Ethics, ecology and economics

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This paper describes the general structure of an environmental philosophy. There can be many such philosophies, and those with their roots in economic theory have been extensively studied recently. Specific examples cited in the paper include the work of David Pearce and Robert Goodin. Economics-based philosophies can founder on the issue of externalities and a misplaced attempt to provide a comprehensive approach to valuing nature as a bundle of goods and services. It is argued that it is dangerously easy to slide from considering nature as a standing reserve of processes and objects that have the potential to satisfy human desires to the idea that it is nothing more than that. In general, the consequentialist basis of economics limits its usefulness in contributing to informed environmental decisions. But there is room for a sensitive use of institutional environmental economics as a partial guide for our reflections and choices. Any such development should take on board the existence of a plurality of perspectives on fundamental issues and the pluralism of values that can be found within moral theory itself.

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Environmental ethics

The development of environmental ethics has been one of the most exciting and challenging things to happen in recent philosophy. To explain why this is so, it is necessary to understand the way that appeals to community and commonality have figured in western ethical theory, particularly since the Enlightenment. Although the eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume remarked that it was ‘evident’ that ‘beasts are endow’d with thought and reason as well as man’ (1739), this did not lead him to view non-human animals as worthy of moral consideration. Indeed, it was not until 50 years later that Jeremy Bentham suggested that any being capable of suffering has a moral claim on us. For him, the morally important question to ask was not ‘Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?’ (1789). If once we concede that non-human animals can suffer, then it seemed clear to Bentham and his followers that we are obliged to take that suffering into consideration when making moral decisions.

The development of active movements against animal experimentation and intensive farming has been helped by considerations like Bentham’s. If we humans share some common features with other animals – like the capacity for suffering – then this seems to give a basis for taking account of animal suffering when deciding what to do. People associated with animal rights and animal liberation movements have been quick to point to commonalities between human and non-human animal life as part of their case for political and social change. The capacity to feel pain is not the only commonality. Those fighting to preserve the cetaceans often build their case on considerations relating to the high intelligence of dolphins, or the social instincts, monogamy and nurturing behaviour of the great whales (Dobra, 1986).
The search for features common to humans and other animals is related in an obvious way to the attempt to build a moral community. For many ancient moral traditions, whether the Stoics of ancient Greece or the Confucians in China, the growth of moral maturity is associated with recognizing the moral claims on us of others outside what the Stoics called ‘the community of our birth’. Most people have no difficulty in recognizing the moral bond between parents and children, the obligations associated with broader family life and the appropriateness of doing what is right by our friends, relatives, neighbours and so on. The terminus for this extension has traditionally been the human community as a whole. As we extend our moral cares beyond friends, family and people in our immediate neighbourhood, we naturally look for features which give a foundation for this extension.

In much of modern western philosophy since Descartes the grounding of moral respect for other human beings has been based on the following idea: each one of us is a centre of reflective conscious life; each has projects, desires and things we value; now, if I claim moral respect for myself on the grounds that I am a centre of values, desires and self-conscious reflection, then I cannot in all consistency deny giving moral respect to any other creature which is like me in these ways. From this idea flows a number of others. One is to do with equality. Being a subject of a centred, conscious life, with interests of the sort that humans have is not something which comes in degrees. No doubt some people are more intelligent than others; and some have richer sets of desires and projects than others. But all normal adult humans have some desires, some projects, some capacity for self-conscious reflections. So all normal adult humans are equally moral agents, and they are equally moral patients (that is, their interests ought to be taken into consideration by other moral agents).

Suppose we accept the line of argument just given. A moral community, linked by reciprocal recognition and obligation, is one founded on common features like the capacity for self-awareness and reflection. Now think about Bentham’s argument for extending moral concern to other animals, an argument based on appeal to the capacity for suffering. What Bentham can be thought of as saying is that the capacity for suffering is just as important as the capacity for self-awareness and reflection when it comes to establishing a moral community. For the presence of that capacity in other animals gives a foundation for including them in a single moral community along with normal adult human beings. Modern theorists have even focused on the differences between children, people in comas or the confused elderly on the one hand, and healthy and intelligent primates on the other, to argue that our moral responsibilities towards some groups of human beings are less clear than our responsibilities towards at least some other animals.

So the ideas of commonality and community go hand in hand. Leaving aside the numerous possible objections to the style of argument just described, we could say that, for the most part, the extension of moral consideration to non-humans has been argued for on the same kind of basis that traditionally was used to support the extension of consideration from one group of humans to other groups of humans. In arguing that we should care, morally speaking, about the fate of other animals, Bentham and his followers are arguing in the same way that Aristotle could have argued (but, notoriously did not!) for including women as well as free men in the moral and political community.

It is against this background that environmental ethics is so challenging. Whereas arguments on behalf of non-human animals urge the extension of moral consideration in a perfectly traditional way, environmental ethics challenges the entire tradition. For