

THE ATROCITY PARADIGM APPLIED TO ENVIRONMENTAL EVILS

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Environmental ethicists have been remarkably reticent to use the word “evil” in describing ecological ills. This is not to say that we are somehow behind the curve in the wider world of philosophy. Claudia Card has rightly noted (2000, 9), “Until the past two decades, surprisingly few secular moral philosophers have attended specifically to the concept of evil.” Shortly thereafter she notes that her own list of atrocities “includes evils done to animals who are raised on factory farms and butchered in mass-production slaughterhouses,” and elsewhere she mentions that some might consider the widespread use of pesticides and nuclear power as evils (8,14). I take it as uncontroversial that we can identify ecological evils, at least on an intuitive level. I remember my shock at learning of the near-decimation of the buffalo of the American West, my creeping horror at being told every person on the earth stores trace amounts of DDT in their bodies, and the depression from reading a quote by someone who said merrily, in the nineteenth century, that hundreds of years of logging could not begin to deforest south central Wisconsin.¹

While I am persuaded both by the theory of evil advanced by Claudia Card in *The Atrocity Paradigm* and by the idea that there are evils done to the environment, I argue that the theory of evil she describes has difficulty

living up to her claim that it “can make sense of ecological evils the victims of which include trees and even ecosystems” (2002, 16). Nevertheless, I am interested in just that sense-making project, if only to better defend my conviction that we can inflict evils on ecosystems and nonhuman beings.

First, I outline Card’s account of evil, with emphasis on what she considers intolerable harm. I argue that it does not accommodate the kinds of harms inflicted on ecosystems and such nonhuman individuals as trees. I consider the argument that Card intends a much broader version of evils than the language of the atrocity paradigm lets on, with its attention to sentience and dignity. I’m so persuaded by the atrocity paradigm, however, that I retain the centrality of suffering and introduce the idea that atrocities are intuitively massive, that is, done to groups or generations and not an individual person, animal or tree, so that the paradigm encourages us to think of evil as it relates to far more holistic entities which include the sentient. I challenge the reader to think of an evil in which sentient beings are not bound up. Do we identify evils to oceans that are not evils to the animals within and the people dependent upon it? I suggest we bite the bullet and accept that evil does require the sort of suffering that only sentience can give rise to, which is not to say we let out trees but says rather that it is impossible to identify wrongs to ecosystems and groups that are not also intertwined with the fates of their sentient dependents. I conclude that Card is right to emphasize victims’ suffering as a chief component of evil, and that the ontology of what constitutes a victim must be interpreted broadly, not the notion of suffering.

Card defines evils as foreseeable intolerable harms that are produced by culpable human wrongdoing, and she takes atrocities as paradigms of evil (2002, 3,9). The idea of the intolerable gets considerable attention, and is meant to convey, according to her most basic account of it, harm that “deprives, or seriously risks depriving, others of the basics that are necessary to make a life possible,” including such things as food, water, air, sleep, affective ties with others, and freedom from prolonged pain (16). She intends ‘tolerable’ as a normative concept, and says, “A ‘tolerable’ life is at least minimally worth living for its own sake and from the standpoint of the being whose life it is” (16). Here she notes that “if we can meaningfully consider what is tolerable and decent for other forms of life and living systems in general,” then her theory “can make sense of ecological evils the victims of which include trees and even ecosystems” (16). Although she explicitly sets aside consideration of such questions in this work,

I am very interested in seeing if we can meaningfully consider what is tolerable for nonhumans and natural systems on this account, to see if the intuition that some ecological evils are atrocities is borne out by her theory as to what makes such instances evils.

Is it possible to meaningfully consider what is tolerable and decent for other forms of life and living systems in general? Many philosophers have, at least, articulated the basics necessary to make the life of nonhuman entities and systems possible, and here I'm thinking in particular of Martin Goodpaster's argument that we can know what such beings need; he establishes that such entities are morally considerable and have interests which we can reasonably consider, insofar as they have a welfare (Goodpaster 1978). Even a lawn, he notes, can signal that it is deprived of sufficient water. It is somewhat more difficult to say what basics are necessary for ecosystems to "live," but we can at least appeal to something like Aldo Leopold's idea that biotic pyramids have such qualities as stability and integrity, which we ought to foster (Leopold 1949). Such qualities are themselves the subject of debate among environmental ethicists. It is not clear how we are to define stability and integrity, but at least valuing the stability and integrity of such systems gives us a place to start in considering what is necessary to their persistence. If evils are the result of culpable human wrongdoing, we can imagine culpable actions which would disrupt the stability of such a system. Development and pollution of the Chesapeake Bay have rendered that biotic community unstable, and marine life cannot regenerate as fast as humans continue harvesting. In my former home state of Wisconsin, the construction of a springwater bottling plant was met with deep and wide grassroots opposition, in part out of concern that the integrity and continued persistence of the ecosystem would be compromised. The life of species like the buffalo is again a matter of some debate, and arguments as to what constitutes a recovered species abound, but we can at a minimum establish that their absolute extinction is not persistence! And even the status of a species as endangered implies a loss of what Leopold might consider stability; for example, if failures to breed a few pandas in captivity continue, the species may die out in my lifetime.

Although it may be possible to establish the basic necessities for the persistence of nonhuman systems and species, this does not yet establish that their lives are intolerable in the normative sense Card outlines. Card notes that in an earlier work she treated basic harms as themselves evils (2002, 17; 1996, 72–96). If Goodpaster, Leopold, and others are right that

nonhuman systems have basic needs for their persistence, then the lack of those basics would be a harm. But this does not capture the sense of intolerability conveyed by the atrocity paradigm. Card seems correct that tolerable life is “minimally worth living for its own sake and from the standpoint of the being whose life it is” (16), but I do not see yet how we can extend this idea to entities incapable of tolerating harm or having standpoints. Although Goodpaster’s lawn struggles along without water, this is not the same as saying it tolerates the intolerable; although the Chesapeake Bay seems doomed on many levels, it cannot have a life *worth* living from its standpoint, which presupposes some enjoyment of one’s own thriving.

Her normative notion of the tolerable is consistent with Card’s identifying as evils the harms inflicted on slaughterhouse animals capable of suffering their losses. It brings to mind the findings of zoologists that baby elephants die of loneliness if they lose their mothers or caregivers; such beings not only experience such loss as a basic harm, they are unable to bear it even though in other senses they could still live. The near-extirmination of the buffalo (or the panda) is more coherent on her account, if more indirect. One could argue that the harms which lead to the panda and the buffalo approaching extinction are also harms they suffer from, including loss of habitat, plentiful food and water, and affective ties with many of their own kind. It is not my project here to establish how species endangerment is a harm to the members of that species, itself an extensive philosophical project.² I think it safe to say that the types of losses animals suffer in the course of their species’ extinction are consistent with the types of losses Card identifies.

This still leaves me with evils such as rapid and careless deforestation and the pollution and abuse of whole ecosystems like the Chesapeake Bay. Against my argument that such an entity cannot have a life *worth* living from its standpoint, philosophers including Paul Taylor and Eric Katz argue that ecosystems have inherent worth, so that it is disrespectful and wrong to treat them with negligence, or as Card says, “as though their only, or even their most important, value were utilitarian” (2002, 82). I agree with the arguments for the inherent worth of such entities. This establishes that mistreating such entities is wrong. It does not establish that it is an evil, on the atrocity paradigm, and I wish to stay true to Card’s project of distinguishing evils from other wrongdoings. This wrongdoing seems less than evil given her attention to victims’ suffering, which she

gives priority of place in her theory of evil; according to Card, “suffering or harm” is “a necessary element, even the most outstanding element, of evil. Victims are not accidental to it” (4). It is not just any harm that will do on this account, and she persuasively argues that one of the shortcomings of Kantian accounts like Taylor’s is that in theory they do not adequately distinguish the severity of the harm done; instead, Kantian accounts locate such acts’ wrongness in the intent to treat as a thing an entity with inherent worth, and not the scale of the suffering that results. The atrocity paradigm encourages us to see evils as producing great suffering, not just for the direct victims but indirect victims, even into whole generations, and it is this strong sense of suffering that gets lost in talking about evils against systems and such individual entities as trees. Further, Card appeals to the idea that the intolerable is that which most people would not voluntarily undergo (17, 63). In discussing primarily human victims, Card indicates that extreme suffering or intolerable harm is that which the will cannot bear, or can only bear with difficulty.

It is inviting at this juncture to consider that her association of suffering with willing is merely the result of Card’s particular focus on human suffering, and if so one can interpret the idea of evil harm more broadly than I have so far. To do so we need to imagine substitutes for the victim’s standpoint or perspective, and for intolerability or suffering, which work for ecosystems and trees without letting in too much that is wrongdoing without evildoing. At the same time, I am interested in avoiding the hubris of some biocentric theories which argue for wide self-identification of one’s human interests with the interests of other or all natural things.³ One substitute for the victim’s standpoint is suggested by Christopher Stone, who argues that we could legally represent natural entities like trees and rivers, argue for reparations on their behalf when they are harmed, and arrive at a rough judgment of how much money and effort it would take to restore such objects to their condition before the harm (Stone 1974). This takes Goodpaster’s idea that trees and rivers have welfare or interests a step further, to include the idea that we can be their trustees and lay claims to better treatment on their behalf. While such guardianship could address many kinds of wrongdoing, perhaps one way to make sense of when these are evils is to see if reparations are even attainable. Card says of the atrocity paradigm, “the nature and severity of the harms . . . distinguish evils from ordinary wrongs” (2000, 3). When harms to rivers and trees are not repairable, for example, when no amount of money or time seems sufficient

to repair a toxic superfund site, or the money and time it would take is not available in less than one's lifetime, then we could argue we have something like Card's notion of severe harm at work. Card suggests we can distinguish degrees of evil by comparing the severity of harms, including their reversibility, possibilities of compensation, and duration; if so, I suppose we can distinguish between evil and non-evil wrong by similar methods (14). The intuitive sense that evils, especially atrocities, evoke shock and horror can be captured by the assessment that human wrongdoing to an ecosystem has resulted in irreversible harm beyond our monetary means to repair.

Although this line of reasoning has potential, it seems less convincing than does Card's account of evil as centrally including great suffering. Victims' perspectives that their sufferings are intolerable to them convey something more than does the monetary valuation of how much we can repair. And I can think of natural objects that will never be the same, yet whose irreversible human-wrought changes do not evoke shock or horror. Domesticated dogs will never be the animals their wolfy ancestors were, and to many this is wrong insofar as it results in human-bred dogs with traits that are not good for the dogs themselves. Yet some of us who find this wrong would be hard-pressed to say that the domestication of dogs is an evil, especially if the domestication of dogs was partly the result of dogs' own efforts to survive.⁴ The ecosystem which was disrupted by the growth of the city of Chicago would take a great deal to recover, and as reversing the damage would include reversing the flow of a tributary of the Mississippi, it may seem positively undesirable to pursue, even though the story of the original disruption is often a gruesome story of harm done to the land and the animals around it.

The aspect of the Stoneian solution above which seems most plausible is that of harm to natural objects which is so great that its cost makes us gasp with shock and horror. These reactions are usually in response to massive harm, and I wish to investigate what constitutes massive harm to natural entities to bear out that intuition. In light of Card's powerful argument for the centrality of suffering to her theory of evil, I suggest that we see harm to natural objects as massive or intolerable when they inevitably involve the kind of suffering that sentient beings experience. Such suffering is especially severe when it includes many victims, either now or in the future, perhaps to past victims, perhaps to future victims or indirect victims. Further, if we subscribe to a form of modified holism, and see our-

selves, nonhuman animals, trees and other natural objects as constituted in part by our relations, then we may find it easier to see the connections between human wrongdoing to ecosystems and the suffering that results for those beings that can or will suffer. Although in theory this may let out great wrongdoing against natural objects that does not affect beings capable of suffering, I would argue that in practice we cannot identify an evil against natural objects that does not affect the sentient, or at least those capable of a standpoint.

I am not arguing that the being with a standpoint, such as a gorilla, is the being that gives rise to the judgment that a wrong to his habitat is an evil. I am arguing, rather, that on the theory that we are selves-in-relation, constituted in part by our relations to other living things, the gorilla is not simply separable from his habitat. Therefore, what makes the rapid and violent encroachment of humans on the gorillas' habitat evil is the severe harm it does to such a large body of victims that inevitably includes the great suffering of some of its members. Even my schoolgirl sadness at the wanton destruction of Wisconsin's forests is the sense that humans undoubtedly meted out great harm at the time, and will inevitably suffer in the future as a result, and Leopold's research on the resulting environmental ills of deforestation bears out that intuition. For the same reason the stories of Western American Indian tribes, the buffalo, the settlement of the land, and the depletion of its water table are not easily separable stories. What causes us dismay is the thought that the thoughtlessness of such expansion gave rise to so much suffering and seems doomed to yield new and great harms in the future.

One could object that applied this way, the theory of evil so described will always consider the harm done to a sentient being more important than the harm done to the nonsentient. An even graver implication is that the suffering of the more sentient is always worse or more important than the suffering of the less sentient, which I'm anxious to avoid. These objections would only work, however, if I argued that degrees of severity of harm attach to degrees of sentience, and further, such objections still seem to presuppose a strongly individualistic view of the suffering being. First, I do not intend to imply that degrees of severity of harm attach to degrees of sentience. I intend only to take seriously Card's argument that wrongdoings are evils when harm is especially severe, and it is especially severe when the victims of such harms could be said to suffer intolerably. Such criteria give us a place to start distinguishing evils from other wrongdo-

ings, and as Card points out, this theory does not presume to advance a criteria for comparison between evils.

NOTES

1. It took forty years; see Kates (2001). For absorbing accounts of the endangerment of the buffalo, see Hornaday (2002) and for a more timely source, Isenberg (2001). The claim about the wide effects of DDT has enjoyed enormous debate which has yet to allay my concern; see Matteson (1998); see also Colborn, Dumanoski, and Myers (1997). For a passionately pro-DDT position see also the well-known Junk Science Home Page (Edwards 1999).
2. See, among others, Russow (1981); Rolston (1991); Feinberg (1974).
3. I'm attentive in this case to certain ecofeminist objections to those varieties of deep ecology in which the identification of one's (narrowly construed) self with the wider natural world leads one to see a wider Self as boundless and sharing the same interests. See Naess (1988); Devall and Sessions (1985).
4. Although the theory still enjoys some controversy, the debate is itself informative; see Coppinger and Coppinger (2001).

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