

"Is There a Need for a New Environmental Ethic?"

Richard Routley

old and prevailing ethics do deal with man's relationship to nature
but in that view the only moral obligation concerns the effects on other human beings
the sphere of moral consideration does not extend to non-human nature
Leopold's new "land ethic" challenges this view
Leopold seems to think that an extension of traditional morality is required
Routley is here arguing for something more radical, for a change in ethics

if one owns property, does one have the right to do whatever one wants to the land so long as it does not affect other human beings?
Leopold thinks that a farmer is subject to moral censure for the way the land is treated
is a new ethic required for such judgments or can the traditional ethical view evolve to make such judgments possible?

what is going to count as a new ethic?

two possibilities in merely extending prevailing ethics:

- 1) an extension or modification in prevailing ethics, development of principles already latent in the prevailing ethics
- 2) the framework of prevailing ethics is pretty open anyway...there isn't a single monolithic structure to prevailing ethics

three important traditions in Western ethical views concerning relationship to nature
(from John Passmore)

- 1) the dominant despotic tradition
 - 2) the stewardship position, with man as custodian of nature
 - 3) the co-operative position with man as the perfecter
- Routley adds to these, primitivism, romanticism, and mysticism

the dominant view is simply inconsistent with an environmental ethic
for man is free to do as he pleases
but perhaps an environmental ethic can be developed from the other positions
Routley argues here that both the stewardship and the co-operative tradition
are also inadequate because "they imply policies of complete interference, whereas on an environmental ethic some worthwhile parts of the earth's surface should be preserved from substantial human interference" (42)

thus Routley calls for a new environmental ethic
something not primitive, mystical or romantic

an ethical system is a structured set of principles which include:
a set of values
a set of general evaluative judgments
notions of rights

if an environmental ethic differs on some core principles
this would then be a new ethic

core principles of Western ethical systems
recent formulation of the Golden Rule principle:

The liberal philosophy of the Western world holds that one should be able to do what he wishes, providing (1) that he does not harm others and (2) that he is not likely to harm himself irreparably.

Routley refers to this as the principle of basic human chauvinism
under this principle humans come first and everything else last
there is also the problem of defining what exactly counts as harming others or oneself

any principle should make clear:
what is permissible in some ideal situation
what is obligatory in every ideal situation
what should be excluded from every ideal situation

assumes that ethical principles are universal

the last man thought experiment
if there were one human being left
would he have any obligations toward nature or is he free to do as he pleases?
the last people example
what if there were a last people
(radiation has killed everyone else and also prevented any further reproduction)
thus they do not have other peoples or future generations to be concerned with

Section 3

here Routley claims that an environmental ethic does not necessarily have to hold that natural objects such as trees have rights

considers consequences of Greatest Happiness principle
in either act-utilitarianism or rule-utilitarianism
problem is that this only considers greatest happiness of human beings
thus human interests can be the basis for deciding what is environmentally desirable
whether the blue whale survives should not have to depend on
what humans know or what they see on television

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why does Leopold's "land ethic" not count as a new ethic?
it seems Routley's only requirement for an environmental ethic is that it should expand the sphere of moral consideration to include non-human nature, doesn't the land ethic do this?

"Must a Concern for the Environment Be Centered on Human Beings?"
Bernard Williams

we have to move beyond a narrow anthropocentrism
but just what does this entail?

in one important sense the ethics regarding the environment
is a human concern
it is human beings who are asking the questions
the answers must be human answers
and thus they must be based on human values

he thus questions the notion of inherent values in nature

when we consider issues that directly concern human interests
this is often understood in economic terms
if the actions of A have a negative impact on B
the basic question is to determine whether B should be compensated
and how much, by whom, and on what principles

another range of questions concern the kind of affect
whether the effect on B involves B's states of perception or knowledge
as well as experiential effects

beyond this, there are the effects on non-humans
non-human effects and even non-animal effects
effects on trees or a mountain
(how might the concern for Mauna Kea be put?)

the effects on non-humans could, of course, also be detrimental to humans
but the human concern for non-human effects
is misrepresented if it is understood only as a kind of human self-concern

even if we are concerned about these non-human effects
and thus our concern is non-anthropocentric in some sense
they are still our attitudes, expressing our values

point about the experiences of non-humans
there are effects on the experiences of non-humans
but most of the concern in conservation concerns species not individual animals

a well-known kind of theory represents our attitudes as still radically anthropocentric
even when they are not directed exclusively to human interests
this type of theory still measures the badness of environmental effects
in terms of human experience
our dislike or distaste for what is happening

(are we concerned about the slaughter of dolphins in Japan because of the interests of the dolphins or because we find it distasteful?)

the problem with this approach is that it still reduces the whole problem to human consciousness of these effects

another approach extends the class of things we may be concerned about beyond ourselves and the sufferings of animals by supposing that non-animal things (trees and mountains) do have interests Williams does not think this approach will be very helpful to say that a thing has interests is to make a claim upon us not to violate that interest but if we extend interests in this way (to all non-human and non-animal things) there is no way to maintain that these interests would make a claim on us

(in what way would a tree, say a giant redwood, have an interest that makes a claim on us?)
it is difficult enough to account for how something can have interests that make a claim on us if that thing, a tree or a mountain, can have no experiences

Williams thinks a better approach is to look at our ideas of nature the idea of "raw" nature as opposed to culture

- 1) a concern for the preservation of nature is not nature but rather an expression of culture
- 2) the disappearance of species is itself natural
- 3) many of the things we want to preserve, landscapes and parks, are cultural products
- 4) cannot rule out that our "nature" is a predatory kind

notes a strange paradox that comes with trying to reject traditional picture of humans as somehow different from nature and then rely on an understanding of human beings as morally above the rest of nature such views only preserve the traditional doctrine of our transcendence of nature

thus the concept of "natural" is not going to be very helpful to guide our actions also finds the environmental concern to have a religious origin to be unhelpful

looks to the source of a concern for nature in humanity itself human beings have two basic kinds of emotional relations to nature gratitude and terror two kinds of feelings famously finding their place in art the beautiful and the sublime

a concern for the environment is rooted in a form of fear a Promethean fear of taking too lightly our relation with nature a sense of healthy respect for nature while we may also be moved in our values by the experience of the beautiful

it is the Promethean fear that reminds us that nature is beyond our control

ends with a reflection on two difficulties when we
recognize that our values regarding nature are rooted in this Promethean fear
the difficulty of assessing these values
ends up in the political arena

secondly, what many conservation interests want
is to preserve a nature that is not controlled by humans
the problem that anything we leave untouched we have already touched

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What would Williams' response to the "land ethic" be?
is the concern for maintaining the "integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic
community" rooted in this Promethean fear?
or is it that the biotic community has interests that makes demands upon us?

On Being Morally Considerable
Kenneth E. Goodpaster

Goodpaster argues that the only nonarbitrary position is to value all living things
including nonsentient living things such as trees and plants
because they are "self-sustaining," have "independent needs,"
and "capacities for benefit and harm"

begins with the important quote from Leopold

takes up a preliminary inquiry into the question
what are the requirements for having moral standing?

I

Kant's answer:
for X to deserve moral consideration from A, X must be a rational human person
as such a criterion eliminates children and mentally handicapped adults
it is too narrow

another answer is to say X must be a potential rational human person
but this is not why we say such human persons deserve moral consideration
it short it is arbitrary to draw the sphere of moral consideration
to include only rational human beings

Warnock locates the criterion of moral considerability in the capacity to suffer

cites W.K. Frankena and Peter Singer as holding a similar view
Goodpaster does not see what makes such a criterion necessary
he wants to extend the criteria beyond sentience

II

takes up Joel Feinberg's position
raises the issue of the difference between
having "rights" and having moral consideration
finds in Feinberg's discussion the clearest defense of sentience

Feinberg's thesis:

a thing cannot be said to possess moral rights (or moral consideration)
unless it satisfies the "interest principle"
a right holder must be capable of being represented
and it is impossible to represent something that has no interests

implicit are two arguments that he finds to be the best defense of the sentience criterion:

1) only beings who can be represented deserve moral consideration
2) only beings who have interests can be represented
therefore, only being who have interests deserve moral consideration

1) only beings capable of being beneficiaries can deserve moral consideration.
2) only beings who have interests are capable of being beneficiaries
therefore, only beings who have interests deserve moral consideration

will grant the first premise in each argument
but finds the 2nd to be equivocal

III

contests that these arguments do not acknowledge in non-sentient living beings
the presence of independent needs

thus Goodpaster defends a "life principle" rather than sentience
considers several objections to the life principle:

1) amounts to a mere Schweitzerian romanticism
in considering even microbes to be sentient
his response to this is that he is not advocating an extension of sentience to all of life
but rather identifying life and not sentience as the criterion of moral considerability

2) to suggest that all life has moral considerability
is to suggest that conscious, feeling beings have no more central role in moral life than
vegetables
his response is that one can still recognize differences of moral significance

3) there is no precise definition of life

his response is that this uncertainty doesn't make the criterion untenable

can still be room for debate about the definition of life

4) if life is the criterion then the principle could be extended to biosystem as a whole

his response is to accept that biosystems as a whole might be included

(this would seem to support the land ethic)

5) severe epistemological problems with imputing interests to nonsentient beings

what is it for a tree to have needs?

his response is that we make decisions in the interests of others all the time

6) the strongest challenge to the life principle: we couldn't live according to it

his response is that we can still make choices

emphasizing that all life has moral considerability

is asking for sensitivity and awareness, not suicide