

PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC

We've seen that using economic approaches to placing a value on biological diversity poses great challenges, and we've seen that an important part of using those approaches must be incorporating non-use values into the economic framework. We've just finished a very brief review of philosophical approaches to ethics, and I've already suggested that under both consequentialist and some non-consequentialist views biodiversity seems to have only instrumental value. Now it's vital to remember that *instrumental* value is not the same thing as *use* value.

- *Use* values are those derived either from using a resource, e.g., the commercial value of lumber extracted from a forest, or from the costs we incur from failing to protect a resource, e.g., the cost of levees and dams used to control river flooding when floodplain wetlands are converted to residential or industrial use.
- *Non-use* values include those associated with pleasure or appreciation, i.e., aesthetic values, and those associated with obligation or duty, i.e., ethical values.

It is therefore not problematic for an adherent of *any* ethical system to incorporate non-use values of biodiversity into decisions about what is right or just, so long as the non-use values concerned are aesthetic values. An interesting question is, however, is there some sense in which we have a duty, an ethical or moral obligation, to conserve biodiversity (or protect the biological integrity of a system or ensure the ecological sustainability of our use of a system and its resources)?¹

The problem of holism

As Sober [3] points out one particularly important distinction to keep in mind: The things on which an environmental ethic would place value are whole species, communities, or

¹I'm going to use the phrase "conserve biodiversity" throughout the rest of these notes. I don't mean to imply that conserving biodiversity is the *only* thing we might have an ethical obligation to do towards the environment. I just don't want to repeat myself constantly.

ecosystems, not the individual organisms of which they are composed.

- Consider the question of whether to control the size of deer populations in reserves maintained by The Nature Conservancy. Many would agree that such management is needed to conserve the species and communities within those reserves.
- Philosophers like Peter Singer [2] argue that we have an ethical obligation to prevent the suffering of *individual* animals. On this view, management of deer populations would be unethical if it involves any harm to individual deer, e.g., by allowing hunters to kill some deer, even if this harm to individual deer was beneficial to other conservation values associated with the preserve.
- Jane Goodall has been criticized by some conservationists for devoting too much attention to the welfare of individual chimpanzees and to little attention to the “broader” issues of ensuring that chimpanzees have the habitat they need to survive in the wild.

Suggesting that we have a duty to a whole species, as opposed to its individual members, is analogous to the way we often suggest that we have a duty to a group, e.g., our department, the University, the profession, our country, that goes beyond our obligation to the individual members of that group. Moreover, we often recognize a conflict between our duty to individuals and our duty to a group, e.g., the conflict between individual liberties and national security.

The problem of “natural”

“Every ethical theory must provide principles that describe which objects matter for their own sakes and which do not” [3, p. 188]. So how do we determine that species, to take one example, “matter for their own sake?” In particular, how do we determine that causing a species to go extinct is “bad” and that preventing its extinction is “good,” especially when we remember that the eventual fate of every species is extinction?² The response I gave in one of the first lectures in this class was that the current rate of extinction is much higher than it has been at any time in the recent geological past. But why is a high extinction rate bad?

One response might be that it isn’t a “natural” rate of extinction. It’s a “human-caused” rate of extinction. That seems plausible, but it raises another issue:

²The reason everything isn’t extinct is that some species give rise to one or more new species before they go extinct.

If we are part of nature, then everything we do is part of nature, and is natural in the primary sense. When we domesticate organisms and bring them into a state of dependence on us, this is simply an example of one species exerting a selection pressure on another. If one calls this “unnatural,” one might just as well say the same of parasitism or symbiosis (compare human domestication of animals and plants and “slave-making” in the social insects).[3, p. 180]

Similarly, if humans are causing a higher rate of extinction and we are part of nature, how can we say that human-caused extinctions are unnatural?

As Callicott et al. point out [1] whether we regard humans as part of the system or not goes well beyond simply noting that we are evolutionarily related to all other living things on this planet. The answer depends on whether we take a more compositionalist view of ecosystems or a more functionalist view.

- *Compositionlists* view the biotic world as consisting of organisms that are aggregated into populations, communities, and ecosystems.
- *Functionalists* view the biotic world as consisting of physical and chemical processes associated with energy flow and nutrient cycling.
- *Compositionlists* tend to think of human beings as separate from nature “because culture uniquely enables *Homo sapiens* to adapt ... orders of magnitude than can other species ...” [1, p. 24].
- *Functionalists* tend to think of human beings as part of nature because “human dissipative structures do not stand out so sharply from others of comparable size and distribution” [1, p. 24].

Callicott et al. suggest that *biological diversity*, *biological integrity*, and *ecological restoration* are values typically associated with a compositionalist approach, while *ecosystem health*, *ecological services*, *adaptive management*, *ecosystem management*, *sustainable development*, *ecological sustainability*, and *ecological rehabilitation* are values typically associated with a functionalist approach. They argue that a synthetic approach combining insights of both is needed.

There’s one final question that we’ve skirted throughout these discussions that I want to mention, not answer, before closing the book on this semester: Who gets to make the decisions about conservation policy?

- If I am committed to democracy and individual rights, I must also be committed to the right of others to choose differently from me, even if they make what I think is the wrong choice.

- If I am also committed to conserving biological diversity, I must either be convinced that I can persuade others of the rightness of my views so that the policies I favor will be democratically adopted, be willing to accept a democratic decision allowing policies that will harm conservation values I hold dear, or be willing to believe that my opinion matters more than the opinion of those who don't value biodiversity as highly as I do and make policies for them that's in their own best interest.

References

- [1] J. B. Callicott, L. B. Crowder, and K. Mumford. Current normative concepts in conservation. *Conservation Biology*, 13:22–35, 1999.
- [2] P. Singer. *Animal Liberation*. Random House, New York, NY, 1975.
- [3] E. Sober. Philosophical problems for environmentalism. In B. G. Norton, editor, *The Preservation of Species: The Value of Biological Diversity*, pages 173–194. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1986.