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Moral Pluralism and the Environment

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ABSTRACT: Cost-benefit analysis makes the assumption that everything from consumer goods to endangered species may in principle be given a value by which its worth can be compared with that of anything else, even though the actual measurement of such value may be difficult in practice. The assumption is shown to fail, even in simple cases, and the analysis to be incapable of taking into account the transformative value of new experiences. Several kinds of value are identified, by no means all commensurable with one another – a situation with which both economics and contemporary ethical theory must come to terms. A radical moral pluralism is recommended as in no way incompatible with the requirements of rationality, which allows that the business of living decently involves many kinds of principles and various sorts of responsibilities. In environmental ethics, pluralism offers the hope of reconciling various rival theories, even if none of them is universally applicable.

KEYWORDS: Cost-benefit analysis, pluralism, preferences, rationality, transformative values.

1. WHAT IS WRONG WITH COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS?

It is normal for writers to make extravagant claims for their disciplines. Perhaps there is no discipline at present of which this is more true than economics. In environmental discussions, the economist often takes the part of the sensible, rational being, the person who wants to be objective, and base judgments on solid fact. Yet the appeal to economic rationality is highly dangerous – some would say immoral.

Let us start by thinking about a case where economic rationality may make some sense. Suppose we want to reduce the carbon and sulphur pollution associated with a range of industries. Is there any sensible way we can allocate a level of taxation on these pollutants which will be fair? Let us further suppose

that part of our idea of what is fair involves being able to justify the proposed level of tax to the industries which produce the pollution.

We can approach this problem by considering first of all just how much damage is caused by the pollution and how to put a monetary value on it. Thus for the pollutants mentioned, we can look at effects on health, in terms of treatment costs for patients with respiratory disease directly due to the pollution. We can consider the cost of repairing damaged buildings, the losses suffered by forestry and the loss of agricultural production. All of these costs can be put in monetary terms (more or less), and give us a measure of the costs associated with air pollution. Put another way, the same figures indicate the scale of benefits that could be achieved by restriction of such pollution.

Now it is not a simple matter to fix the appropriate level of sulphur and carbon taxes in the light of the above information. But we can make sense of the idea that quantifiable costs are associated with pollution and quantifiable benefits are to be gained from controlling it. However, economists typically want to count in other effects of air pollution apart from the ones just mentioned. Consider, for example, the loss of pleasure due to impaired viewing conditions. If air pollution is bad enough in an area with a tourist industry, then there may well be loss of tourist revenue to count in with the other losses. But what of the people who already live or work in the area? Would they not also count in the economic equation? Even if their health is not directly affected, are they not suffering other losses of amenity?

In trying to count in the losses of this last sort, economists usually resort to a technique known as 'contingent valuation' or 'shadow pricing'. But this technique is not without problems. How, for example, can we put a price on reduction of visibility in everyday life? Some American economists from the University of Wyoming tried to do this. They showed a number of people photographs of their surroundings in which air quality was better and worse. They then asked how much the subjects would be willing to pay in addition to their normal electricity bills to preserve a particular level of visibility rather than the next lower one.¹

This attempt to elicit willingness-to-pay is regularly used by economists. In another study, economists managed to put values on grizzly bears and bighorn sheep by quizzing hunters about how much they were willing to pay to maintain sufficient stocks of these animals.² But, as Mark Sagoff points out in a critique of such studies, they are often undermined by the large number of people who refuse co-operation. Thus, instead of agreeing some level of payment to ensure better visibility, many of those questioned simply refused to play the economists' game. They would either refuse to make bids, or they would lodge protest bids which were in excess of any sums they could actually afford to pay. In cases where subjects are asked about levels of compensation for some loss or disbenefit, protest bids – as Sagoff points out – sometimes include a demand for infinite compensation.

The existence of protest bids is uncomfortable for the economist. But the fact that some people show discomfort about the whole exercise of contingent valuation is itself interesting. For what the exercise is supposed to reveal is something about preferences. We are all consumers of various goods and services, and in making consumer choices we reveal, so it is thought, our preferences. It seems logical, then, to try to find out what our preferences about visibility are, just as it is worthwhile to find out what our preferences are on hospital treatment, the colour of toothpaste or whatever. The moral that Sagoff draws, however, is rather different. For he argues that the existence of protest bids in the contingent valuation experiments reveals that the issues involved are not simply ones about preferences.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AND ITS FOUNDATIONS

Sagoff's general strategy is to argue that matters of public policy involve values as well as preferences. He has a general objection to economic analysis on the grounds that it pretends there is no difference between matters of preference and matters of value. However, I want to consider whether economic analysis can even get to grips with preferences themselves. It turns out, if I am correct, that the economist's claim to rationality is a feature of a wider view about rationality which is quite false. But the falsity of that wider view has important consequences for ethics as well as economics.³

It is widely recognized in human communities that not all preferences are of equal weight. If my preference is to make money by stealing, or by murdering those who are wealthy, then the laws of every society will be against me. Passing laws against murder and stealing is one way a community can protect itself against citizens who might otherwise develop unworthy preferences. From the point of view of the law-abiding individual, illegal acts do not find a place on that person's preference-map.

Economists have long recognized that the preferences of individuals are hard to map. For example, as Mark Sagoff has pointed out, a person may rationally bribe a judge on one occasion (in order to save their driving licence) yet later help to vote the judge out of office (because the same person disapproves of corruption in the law). One way of explaining this behaviour is to suppose that in the role of *consumer* I operate with quite different preferences from those I have in the role of *citizen*. In taking this approach, Sagoff develops arguments originally put forward by other writers (See Tullock 1967, Sen 1977, and Sagoff 1988). If Sagoff and these other writers are correct, then there is no single order in which all my preferences can be placed, for there is no single role which embraces all my roles. It would then follow that there is no single preference-map which can be ascribed to me. Yet it is a feature of standard neo-classical

economic theory that all of us do possess a single set of ordered preferences.

I would be inclined to go further than Sagoff and argue that even within a single social role, I lack an ordered preference set. Consider, for example, our behaviour concerning books or music. Do I prefer Schumann's *Études Symphoniques* to Chopin's *Préludes*? I have no answer to give to this question, not because I am indifferent between the Schumann and the Chopin but because each has its own strengths. The Chopin is more pianistic, while Schumann's work makes, so to speak, an orchestra out of the piano. Sometimes I would rather listen to the Schumann, and other times to the Chopin. But such an observation shows nothing about the possibility of placing the two works in a single map of ordered preferences. The difficulty here is noteworthy, for we might have expected two standard works from the romantic piano repertoire to be commensurable in many ways.

One way of explaining this difficulty about preferences is by resort to the idea of *value*. In the case of music, we might say that different pieces have different mixes of values. The aesthetics of music will thus not be simple. Even in comparing two romantic composers of the piano, like Chopin and Schumann, we will encounter complexes of value which make rankings difficult, if not impossible. Now, a simple story about preferences, let us suppose, is that we try to accord the higher preference to the item of greater value. According to this story, the acquisition of musical taste is in part the process of learning to prefer music of greater value to music of lesser value. But if values are themselves mixed, and fail to condense into a single order, there is no single set of values for our preferences to latch on to.⁴

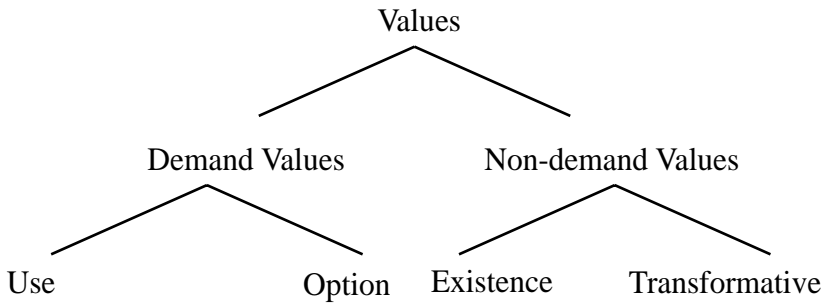
3. KINDS OF VALUE

If we lay the question of mixed values aside for a moment, we can try to make sense of ordering our preferences in a different way. If we can distinguish a number of kinds of value, then perhaps we can try to ground our preferences in the different values that things have. When we try to defend our *considered* preferences, we can do so perhaps by pointing to the different sources for these preferences in the things valued.

Theorists of environmental policy and ethics usually distinguish three kinds of values. First, there is a major distinction between *intrinsic* and *instrumental* value. Something is of intrinsic value if it has value in its own right, or for its own sake. Education, for example, is often held up as an example of something of intrinsic value, as is the study of music, literature, the sciences and the visual arts. By contrast, something is of instrumental value when its existence is necessary for the preservation or realisation of some other value. A good violin is of instrumental value because without it we could not appreciate certain kinds of

fine music. A forest is of instrumental value if it yields timber for building and paper making. Notice that the forest may also be of value in its own right: the categories of instrumental and intrinsic value are not exclusive.

Bryan Norton has pointed out that there is a class of instrumentally valuable goods which stand in a peculiar relation to our preferences (see Norton 1987). For they are things which do not simply satisfy our considered felt preferences. Rather, they provide an occasion for examining and sometimes revising these preferences themselves. In this way, they contrast with what might be called 'demand values'. The latter are characteristic of things which either have a use for us, or which may conceivably yield a use for us in future. Norton contrasts demand values of this sort with non-demand values. See the following table:

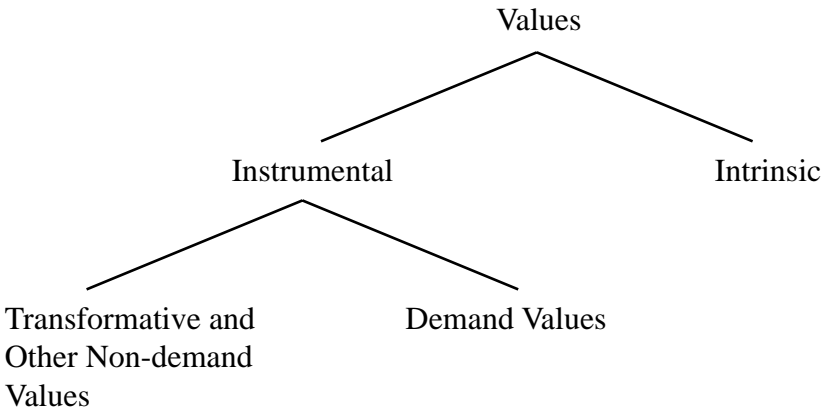


The items we buy at the market or in the shops are typical examples of what have a use value. To argue that rainforest species should be preserved on the grounds that they may one day yield useful medicines is to claim that such species have an option value for us.

But some people would like rainforest species to be preserved independent of any future industrial or pharmaceutical value we might find for them. What they are recognizing, then, is value in the existence of such wild places. Now to recognize such existence values, we do not need to argue that rainforests have value in their own right. Rather, it may be that the existence of rainforest species is instrumentally valuable, in that without them other things of value would be lost.⁵

Finally, the category of transformative value represents a further instrumental type of value that something may possess. Norton gives the example of a teenager who is forced, by circumstances beyond her control, to go to a classical music concert. Until then, we are to suppose that she was keen on popular music and had no time for other musical forms. Surprisingly, the classical concert appeals to her; she subsequently develops an interest in Mozart and starts

collecting classical music. Attending the concert has transformed her considered preferences. We can thus classify the three forms of value in general as follows:



Now a very difficult problem is posed by the existence of transformative value, at least as far as the economist is concerned. For if we try to put a price on transformative value, we shall fail. The impact of transformative values on people's preferences is completely unpredictable, and the degree of impact (when it occurs) will vary massively from person to person. However good cost-benefit analysis is when dealing with demand values, it is bound to leave out transformative value. If we now agree with Norton that natural things and systems themselves possess transformative values, then it will follow immediately that they cannot be priced by the standard techniques of economics.

Norton's results are very much what we might expect. It would be foolish to think that an economic technique which has important application in the field of pollution control can be extended to all environmental policy areas. Yet this is precisely what is attempted by those economists who aim to include all values in their calculations. They are pursuing a phantom; for however hard they try, there will be values which forever elude them.

These thoughts about value also provide the answer to an earlier problem. Recall the suggestion that we might try to make our preferences line up, so to speak, with the order of values in the things around us. If there is no single order of values, then we cannot look for help here in constructing our preferences. We saw already that musical compositions may display mixes of different values, as do novels, paintings, scientific treatises and natural objects. These various values, we can now see, break down further according to whether they are intrinsic, instrumental or transformative. But since some of these forms of value

will forever elude quantification, it would be folly to try to set up a single order of values, or of corresponding preferences. Much though economics may like to present itself as a rational discipline, commitment to a single order of values and of preferences would be quite the opposite of rationality.

4. PLURALISM DEFENDED

The suggestions I have just made may seem to give grounds for pessimism. How can we approach issues of public policy in medical ethics, allocation of scarce resources and environmental protection in the absence of shared, objective standards by means of which to judge between different values and different sets of preferences? Unfortunately, it will do no good to turn for help to ethics rather than economics. For ethical theory, as understood by the majority of contemporary moral philosophers, parallels economics in its attempt to reduce complexities about value to simple principles and single measures. Even people who are sympathetic to what I have argued so far may prefer to stick with the methods of cost-benefit analysis, and try to extend these to all forms of environmental impact assessment. The alternative looks like muddling through in an impressionistic, irrational way.

It is important not to underestimate the power of the conception of rationality that is built into the fear just mentioned. That conception is central to economics, and to standard moral philosophy.⁶ Bernard Williams has described it in the following terms:

[there is] an assumption about rationality, to the effect that two considerations cannot be rationally weighed against each other unless there is a common consideration in terms of which they can be compared. This assumption is at once very powerful and utterly baseless ... The drive toward a *rationalistic conception of rationality* comes ... from social features of the modern world ... (Williams, 1985, 16-17)

Williams goes on to explain that the social features to which he is referring impose on *personal* deliberations a model drawn from a particular understanding of public rationality. According to that model, every decision must be based on grounds which can be laid out by appeal to certain general principles which are comparable with each other.

I think it is clear both that the phenomenon exists and that it exerts a peculiarly compelling force on us. If we want to regard ourselves as operating in *principled* ways, we expect that our behaviour falls under certain principles, even if we are not terribly good at articulating them clearly. Likewise, if there are regularities in natural processes and systems, we hope that our sciences at least approximate to some of these, even if we can never be entirely sure that we have hit upon the ultimately *true* theory. It is a short step from these thoughts to the idea that the

sciences are ultimately concerned with one kind of object or event in terms of which everything else can be explained. This is what has motivated atomism in its various guises over the years. It is also one of the motives in the positivists' search for a unified science. Likewise, economic theory – as we have seen – orders values according to one monetary weighting and orders our preferences in a corresponding way. Finally, moral philosophy often purports to deal with just one kind of state of affairs in terms of which the good or the right is defined. For example, in utilitarianism all morally relevant states will be compared in terms of overall pleasure (or in terms of some other single measure of utility).

Once these ideas are out in the open, it is easy to see why Williams regards the shared notions as baseless. Few modern scientists would want to make the objectivity of science depend on there being a single set of objects (or events), and a single theory of them, which explains everything.⁷ And once we are free from the lures of economic theory we recognize that economic considerations are different from, and not commensurate with, moral or aesthetic ones. So the attempt to reduce all science to a common coin, like the attempt to reduce all values to monetary ones, looks doomed.

But we could agree to what has just been said while still defending monism in morality itself. We could argue that there will be just one set of principles concerning just one form of value that provides ultimate government for our actions. But why should we want to do so? It cannot be to defend notions of objectivity and impartiality. For, once we give up the monistic model of rationality, we recognize that there is nothing whimsical, or unreasonable, in deciding on one issue to be swayed by economic considerations, while on another to follow aesthetic ones. If we use statistical mechanics for studying the behaviour of gases, this by no means determines the theory to be used in studying the ecology of a salt marsh. Nor is there anything irrational about preferring Schumann one day and Chopin the next. For, as we have seen, within the aesthetic sphere there are mixes of values and mixes of preferences. If we have really shaken off the rationalistic picture of rationality, then it is not a lapse of rationality that there is no higher set of comprehensive considerations under which all aesthetic considerations fall, let alone both aesthetic and economic ones. Still less would we want to reduce the aesthetic to the economic.

If we can be objective and rational in adjudicating the competing claims of aesthetics and economics, then we can be equally objective and rational, within the moral enterprise itself, when faced with competing claims. That we come to moral decisions does not mean, then, that we must somehow have reduced all the competing claims to a common measure, or have seen them as falling under some single hierarchy of principles. *Moral pluralism* – to give a name to the position opposed to monism – allows that the business of living decently involves many kinds of principles and various sorts of responsibilities. It recognizes that our feelings and responses to situations are drawn from many sources and cannot be simplified without distortion. Moreover, it maintains that the absence of any

clear principles we can articulate for a given case is no evidence of the absence of moral significance. Once we have succeeded in resisting the lure of the rationalistic conception of rationality, it is hard to see why moral monism should commend itself over a pluralist perspective.

It remains true that a pluralist perspective will not be easy to use. If many different sets of values are in play when environmental issues are being discussed, the role of the policy-maker becomes much more complicated. But life is complicated, and we will not make progress in tackling the grave difficulties we face unless we learn to avoid shallow thinking and simple solutions. Although Sagoff has expressed the hope that democratic communities are well placed for establishing procedures by which we can start to give weight to the many complexities of environmental problems, it remains to be seen whether his optimism is justified.

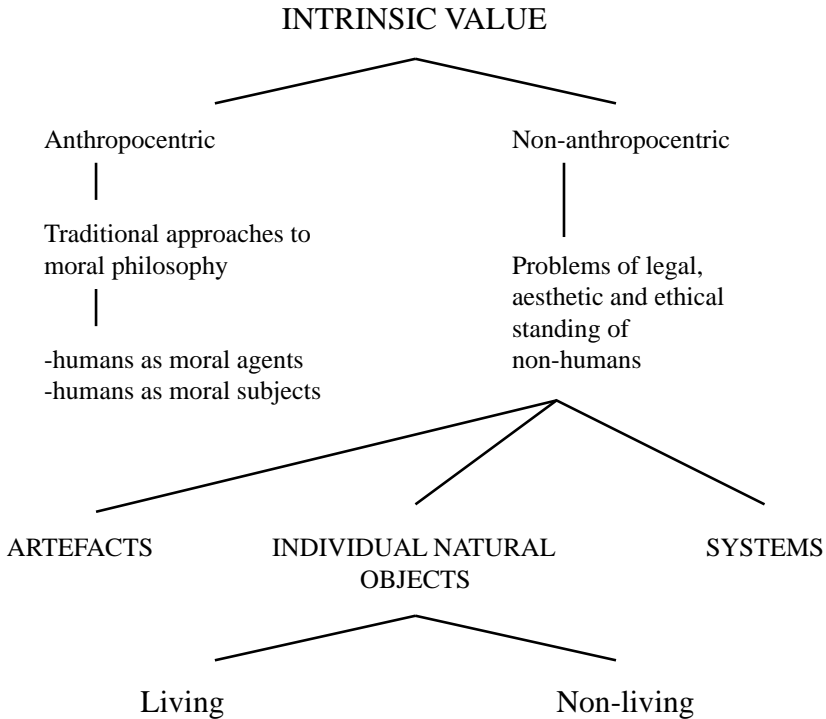
5. ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

I conclude with a brief survey of the main underlying theories of environmental ethics and with a suggestion about how we should think about the challenge they pose to conventional ethical theory. There are two main approaches: ethics that are human-based (anthropocentric) and those that are non-anthropocentric. The human-based ethics focus on human beings not only as the actors in morality, but also as the proper subjects of morality too. Now some human beings value natural things and processes in their own right. An anthropocentric ethic can take account of this, since it regards human interests as the only ethically significant ones. Likewise, an anthropocentric ethic can make sense of preserving buildings, paintings or other artefacts for the benefit of those humans who enjoy or study them.

But over the last twenty years or so, environmental ethics has been largely occupied with exploring an alternative, non-anthropocentric approach to morality. According to this approach, things apart from human agents might be proper subjects of moral concern. Those theories that are *biocentric* claim that at least some other living things are possessors of value in their own right. But other accounts of moral value suggest that the possession of life is not itself morally significant. For these last theorists, there can be ethical (and aesthetic) value in a lake, a landscape or a mountain range, even though none of these things is itself alive.

The range of non-anthropocentric theories has posed something of a problem for moral philosophy as it is usually conceived. Contrasted with the conventional treatment of human beings as both moral agents and moral subjects, the new theories have forced reflection on the moral, legal and aesthetic standing of many kinds of non-human beings. These include artefacts (such as paintings,

buildings and corporations), living and non-living natural objects, and also systems and processes:



We can map the various kinds of non-anthropocentric value theory by noting that some of them are very much individually-based, while others are holistic in the sense that they attribute intrinsic value to aggregates of individuals. Under the impact of writers like the Scot John Muir and the American preservationist, Aldo Leopold, several more recent theorists have argued that whole communities, ecosystems and even the land itself are complexes which deserve respectful treatment (see Muir, 1988, Leopold, 1949, Rolston, 1988). Of course, the distinction between an individual and an aggregate is not clear-cut, but it is possible to make a rough and ready distinction between holistic and individualistic theories, thus:

NON-ANTHROPOCENTRIC VALUE

| | Holistic | Individualistic |
|----------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Biocentric | <i>Deep Ecology</i> <i>Gaia</i> | <i>Animal Rights</i> <i>Respect for Trees</i> |
| Non-biocentric | <i>Systemic Value</i> | <i>Art works</i> <i>Rocky crests</i> |

These positions are by no means exclusive. For example, Holmes Rolston has argued that there is moral value in individual lives, in species, and in ecosystems. Other theorists, Paul Taylor for one, have adopted a resolutely individualistic, life-centred ethic, while those who follow Arne Naess's thoughts about deep ecology generally support the view that living things are knots in a larger web of value (see Taylor, 1984 and Naess 1973).

What is striking about all the non-anthropocentric value positions is that they challenge centuries of orthodox philosophical theory. The fact that things other than human beings have a place in our moral thinking in their own right is something on which all the major theories of morality – whether rights-based, utilitarian, or virtue-based – have been largely silent.⁸ Environmental ethics thus differs from other areas of applied philosophy, in that it does not call for the extension of existing value categories and moral analysis. Rather, it challenges the standard categories and analyses themselves. Environmental ethics does not call for expanding the circle of beings recognized as having feelings, for example, or capable of feeling pain. In this way it contrasts with the position of those who argue for the extension of moral consideration to non-human animals (see Callicott, 1980). Rather, some environmental thinkers have posed the question of why feelings should be so important to morality. Forests, lakes and rocky crests have no feelings, nor have they, as far as we know, any other interests we can take into account. But that fact alone does not mean that they have to be left out of the moral reckoning.

Many workers in the field would disagree strongly with what has just been suggested. For some of them, the heart of our environmental concerns lies precisely in a kind of extended individual benevolence. Writers like Stephen Clark defend vegetarianism and the elimination of animal experimentation on

the grounds that present human practices do wrong to other animals (Clark, 1977). It is perhaps natural to extend this concern, as Clark does himself. If animals can be wronged, then perhaps so can plants, forests, lakes and rocky crests. Tom Regan, to take another notable example, holds that non-human animals have what he calls 'inherent value' through being subjects of a life. Such value does not come in degrees: if rabbits have it at all, they have it equally with us. For Regan, our duties towards other animals, and their rights, are founded on this inherent value. For the environment, Regan articulates an ethic of general non-intervention in nature, based on the inherent value of all natural objects. These examples could be multiplied.

Without in any way wishing to challenge the moral sincerity of the writers just mentioned, I would like to propose that theirs is not a route worth following. I have given detailed reasons elsewhere for thinking that species, natural systems and landscapes cannot plausibly be regarded as having interests of any sort, nor do they have modes of flourishing, nor can we make sense of the claim that they have directions of development.⁹ I will not repeat these arguments now but instead I would like to suggest a partial explanation for why so many writers have taken the route, however ill-advised it is to do so. They have, I conjecture, simply followed tradition. The recent tradition of moral philosophy has regarded the interests of the parties concerned as central to their role in the moral enterprise. For the utilitarian, the morally relevant parties in any situation are those whose pleasures or pains will be affected by what is done in that situation. A standard prescription for the agent is that he or she should act so as to ensure that pains are minimized or pleasures maximized. For the contract theorist, the moral community consists of a group of beings with interests, and principles of morality and justice are devised so that these interests are respected without special regard to status or special position. Rights theorists who are not contractarians normally have in mind a moral community of items who can be represented in their own right, and thus as possessors of interests.¹⁰

In the face of this near-unanimity on the features of the moral community, we are faced with a real problem if we try to introduce considerations on behalf of items that lack interests in the sense of having no primary goods, no projects, no directions of development, no possibilities of pleasure, pain or other utility and no other features in terms of which they can be represented in their own right in moral debate. How could such items possibly have a moral claim on us? In desperation, heroic efforts are sometimes made to try to establish that trees, rocks, landscapes, and even natural systems have interests. A great deal of nonsense has been written in the attempt to characterise ecosystems as having possibilities of flourishing, directions of development or ways of being more or less healthy. Moreover, the need to introduce considerations about preserving trees, species and landscapes into debates on public policy has seemingly added urgency to the underlying philosophical project. Even though the works of philosophers have little direct bearing on public policy, it is not helpful to our

reflections on these matters to find no room for valued environmental features in our ethical deliberations.

6. PROSPECTS FOR A 'NEW ETHIC'

There has been a tendency in recent years for concerned people to suggest that what we need is a new ethic to moderate our dealings with nature. If my diagnosis of the challenge posed by environmental ethics is correct, we can begin to see why this is so. The conventional model for moral deliberations has been built on the understanding that the moral community is constituted of a number of individuals each with their own interests. Extending that community from humans first to other animals and ultimately to ecosystems has seemed to be an attractive option. But even early in the process there were symptoms that something was amiss. The claim by some animal liberationists that the world would be a better place if there were no predators and no parasites is entirely in keeping with the utilitarian arguments in favour of changing our modes of treating animals. Yet such a claim is anathema to many environmental philosophers. Over the last fifteen years, the animal rights and environmental philosophy camps have showed ever wider divisions, despite some attempts to heal the rift. The rift itself signifies a tension in the way the extension of individual benevolence has been perceived. Finally, attempts like Regan's to suggest that we should adopt an ethic of non-intervention in nature seem to constitute a *reductio* of the whole project of extending the circle of benevolence (Regan, 1981). Such non-intervention has never been an option for humans, any more than it has been an option for other living species.

In the face of the challenge to find a new ethic, what can moral philosophy do? And, more urgently, what can the philosopher say to those who are concerned to frame environmentally sensitive policy and regulations? If we follow the monistic tradition and the rationalistic conception of rationality, we may perhaps look to interests or some other single feature to fund the value of trees, rocks, ecosystems, bacteria, dogs and people. Such a feature would be one in terms of which natural things and systems could gain entry to policy debates and be recognized as having standing in their own right. I now think there is probably no such feature.¹¹ But even if such a feature could be found, it is hard to believe that we could develop any plausible ranking of the relative value of all the things which possess it. Alternatively we can give up the rationalistic conception of rationality and the associated monistic point of view. We can start to think in terms of a plurality of values, and an associated plurality of principles. More radically, we will recognize that not all matters of morality can even be thought of in terms of principles, rules, contracts and the rest of the apparatus of conventional moral theory.¹²

To make clear just what is at stake here, notice that there are several kinds of

pluralism. Liberal democracies are supposed to admit that there are competing conceptions of the good, and an associated plurality of values, held by their citizens. What might be called *moral liberalism* would be the ethical equivalent of this political position. It would accept that different people might bring different ethical perspectives to bear on an individual case (noting that in some cases the different perspectives would agree on what counts as the *right* course of action). This is *not* the kind of pluralism that I am advocating here. By contrast, in the present paper, moral pluralism is meant as a philosophical, not a moral, thesis. In its philosophical sense, we can still distinguish a number of forms for pluralism to take. I will look at two different forms, noting that the first form itself permits of several varieties.

The first kind of moral pluralism recognizes the possibility that *different considerations apply in different cases*. This somewhat ambiguous notion of pluralism has been at the centre of attention in recent discussions of moral pluralism in environmental ethics.¹³ It is surprising that any controversy at all has been aroused by this idea. Take three simple cases. Consider, first, the proper response to an injured animal. If it is badly injured and in obvious pain, the most humane course might be to kill it speedily. By contrast, there are circumstances in which it is decent to preserve the life of a human being who is suffering extreme pain. Third, trees, as far as we know, are not sentient beings at all, yet it may be proper to take steps to preserve a tree or trees by actions which cause pain to a sentient being (for example, when a vandal is forcibly restrained). What the first form of pluralism suggests is that no one set of considerations provides the rationale for these three cases, let alone for the multitude of others that face us daily. Yet what is involved in treating different cases differently? Someone who holds only a single, structured theory of ethics with a single standard of right and wrong might well count considerations involving human interests and welfare differently from those affecting other animals and plants. Although the considerations are not the same, this kind of pluralist would hold that – at a suitably abstract level – the principles are always the same.

As pointed out already, this version of pluralism has several varieties. Perhaps a more interesting variant is associated with the thought that principles drawn from one kind of understanding of ethics may apply in one case, while those drawn from a separate understanding apply in another. For example, maybe we could approach issues of public policy from a utilitarian point of view, yet be committed to some quite different point of view in our dealings with friends and relatives. Even if I think about public policy in terms of the balance of benefits or happiness over disbenefits, when fulfilling a promise to a friend, it may never occur to me to consider whether greater good overall might be achieved by breaking the promise and doing something else instead. Notice two points that arise from this example. First, the discrepancy between utilitarianism on public policy and some quite different approach to private morality does not indicate inconsistency on the part of the thinker or moral agent. Second, even

if I do think about public policy in ways different from the way I think about obligations to my friends, it is not clear that the conventional distinctions of standard moral theories are best for describing such a difference.

More generally, it seems extremely simplistic to try to characterise our thinking about issues of public policy in terms of any one theory of ethics. For we are caught up in a number of very different considerations as soon as we try to give detailed attention to whether, for example, a leisure development should take place on farmland recently set aside from arable use. In such cases, we typically think of impacts on local employment, the many different interests and needs of those living in nearby towns and villages, effects on local ecosystems and biological communities – both physical and chemical – as well as aesthetic issues. Then there are notions we have about the sense of place shared by inhabitants of an area, and to what extent any proposed development will fit in with a continuing narrative history that can be given for that place. To reduce all these considerations to ones of utility, duty or beauty may be, in its own way, just as simplistic as the attempt to reduce all values to monetary ones.

These ideas give rise, finally, to a second development of the concept of moral pluralism. According to this, any particular situation in which we face a decision, or have to act, is complex. Its complexity could be described in terms of the idea of mixed values introduced earlier. Alternatively, it can be claimed that there is no single activity of valuing involved in assessing any situation. Pluralism of the second sort maintains that there is no single theoretical lens which provides a privileged set of concepts, principles and structure in terms of which a situation is to be viewed. Furthermore, complexity is a feature of the situations that arise in public debate and also in the most private of moral deliberations. This second kind of pluralism seems to me more interesting than the first sort, although related to it. As opposed to the claim that different cases call for different treatment, this new form recognizes that one and the same case can properly be viewed in many different ways.

There is a way into the thesis that the ethical enterprise is pluralistic in this second way which draws on the first, less controversial form of pluralism. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the simplistic philosophical models have some merit. I think about public policy as a utilitarian, let us imagine, but I think about duties to my friends in terms of their moral claims on me as Kantian ends-in-themselves. By contrast, I cultivate a caring and responsible attitude to my local environment by way of a conception of worthwhile human living in nature which does not reduce either to utilitarianism or Kantianism. I do not, for a moment, intend that any of these descriptions does more than caricature the moral situation of an agent. But if we accept the caricature for the moment notice how the switch of perspective from one case to the next can reveal something we may overlook when we concentrate on a single case viewed through a single lens. This is that the various perspectives brought to bear on the several cases can be brought to bear – to some degree – on the individual case as well. If each case

can be viewed from more than one perspective, then the business of being morally engaged with the world around us involves a multiplicity of perspectives and a value complexity which is ignored in the standard, reductionist accounts found in textbooks. That a certain perspective tends to dominate in a particular kind of case does not mean that the others are inapplicable to it. Moral pluralism as a philosophically interesting thesis is the claim that valuing things is pluralistic in just this way.¹⁴

It is the second form of moral pluralism which is not only interesting, but which urgently requires exploration. By adopting the pluralist stance, we not only start to do justice to the complexity of real situations, but we also can start to look for ways by which environmental ethics can be linked up with other modes of valuing and ways of responding to our surroundings. Utilitarianism and its rivals need not be abandoned, but can be considered as partial accounts of the moral life. There is scope, for example, for developing notions such as attention, humility and selflessness in our dealings with nature as part of the story of what makes a worthwhile human life. These notions should not be thought of as *the truth* about morality – any more than utilitarianism is. Rather, they provide greater depth in characterising our situation.¹⁵ Abandoning reductive monism about values and valuing makes even more sense once the force of moral pluralism in this latest form is recognized.

If we accept moral pluralism as a philosophical position, the project of environmental ethics can be seen in a new light. The challenge of non-anthropocentric ethics to the western, human-centred tradition need not be described as an attempt to supplant one set of principles (ones regarding human welfare, or human virtues or whatever) with some new overarching set that embrace not only *human* concerns but also the interests, whatever they are, of other natural things. Instead, exploring non-anthropocentric ethics is to be seen as adding further sophistication to our moral discourse and helping us understand a further dimension to our lived experience. Seen in this way, environmental ethics is less a competitor for a certain moral position, but an investigation of a more sophisticated turn that moral philosophy has taken. Embarking upon it is a partial recognition of the complexity of our moral situation. Note, once more, that the complexity in question is intrinsic to the business of being moral. Moral pluralism is a philosophical, not a moral, thesis.

To say this may seem not to help the policy-maker, for it involves admitting that we face a challenge to which philosophy has not so far found a solution. None the less, it provides at least some negative advice. We can caution against the use of reductionist methods, and the trap of thinking that policy decisions can always be reduced to some common, comprehensive weighting. Environmental ethics can provide an antidote to theories which encourage the idea that our moral situation is a simple one. So it can be an antidote to a tradition of systematic, but simplistic, theorizing. When we turn our attention to the challenge within

philosophy itself, it will hardly be surprising if we find that many of our philosophical concepts do not quite fit us for meeting the challenge of moral pluralism. But this is certainly not the first time that efforts have to be made to see just which of our concepts are adequate to map newly encountered terrain. Indeed, it remains to be seen to what extent a developed ethics of the environment will fit in with the complex of other theories, intuitions and feelings we have about value. But this exploration is not something for rationality to avoid, but one which an appropriate sense of imagination and discovery should commend to us.

NOTES

Versions of this paper have been read in Singapore, Stirling, Lancaster and London, and I am grateful to members of all those audiences whose comments have been important in establishing the final shape of the paper.

¹ See Rowe, D'Arge and Brookshire, 1980. This study is described and commented on in chapter 4 of Sagoff, 1988.

² For references to this and other studies, see Pearce, Markandya and Barbier, 1989, chapter 3.

³ That economists do lay claim to rationality is shown by statements like the following: 'By trying to value environmental services we are forced into a rational decision-making frame of mind. Quite simply, we are forced to think about the gains and losses, the benefits and costs of what we do. If nothing else, economic valuation has made a great advance in that respect'. (Pearce, Markandya and Barbier, 1989, 81).

⁴ See the recent discussion in Raz and Griffin, 1991. A sensitive treatment of value pluralism is found in Nussbaum, 1986. Clearly, in a brief attack on common assumptions about preferences, I am unable to give detailed attention to all the possible kinds of orderings for preferences. The difficulties suggested here arise well before the stage at which it would be necessary to investigate different orders for individual preferences.

⁵ There is a dispute about whether existence values are to be considered as a kind of demand value (given that people clearly indicate preferences regarding the existence of things remote from them and which do not impinge in a direct way on their lives). I am not intending to take sides on this issue in the present paper.

⁶ It is also to be found elsewhere, I would argue, particularly in the positivists' conception of a *unified science*, and particularly in Rudolf Carnap's early work on scientific objectivity. Mandelbaum points to the influence of the economist Emmanuel Hermann on Carnap's thinking (Mandelbaum, 1971).

⁷ At the height of his Vienna Circle involvement, Carnap put forward a view of science which related its unity to just the conception of objectivity which I think is implausible. Michael Friedman has pointed out that Carnap's view of how concepts are to be discriminated from one another is deeply linked with the idea that all concepts are part of a single interconnected system. Such a single organization can only be possible if, in Carnap's own words, 'there is only one object domain and each scientific statement is about the objects in this domain'. See Friedman, 1987.

⁸ An important exception to this claim is the work of Iris Murdoch, which, although focusing on the virtues of attention and care, does not rule out the importance of what she calls the ‘sheer alien otherness’ of non-humans (Murdoch, 1970). I also ignore dissenting voices within the western tradition itself, such as Heidegger’s.

⁹ See Brennan, 1986, and further discussion in Brennan, 1988.

¹⁰ One standard statement of the link between interests, rights and the capacity to be represented is given in Feinberg, 1974.

¹¹ Although if there is such a feature it would have to be something like the lack of function characteristic of natural objects – see Brennan, 1984, and Brennan, 1988, chapter 13, paragraphs 13.2-13.3.

¹² Feminist and other critiques of conventional moral philosophy have made this point repeatedly. Although the status of feminism as an epistemological and metaphysical position is unclear, I am happy to be aligned with feminists in their objection to how the project of morality has been followed in post-renaissance western philosophy. For a useful overview of ecological feminism, see Warren, 1987.

¹³ This is the conception of pluralism which seems to be attacked in Callicott, 1990. Callicott’s principal target is Stone, 1988 (and Stone, 1987).

¹⁴ Christopher Stone uses an analogy with the multiplicity of maps which can be produced for a single territory. See Stone, 1987, chapter 5.

¹⁵ In an interesting, but so far unpublished essay, Tom Birch has tried to develop an account of meaningful attention which would fund our valuation not only of other living things, but also of rocks and lakes. Many of the remarks in Murdoch’s *Sovereignty of Good* seem to merit exploration in an environmental context.

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