Why Conserve Nature?

4.1 Phenomenology and moral normativity

In Chapter 3, we saw that our moral relations with the natural world are too diverse to be captured in the monochromatic idiom of values-thinking. To understand those relations we need to consider a range of factors: not just how much value our actions promote but our bonds with non-human others, for example, or the ideals we express through acting in certain ways towards natural things.

By illuminating the diversity of moral considerations, phenomenological inquiries can support a certain kind of moral pluralism. But can any sort of phenomenological inquiry recommend a particular course of action? Can phenomenology generate moral norms? Some writers contend that it cannot. Peter Heath, for instance, writes that ‘Phenomenology may … be useful in studying moral experience, but can do nothing to recommend or vindicate any particular form of morality’ (1975: 159). The findings of phenomenology, he adds,

will be neutral … in the sense that they cannot and should not be expected to exert any direct influence upon the desires, wishes, feelings, etc., of the phenomenologist himself, or of those he seeks to instruct. [The phenomenologist’s] role is merely that of an observer, reporter, analyst, taxonomist and so on, and his sole business is to provide information. Even if, as is at least conceivable, his investigation should reveal ‘norms’ or ‘values’…, they would strictly be ‘value-facts’ in this context, and his account of
them would likewise be purely descriptive and not normative in character.

(1975: 161)

If Heath is correct, then phenomenological inquiries will not be able to provide any guidance on what we ought to do. And so they will be of no use in helping us decide how we should act in relation to the natural world.

The primary aim of this chapter is to show, against Heath, that phenomenological inquiries are able to generate moral norms that can be fruitfully brought to bear upon the question of how we ought to relate to the natural world. More precisely, I will use a phenomenological approach to demonstrate that it is a good thing – morally a good thing – to attend carefully and selflessly to natural things, processes and places. And I will also show, by means of a broadly phenomenological mode of inquiry, that there is a moral imperative to conserve nature.

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The first thing to note, in response to Heath’s charge, is that even if phenomenological investigations are inherently descriptive, the descriptions thus produced might nonetheless have implications for normative ethics.

An example should make this clearer. Phenomenologists maintain that in order adequately to describe what it is like to be human, one must distinguish one’s experience of objects from one’s experience of persons. So, for instance, Husserl spills a great deal of ink describing what it is like to relate to a being as to another person. Likewise, as we saw in Chapter 2, Heidegger explains what it is like to share a world with beings who are in certain essential respects like oneself. Yet whether it is framed in terms of ‘persons’ or ‘Dasein’, the basic point is the same: autonomous beings like you and I are experienced as special kinds of being, essentially unlike chairs and tables.

Now, to be sure, all this is descriptive: the phenomenologist is describing what it is like to experience beings as persons rather than as things. However, it is important to note that by conveying what it is like to experience another being as a person, the phenomenologist