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ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS - ETHICAL ECOSPHERE

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Fundamental Concerns

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that studies and evaluates human conduct in the light of moral principles, the latter conceived to be either innate matters of conscience or powers of discrimination acquired through experience. However derived, moral principles are normative, they concern what is right or wrong, good or bad. In general they guide conduct away from egoism toward altruism, from selfishness toward unselfishness, from insensitivity toward sympathy. Melden 1 observes that acting out of self-interest is not a moral reason, while Warnock 2 claims that the proper general object of morality is to expand our sympathies, so as to reduce the damage inherent in narrowness of knowledge and of limited interests.

Nevertheless ideas of self-interest, either egocentric or, by extension, ethnocentric or anthropocentric, underlie most ethical theories. The prudent utility of acting well — in the more or less disguised interest of the self, the society or the species — is the popular theme. Small wonder, when zealots in biology have convinced the general public that the world can be explained in terms of selfish genes and competitive species. Thus, Darwin's idea that ethics have evolved to facilitate social cohesion underlies and justifies Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic*, positing reproductive advantage for common thoughts and behaviour patterns. The individual may think that altruism impels her to respect the Land as an ecological community but as explained by Leopold 3 "the path of social expediency is not discernible to the average individual." Having identified to his satisfaction the hidden "scientific" prudential source, Leopold advocated a charitable respect, love and admiration for the land.

Much earlier, David Hume 4 supported the idea that altruism is a normal human attribute. He argued that feelings of esteem, respect, regard, kinship, affection and sympathy are as natural to us as self-love. Their expression and scope, he suggested, depend on how reason and understanding inform them. Although he had society in mind as the beneficiary of its citizens' altruistic sentiments, I see no reason why benevolence should stop there.

Starting from this generous appraisal of human nature, the central problem for

ethics is posed by the question: What beyond my self is important ? On what larger group, society, community or world shall I centre my natural sentiments of sympathy and compassion? What shall I love here on Earth ? The answer, it seems to me, is the World, the Ecosphere, as the natural surrounding environment. But what exactly do these words mean?

The way "environment" is conceptualized is supremely consequential, and an early task of environmental ethics is to define an environment worthy of human sympathy. Without a clear and compelling concept of the world-of- Nature and of its significance the question as to how people ought to behave and act, individually and socially, is ambiguous and unanswerable. Once this importance-base is established, the next task is to construct a system of normative guidelines to govern attitudes, behaviour and action toward that environment or nature. Therefore, a strong environmental ethic should provide answers to three basic questions: 1. What is the environment? 2. What is the relationship between people and the environment? 3. What attitudes should govern people's relationship to the environment?

1. What is the environment ?

Today Earth's creation story is being rewritten in accordance with what has been learned from evolution, ecology and the earth sciences as well as with what has recently been seen from outer space. We have all heard our history of relatedness from simple beginnings: of our cell parts indistinguishable from bacteria that appeared on Earth billions of years ago, of our DNA genetic material similar to that in other organisms, of our haemoglobin resembling the chlorophyll in plants, of our blood salinity like sea water, our bones made from the stuff of corals and phosphorus-rich sediments. Obviously we belong to this surrounding system. Further, looking in from outer space, we have seen the blue cloud-swathed planet and realized with a sudden shock our status as deep-air animals, living at the bottom of the atmosphere, enveloped in its transparent skin. How obvious now that we are Earthlings, evolved out of star-dust, air and water, warmed by sunlight. No need to search for reasons nor labour arguments as to why we ought to place high valuation on the environment and protect it, because there it is — the Ecosphere or Home-sphere — ourselves in it, an apparent in tention of it, and it an ex tension of ourselves.

The outside-in view shows the whole Earth and then, at high magnification, the human part within, revealing the unitary Real Thing that incubates and sustains us. The supplementary view, from the inside-out, extends the field-of-care (Heidegger's Dasein) that defines the self, embracing the wider world and merging the part with the whole. ⁵ Both perspectives support such truths as Alan Watts' "The World is Your Body," ⁶ Wendell Berry's "We cannot intend our good without intending the good of our place, the good of the world," ⁷ and John Livingston's "You mess with the world, you mess with me." ⁸

Nature, the Ecosphere, is what we are immersed in: a magical ecological system that daily and seasonally renews its organic presence and cyclically replenishes its energy, air, water and soil. Nature is neither the capricious bitch whose secrets science is justified in taking by force as Francis Bacon argued, nor the soul-less machine that Descartes conceived; not the heathen god of place as opposed to the Judaeo-Christian God of history, nor merely the residue after all of human worth has been wrung out of the world as C.S. Lewis proposed. The Ecosphere, Nature, our earthly environment is the foremost unitary reality that we directly experience. It is the Whole of which we are parts.

A most important ecological truth follows. The Ecosphere, not organisms, is the bearer of life. Whatever the vivacious element or essence of the world, its residence is clearly in ecosystems not in isolated protoplasm. How long would organisms remain "alive" deprived of their life-giving air, earth and water? The whole world is shot through with vitality which, though expressed most animatedly in organisms, must also be in their surrounding matrix. Environmental ethics that gives up on finding reasons for preserving "non-living" Nature should look again. If "life" is valuable and worth preserving then chunks of earth-space, the sectoral ecosystems of the Ecosphere, are the primary objects of concern. Attention to the wild ones — wilderness, the unpossessed — symbolizes our sympathy for the whole, our belonging and not-owning.

2. What is the relationship between people and the environment ?

The valuation from which environmental ethics springs is ecological, based on the knowledge, belief and faith that what for years has passed inconspicuously as "environment" is a reality more important than me, you and all of us. We are components of a greater entity that somehow, over 4.6 billion years, produced as and continues to sustain us. That the whole is more important than the part establishes the moral priority of the ecocentric over the anthropocentric perspective.

Deriving an "ought" from an "is" seems straightforward enough when reality is conceived as wholes and parts because, functionally, parts must serve the whole that comprises them. If they do not, then they are deformities or pathologies — which they ought not to be. This is precisely our current relationship to the planet, and the diseases that we have caused by our unconscionable numbers and polluting industries are, among other things, accelerated soil erosion, desertification, acidification, destruction of biological diversity and changes in the atmosphere's chemistry. The world is running a fever and we are the flu. Humanity ought not to be a disease nor a deformity in the body Earth.

The part must serve the whole. Just as the function of the heart is to maintain a healthy body so the function of people — one tissue among Earth's 20 million

others — ought to be keeping the Ecosphere healthy, beautiful, creative and vital, rather than pursuing the present goal of oxidizing, as rapidly as possible, the hydrocarbon seams and pools that hitherto lay safely sequestered underground.

3. What attitudes should govern people's relationship to the environment ?

The attitude that is slowly killing the world and which, if continued, will finish the human race, is anthropocentrism: the religion of humanism that puts people first in all matters. Its highest goal is service only to the human community. It is our legacy of many thousands of years, the natural mood of a conscious species inclined to be self-congratulatory and short on ecological sense. And still today paternalistic religions and male-dominated societies hone the vanity and presumptuousness of an imagined man-centered world.

The saving attitude, the attitude in short supply, is ecocentrism that identifies the Ecosphere as the centre, a focal point not only for ethics but also for art and religion, at least in the latter's immanent aspects. Can the world be valued in all three modes? Only when its surpassing importance is widely recognized, when wondering admiration for Nature becomes our second nature, when we value the Ecosphere above all else. But cultural obstacles stand in the way.

On Valuing the Supra-human

Having glorified the individual in the dominant political ideology of the last few centuries, we find it difficult today to value anything else. Charters of Rights are dictatorial, overruling even responsible actions aimed at strengthening the social and ecological fabric. If the individual is the centre of the universe, then the only way that other things can be brought within the ethical ambit is by extension to "things like us". The scope of traditional ethics therefore hinges on what is accepted as "like us." Much depends on education, insight and sensitivity.

A summary of ethical extensionism following Goodpaster's analysis is presented by Callicott. 9 Kant's criterion for ethical extension was rationality; only other rational beings qualified as moral agents and as a result the rest of creation was considered grist for the rational human mill. In modern times Tom Regan has taken a further step, drawing the outer ethical boundary around mammals. Peter Singer has cast a still wider net, including within his ethical concern all sentient animals. Albert Schweizer extended reverential sympathy to all forms of life in his Reverence For Life Ethics.

Ethics-by-extension soon runs into the problem of diminishing returns. With each expansion, with each enlargement of the circle of concern, the ethical impulse — strong at the centre — is more and more attenuated at its perimeter.

For example, Callicott argued strongly for acceptance of Leopold's Land Ethic as a logical extension from the individual to the ecological community, but having made the case he then undermined it by stating that Land, the ecological community, is secondary in importance to ethical objects closer to the centre: friends and relations. Faced with the charge that a Land Ethic might overrule the rights of people (as in most circumstances it should), he surrendered without a shot, abandoning the Land in favour of the rights of *Homo sapiens*.⁹ Clearly ethics-by-extension is not the route to development of normative goals and guidelines strong enough to combat the human species self-love, the anthropocentrism, which is destroying the world.

Suppose that the planetary Ecosphere within which we live, move, and have our being, is taken as the primary reality. Suppose It is accepted as inherently valuable, an ethical thing- in-itself, producing life and continuously sustaining its many organic forms which are, however, secondary in significance. Such a novel viewpoint brings a radical shift in the orientation of ethical thought. No longer does it proceed by extension from the inside outward, from the self to like organisms, but instead from the outside in, from the Ecosphere to its contents. Then the foremost ethical question is reframed: How shall the health, beauty, diversity and permanency of the Ecosphere and its sectoral ecosystems be secured? After that, secondly, how shall people and societies fit their activities creatively to the Ecosphere's maintenance? A greater-than-human goal guides human goals.

Moral standards and ethical actions are human inventions, tied to beliefs, faiths and understandings. They are our own, formed by us and therefore human in form, anthropomorphic. This does not mean that they are necessarily anthropocentric, centered on ourselves, for nothing prevents us from formulating ecocentric prescriptions.¹⁰ Ethical action need not be confined to our own kind but can be extended to whatever we choose — whenever and wherever we recognize the values and importance of things outside our skins. Specifically, we need not confine moral concerns to those protoplasmic fragments of the world that are conscious or sentient, for such organic parts though significant have no monopoly on importance. Thus bio centrism (rather than eco centrism) that limits value-laden concerns to the bios alone — to people, to endangered species, to animals and their rights and to biological phenomena in general — is a dangerous detour from the way which is to value the largest unities, the most complete realities, that we can comprehend.

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