

1-2002

A Hybrid Theory of Environmentalism

Steve Matthews
Charles Sturt University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Matthews, Steve (2002) "A Hybrid Theory of Environmentalism," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 3 No. 1

A Hybrid Theory of Environmentalism

Abstract

The destruction and pollution of the natural environment poses two problems for philosophers. The first is political and pragmatic: which theory of the environment is best equipped to impact policymakers heading as we are toward a series of potential eco-catastrophes? The second is more central: On the environment philosophers tend to fall either side of an irreconcilable divide. Either our moral concerns are grounded directly in nature, or the appeal is made via an anthropocentric set of interests. The lack of a common ground is disturbing. In this paper I attempt to diagnose the reason for this lack. I shall agree that wild nature lacks features of intrinsic moral worth, and that leaves a puzzle: Why is it once we subtract the fact that there is such a lack, we are left with strong intuitions against the destruction and/or pollution of wild nature? Such intuitions can be grounded only in a strong sense of aesthetic concern combined with a common-sense regard for the interests of sentient life as it is indirectly affected by the quality of the environment. I suggest also that of the positions on offer, a hybrid theory of the environment is best suited to address our first problem, that of having an effective influence in the polity.

Introduction

There are two irreconcilable perspectives in environmental ethics, viz., an anthropocentric (or shallow green) position, and a non-anthropocentric (or deep green) position. I argue neither is wholly satisfactory, and that the way out is not new: what ought to be driving our environmental concerns is not purely a moral matter, but an aesthetic one as well. What is thus needed is a hybrid theory of environmentalism. I suggest that our non-derivative moral concerns can and ought to be for future generations of sentient creatures, but in addition, should be driven by the obligation to preserve objects of great aesthetic value.

The hybrid account has the merit of tapping easily into familiar intuitions. It is this familiarity I regard as crucial to a theory's potential for action-guidingness. The pressing problems of environmental degradation are not going to be addressed unless people's normative motivations are given the right intuitive base from which to express themselves. I think there are two such intuitions, expressible metaphorically this way: why does anyone invest time, money and effort into maintaining a home? The answer, roughly, is that a home is supposed to provide the conditions for comfortable living but also a place for expression of one's aesthetic sense. This is confirmed in endless ways once we consider the many aspects of design, decoration and the rest that occupy much of our domestic time. Something like this simple thought, *mutatis mutandis*, ought to drive

our grander environmentalist concerns.

The Deep and the Shallow

The challenge to devise an environmental ethic has been confronted by two irreconcilable theoretical perspectives, sometimes labelled (following Naess (1973)) the shallow and deep green views. These labels are used in a variety of ways, so let me first explain how I will use them. Deep greens, as I characterise them, assume that the environment (including usually much of its inanimate mass) matters morally in itself. They regard the value of the environment as something greater than the summed value of its parts. Such a holistic approach implies that in certain circumstances trading off the interests of individual members of the environment in favour of the integrity of the biosphere, or the ecosystems it contains, is something that is morally permissible. By contrast, shallow greens treat non-sentient material – including such things as forests, species or ecosystems – as having value only to the extent that it contributes, or could contribute, to the well-being of, typically, individual humans. Some theorists, e.g., Peter Singer, extend the sphere of moral considerability to all individual *sentient* creatures. There may be some reluctance to regard a theory with such an extension still as a shallow theory, but I will regard it this way, for reasons that should become clear as we proceed. This theory, which regards all and only individual sentient creatures as having intrinsic value, I will call the *extended shallow view*.

The Deep View and Moral Motivation

The deep green view is one whose object of direct moral concern is the biosphere, and so one that cannot be accused of failing to take environmental issues seriously; but this is a view that faces substantial difficulties in connecting its first order prescriptions with agents' moral motivations. A moral theory needs to be plausibly action-guiding, prescribing tolerable moral demands for its practitioners. A thoroughgoing deep green approach to environmental practice would require a radical re-prioritisation of our ordinary moral codes. Environmentally right action is defined here in terms of its positive contribution to the integrity of the biosphere as a whole, or as action that "...tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (Aldo Leopold, 1993: 99). Environmentally wrong action is thus any action that would undermine such properties of the biosphere. Already, then, much human activity is in breach of deep green moral precepts. To even get started on the proper path would require, for example, a massive "de-mobilisation" of industry, the winding back of development, and the immediate reversal of population growth trends. That is not to say that measures in a similar direction of a more moderate kind should not be pursued, but the deep green theorist offers such measures as a mere starting point; what would then follow is a radically different approach to living that treats human interests, and any other particular sentient interests, as something very much secondary to the interests inherent in a wider ecological scheme.

Certain forms of morality are sometimes accused of being over-demanding, of prescribing to ordinary human agents patterns of behaviour they are just not up to performing. Act utilitarianism, for example, is sometimes thought about this way, or indeed, moral codes generally that demand we become moral saints if we are not to hypocritically mock the moral system we espouse.¹ What is wrong with such systems of ethics, among other things, is that taking seriously what they tell us to do cuts us off from the things that make us human, from our concerns for

those close to us, and our ordinary moral integrity. Internalising the values of the deep green position in a motivationally realistic way would have similar effects. To see what kind of effects, consider the following comments from some deep green theorists. Callicott (1995: 46) says “The preciousness of individual deer, as of *any* other specimen, is inversely proportional to the population of the species.” (My italics). Edward Abbey (1968: 20) puts what amounts to the same thing in less mincing fashion by pointing out that he would sooner shoot a man than a snake. Not disconcerted by this, Callicott (op. cit.) comments, “This is perhaps only [Abbey’s] way of dramatically making the point that the human population has become so disproportionate from the biological point of view that if one had to choose between a specimen of *Homo sapiens* and a specimen of a rare even if unattractive species, the choice would be moot.” Finally Garrett Hardin (1969: 176) strongly recommends limiting access to wilderness. Emergency roads and airborne access are out; if there is a serious accident Hardin recommends that the wilderness adventurer should get out alone, or die in the attempt. After all, he says, great and spectacular efforts to save an individual “...[make] sense only when there is a shortage of people. I have not lately heard that there is a shortage of people.”

Leaving aside qualms about the moral content of these thoughts it suffices to point out the deep implausibility of thinking that human agents quite *generally* might be capable of acting from the deep perspective. If the arguments in relation to the over-demandingness of certain impartialist moral theories (by Wolf, Williams, Cocking and Oakley, and others) have any bite, then *a fortiori*, they should have bite against a theory whose prescriptions are even more demanding. Perhaps there is a logically possible world containing deep green agents. But it is not a world where the kinds of interpersonal and social relations we currently value continue to be maintained. The view is thus severely at odds with ordinary assumptions concerning our practical reason. People simply are not up to its practical demands. Moreover, given that there are certain shallow green alternatives to it, which also reject the normative *status quo*, we might think that the deep green alternative is an unnecessary one.³ Note finally that even if we accepted the possibility that agents might be morally motivated by the deep green agenda, it could still be argued that, given the current precarious state of the environment, together with the present corporate and government institutional arrangements that operate worldwide, there simply is not enough time to effect the kind of psychological paradigm shift required. Thus there may be a decisive, if purely pragmatic reason, telling against the deep perspective, and this is something deep greens themselves might, and perhaps should recognise.

Holism and Individualism

Let me begin this section by first defining the notion of moral considerability. An object that is morally considerable is one that we take directly into account in our moral deliberations either because we attribute rights to it, or because we think the thing has intrinsic value. Several writers have noticed an ambiguity in the notion of intrinsic value. First, we can talk about the value of something as an end, as opposed to the value of something as an instrument to some end. Or we can talk about the value we associate with something in virtue of its intrinsic properties, as opposed to the value a thing has extrinsically, that is, the value a thing has in virtue of its relation to some other thing. I include here, under the rubric of moral considerability, both senses of intrinsic value.⁴ According to the extended shallow view, it is individual sentient creatures that have moral considerability. The vulnerability of sentient animals to suffering demands we treat

them as ends; and their having an independent perspective on the world (perhaps as persons, perhaps something less) requires a recognition of the (morally valuable) property of subjectivity. The deep view on the other hand typically takes the biosphere itself, or the ecosystems it contains, as the appropriate morally considerable objects. The biosphere is an object of value in itself and so the role individuals play within it is to be considered valuable only in so far as they contribute to its value. The deep view thus enjoins its practitioners to take a holistic approach to moral decision-making; what this means, roughly, is that practical deliberation should be dominated by thoughts about whether one's actions will turn out to be, all things considered, best for the environment. It implies that in certain circumstances the interests of some individuals within the biosphere may be traded off if doing so contributes to the well being, or the integrity of the whole system. As we saw earlier this view is unnecessarily harsh. The harshness stems from combining a morally monistic account of intrinsic value with a holistic account. As Elliot Sober (1995: 241) puts it, "Here we have a view that is just as monolithic as the most single-minded individualism; the difference is that the unit of value is thought to exist at a higher level of organization." Further, apart from its harshness, the monistic deep view would fail to provide much if any guidance on a range of practical dilemmas. Consider those cases where we must decide on a matter of environmental importance in a context where there is no threat to the basic integrity of the biosphere. In such cases how does the deep green theorist compare the value of a mosquito with that of a chimpanzee? In the absence of a criterion for the making of such comparisons, a large number of quite important cases just fail to be dealt with. Any serious environmental ethic must supply a means of comparison, even if only rough, for cases where there are competing interests between individuals or groups of individuals.

Extended shallow green environmental ethics do not presuppose an untenable picture of the moral psychology of agents, even though here too there are some difficulties. The main difficulty for the extended shallow view lies in providing a plausibly robust environmental ethic, since its prescriptions to act will by definition make the environment matter morally only in so far as it matters to sentient life. That makes the shallow view, on the face of it, a risky view. For it fails to really guarantee protection of the non-sentient parts of the environment. It affords no direct protection to a large range of places and objects where it is estimated their destruction would have no negative effect on sentient life. Moreover, where it is thought destruction of some place or object would on balance contribute to the well-being of sentient creatures, there would be, in fact, a positive argument in favour of such destruction.

Thus although the difficulties the deep view faces look fatal, it is clear that the shallow view, even the extended version, is far from satisfactory. It is worth considering, then, whether the deep/shallow distinction doesn't artificially rule out some kind of intermediate position, one that might yet allow for the conjoining of attitudes from both sides of its divide. I initially thought this would not be possible because shallow greens emphasise a moral atomism, or individualism. Shallow greens value ecosystems only in so far as they can aggregate their concern for the individuals within the system; deep greens, by contrast, consider individuals that have a subversive impact on the larger systems they depend on as having negative value, even if, considered in themselves, such individuals realise the kind of value emphasised in more traditional moral frameworks. But if we think of either side of the shallow/deep green divide as supplying a list of the things that are morally considerable, then there seems no reason why we cannot simply add the biosphere, or its ecosystems, to the list of *individuals* that are morally considerable. In other

words, we continue the moral extensionism adopted by the shallow position, beyond sentient life to inanimate natural objects, right out to the biosphere. This theoretical shift is well-motivated of course, because it would provide the shallow green with a way of accommodating the charge of its being anti-biocentric in character.

However, there is, at the same time, the following associated cost. To engage in this extreme moral extensionism only makes sense if we adopt a metaphysical shift in the way we think of the biosphere (or its ecosystems). What motivates concern for *sentient individuals*, if you are a shallow green, is that they have the capacity to feel pain, and to suffer, and this is particularly important for entities which have a point of view, a perspective on the world, or entities that constitute some kind of conscious agency. If a shallow green is to assimilate the biosphere into the fold of morally considerable individuals, whilst preserving what genuinely motivates membership in this moral club, it requires a metaphysical shift away from thinking of the biosphere as simply an (unconscious) system, or set of systems. It requires some attribution of sentience, or of consciousness, or of agency, or at the very least some kind of fairly radical revisionist attitudes to such a thing based on its being more than just the set of individuals that make it up. Such suggestions have been made, and it is important to note that if we are to attach significance to thinking about the biosphere in this new kind of way, such attributions cannot be understood merely metaphorically. James Lovelock (1975), and Freya Mathews (1991) following him, regard the global ecosystem as a kind of self with its own built-in mechanism for self-realisation, and refer to it by the name of the Greek Goddess Gaia. If such attributions of selfhood, hitherto thought to be inanimate objects, are meant literally, then the burden of proof falls to the deep green to demonstrate this literal significance, or at the very least provide some grounds for doubting our common-sense framework regarding these matters. At this point, there is no evidence for thinking these larger systems have any of the psychological attributes the higher animals have, and there is little motivation for scientific research into the question. So I am doubtful about extending our ordinary sentience-based morality to these larger systems. What this shows, ultimately, is that the attempt to find an intermediate position along the deep/shallow divide that could be accepted by a majority of theorists is simply not going to wash.

I have so far explored the well-worn paths in environmental meta-ethics, but without satisfaction. The general methodology has been to argue for a base class of objects we regard as morally considerable as a way of generating beliefs about the duties or obligations we have towards such objects. Extending moral membership to individuals other than human beings or at any rate sentient beings, offends our moral sensibilities, is morally impractical, and forces an unnecessary shift in metaphysical commitments. But on the other hand the failure to extend is morally risky business indeed. For both Kantians and utilitarians, there is no direct moral commitment to nature itself, to the preservation of species, to old growth forests, or to wilderness areas generally. A purely anthropocentric environmental ethic is forever doomed to make compromises against the natural environment in favour of its core ethical membership, viz., human beings; the extended shallow view may do a little better, but in the end even this theory will prescribe protective measures regarding the natural environment only consequent upon our duties to sentient creatures.

The failure of both the deep and shallow views thus places us in a quandary. There is no doubt a theory of environmentalism is needed which overcomes the chauvinism of the shallow position, but

such a theory must somehow sidestep the controversial ground we arrive at from the deep perspective. The outlook for such a position is pessimistic to say the least. Indeed, we should go a step further. Given the dilemma I have posed what really should be faced squarely is the fact that there just is no such thing as an environmental ethic. The extended shallow view represents the outer edge of any ethic attempting to bring non-sentient nature into its purview. This position – the end of the line for theories deserving the tag ‘ethic’ – is not an environmental ethic, but permits decisions that indirectly (and only contingently) place restrictions on our behaviour in relation to the environment. I suppose if we had to choose between the shallow and deep views then the former is what we would opt for since the former at least provides the hope of a solution at the level of political economy. The latter does not. This would be a pessimistic outlook indeed, but it is premised on the imperative of the two-option choice; fortunately there is another option.

In what remains I want to present a hybrid theory that combines a familiar variety of extended shallow green ethic committed to future generations with an environmental aesthetic. Such a hybrid view supplements the axiological foundations of environmentalism by going beyond ethics, but not beyond shallow green ethics; it emphasises a central connection between valuing wild nature for itself and valuing the future for the generations to come. What animates such a theory is the simple thought that wild nature is an object of great aesthetic value as well as an object that sustains a certain kind of life. We are thus enjoined to tailor our practical commitments in ways that avoid undermining these qualities. The advantage of such a theory – particularly over the deep green view earlier criticised – is that one’s environmental commitments connect in a plausible way with familiar notions, e.g., protecting the beauty of the environment for the sake of one’s children. Such familiarity is important also from the perspective of the possibility of rapid implementation of environmental programmes. In what follows I give a short sketch of the hybrid view beginning with the aesthetic component.

Themes in Aesthetics

I start from the premise that any object that is potentially an intentional object is apt for appreciation in the aesthetic sense. The ‘potentially’ is crucial of course since we cannot, for example, have thoughts about future objects that do not exist now, and they are absolutely central to the case. So not only intentional objects are aesthetic objects, and I do not think that only material objects have the potential to be aesthetically appreciable objects. Obviously abstract, and purely fictional entities can fill the role as well. Thus I include among the aesthetic objects such diverse things as the film *Citizen Kane*, the square root of 42, a nicely formed crater on an undiscovered planet, a cough, a pair of muddy gumboots, or a clear mountain stream tumbling down a forested ravine.

At various points in the history of aesthetics attempts have been made to circumscribe a narrower field than the open one just outlined. The word ‘aesthetics’ derives from the Greek *aisthanesthai* ‘to perceive’, and Kant for example defined aesthetics as ‘the science of the conditions of sensuous perception’. Contemporary dictionaries define ‘aesthetics’ narrowly in terms of the philosophical study of beauty and taste; or the study of the principles of art. Plato’s answer to the question “what is beauty?” emphasised the form of the object over its content; Aristotle reduced beauty to three essentials, viz., wholeness, harmony and radiance. However, the concern to regard aesthetic appreciation as focusing on beautiful objects of sense cannot really be supported. To see why, it is worth first distinguishing between what Porteous (1996: 22) calls the sensory, formal, and symbolic

modes of aesthetic appreciation. As he puts it:

Sensory aesthetics is concerned with the pleasurable nature of the sensations one receives from the environment; it is concerned with sounds, colours, textures and smells. Formal aesthetics is more concerned with the appreciation of the shapes, rhythms, complexities and sequences of the visual world. Symbolic aesthetics involves the appreciation of the meanings of the environments that give people pleasure...

Clearly one can take pleasure in objects that are not beautiful in any classical sense as possessing such qualities as uniformity, harmony, diversity, proportion and so forth. Some of the music of certain modernist composers, Stravinsky for example, could hardly answer to these qualities; the *Rite of Spring* is not a work to be described as beautiful. ‘Sublime’, ‘powerful’, even ‘primitive’ are more apt descriptors and it is noteworthy that despite becoming one of the greatest ballets of the twentieth century, the opening-night audience in 1913 were so loud in their protests that the dancers could barely hear the music. Obviously this was an audience used to beautiful music.

One can obviously take pleasure in non-sensory objects. Despite Porteous’s emphasis on the visual world, one can have a formally aesthetic experience that focuses for example on the elegance of a proof in symbolic logic, the moves in a chess game one plays in the head, or the mathematical precision of an architectural masterpiece one has imagined prior to the design stage. In summary, then, it is simply too narrow to think of aesthetic experience as hooking up only to beautiful art objects in one’s sensory field.

Another distinction worth observing is one that runs parallel to ethics. Korsgaard (1988) has pointed out that in our western ethical tradition there have been two kinds of emphasis. Utilitarians, with roots in the empiricist tradition, have emphasised the passive aspect of human nature. Human persons are seen as vessels for the having of experiences, and this leads to a moral outlook that prescribes that we make these experiences as pleasant as possible, by acting to minimise burdens and maximise benefits. In the Kantian tradition, on the other hand, emphasis is placed on our capacities as free and rational agents. Our natures are seen as more active; so, rather than emphasise what persons should have happen to them, the Kantian focuses on what persons should do. Korsgaard does point out that the difference in our natures so described is a difference in emphasis only, since Utilitarians are of course concerned with what a moral person should do, and Kantians are of course concerned with what agents should have happen to them. But here the different emphases on aspects of our nature does re-emerge. A Utilitarian agent should be a rational maximiser of moral goods, usually aimed in an impartial way, and in the form of *good experiences*. By contrast, Kantian agents, as Korsgaard puts it, ‘should be given the freedom to make their own choices, and to do things for themselves’ (1988: 102).

In aesthetics, we also exhibit an active and a passive disposition. In the arts, for example, we are sometimes moved to create, to imagine, and to produce works of aesthetic merit; on the other hand, paralleling the passive in ethics, we are moved to experience such works, as well as other assorted objects, a cough perhaps, or a muddy pair of gumboots. More generally, nearly all of us are concerned to groom ourselves for presentation in the social world, and again most of us are keen judges of such presentation. When it comes to the natural environment things are not so clear cut, since of course the producer of the work which is wild nature is not a person, unless of course, we want to regard the author of nature as God. (I do not, and will ignore such a contested position

here.) This observation leads us to inquire into the alleged differences between the appreciation of natural as opposed to cultural or art objects. It might be argued that appreciation of art objects provides the only paradigm for aesthetic experiences, and appreciation of natural objects cannot be assimilated to this paradigm; hence, we cannot take seriously the idea of an environmental aesthetic.

Although I do not accept the question-begging premise of this argument – that art objects provide the only paradigm examples of aesthetic objects – it will be instructive to note the points of difference between the natural and cultural as a way of shedding light on the nature of the aesthetic experience of natural objects. In the light of the active/passive distinction above, the first difference, it might be argued, is that the aesthetic value in natural objects is not something we create, but something we can only experience. But this really only reflects the obvious and necessary truth that wild nature is not an artefact. Further, we can say similar things about art objects. For example, having no knowledge of the process of creating music obviously is no hindrance to its appreciation. Still, what this argument does point up is that in cases where the aesthetic is available only passively, it is important to develop an understanding of how best to engage with the object in question. Subjects of such experiences are, in a sense, then, not completely passive, since after all much work often has to be done in order to situate yourself in relation to the object in order to maximise the value of the experience in question.

A second (alleged) difference is that natural objects are not presented to us in a frame, in a case, or on a stage, as are cultural ones. Nor are they part of some cultural heritage. As Porteous (1996: 23) describes it:

Philosophers are keen to emphasize the differences between natural objects and works of art. Works of art...are framed in some way, whereas natural objects are frameless. That which lies beyond the frame cannot be part of the aesthetic experience, whereas in a natural environment extraneous signals may intrude, as when aircraft noise penetrates a sylvan scene...Further, there appears to be no body of ‘critical literature’ or ‘systematic description’ to provide a background for interpretation. Whereas art appreciation is promoted by built-in guidelines to interpretation, contextual controls for our response that are deliberately placed there by the creator, no such guides can exist in nature. A landscape is an ‘unframed ordinary object’, and rigorous modern aesthetics simply cannot handle objects which have no author, no system underlying their making, and which belong to no known school.

Let me reiterate that I reject what really amounts to a question-begging presupposition here, viz., that unless an object comes to us framed – in some very general sense of that term – we are thereby rendered incapable of taking an aesthetic stance towards that object.⁵ Nevertheless, the framing problem does set a challenge to natural landscape aesthetes to specify criteria for making judgements about the value of the natural. That task is really not the burden of this paper, but it seems to me hardly one that is insurmountable. However, the tricky problem the framing issue does point to is why we might think the *naturalness* of certain landscapes is particularly special from an aesthetic point of view. I will later address this issue that largely turns on the difference between the value of an original versus the value of a copy or fake.

A final alleged difference between natural and art objects emerges out of a consideration of the framing problem. To frame an object in our general sense is to encapsulate it wholly in such a way that, at least in principle, we may provide conditions for its individuation, conditions that do not overlap with those of the viewer. So, for example, in art appreciation the lines between art object and viewer are generally clearly demarcated as when we partition off an audience from the performance, or rope off the statue or portrait, place covers around the novel, and so on. It is, by contrast, seemingly difficult to draw such neat lines between the viewer of nature and nature itself. Consider a person who has hiked into a heavily forested creek gully. The only sounds are the running of crystal clear waters over mossy boulders, a warm breeze through trees on the bank adjacent and the distant cries of black cockatoos further up the valley. The soft green light is the product of a heavy canopy above with a rich complement of tree ferns standing around the trunks of three hundred year old mountain ash gums. Rich wildflower aromas bombard the nose. And so on. The person in this scene is, so to speak, inside the frame of nature, and has become, again in a sense, a part of that nature.

In response, is it really clear that art and nature are so different in their relation to the viewer? Surely there is no genuine problem separating a person from a natural environment, just as there is no genuine problem separating a viewer of art and the art object. In both cases the viewer may disengage from the aesthetic experience. It may take longer in the case of the hiker, compared to the theatre-goer, but that's irrelevant. But perhaps the idea is not one of potential disengagement from the object, but rather that whereas you can lose yourself in a natural setting, you can never do so in contemplation of an art object. If that is the view, then it is plainly false. For many people, the art world provides their main means of escape from the rigours of mundane reality.

Still, even if the argument fails, the idea of, metaphorically speaking, losing oneself in the object of appreciation is fecund. That the lines of individuation between the viewer and the object are muddled in fact provides rich possibilities for the development of a first order account of the aesthetics of environment.

Environmental Aesthetics

The dividing line between moral and aesthetic concern may be nicely made if we include sentient individuals in the moral camp, and non-sentient individuals such as trees, plants, and natural formations in the aesthetic camp. (Of course, I don't rule out the aesthetic regard we do have for sentient creatures – tigers for example, are majestic animals indeed – but I am far less sanguine about placing non-sentient entities of the type mentioned into the moral camp.) We should include in the aesthetic camp the troublesome entities for the shallow position such as ecosystems, and the biosphere. Environmentalism thus conceived avoids the very counterintuitive idea that there is a range of objects such as trees, rock formations, and ecosystems which may be made to suffer, have their interests frustrated, or have the satisfaction of their desires thwarted, yet it retains the idea that these things have value in themselves. The aesthetic dimension of this environmentalism also helps explain a lot of the ordinary judgements we make in connection with the environment, even possibly the difficult case of the extinction of a species. Taking out the aesthetic component, (extended) shallow greens such as Singer (1993) have a particular difficulty with the disvalue of extinctions because they place no value on species membership per se. In fact Singer takes some trouble to repudiate the idea that species membership has any moral relevance; he claims that favouring the interests of one's own kind constitutes speciesism, an arbitrary moral selectivism.

That's partly why someone holding his position finds it difficult to account for the strong intuition we have that the loss of a species is something far worse than the loss merely of the particular individual belonging to that species that is finally killed off.

An environmental aesthetic, though, can help to explain the gap that is left here. (Ironically, Singer (1993: pp 276-280) takes some time to repudiate environmental ethics that value non-sentient objects such as species, but despite his support for an environmental aesthetic, fails to give voice to an argument connecting aesthetics and species loss.)

There are strong parallels between the loss, say, of a great artwork such as a piece of music, and the loss of a species. A musical work has individual performances, just as a species has individual specimens. If the only copy of the music is lost, then there can be no more performances; similarly, if the genetic code for the species is lost as its last specimen dies, there can be no more individuals of that type. It is like losing forever a vital piece of information, though that is to underestimate what is at stake. In the case of the musical work an important artefact may disappear from the culture; in the case of a species (especially one of the calibre of say the thylacine), a slice of nature itself is gouged out from the face of the earth. We can contrast these two cases, where the significance of the loss is its finality, with the loss of tokens of some information type. If a print run of a mass-produced book on art is bungled, this represents a financial cost to the producer and no worse (I would of course acknowledge the environmental cost involving paper waste!). Similarly, if a plantation of pine trees is ruined by a wood-boring pest, the resulting disvalue is best measured in financial terms, not aesthetic ones. There is not a sense of finality involved in these kinds of losses.

There are other reasons why the aesthetic dimension of environmentalism is explanatorily felicitous. I return to an earlier theme concerning why we might think there is something special about the naturalness of aesthetic objects. Why is it that we are disturbed by the replacement of certain natural objects? Take the case of a mining company that attempts to replicate the natural environment it has just destroyed. We might think that even if the replacement is very good, or perhaps indistinguishable from the original, nonetheless something importantly essential is missing. What might this be? Robert Elliot (1995) argues that the way we value objects is partly determined by knowledge of their causal origin. There would thus be an important difference between a pile of rocks arranged in a certain way as a result of ancient volcanic activity, and a similar pile placed by a company engineer merely to mimic this arrangement. Or consider Elliot's example. Suppose you find out that a statue you had long treasured was carved from the bone of a person killed specially for the purpose. What had previously seemed intricate, delicate, and elegant is now judged in a different light. Cases of art forgeries, too, have the potential to cause in us a similar fundamental revision of the way we judge them. Faking nature, argues Elliot, is a bit like faking art. In tampering with the causal origins of a natural object one affects its value sometimes in quite acute ways.

Challenges

There have been challenges to the idea that the value of the natural environment is best understood as an aesthetic value. Val Routley comments that people who value wilderness do not do so merely because they like to soak up pretty scenery. (Cited in Elliot, p.87) In keeping with this objection is the idea that wilful and unnecessary destruction of pristine wilderness is bad because of its effects

on sight-seers, not particularly because of the damage done to the environment. What drives these thoughts is the idea that aesthetic judgements are merely human judgements, and consequently if there were no humans (or more generally aesthetes) there would be no aesthetic value in nature. The argument implies it is right to retain bits of wild nature if that is what humankind chooses. Those who run this argument think that there is no necessary connection between aesthetic value and intrinsic natural value, and assert that a profoundly changed nature might come to be regarded as more pleasing than having large tracts of untouched wilderness. Perhaps in several generations, they say, people might come to value the idea of turning what's left of our unspoiled areas into enormous botanical gardens.

The implications of this argument would certainly weaken the position I am sketching. Part of the motivation for introducing aesthetics into the picture is to avoid the shallow green idea that non-sentient wild nature is only derivatively valuable. The alleged problem for this position, put starkly, is that such wild nature can never be defended on the grounds that it alone provides the source of aesthetic value. In other words the alleged problem is that environmental aesthetics reduces to a form of anthropocentrism, the very thing the aesthetic argument was designed to get around. The “botanical gardens” argument, as I call it, is really another version of the so-called ‘anthropocentric fallacy’. (See Fox 1990: 21) Those who commit this fallacy think that because of the way we view the world we are unable to make judgements that somehow escape the human-centred perspective. The sense in which this is true is trivial and banal. Obviously I cannot, in any literal sense, view the world the way my cat views it. Moreover, it does not follow from this trivial sense of anthropocentrism that our judgements of value must reduce to, or somehow depend on our being human. That position must be explicitly argued for, and indeed often is, especially by some economists. Similarly, the conclusion of the “botanical gardens” argument cannot depend merely on the claim that human beings are the ones with aesthetic preferences. What would need to be shown is that on the whole human beings are inevitably capricious about such preferences. That claim simply ignores all of the reasons there are for regarding wild nature as an extraordinarily valuable object. It is noteworthy that human beings converge on the same kinds of reasons for making such a judgement, e.g., we point to the naturalness of wilderness, its diversity, the rareness of a species, the self-sustaining nature of an ecosystem, its ruggedness, its unpredictability, and so on. None of these features are anthropocentrically based; the diversity of wilderness, for example, *grounds* our aesthetic response to that characteristic, not the other way around.

A second challenge to an environmental aesthetic would claim that it is motivationally inert. Tony Lynch (1996) has put the point eloquently as follows:

The crucial point is that in aesthetic experience...the object of the experience makes no *direct demands for action* on the spectator. The object is not viewed in such a way that it generates demands which bear directly on our will, leading us at once...to favour certain kinds of actions towards it over others, and nor does it engender in us any system of desires for doing anything immediately with it, except perhaps...to continue gazing at it, or listening to it, or whatever. Indeed, if we look at some object and see it immediately through the eyes of desire or duty, then we are not contemplating for the moment anything aesthetic, for it is the mark of aesthetic experience that in it the will is *silent*. (Lynch, p. 154)

As Lynch insightfully notes, that the will is silent in aesthetic contemplation is in fact precisely what is needed in an environmentalism that does not, in the end, see nature as a mere instrument in the satisfaction of human interests. Nevertheless, environmentalists are keen to enlist the services of people opposed to those who see nature this way. If the aesthetic strand of environmentalism contains no action-guiding component, then it will fail a crucial theoretical test. At this point it would be helpful if we could appeal to the other shallow green strand in my theory to fill the action-guiding gap. But as we have seen, an unfortunate defect of the extended shallow view is that non-sentient nature benefits from our environmental concerns only contingently.

Lynch's way out of the motivation problem is to point out that although the will is silent *in* aesthetic reflection, it is obviously not silent *about* aesthetic reflection, as evidenced by our deep commitments to the arts, to personal presentation and the rest. Lynch further claims it is no argument against an environmental aesthetic that since we are the ones who act to preserve the aesthetic values in nature such a theory is really just another human-centred cop out from any serious environmental undertaking. To argue along such lines, says Lynch, would simply repeat the anthropocentric fallacy earlier discussed. Obviously any environmental theory is going to prescribe action on the part of human beings to respond to the environmental crisis. The interesting question comes down to what ultimately drives those actions. The charge of anthropocentrism has bite only if one's environmental theory is driven ultimately by human utility. Lynch claims this is not the case since the aesthetic objects in nature are those

...which we must be able to experience and think of independently of the human-centred moral demand for sympathy, or of our equally human-centred instrumental purposes. The very point of the aesthetic attitude on this view is to protect and to cherish that which makes no human, no moral and no instrumental, demands on us. (Lynch, p.154)

It is all very well to claim that the environment places no demands on us – that is simply to reiterate the point about the silence of the will in aesthetic experience – but the important point that needs to be made has to do with our ultimate motivation for preserving aesthetic value in nature. Lynch (p.154) claims that his view is not substantially anthropocentric because “...the possibility of aesthetic experience means that it is important to us that there are objects which are suited to, or can sustain this experience.” We ought to be uneasy about one possible reading of this statement. If a necessary condition for the existence of aesthetic value in nature is the possibility of experiencing that value, then despite Lynch's claims to the contrary, such a position would collapse back into some kind of shallow green view. In order to avoid this, it needs to be stated unequivocally that aesthetic value resides in nature independently of human perceivers. We discover it; we do not invent it. This de-linking is of course conceptual. There is, however, a link in practical reason. A central reason motivating our interest in nature is precisely because of its *wild* qualities, and this can be further explained with reference to an earlier point about the compromises made in faking nature. We will only understand the value that attaches to our aesthetic experiences of nature when we notice a necessary presupposition underlying the content of those experiences, viz., that the objects in those experiences lie outside them, unconstructed by them, and with a largely unperturbed causal history linking the experience to the object now represented.

I now turn briefly to the second aspect of the hybrid theory. A standard argument raised by those who place human beings at the centre of moral considerability links environmental concerns to the responsibilities borne to future generations. What is this link? Essential to the protection of the vital needs of future generations is an environment that sustains them. And by ‘vital needs’ is meant those (pretty unsophisticated) needs, the protection of which ensures a fundamental level of physical survival. This would include the continuing capacity to breathe sufficiently untainted air so as to live to a natural age, the capacity to produce sufficient amounts of food, provide sufficient amounts of clean water, and to ensure an ongoing supply of energy to maintain ordinary kinds of infrastructure such as transport and communications. Vast amounts of evidence have now been accumulated supporting the proposition that in order to safeguard such needs public policy must be designed to protect them, since it is the failure in this area that has led to the kinds of polluting behaviour and profligacy which threatens the well-being of future, and in many cases present, peoples. Indeed, if it is thought there exists an obligation to maintain conditions necessary for the physical survival of people right now – and this is something both deontologists and consequentialists would readily assent to – then why not think this obligation exists for people outside our time who we can affect? This observation leads to an argument that draws a parallel between space and time – the basic idea is that since distance across space does not make a moral difference, distance across time should not either.

Morality knows no spatial borders. This point can be put in two quite separate ways, both relevant to the present task. First, if someone is made to suffer in circumstances *c*, then this counts as morally bad in all relevantly similar circumstances to *c* regardless of place. The suffering of an innocent child is morally repugnant here, just as it is in another country, or anywhere else on the planet and beyond for that matter. Second, in judgements of moral responsibility spatial location is irrelevant. If a child is left in my care so that I am given the responsibility for her welfare, we do not think this responsibility diminishes in any way connected with where I am relative to the child. Suppose my responsibility lies in providing financial support for the child. In failing this responsibility it would be no excuse to explain that because I had moved away I could no longer be expected to pay, if that was meant to excuse the *failure of responsibility* (it might explain a difficulty I had in paying, but that’s not to the point).

Morality knows no temporal borders either. Again, there are two ways of expressing this idea. First, an instance of suffering is morally bad regardless of when it occurs. If the circumstances are the same surrounding two (or more) such instances that are temporally remote from one another, then this distance alone cannot supply a reason for moral differentiation. Second, with respect to moral responsibility, distance in time also is irrelevant. If my reckless actions cause harm in the future, then I may be held responsible for those harmful consequences regardless of how far in the distance they will occur. (We could imagine a time-travelling police officer from centuries in the future arriving minutes after I have just buried toxic waste in the ground to report on the horrible deaths I have just caused, and duly arresting me for the crime.) To return to the environment, there are now many experts whose very task it is to predict the consequences of current polluting behaviour for the future. There is ample information for potential polluters, it is widely known that there is, and it is widely known that there are scientific practices devoted to supplying such information. For example, major developments in sensitive areas are typically subject to an environmental impact study. Moral responsibility is thus a concept perfectly well applicable over the generations.

The reason that the degree of distance is irrelevant to our judgements of moral responsibility for both space and time is because what really matters is that there be a causal link between act and consequence, and the length of this causal chain is orthogonal to questions about the applicability of the concept. Indeed, the contrast between space and time often raised in the literature is somewhat of a contrivance designed to help bring out some intuitions we have about these cases. Any case is going to involve an act and a consequence separated by either more or less space-time. Even the apparently “pure” spatial case involves a temporal gap. The central point is that the nature and length of the causal chain that links an action of mine to its consequences is not something directly relevant to judgements about my being the object of praise or blame for that action. Let me add that, of course, there merely being a causal link between act and consequence is not a sufficient condition for moral responsibility, but rather a necessary one.

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to specify the only thing an account of environmentalism could be. I have argued it could not be simply a moral theory, indeed that the moral dimension of environmentalism really should take a back seat to the aesthetic dimension. An environmental aesthetic overcomes the problems of shallow green ethics because it places the environment appropriately at the centre of our concerns; this is something the deep green movement emphasised but they failed to provide a convincing rationale for believing it.

Finally, we should notice an obvious connection between the two strands of the theory here presented. A policy motivated by aesthetic concerns will preserve wild nature and address the problem of pollution, among other things. It thereby acts in a morally responsible way in terms of the way it affects the welfare of future generations, and it acts in an aesthetically responsible way by attending to nature itself thereby protecting objects of immeasurable value. By so protecting them such a policy provides for the conditions under which future generations may benefit from these objects. Such a policy is thus grounded in the two intuitions we began with, namely that the planet deserves protection in order not to disrespect its beauty, and in order to continue to provide the conditions for an appropriate standard of habitation.

Steve Matthews

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics

Charles Sturt University

References

Abbey, Edward (1968) *Desert Solitaire*. New York: Ballantine Books

Callicott, J. Baird (1995). “Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair.” In Robert Elliot (ed) *Environmental Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cocking, Dean and Oakley, Justin (1995). “Indirect Consequentialism, Friendship, and the Problem of Alienation.” *Ethics*, 106, 86-111.

Elliot, Robert (1995). “Faking Nature.” In Robert Elliot (ed) *Environmental Ethics*. Oxford:

Oxford University Press.

Fox, Warwick (1990) *Towards a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*. Boston: Shambala.

Green, Karen (1996) "Two Distinctions in Environmental Goodness." *Environmental Values*, 5, 31-46.

Hardin, Garrett (1969) "The Economics of Wilderness." *Natural History* 78, 173-7.

Korsgaard, Christine M. (1988) "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 18, 101-32

Korsgaard, Christine M. (1983) "Two Distinctions in Goodness." *The Philosophical Review*, 92, 169-95.

Leopold, Aldo (1993) "The Land Ethic." In Michael E. Zimmerman (ed) *Environmental Philosophy*. London: Prentice-Hall.

Lovelock, James (1975) "The Quest for Gaia." *New Scientist*, 65.

Lovelock, James (1979) *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford: OUP.

Lynch, Tony (1996) "Deep Ecology as an Aesthetic Movement." *Environmental Values*, 5, 147-60.

Mathews, Freya (1991) *The Ecological Self*. London: Routledge

Naess, Arne (1973) "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary." *Inquiry* 16, 95-100.

Porteous, J. Douglas (1996) *Environmental Aesthetics: Ideas, Politics and Planning*. London: Routledge.

Routley, Val (1975) "Critical Notice of Passmore's *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 53, 171-185.

Singer, Peter (1993) *Practical Ethics* 2nd edition. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sober, Elliot (1995) "Philosophical Problems for Environmentalism", In Robert Elliot (ed) *Environmental Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williams, Bernard and Smart J.J.C. (1973) *Utilitarianism: for and against*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Notes

1. See, for example, Susan Wolf (1982).

2. See for example Bernard Williams (1973); also Dean Cocking and Justin Oakley (1995).

3. At this point we are considering the two moral alternatives only.

4. See Karen Green (1996). Green follows Korsgaard (1983).

5. Porteous is outlining a view held by others; I am not claiming that Porteous has begged the question.

Copyright © 2002, Humboldt State University