

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.02 Moral Problems and the Good Life
Fall 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

Environmentalism

I. The question

Asphalt: “A wealthy eccentric bought a house...surrounded by a beautiful display of grass, plants and flowers, and it was shaded by a huge old avocado tree. But the grass required cutting, the flowers needed tending, and the man wanted more sun. So he cut the whole lot down and covered the yard with asphalt.”¹

Redwoods: A recent California governor “defended the leveling of ancient redwood groves, reportedly saying, “If you have seen one redwood, you have seen them all.””

Bomber pilot: You are a bomber pilot and need to discharge your payload in order to make it back to base. You can drop your bombs in the open ocean, or on a small uninhabited island that has a unique ecosystem. If you drop the bombs in the ocean, you will kill some living things, but not destroy any ecosystem; if you drop them on the island, the island’s ecosystem will be destroyed.

Last human: Same as bomber pilot, but you are the last human.²

For many people, both *asphalt* and *redwoods* arouse moral discomfort. Why? Is this moral discomfort grounded in a defensible moral framework? In each case, has a moral wrong been committed?

In the introduction to the section on the environment in *Disputed Moral Issues*, Timmons defines ‘direct moral standing’ as having moral standing based on intrinsic, and not merely instrumental, worth. He then asks:

- Do biological entities other than humans and higher nonhuman animals have at least some degree of direct moral standing?
- What about nonliving things such as mountains and streams?
- If so, what does this imply about how human beings ought to treat them?
 - How should we weigh the value of humans and the value of other nonhuman beings? E.g., what should we do if we can save a species from extinction but at the cost of a human life? Does it matter what sort of species we’re talking about? Why?
 - If protecting the environment causes human suffering, is it morally permissible? How far must humans make sacrifices for the benefit of nature? How far are we allowed to ravage nature for our own pleasure?

Following Timmons, we can consider five possible responses to these questions:

Anthropocentrism: only human beings have direct moral standing. (Baxter)

Sentientism: all and only sentient beings have direct moral standing. (Singer)

Biocentrism: all living beings *because they are living* possess direct moral standing.

Ecocentrism: ecosystems, because of their functional integrity, are the primary bearers of direct moral standing. Individuals within ecosystems may have secondary moral standing. (Leopold?)

Ecotalism: ecosystems and some individuals that compose them have direct moral standing.

An ‘*environmental ethic*’ is a moral position holding that some non-sentient things have direct moral standing.

¹ *Asphalt* and *Redwoods* are from Thomas Hill, “Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments,” in Hugh LaFollette, ed., *Ethics in Practice*, Blackwell Pub. 2002, p. 654.

² *Bomber pilot* and *Last human* are adapted from an essay by Peter S. Wenz.

II. Against an environmental ethic

The “anti-environmentalist” has several arguments that appear to challenge the suggestion of moral wrongdoing in the *Asphalt* and *Redwoods* examples above. For example:

- 1) The wealthy eccentric owns the property and this brings with it the right to do with it as he pleases. A system of private property is defensible on both utilitarian and Kantian grounds, so he has done nothing wrong.
- 2) Morality only concerns the effects of actions on people (or sentient beings). If it can be shown that the benefits to humans (or sentient beings) of leveling the redwoods outweigh the costs, then there is no reason not to do it. Plants don't have rights; they aren't part of our moral community whose interests must be considered.

William Baxter offers the following considerations against environmentalism (p. 515):

- a) People do not, as a matter of fact, value the environment/ecosystems for their own sake.
- b) It is not clear what the preferences of animals/ecosystems are, or whether they even have preferences.
- c) Animals and ecosystems cannot represent themselves in moral dialogue, and we cannot trust other (self-appointed) humans to represent them.
- d) There is no good or bad, right or wrong, in nature. All value is conferred.
- e) There are reasons to protect much of the environment, even if nonhumans lack direct moral standing. Humans benefit from a healthy environment, and it is open to each individual to engage in private altruism towards animals, plants and the like. So even if nonhumans lack direct moral standing, the environment won't be completely destroyed.

Argument from conferred value

1. *Conferred value principle*: if the value of X is conferred, then x should not be valued for its own sake, but only instrumentally.
2. The value of things other than humans is conferred.
3. Therefore, nonhuman things lack intrinsic value and should only be valued instrumentally.

Is the conferred value principle plausible? Can you think of counter-examples?

Consider love. When we love something, we confer value on the beloved. What sort of value do we confer? Do we confer only instrumental value? My loved ones are valuable to me by virtue of my love for them. But the value they have for me is not merely instrumental, i.e., it is not simply that their value is as means to my ends. I value them for themselves; is the value I confer non-instrumental? This may be confusing because we take humans to have intrinsic value independent of their being loved. Consider a dog: I love my dog. In loving my dog, I confer value on him. My valuing him the way I do is not compatible with treating him simply as a means to my enjoyment.

Are there other principles that justify the claim that only humans (or only sentient beings) have intrinsic value?

III. Environmentalist strategies

- a) Invoke religious perspectives, e.g., God created the environment and asked us to be good stewards of it.
- b) Argue that the value of nature is not conferred; or argue that things with conferred value should nevertheless be treated with respect (non-instrumentally).
- c) Affirm the intrinsic value of the environment, and endorse a moral view that requires us to maximize (consequentialists) or respect (deontologists) intrinsic value.

- d) Connect the disposition to respect the environment with other human excellences or virtues.
- e) Develop the world view of “deep ecology” (Leopold, Naess).

IV. Deep Ecology

The deep ecology movement attempts to develop a comprehensive worldview in contrast to the contemporary Western anthropocentric view.

Ecological consciousness and deep ecology are in sharp contrast with the dominant worldview of technocratic-industrial societies which regards humans as isolated and fundamentally separate from the rest of Nature, as superior to, and in charge of, the rest of creation. But the view of humans as separate and superior to the rest of Nature is only part of larger cultural patterns. For thousands of years, Western culture has become increasingly obsessed with the idea of *dominance*: with dominance of humans over nonhuman Nature, masculine over the feminine, wealthy and powerful over the poor, with the dominance of the West over non-Western cultures. Deep ecological consciousness allows us to see through these erroneous and dangerous illusions. (Devall and Sessions, 514)

The deep ecology movement emphasizes two principles³:

- 1) **Self-realization**: spiritual growth requires us to overcome the idea of self as a separate ego. We must identify with others and see ourselves as just a small part of a larger whole. Ultimately, we must not only identify with others in our species, but the cosmos as a whole.
- 2) **Biocentric equality**: all things are capable of and have an equal right to self-realization. We should live simply in ways that have minimal impact on nature. Consumer culture encourages desires and supposed “needs” that are harmful, and we should instead seek harmony with Nature.

Questions:

- What are the moral principles underlying the deep ecology view?
- What empirical claims are being made and what evidence is relevant to evaluating the view?
- Deep ecologists are suggesting a change in world-view. How should we evaluate world-views? Are there rational grounds for adopting one world view or another?

³ See Bill Devall and George Sessions, “Deep Ecology,” *Social Ethics* 6th edition, ed. Thomas A. Mappes and Jane S. Zembaty, McGraw-Hill, 2002, pp. 513-521.