-human natural collective entities such as species and ecosystems, as opposed to individual animals. Questions about the moral status of individual animals inspired the evolution of the parallel literature in animal ethics led at about the same time by philosophers such as Tom Reagan and Peter Singer[2].

Naess and Routley, and following closely on their heels figures such as Robin Attfield, Andrew Brennan, J. Baird Callicott, Val Plumwood, Holmes Rolston III, and Karen Warren, had in common two principle concerns: 1) Most conceptions of natural value tended to reduce it to instrumental economic value and, as such, 2) These conceptions were anthropocentric and so did not consider the idea that nature has value in and of itself that should be respected by humans. All of these figures, and many others since, have proposed different ideas about how to build a positive philosophical account that nature has some kind of value deserving of direct moral consideration. The details of their accounts need not concern us at the moment.

What was common in most of them however was that they generally argued, in opposition to the dominant understanding of natural value found, for example, in environmental policy, that nature has non-anthropocentric intrinsic (or inherent) value. The argument was that if we step away from looking at nature only from our human centered view of the world, and instead accept that things other than humans are the proper objects of moral consideration, then we can see that nature too has value independent of the instrumental ends to which it is used to advance human interests.

There have of course been strong minority views in environmental ethics that have grown louder and more influential over the years. In 1974 John Passmore published *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, arguing that there were in fact traditional anthropocentric schools of thought in the Western tradition that could be used to argue that humans have a moral responsibility to take better care of the Earth and its non-human inhabitants. While this book made little impact at the time of its publication on the emerging academic field, a decade later Bryan Norton (1984) began arguing for a form of anthropocentrism (which he has called variously "weak" or "broad" anthropocentrism) that could serve as a foundation for a robust environmental ethic rather than necessarily being antithetical to it. He followed later with a series of books greatly elaborating on this initial claim (see Norton 1987, 1991, and 2005) that a number of other figures in the field have joined.

However, what I want to note now is the predilection among the non-anthropocentrists, and a good number of the weak anthropocentrists, to insist that they needed to ground their accounts of the intrinsic value of nature in entirely new accounts of value theory. Sylvan's first paper in the field is titled "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" A core claim of the piece is that traditional ethical theories simply do not have the capacity to consider the claim that something like an ecosystem could be the proper subject of moral concern. In turn, most of the predominant non-anthropocentric accounts of natural value in the first two or three generations of thinkers in the field reject more traditional schools of moral theory. In this respect, most environmental ethics is "anti-extensionist," by which I mean that unlike many forms of applied ethics, it doesn't seek to extend one or another form of consequentialism, non-consequentialism, or virtue theory to a particular problem in the world.

I do not have the space here to go into a detailed examination of the merits of one or another of these theories but I have done so elsewhere (see for example Light 2002 and Light and de-Shalit 2003). Now I will only point out what a nearly impossible goal the field set out for itself in these early days. It's a difficult task, to put it mildly, to rigorously and successfully apply an established theory of ethics to a new realm of practical inquiry and then reflect back upon how that application can challenge one's theoretical starting point. But it's surely an even bigger challenge to invent an entirely new theory of value in order to better understand the moral qualities of the non-human natural world.

In this respect many of the self-described founders of the field reject the notion that what they are up to really is a form of applied philosophy. J. Baird Callicott, one of the founders of North American environmental ethics, put it this way: "Environmental philosophy has, for the most part, been pressing the envelope of theory, especially ethical theory. […] [B]ecause the whole of the Western tradition of moral philosophy has been resolutely (and often militantly) anthropocentric, environmental philosophers have been largely preoccupied with the more fundamental intellectual business of devising new, more nature-oriented and environment-friendly ethical theories than with the pedestrian work of applying off-the-rack ethical theories to moral problems in the environmental arena" (1999, 2-3).

I will return to this question of whether this trade-off, explicitly admitted to here, rejecting detailed investigation of actual environmental problems for an attempt to create a new basis for moral theory was worth it. The question now is whether the field has yet produced something like a successful new moral theory?

The most charitable answer is that it's too early to tell. From inside the field no single account has become dominant. From outside the field, according to figures like Callicott, environmental ethics "remains something of a pariah in the mainstream academic philosophical community" (*ibid*, 1).

A little over a decade later, I think Callicott is still correct though "pariah" seems an exaggeration. While he attributes this status to the anthropocentric prejudices of mainstream philosophy, I think the theoretical overreach of the field is more to blame.

By emphasizing the necessity of creating a new form of ethical theory, environmental ethicists have created a hurdle to accepting what to many is a clear and obvious point: Many if not all environmental problems have deep and abiding, even intrinsic moral dimensions. If one has to get to this point, for any given environmental problem, by first going through a fairly underdeveloped and questionable ethical theory, then it's no wonder that environmental ethics has not grabbed the attention of the rest of the discipline.

By contrast, consider two other closely related forms of applied philosophy: animal ethics and climate ethics[3]. Most of the major figures in both of these fields, in contrast to the non-anthropocentric tradition in environmental ethics, practice some kind of ethical extensionism, applying more established ethical theories to their area of inquiry.

For example, both Peter Singer and Dale Jamieson apply traditional forms of utilitarianism both to questions of animal welfare and climate change (see Singer 1990, 2004 and Jamieson 2003). For the most part, the major figures in both of these literatures have not insisted that a new theory of value is needed to fully describe the moral dimensions of our relationship with non-human animals, on

the one hand, or our moral duties to respond to climate change, on the other. And unlike the core of environmental ethics some of the most important mainstream academic philosophers of our time have become active participants in the literature on animals and climate change and certainly do not treat these fields as pariahs (see for example, MacIntyre 1999, Nussbaum, 2007, O'Neil 1998, and Parfit 1983).

Many explanations could be given for why these figures — more known for their work in ethical theory — have worked on animals and climate but have not turned with such vigor to the moral status of species or ecosystems. It could very well be that the dominant ethical theories that have emerged over the last couple thousand years simply are not up to the task of understanding the moral status of such collective entities other than to reject the prospect that they do have such status. But as Norton and others have amply demonstrated, one need not embrace a new non-anthropocentric theory of natural value in order to either recognize the moral dimensions of environmental problems or indeed defend a robust account of why we may have obligations, at least to each other, to preserve and protect non-human collective entities. Absent a more compelling explanation, then at least part of the blame for why environmental ethics has not been very successful in gaining acceptance in the philosophical world in this case should be placed on the messenger.

2. ASPIRATIONAL OVERREACH

At the end of the day though the biggest problem is not that famous philosophers are not doing environmental ethics. A more important problem is that we don't generally find environmental ethicists present around the tables where the most important issues of environmental policy or regulation are being discussed and generally relegated only to a minor supporting role in interdisciplinary teams working on many specific environmental problems[4]. As I've written at length elsewhere about this disconnection between environmental ethics and environmental decision-making, I will not document this problem further here (see, for example, Light 2009 and 2011). In the last five years I have worked on the front lines of international climate and energy policy and have seen for myself the lack of a meaningful role for our field even when issues of ethics are actually being discussed.

Part of the problem here is the ubiquitous issue of the overwhelming relegation of philosophy itself to the ivory tower. But another part of the problem is surely connected to the theoretical overreach described above. Recall Callicott's claim, cited earlier, that environmental ethicists have simply been too busy with ethical theory to be involved in the actual application of ethical theories to environmental problems.

Another related issue confronts us here however; one that, arguably, further marginalizes environmental ethicists from other environmental professionals. Too many of us have assumed that the proper goals of our field are nothing less than

informing a fundamental transformation in human consciousness, connecting or reconnecting humans with the non-human world. This change in consciousness, worldview, or outlook would change all environmental priorities, no matter the particular issue. As a result, we have distanced ourselves from the arguably harder work of getting to know enough about particular environmental problems to offer assistance to those trying to solve them on the ground.

For example, in a discussion of the relationship between environmental ethics and environmental activism, Callicott explains away the lack of detailed work on environmental issues in the field by arguing that the most "lasting and effective" form of environmental activism that philosophers can engage in is simply philosophy itself. Reasons must always precede polices, according to Callicott, and the trajectory of core efforts in non-anthropocentric environmental ethics has been primarily aimed at creating better policies, insofar as it is "devoted to articulating and thus helping to effect […] a radical change in [environmental] outlook" (1995, 21).

More recently, in an otherwise admirable essay by Holmes Rolston on the future of environmental ethics, he argues that the role of the field should be to "persuade large numbers of persons" that an environment with wilderness, biodiversity and the like is a better world in which to live than one without these attributes (2010, 566). But when offering suggestions on how we environmental ethicists will accomplish this goal, like Callicott, he puts the task primarily in terms of "the elevation to ultimacy of an urgent world vision" (572). A vision that is accomplished by having people reflect on the life-creating properties of this "superb planet" we share with other species.

There's certainly nothing wrong with philosophers setting out for themselves the task of changing how people think about something. In essence, all kinds of philosophy share that core aspiration in common. But the assumption that a change in thinking will actually do the job needed now to resolve environmental problems is naïve, and represents a one-size-fits-all approach to the role philosophers could take in cooperative efforts to solve these problems.

For one thing, the time horizon assumed in this vision is completely at odds with what is currently needed on the environmental front. Changing global worldviews to the extent that they change policies and actions is a millennial project. But the biggest challenges we face on the environment now are immediate and pressing. For example, to avoid some of the worst scenarios for climate change in the future, climate scientists argue that we should peak global emissions this decade or else pursue alternative strategies to mitigate anthropogenic warming (Hansen, et. al. 2008). If philosophers want to be part of efforts to avoid catastrophic warming, then they must set aside their "long-range" aspirations, as Arne Naess described such efforts, and seek to influence the institutions that are, here and now, being formed to work on solutions. Otherwise, the world we are hoping to influence in the future will be a very different one than we might expect.

Second, it's highly improbable that articulation of a broad theoretical shift in outlook or vision is going to give us the answers we need to change conditions in the actual world. Even if people could become convinced that human needs and interests are not always more important than the conditions that make life sustainable for other entities in the world, the pull of competing needs always makes selecting the optimum moral choice difficult. Many environmental problems are collective action problems precisely because people do not realize that acting in their self-interest in fact undermines their welfare. A new non-anthropocentric vision will not necessarily give us any guidance on how to resolve all collective action problems because, depending on the issue at stake, they might be resolved in very different ways. In some cases humans can be persuaded to forego their short-term interests in exploiting a natural resource out of self-interest and in other cases, different conditions make such solutions unworkable[5]. A general plea that humans should think differently about the environment than they tend to do now will not help much when addressing a particular policy dilemma.

3. RENEWING ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

So what should be the future of environmental ethics? The best future would be one where more thinkers in the field stopped making the mistakes I've identified here. I would never argue that those interested in such "deeper" issues are not doing something philosophically interesting or even valuable. What needs to stop though is the presumption that these kinds of projects are really the core of our field rather than, as Callicott put it, the more "pedestrian" applied work.

Imperfect as it is, our best model would be to aspire to the success achieved by bioethics. Bioethicists are thoroughly integrated into the medical establishment at almost every level from education to professional, national, and international policymaking. The best bioethicists are experts in the particular questions they work on and are valued core members of interdisciplinary teams working on solutions to particular problems.

If anything, the progressive edge of the internal debates on the future of bioethics tends toward expanding through broader problems of public health and into the environmental realm. In a call to action for his field, bioethicist Jonathan Moreno argues for greater intellectual exchange between bioethics and environmental ethics to better equip bioethicists to respond to the extreme changes we are now seeing in the world (Moreno 2005). Some might demur that bioethics is now so far removed from the core of philosophy as to be a different field altogether. In some respects it is. Insofar as "geography is destiny" in the modern academy, it's noteworthy that the best bioethics units in North America stand alone or in medical schools. This trade-off seems entirely worth it to me insofar as it has helped to create the connection between these ethicists and their closest practitioner colleagues.

From my vantage point it looks like environmental ethics is headed more in this direction. The work of Ronald Sandler, for example, shows how much the field has changed of late. After publishing the first book length treatment on environmental virtue ethics (Sandler 2009), laying out a theoretical account which does not suffer from the problems I mentioned above, he is following it up with a new book which takes a very deep dive into the detailed work of conservation biologists working on assisted migration and other extreme measures for preserving endangered species (Sandler 2012).

But for every encouraging sign I see like this, another manuscript or book proposal gets sent over my transom, claiming to have discovered a new theory of intrinsic value that will solve all of our problems. A new, potentially more productive future for environmental ethics, waits beyond those efforts.

NOTES

1 Contemporary environmental aesthetics preceded environmental ethics, first appearing with Ronald Hepburn's work (1966) which reintroduce the environment into contemporary aesthetics at the time. I note this point insofar as today there are many ways in which environmental ethics and environmental aesthetics overlap, both in terms of value theory and attempts at practical application. Unfortunately, accounts of the origins of environmental philosophy as a whole neglect the fact that Hepburn's work came before the canonical papers of early environmental ethics. I expect part of this omission is that Hepburn's work does not compliment the claim that a correct assessment of the value of nature need be in terms of nonanthropocentric intrinsic value.

2 Again, the origins of work in animal ethics are much older than the emergence of the contemporary literature, and actually much deeper among canonical philosophers than work on the environment. I should also note that some have argued that this distinction between environmental and animal ethics is artificial – a point that I agree with – but it still persists to this day in the form of the distinction between so-called "individualists," and "holists" in environmental ethics. The former argue that moral considerability cannot be extended beyond individual entities which can be properly described as having direct interests of some sort, and the latter argue that the question of whether the environment, writ large, has moral status requires extending moral considerability beyond individuals which are more the proper subjects of the science of ecology.

3 I admit that it's question begging to label climate ethics as a separate kind of ethics from environmental ethics. I do not have time to fully justify this choice here but suffice to say for now that the core literature in environmental ethics evolved quite separately from work on climate and ethics. Many of the original leading figures on climate ethics are not considered to be environmental ethicists, such as Henry Shue, which may in part be for the reasons I explain below: they weren't trying to invent an entirely new form of ethics in order to discuss our responsibilities to respond to climate change. It is also noteworthy that it took decades before an article on climate change appeared in the journal *Environmental Ethics* and one still rarely sees them in that journal today.

4 This is a case where the exceptions prove the rule. Paul Thompson, one of the leading agricultural ethicists in the world today, has been vastly more effective at influencing public policy in large part because his deep knowledge of an array of agricultural issues has aided his acceptance by allied practitioners in the applied agricultural sciences. Like Singer, Regan, and others mentioned above in animal ethics, he generally does not pursue the kind of grand theory building projects I am criticizing here (see Thompson 2010).

5 It's also important to keep in mind that we may not really care, within certain constraints, whether people understand themselves to be doing the right thing with respect to a particular environmental problem but only that their actions cohere with a considered view of what needs to be done to solve a particular environmental problem. In fact, it's likely the case that given the complexity of environmental problems, and the huge numbers of people involved, it would be impossible for most agents to know that they were doing the right thing for the right reason. Elsewhere I have argued that the complexity of environmental problems may in some sense demand a very practical form of moral pluralism (Light 2003).

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