

Why There is a Need for Environmental Ethics

One question that we should tackle right at the beginning of this course is whether there is a need for an “environmental ethics”? Since our subject matter involves questions regarding values and the environment, we should pose whether there is a need for a special subfield of philosophy entitled “environmental ethics”. What I mean here is what is the connection between the environment and ethics? Wouldn’t most if not all ethical theories handle questions regarding the environment? In order to attempt to answer this question, we first ought to look at what ethics is.

Generally speaking, “ethics” is the science concerning “right” and “wrong” of human actions. This means that ethics is first a science. By “science” I mean an activity that is studied rationally and systematically and whose conclusions seek to be exact. Second, ethics is concerned with “right” and “wrong”. These words refer to judgments that assign praise or blame. In the case of ethics, these judgments are usually assigned to people or to actions according to some standard. Just what this standard is and how it is justified is the source of some controversy. Third, the standard subject matter in question is human action. This does not mean that other types of actions may not come into the examination. For example, animals, trees, and the oceans might be part of what is taken into consideration in the examination of human action, but normally these sorts of things matter only inasmuch as they are objects of human action. Thus how a human treats a dog, a forest, or a waterway may be a question of ethics, but how dogs treat each other, how trees interact, or how the molecules of water collide is *not* a question of ethics. This is so because humans are the only rational creature (meaning, roughly, that they exhibit characteristics of deductive and inductive logic, which are expressed in an operationally observable set of behaviors that can be classified as a language, namely, that such behaviors exhibit [at least] a syntax and grammar), and that this rationality is empowered with some modicum of free choice about what we do.

Because of this ability to rationally choose, we acquire ownership of and responsibility for the reasonably foreseen consequences of our actions. It is due to this ownership and responsibility that “good” or “bad” are assigned as value judgements according to some recognized “norm” or “standard” that applies to all (or at least some) people. In short, *human action* refers to humans interacting with humans or with anything else in such a way that we assume it originated from free rational choice.

Hence, this understanding of ethics eliminates many types of things. First, it eliminates speculations that are not primarily systematic or rational. These systematic and rational justifications can be termed “good reasons for acting”. Such a restriction would eliminate justifications based *solely* on emotion, desire, or mere whimsy.

Second, the definition does not pertain to anything to which a neutral or merely descriptive depiction might apply. This might include actions such as combing one’s hair or deciding whether to place the new picture on the right or the left wall. These activities are distinguished

because they do not affect others in their sphere of action, nor would they affect the self through violation of essential duties to the self. I do not diminish another or myself (generally speaking), if I should choose the spaghetti or the linguini for my dinner.

Third, the definition does not apply to nonhuman entities (animals, vegetables, and minerals) except as they come into contact with humans.

Fourth, the definition does not apply to actions that are not the result of free, rational deliberation. Thus, if one is coerced into certain actions by physical or severe psychological means, one is absolved from moral responsibility along some sliding scale representing diminished capacity. For example, if I strap you down, and overpower you and then take your hand and make you push the button setting off a nuclear attack, you are not responsible for the results, because you could not have done otherwise. On the other hand, if you were somewhat, or even greatly, influenced by someone but you could have done something to prevent some action that you then committed, I think that *some* responsibility rests on you. This is so because moral responsibility rests on the free choice *to do otherwise*. This is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Therefore, according to a sliding scale, one is proportionally responsible according to how free he or she really was.

Ethics really requires at least two agreements about freedom: 1. The metaphysical understanding that we are *positively* free to commit certain actions and 2. The ethical consideration about how we are to understand the limitations on this freedom respecting our *blame* for committing this or that action.

I take the above as a good foundation and expression of what standard ethical theory entails and its limits. For our purposes, let's now examine this understanding to see why there is a need for an environmental ethics.

First, the only moral agents - those beings whose concern factors into the assignment of "right" and "wrong"- are human beings. In other words, how my actions affect myself or other human beings are the only aspects of my actions that have moral consideration. Let's take a prime example of this. Suppose I had a small plot of land, say one acre. I needed to get rid of some spent motor oil, but I did not have a container to properly dispose of this oil. If I dug a hole in the back of my property, and poured the spent motor oil into the hole, then my action, under the above description, would not have any moral weight to it. That is, so long as I did not harm myself in the future by this action, and that the spent motor oil did not adversely affect my neighbors. Now let's also suppose that this action did cause the trees on the property line to die, and that I shared these trees with my neighbor. The trees are fruit trees of some sort (say, apples or pears). Insofar as my action denied my neighbor the trees and the future fruit of these trees can it be said that I did a blameworthy action. Now let's add to this scenario the following additional considerations. Let's suppose that the fruit of these trees was not consumed entirely by myself or my neighbor. Various migratory birds also fed off of this fruit. Let's also consider the number of insects that utilized the pollen from the flowers of the fruit trees. The birds and the insects are all adversely affected by the mishandling of the motor oil, and, not the least, the trees themselves are killed by this action. Under the above description of ethical theory, the only

part of this action that has any moral consideration at all is the fact that I denied my neighbor future fruit and the shade of the trees. Nothing else matters.

Second, our human relationship to the natural world and other non-human species is seen in terms of the natural world and non-human species being *natural resources*. Non-human species concern and how our actions affect positively or adversely the natural world do not matter unless it affects other humans. Again to illustrate the point, let's consider the following. Suppose I had one acre of land again. On this land, there were a number of native species of plants, several trees, and a stream on the border. Let's also suppose that the native species are not endangered. These plants are used by birds, insects, fish, and other non-human species for food. However, I want a green lawn on my property. So, I dig up all of the native species, effectively killing them, and plant Kentucky bluegrass, a non-native species. I also religiously mow my lawn and fertilize it so that it is bright and green. However, by killing off the native species, all of the non-human species that used these for food are effectively starved. As well, because I used standard petroleum based fertilizer, the run off killed the fish in the stream. Under the above description of ethical theory, my action of using the land as I saw fit had no moral weight. My action of digging up the native species and planting a non-native species has no moral consequences to it. Nature is there for me to do with it as I want, because I own the land. I have no further obligations to the land outside of what the law demands. Since most states have few restrictions on what owners can or cannot do with their land, legally I can do with it as I will. Morally, I can do with it what I will so long as there are no immediate or long-term consequences to those actions, *even if those actions result in adverse consequences on other non-human species*. In fact, this example dramatically demonstrates that I do not even have any duties to either the land or to others insofar as what I choose to plant on my land. By planting a non-native species of grass, I have chosen to reject using a species that would be hardier to the local environment. I could have planted blue joint grass, a native Illinois species which is highly tolerant of the range of temperatures experienced in this state, one that does not require fertilizer, and reseeds itself and grows by rhizomes (meaning that I do not have to spend hundreds of dollars each year to fill in the patches of dead grass). I could have left some of the native species on the land. This would have allowed the other non-human species to still have their traditional food source and I could still have the green lawn that I desired.

This example vividly demonstrates at least three things. First, non-human species needs are subordinate to human desires. Second, we are not held morally accountable for the adverse impact most of our choices have on the environment. Finally, the lack of understanding most people have about the availability of native species, ones better fit to thrive in our local environment. Obtaining native species can be a bit difficult. You cannot just walk into Lowes and buy a bag of a native grass species seed. Most lawn services will not have these available either. The average consumer will have to do some additional work in order to presently obtain these, however, in the long term, use of native species will have a number of beneficial consequences. A. By using a native species, you are contributing to genetic diversity. B. By using a native species which is more resistant to local weather fluxuations, you end up using less water and fertilizer to maintain your lawn. C. By using a native species, other non-human species have access to foodstuffs not otherwise available. D. By using a native species of grass, it is more likely to tolerate the soil and weather conditions, meaning less work and expense to

have the coveted green lawn. With some exploration of native species, one can even find grass species, which are native to the State of Illinois, which grow only to 2 inches in height. That means no mowing the lawn all season! In other words, having access to the knowledge of what native species exist in your area, you can “engineer” your living space to accommodate human needs and benefit the non-human world.

At this point, one might object. No moral theory denies that the non-human world has instrumental value. The claim is that only humans have intrinsic value. This distinction is old. Something with intrinsic value has value because of what it is. Something with instrumental value has value only because it can be applied to some use or to something else that has value. Human beings need a certain level of cleanliness in the environment in order to survive. Other animals and plants have value because we eat them, or use them for work, or enjoy their company, or find them beautiful to look at. Clearly, animals, and for that matter all plants, cannot communicate with us in order to make their needs, if they have such things, known. Even claiming that animals have rights cannot make sense in the same fashion as the claim humans have rights. By a “right” I mean a legal notion: a way of being treated, a realm of unimpeded activity, or a good or service *socially recognized and legally guaranteed*. This is a political notion. Rights are something that are granted to citizens by governments, or guaranteed by bodies politic in the creation of a government. They are something that is backed up by the force of law. When we say “animals have rights”, we do not mean that the injured animal can phone the police, have the offender arrested, go to court, plead his or her case before the judge, and receive an award of damages. We mean something more like a moral claim. By “animals have rights”, we mean something like, “you should not treat that animal that way”. Even when there are legal prohibitions against the killing of certain animals, the prohibitions fall on human agents, not on other non-human beings. The Peregrine Falcon might be a protected species, however if one were to be eaten by Bald Eagle, we are not going to punish the Eagle. It would be absurd to do so.

The point of this objection is to indicate the problem with extending our usual notions of right and wrong to include non-humans and the natural world. What is needed is a new theory of value, a new ethic. These are the reasons why environmental ethics is a needed subfield in philosophy. It is needed not only to address emerging concerns that impact the human world, but also to stress a seldom second thought with regard to ethics itself. Acquiring moral consciousness and acting morally is a sign of self-development. It is the completion of our nature: as Aristotle said in the *Politics*, human beings are political animals. By “political” he meant “rational - social”. We have a rather good understanding of what is meant by “rational”, but what is meant by “social” might need some unpacking. Recognizing that our actions have effects on others, the choices we make not only affect us, but affect others. The old claim was that we are not completely human until we develop morally. The new claim might be something like, we are not completely human until our moral consciousness includes environmental concerns.