Unit 3 Handout 1: DesJardin’s Environmental Ethics

Chapter 6
Biocentric Ethics
and
the Inherent Value of Life

Introduction

So far we have focused on attempts to extend traditional ethics in an effort to diagnose and solve our environmental problems. (Desjardin calls this ethical extensionism). But all such attempts seemed suffer from three core problems.

Three Problems for Ethical Extensionism

- (1) The principles and concepts used in the applications of such theories are too narrowly focused.
  - They are at, bottom still too human focused, if not entirely anthropocentric.
  - Moral consideration in ethical extensionism is still determined by comparing entities to rational adult humans, and extending moral consideration on the basis of those similarities.

- (2) Ethical extensionism is still individualistic.
  - Focusing on individuals might extend our ethical considerations to include non-humans, but it will still only consider them as individuals. This leaves out species, habitats, and the relationship/interconnectedness of nature out of the moral sphere.

- (3) Ethical extensionism is not, and was never intended to be, a comprehensive environmental ethics.
  - It tells us what not to do, but not how to live a good life. In short, ethical extensionism is a negative and critical, offering no positive solutions.
  - Some of the stuff it leaves out of moral consideration matters morally, e.g. global warming, pollution, species extinction.

In light of these problems, Desjardin suggests that we need to do more than to extend traditional ethical theories, based on old philosophical assumptions. What we need to do is

“adopt the point of view of an environmentalist (or, more simply, of a concerned citizen) seeking to articulate develop, and defend a coherent and comprehensive environmental philosophy.”
Where we start:

- [Revisit the quote on the bottom of pg. 127]
- These facts startle us, make us concerned, but why?
- Answering this question is our starting ground for a new environmental philosophy.

**Instrumental Value and Intrinsic Value**

Central to a comprehensive environmental philosophy is a consideration of the nature and scope of value.

- **Instrumental Value**: a function of usefulness. An object with instrumental value possesses that value because it can be used to attain something else of value. The instrumental value of an object lies not in the object itself but in the uses to which that object can be put.
  
  - Emphasizing only the instrumental value of nature means that the environment is held hostage by the interests and needs of humans.

- **Intrinsic (inherent) Value**: a value that is to be found or recognized rather than given. To say that an object is intrinsically valuable is to say that it has a good of its own and that what is good for it does not depend on outside factors or judgments. It has a value in itself and is not to be valued simply for its uses. The value of such things is intrinsic to them.
  
  - The kind of concern that is evoked when one considers the passage on pg. 127-128 suggests that many of our environmental concerns rest on the intrinsic value we recognize in nature.
  
  - To say that human activity degrades the environment is often to say that our respect for intrinsic value has eroded or been lost entirely.

Thus, an acceptable environmental philosophy is one which requires a re-growth of awareness and respect for the intrinsic value of both the things which compose our environment, and of the environment as a whole.

**Biocentric Ethics and the Reverence for Life**

**Biocentric Ethics**: refers to any theory that views *all life* as possessing intrinsic value. ("Biocentric" means life-centered)

An early Biocentric thinker: Albert Schweitzer

- Schweitzer’s *reverence for life* principle:
  
  - Schweitzer sought to reestablish the connection between ethics and nature, and thought that it was the intrinsic value of living things being ignored that severed the connection.
  
  - Schweitzer believed that the most fundamental fact of human consciousness is the realization that
I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live
and that it is around this fact that ethics should be built.

- Schweitzer was not, however, a philosopher, and as such, did not develop his view or consider the many objections that could be raised. E.g. does reverence for all life mean that I count as much as the mosquito whose trying to bite me? Does it mean I ought to let her drink, and not smack the little bugger?

Taylor’s Biocentric Ethics


Taylor’s goal: a systematic comprehensive account of the moral relations that exist between humans and other living things.

Taylor’s reason for thinking that all forms of life deserve moral consideration: all living things have a good of their own because they are *teleological centers of life*.

- To be a **teleological center of life** means that the actions of your life direct you toward some telos, or distinctive goal. E.g. the telos of an acorn is to become an oak tree.

- When one sees living things as teleological centers of life it is easy to make see that some things are good for that being, and some are bad.

- Once we understand the life cycle and know the environmental conditions an organism requires to flourish (survive in a healthy state and help to propagate its species) it is easy to see how such organisms can be *benefited or harmed* by changes in their environmental conditions.

- So as teleological centers of life, all living organisms can be viewed as having a good of their own.

The next step that Taylor needs to make is to connect a living organisms intrinsic worth (the good it possesses) to the normative claim that we ought to take that value into our moral considerations.

Taylor notes that having a good of one’s own is a necessary but not sufficient condition for having inherent worth.

The normative claim that living things have an inherent worth is to be explained and justified by reference to the **Biocentric Outlook**

- The Biocentric outlook is a system of beliefs that provides a fundamental view of the natural world and our natural world. Recognizing the inherent worth of things from the fact that they have a good of their own is a natural rational inference from the Biocentric outlook.

**The 4 Central Beliefs of a Biocentric Outlook**

- **(1)** Human beings are members of Earth’s community (the same as all other species).
- **(2)** All species are part of a system of interdependence.
• (3) All living things pursue their own good in their own ways.
• (4) Humans are not inherently superior to other living things.

Practical Implications

Taylor then draws out his view by suggesting that adopting a Biocentric view and thus having proper respect for nature leads to

• 4 general duties

(1) nonmaleficence—do no harm (not the same as ‘keep safe’)

(2) noninterference—do not interfere with the freedom of individual organisms
       —don’t manipulate control, modify or ‘manage’ natural ecosystems

(3) fidelity— we cannot mislead or deceive or betray wild animals (i.e. no more hunting, trapping, fishing…)

(4) restitutive justice—humans who harm other living organisms have to make some kind of comparable restitution to those organisms.

• these duties are ranked in order of importance: nonmaleficence is our top duty, and in the event of a conflict of the other three duties: justice takes precedent, then fidelity, then non-interference.

One thing to note: in order to be loyal biocentrists, we cannot allow human interest to automatically take precedent when moral conflict arises.

To make sure that there is some account of how to prevent this, Taylor argues for several formal or procedural rules to provide fair, impartial solutions to moral conflicts. These rules are self-defense, proportionality, minimum wrong, distributive justice, restitutive justice.

Challenges and Developments

1. What exactly does it mean to not “interfere with nature”? It seems to suggest a dichotomy between humans and nature, one we are trying to get away from. Can something non-natural even come out of a natural thing? (i.e. why are the changes that humans make to the environment ethically different from the changes other species make to it?)

2. While it is not anthropocentric, Taylor’s ethics remains individualistic.
• Moreover, it suggests an adversarial relationship between individuals. That it is all about balancing the needs of competing individuals. Thus it deemphasizes the importance of mutual dependency and cooperation that are important elements of ecosystems.

• A dilemma for Taylor: can I dig up a chunk of my lawn and build a stone patio?
  • If I am not allowed to build the patio, then Taylor’s view requires too much of us. It is too strict.
• If I am allowed to build the patio, then Taylor must explain how a non-basic trivial human interest trumps the value of the lives of countless blades of grass, and many insects.
• And he has to do it without appeal to retribution, since one cannot give restitution to dead individuals. (and again, as an individualistic theory, he cannot claim that restitution should go to the species).

• Taylor view derives normative principles from a set of empirical facts. Can you get an “ought” from an “is” this way? We have argued many times throughout the semester that we cannot, or at least that we should be highly skeptical of any view that relies on such an inference.

James Sterba’s revision

Sterba attempts to revise the Biocentric view so that it gets around many of the problems raised for Taylor’s view.

Sterba calls his view **Biocentric Pluralism** to emphasize his attempt to bring ecological wholes such as species and ecosystems into the perspective.

**A Summary of Sterba’s Argument**

1. Some object X has a good of its own if it can be harmed or benefited.

2. If X has a good of its own, then it would be wrong to harm it unless we have a good reason for doing so.

3. There are no non-question begging reasons to assume that human interests always override the good of X.

4. Therefore, Xs have moral standing. X’s are subjects to the same fundamental principles of justice that govern human relationships.

5. Liberal justice, a balancing of liberty and equality is the most defensible principle of social justice to guide human-nonhuman relationships.

**Discussion:** Have the advocates of Biocentrism given any good reason to think that all living things have a good, and that that good entitles them to our moral considerations?