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Environmental Values, Anthropocentrism and Speciesism

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ABSTRACT: Ethical reasoning of all types is anthropocentric, in that it is addressed to agents, but anthropocentric starting points vary in the preference they accord the human species. Realist claims about environmental values, utilitarian reasoning and rights-based reasoning all have difficulties in according ethical concern to certain all aspects of natural world. Obligation-based reasoning can provide quite strong if incomplete reasons to protect the natural world, including individual non-human animals. Although it cannot establish all the conclusions to which anti-speciesists aspire, it may establish many of them with some clarity.

KEYWORDS: Anthropocentrism, obligations, rights, speciesism

Most of us agree that we should value the environment, or at least some bits of the environment; fewer of us agree why we should do so. Leaving aside answers that appeal to sheer prudence or mere preference and looking at some of the array of answers offered under the heading of 'environmental ethics' leaves a great deal obscure.

One reason for valuing the environment might be that it is the locus of distinctive 'environmental values', which we can discover, recognise and then respect and preserve in appropriate ways – or, of course, and more worryingly, fail to respect and preserve. This conception of environmental values as real features of the natural world is often invoked on behalf of views that are broadly speaking vaguely realist and (at least) *biocentric*, or (more commonly) emphatically *ecocentric*, and supposedly reject *anthropocentric* positions. Advocates of realist forms of ecocentric ethics assert that intrinsic ecological values are objectively there in the natural world, whether or not there are any human beings who will recognise these values, and whether or not human beings who recognise the values act to preserve or respect them. Ecological realism can seem both thorough and objective. The values, whatever they may be, are part of the furniture of the universe and make their claims regardless of whether there is any audience, let alone an attentive audience, for the claims.

By contrast, living by an anthropocentric ethics is taken to put the environment, and above all the natural environment, at risk. If anthropocentric ethics derives its views of how we may act on the natural world from features of human life, it can supposedly accord the natural world little respect or protection. Such fears make it easy to understand the appeal of a realist and ecocentric ethic, which ostensibly puts real values, among them real environmental values, first, so is able both to underpin appeals for animal rights or liberation, and to support the wider ethical claims of various sorts of 'deep' or radical ecology.

The main drawback of appeals to real environmental values is that the ambitious claim that the environment, or nature, is the locus of distinctive, real values is so hard to establish. Yet unless we can show that there are indeed real environmental values, appealing to them will not provide *any* sort of reason for respecting or protecting the environment.¹ What makes it hard to establish these real values is the *realism* rather than the *ecocentrism*, a metaphysical difficulty that cannot be overcome by the merits of the cause which real environmental values are supposed to support. Appeals to a position which, if true, would have strong implications will establish nothing at all if the truth of the position cannot be shown. If no realist account of value, environmental or other, can be established, we have very strong reasons not to rely on one.

I cannot show that moral realism, and with it the view that there are real values located in the natural world, is false. What I shall try to show is that a plausible anthropocentric approach may provide a very great proportion of what many people hope to find in a realist and ecocentric approach, without making the same exacting metaphysical demands.

1. ANTHROPOCENTRISM, SPECIESISM AND RESULTS: UTILITARIANISM

If realist approaches to environmental ethics cannot be sustained, non-realist approaches may be more convincing. Yet the long-standing worry about non-realist approaches is that they are all anthropocentric,² in that they take human life (rather than some independent moral reality) as the starting point of ethical reasoning. Anthropocentric positions in ethics vary greatly. They include many forms of consequentialism (such as utilitarianism) as well as positions that take action rather than results as central (such as forms of contractualism, or action-based positions that take rights and obligations as the basic ethical categories).

A common criticism of anthropocentric positions in ethics is that they all incorporate what has come to be called *speciesism*. The term *speciesism*, which was coined by analogue with terms such as *racism* or *chauvinism*, is usually used as a label for *unjustified* preference for the human species. The problem with any form of speciesism, critics complain, is that it accords humans moral standing,

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but unjustifiably accords animals of other species no, or only lesser, standing. On some views speciesism is also unjustifiable in its denial of moral standing to other aspects of the environment, ranging from plants and rivers to abstract entities such as species, habitats and ecosystems, bio-diversity and the ozone layer. Speciesism, as defined, is self-evidently to be condemned, since it builds on something that cannot be justified.

Unfortunately the term *speciesism* is also often used (derogatorily) for any preference for the human species, regardless of whether the preference is justified or not. This dual usage makes it easy to beg questions. In order to avoid begging questions I shall use the term *speciesism* strictly for *unjustified* views about the moral standing of certain species, and leave the question whether any preferences can be justified open for discussion. However, I shall use the terms *anti-speciesist* and *speciesist* descriptively to refer to those who do and do not accord non-human animals (full) moral standing. Speciesists in this merely descriptive sense would be guilty of speciesism only if the preference they accord humans cannot be justified.

The view that anthropocentric positions in ethics are invariably committed to speciesism, so unjustifiably blind to the claims of non-humans, is, I believe, unconvincing. Anthropocentrism views ethics as created by or dependent on human action; speciesism builds a preference for human beings into substantive ethical views. Many anthropocentric positions have benign implications for environmental issues, and specifically for the lives of non-human animals.

To show this it might seem reasonable to turn first to that supposedly *least* speciesist of anthropocentric positions, utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is anthropocentric in the straightforward and indispensable sense that it takes it that ethical argument is addressed to human agents, and that only humans can take up (or flout) utilitarian prescriptions.³ However, Utilitarians claim to repudiate (human) speciesism because they offer reasons for according moral standing to all sentient animals. As Bentham put it, the way to determine moral standing is to ask not 'Can they *reason?* or can they *talk?* but can they *suffer?*'⁴ By taking sentience rather than ability to reason as the criterion of moral standing, utilitarians can show the ethical importance of animal welfare; some of them even aim or claim to justify a conception of animal liberation.⁵

Still, it is worth remembering that utilitarianism needs only a little twist to reach conclusions which anti-speciesists do not welcome. John Stuart Mill agreed with Bentham that happiness was the measure of value, but thought that it came in various kinds, and that the higher kinds were restricted to humans. He concluded that it was better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.⁶ Utilitarian reasoning about required trade-offs between different types of pleasure may demand that human happiness (of the higher sort) be pursued at the cost of large amounts of porcine misery. The readiness with which utilitarian thinking can return to prescriptions which favour humans is not unimportant: in a world

in which xenotransplantation from pigs to humans may be possible, Millian and Benthamite forms of utilitarianism will perhaps reach quite different conclusions about permissible action.

Even if this difficulty were set aside, there are other reasons why Utilitarian thinking cannot provide a comprehensive environmental ethics. Utilitarianism relies on a subjective conception of value which allows it to take account of non-human pleasure and pain, but equally prevents it from valuing either particular non-sentient beings or dispersed and abstract features of the environment: anything that is not sentient cannot suffer or enjoy, so is denied moral standing. Oak trees, bacteria and Mount Everest, species and habitats, ecosystems and biodiversity, the ozone layer and CO₂ levels are not sentient organisms, so utilitarians will conclude that they can have at most derivative value. They may value bacteria and habitats as constituting or providing the means of life for individual sentient animals; they may value bio-diversity as increasing the likelihood of future survival or pleasure for sentient animals: but they will not value these aspects of the environment except as means to pleasure or happiness in the lives of sentient beings.

A second, equally central feature of utilitarianism also suggests that, far from being the most environmentally benign of anthropocentric positions, it is inevitably highly selective in its concern for the environment. Utilitarian thinking, like other forms of consequentialism, insists that trading-off results is not merely permitted but required. Maximising happiness or welfare or pleasure can be achieved only by trading-off some outcomes to achieve others. There is no way in which to pursue the greatest happiness of the greatest number without pursuing happiness that will be enjoyed in some lives at the expense of suffering that is to be borne in other lives. Some of the outcomes that yield a lot of happiness (or welfare, or pleasure) in some lives – for example, economic growth and exclusive patterns of consumption – have high environmental costs which are not, or not fully, registered as suffering experienced in any sentient lives. Equally environmental damage that affects no sentient beings (e.g. destruction of arctic or desert wilderness with no or little destruction of sentient life) will not count as a cost or harm. More generally, maximising approaches that rely on a subjective measure of value will not merely *permit* but *require* pleasurable environmental damage whose costs escape their calculus.⁷

These worries might perhaps be assuaged to a limited degree by working out how environmental gain or damage could be more fully or better represented in utilitarian and cognate calculations.⁸ But better representation of environmental gain or damage in utilitarian and kindred reasoning is still only representation of their effects on sentient lives: a subjective measure of value is still assumed. There is no guarantee that such measures of value will register all environmental gain or damage, and no guarantee that widely shared or trivial short-term pleasures that damage the environment will not outweigh the pains caused by

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that damage. The destruction of wilderness or environmentally sensitive areas will be a matter for concern only insofar as it is not outweighed by the pleasure of destroying them; the suffering caused by destruction of fragile habitats with few but rare sentient inhabitants might be outweighed, for example, by the pleasures of tourism or gold-mining.

Utilitarianism and environmentalism are therefore inevitably uneasy allies, not simply because some versions of utilitarianism reinstate conclusions anti-speciesists would not welcome, but mainly because of the larger implications of an ethical position which treats a system of trade-offs among expected pleasure and suffering for the sentient as ethical bed-rock.

2. ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND ACTION: RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS

Some anthropocentric ethical positions may appear less hospitable to speciesism than utilitarianism is, in that they may be better structured to take account of a wider range of environmental concerns. For example, ethical reasoning that focuses on *action* rather than on *results* is quite evidently anthropocentric, since (as far as we know) only humans have full capacities for agency, and only they can heed (or flout) ethical prescriptions and recommendations. Yet such agent-centred reasoning may, I shall argue, offer a promising way of looking at environmental issues, and may even be less open than is utilitarian reasoning to the conclusions anti-speciesists dislike.

Most act-oriented ethical reasoning looks at required action, at rights and at obligations, rather than at preferred outcomes. It does not assume that there is any fundamental metric of value, objective or subjective; it does not identify required action by its contribution to results weighed in terms of that metric; it does not recommend or require that value be maximised by trading-off less valuable for more valuable results. Act-centred ethics, in its many forms, seeks to establish certain principles of obligation, or certain rights, which are to constrain not only individual action but institutions and practices. It accept institutions or practices that permit or require systems of trading-off for certain domains of life, such as commercial life. However, there is no general reason why act-centred ethics should endorse institutions and practices that permit, let alone require, trading-off or maximising to regulate all domains of life, and no reason why the trade-offs which they permit should be conducted in terms of utilitarian conceptions of value (a monetary metric could often be appropriate). The best known forms of act-centred ethics, which treat rights or obligations as the fundamental ethical categories, limit the domains of life in which trading-off is even permitted, and since they provide no general measure of value, objective or subjective, don't provide a framework for introducing it into all domains of life.

Yet act-centred ethics is often seen as hostile to the environment, because its explicit anthropocentric starting point is thought to entail an ineradicable preference for the human species. This criticism is often directed specifically at forms of act-oriented ethical reasoning which treat *rights* as central. Several criticisms are recurrent. First, although not all rights need be human rights, rights for other animals can be fitted in only with a bit of pushing and shoving.⁹ Second, some supposedly central human rights (such as certain property rights) – and perhaps some animal rights (such as rights to habitat) – can have high environmental costs.¹⁰ Third, rights-based thought appears every bit as blind as utilitarianism to concern for non-sentient particulars and abstract or dispersed features of the natural world.

However, these criticisms pale in the face of more general, structural problems in rights-based thought. The great advantage of rights-based ethics is that it is so beautifully adapted to making claims; its great disadvantage is that these claims can be made with flourish and bravado while leaving it wholly obscure who, if anyone, has a duty or obligation to meet them. Yet if nobody has obligations that correspond to a supposed right, then, however loudly it is claimed or proclaimed, the right amounts to nothing. Proclaiming rights is all too easy; taking them seriously is another matter, and they are not taken seriously unless the corollary obligations are identified and taken seriously. Although the rhetoric of rights has become the most widely used way of talking about justice in the last fifty years, it is the discourse of obligations that addresses the practical question *who ought to do what for whom?*¹¹ The anthropocentrism of rights discourse is, as it were, the wrong way up: it begins from the thought that humans are claimants rather than from the thought that they are agents. By doing so it can disable rather than foster practical thinking.

The profound structural difficulties of the discourse of rights can be obscured because many discussions of rights veer unselfconsciously between claims about *fundamental*, *natural* or *moral* rights and claims about *institutional* or *positive* rights. Identifying the obligations which are the counterparts to institutionalised or positive rights is unproblematic: here the move back to practical discourse is easily achieved. However, appeals to institutional and positive rights are not justifications of those rights: institutional and positive rights are the objects rather than the sources of ethical criticism and justification. In some societies some humans have had the positive rights of slave-masters, in others bears who kill or maim other animals have had positive rights to a trial. Neither fact establishes *anything* about the justice or the ethical acceptability of slavery or about the capacities of bears to act wrongly or unjustly, or their rights to due process. To establish what is right or wrong, just or unjust, rights-based reasoning would have to appeal to *fundamental*, *moral* or *natural* rights – yet these are the very rights whose counterpart obligations can so easily be overlooked, with the consequence that they are merely proclaimed and not taken

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seriously, and that a rhetorical rather than a practical approach to ethics is adopted.

These are ample reasons for act-oriented ethical reasoning to take obligations rather than rights as basic. A switch of perspective from recipience to action, from rights to obligations, carries no theoretical costs and may yield considerable gain: a focus on obligations will incorporate everything that can be covered by a focus on rights (since any genuine right must be matched by a converse obligation)¹² and can also incorporate any other less tightly specified obligations, which lack counterpart rights. (These obligations, traditionally termed *imperfect obligations*, may be the basis of certain virtues.¹³) By contrast, if rights are treated as basic, obligations without rights may simply be lost from sight.

Moreover, this switch of focus from rights to obligations is productive for environmental ethics, and for clarifying the differences between anthropocentrism and speciesism. The main advantage of taking obligations as basic is a simple gain in clarity about anthropocentrism. Even if some rights are not human rights, all obligations will be human obligations. Or, putting the matter more carefully, obligations can be held and discharged only where capacities for action and for reasoning reach a certain degree of complexity, and we have no knowledge of such capacities except among human beings and in the institutions created and staffed by human beings. Even among human beings these capacities are not universal. So in thinking about obligations, anthropocentrism about the locus of obligations is indispensable rather than inappropriate: without it obligations are not taken seriously. Since we cannot take rights seriously unless we take obligations seriously, anthropocentrism *about obligations* will be needed if we are to think seriously about any rights, including animal rights. This anthropocentrism about the locus of obligations accepts that all obligation-bearers are humans, more or less 'in the maturity of their faculties', but leaves open whether any right-holders are to be non-human, or lack 'mature' faculties.

In taking obligations seriously we have also to take an accurate view of the claims of entities which may end up on the receiving end of action, and it is here that issues about speciesism arise. Some of those on the receiving end will be individual human beings; others will be individual members of other species (sentient or non-sentient); yet others will be non-living features of the world (such as glaciers or volcanoes) or abstract and dispersed features of the world (such as species or bio-diversity, such as genetic traits or the ozone layer).

Noting the variety of beings who may be on the receiving end of action does not establish which of them have rights of which sorts. Some obligations to individuals, whether human or non-human, may have counterpart rights, which those individuals could claim or waive, or which could be claimed or waived on their behalves; other obligations may lack counterpart rights. Even where there are counterpart rights, they may not be vested in all the beings on the receiving end of required action. For example, there may be obligations to preserve bio-

diversity or endangered species or genetic traits, and it is conceivable that we owe such action to certain others, but it barely makes sense to speak of these aspects or features of the natural world as having rights. Individual sentient animals, whether human or not, and other locatable features of the world, have a certain unity and certain capacities for independent activity and response, which enable us at least to make sense of ascribing rights to them. It is far less plausible to ascribe rights to particulars which lack all capacities to act, let alone to abstract or dispersed aspects of the natural world that lack unity as well as capacities for independent activity or response. Obligations may be directed to entities of any type, but the coherence of attributing rights to inanimate or to abstract or dispersed features of the natural world is questionable. So a second advantage of an obligation-based over a rights-based approach to environmental ethics is that it readily allows for obligations that are directed towards wide ranges of features of the natural world, to some of which a rights-based approach will be blind.

None of this is to deny that certain obligations may have counterpart rights. Yet even when they do there is advantage in treating obligations as the basic ethical notion. Once obligations have been established, a central task of those on whom they fall may be to work out where they must be directed and whether those who are on the receiving end of action, or others, have rights to their performance, in short to determine whether there are any right-holders. A second task may be to collaborate in the construction of institutions and the fostering of practices which make a reality of meeting obligations and of respecting any counterpart rights. These tasks may prove obscure and burdensome, but in beginning with obligations we at least see them as the tasks of identifiable agents, whether individual or collective. The discourse of obligations, *because rather than despite of its evident anthropocentrism*, has the practical merit that it addresses agents rather than claimants.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL OBLIGATIONS: REJECTING INJURY

These are the substantial advantages in taking obligations rather than rights as the basic category of act-oriented ethics. However, in acknowledging these advantages we do not yet know *which* obligations human agents and the agencies they construct hold, nor *which* (if any) of these obligations have counterpart rights, or *who* the holders of these rights may be. The advantages are, so to speak, *structural*: they allow one to approach ethical questions, including those of environmental ethics, in full recognition of the unavoidable core of anthropocentrism, namely that obligations must be held by humans (often working in and through institutions), and without assuming either that there are real values embedded in the environment or that there is some generally valid subjective metric of value. If these structural advantages are to be of practical use

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the next step must be to provide some account, if inevitably a sketchy and incomplete account, of at least some obligations which could be environmentally important.

A first move in trying to identify environmentally significant obligations might be to ask which sorts of fundamental, as opposed to positive and institutional, obligations *could* be taken seriously. Like rights, obligations may be divided into *fundamental (moral, natural)* obligations, and *positive* or *institutional* obligations which presuppose certain institutions and practices. Many of the obligations which we discuss on a daily basis are positive or institutional obligations. Their basis and their justification is tied to that of certain institutions, practices and roles; if the institutions, practices or roles lack justification, so may their derivative or component norms and obligations. If institutions, practices and roles, and with them their derivative norms and obligations, are to be justified, the justification will have to go deeper and appeal to *fundamental (moral, natural)*, or (we may wish to say) to *human* obligations, which are not so tied.

One feature of fundamental, human obligations which obligations of role or status lack, is that their principles must be *universal* obligations, in the sense that they could be accepted and adopted (not necessarily discharged) by all agents. Whereas institutional and positive obligations are always *special* obligations, held in virtue of *special* relationships or roles, or entered into by *specific* transactions (promises, contracts), a *fundamental human obligation* cannot presuppose the legitimacy of differentiations on which special obligations build, hence must be adoptable by all agents if by any.

These considerations provide a basis for identifying the underlying principles for many obligations. If fundamental, human obligations must be universal obligations, then their principles must be adoptable by all. Many principles of action can readily be adopted by each and by all: anybody and everybody can make it a principle not to commit perjury, to cultivate a good reputation or to refrain from lying (how far each individual succeeds in translating these principles into action is quite a different matter and will depend on many contingent circumstances). Other principles of action that can be adopted by some, even by many, cannot be thought of as universally adoptable. Consider, for example, a principle of injuring others: if we try to imagine a world of agents all of whom adopt this principle we are bound to fail because (since a hypothesis of universal failure is unreasonable) at least some people will succeed in injuring others, thereby rendering at least some others their victims, thereby preventing those others from acting, and in particular from acting on a principle of injuring. A principle of injuring cannot coherently be thought of as a principle all can adopt: to use an old technical term, it is not *universalisable*.

Many universalisable principles are entirely optional: their rejection is equally universalisable. For example, both the principle of fasting by day and the principle of eating by day are universalisable; either could be a principle for all,

and the rejection of either could be a principle for all; neither day-time fasting nor day-time eating is a matter of obligation. By contrast, other universalisable principles are required because their rejection is not universalisable. For example, if principles of injuring, or of deceiving, or of doing violence are non-universalisable, their rejection must be a matter of obligation.

This line of thought establishes a good deal less than some people might hope. For example, by showing that there is an obligation to reject the principle of injury we do not establish any fundamental human obligation not to injure, but only a fundamental human obligation to reject injury, i.e. an obligation not to make injury a basic principle of lives and institutions. Those who adopt a principle of non-injury must prefer non-injury to injury in each and every context; they must be pacifists; they must not retaliate to injury against self and others, however catastrophic their restraint. By contrast, those who reject a principle of injury will indeed seek to limit injury, but may find that in certain cases this requires selective injury. Examples might be self-defence and the defence of innocent others, which in turn point to the construction of institutions which coerce, hence injure, in limited ways, where this will secure some overall limitation of injury. Rejecting injury is roughly a matter of refraining from *systematic* or *gratuitous* injury (either of these would count against any claim to have rejected the principle of injury), rather than a matter of blanket and indiscriminating commitment to non-injury.

Since injury takes many different forms, some direct and others indirect, a fundamental obligation to reject injury, hence not to injure gratuitously or systematically, will have numerous and powerful implications. *Rejecting direct injury* to others may require complex legal and political institutions that secure ranges of rights of the person and of political rights, as well as a social and economic order that secures at least a certain range of economic and social rights. *Rejecting indirect injury* is mainly a matter of limiting injury that arises from damage either to the social fabric or to natural and man-made environments. For present purposes, it is the rejection of injurious ways of damaging natural and man-made environments that is of central concern.

It is commonly supposed that speciesism follows from anthropocentric ethical reasoning that works along these lines. An argument that agents should not arrogantly assume that they may adopt principles which are unavailable for other agents seemingly will take no account of those who are not agents. Yet this form of anthropocentrism also has powerful anti-speciesist implications, and will establish considerable constraints on ways in which agents may use their environment.

Of course, an obligation-based ethic will not prescribe unlimited care for the environment. A commitment to reject injury does not require agents to refrain from all change to or intervention in the natural world. Since all living creatures interact with the natural world in ways that change it, it is incoherent to suppose that those of them who are agents should have obligations to refrain from all

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action that changes or damages any part of their environment. However, if the rejection of systematic or gratuitous injury to other agents is a fundamental obligation, then it will also be obligatory not to damage or degrade the underlying powers of renewal and regeneration of the natural world. The basic thought here is that it is wrong to destroy or damage the underlying reproductive and regenerative powers of the natural world because such damage may inflict systematic or gratuitous injury (which often cannot be foreseen with much accuracy or any detail) on some or on many agents. This argument is of course anthropocentric; but it is likely to have numerous anti-speciesist corollaries.

By this standard it might not be wrong to irrigate a desert or to bring land under plough – unless, for example, the cost of so doing is the permanent destruction of habitats, of species and of bio-diversity, which might lead to systematic or gratuitous injury to agents (and inevitably harms many other sentient). It might not be wrong to use an industrial process – unless, for example, that process would damage conditions of life, such as the ozone layer or the CO₂ level, in ways that will injure agents, (and inevitably harm many other sentient). In acting in disregard of such considerations we at the very least risk injuring agents gratuitously and at worst actually injure them systematically. Because these features form the shared environment of human and non-human life, arguments derived from the requirement of not making injury to humans basic to our lives are likely to have numerous anti-speciesist implications, even if they do not support a comprehensive anti-speciesism.

Moreover, these obligations point to a wide range of further and more specific obligations, and to ranges of institutional and positive obligations by means of which fundamental obligations may be discharged at a given time and place. These positive and institutional obligations might range from obligations to preserve or establish agricultural practices which do not irreversibly damage the bio-diversity of the natural world, to obligations to reject energy and transport policies which irreversibly damage the ozone layer or the CO₂ level, to obligations to work towards economic and social institutions and practices which are robust in the face of low-growth or no-growth economic policies. As is evident from these examples, a great merit of taking an obligation-based approach to environmental issues is that it is not blind to the importance of abstract and dispersed features of the environment.

Moreover, these ways of thinking about environmental obligations do not return us to patterns of cost-benefit analysis and maximising ways of thought. They simply spell out some constraints on what may be done in a given time and place, with its actual resources and population, if agents are not to act on the environment in ways that will or may injure systematically or gratuitously. The constraints that must be met by those who seek not to injure either systematically or gratuitously set complex tasks, which must be met in constructing and maintaining institutions and practices, as well as in individual decisions and action.

4. WHAT ABOUT THE ANIMALS?

Still, this type of anthropocentrism will be only incompletely anti-speciesist; it will also have speciesist implications. As has often been noted, arguments that establish reasons to protect species, bio-diversity and habitats do not always provide reasons for protecting individual organisms, or for protecting individual sentient organisms. The advantage of a framework that takes account of action that affects abstract and dispersed features of the natural world has to be weighed against the seeming disadvantage of lacking comprehensive reasons for valuing individual non-human animals, or for thinking that they have fundamental rights.

The traditional move of anti-speciesists is to try to show that any failure to accord all sentient animals full moral standing, and so as having the same rights as humans, would amount to speciesism, so be unjustifiable. This is usually done by pointing to analogies between human and other animals that minimise the differences between them, so as to establish that non-human animals too have moral standing. If the appeal to analogy is to be plausible it has to be quite subtle, since it is not meant to leave us with the view (for example) that humans have no more obligations than non-human animals, and that a person torturing a cat is on a par with a cat torturing a bird. It is meant to be an appeal that leaves the indispensable anthropocentrism of ethical reasoning intact, while wholly derailing speciesist views by showing that any preferences for the human species that are implied are indeed unjustified. Humans are to be shown to resemble non-humans, who should therefore have the same rights – but not the same obligations.

Indeed, if the appeal to analogy is to be plausible, it will have to support even more differentiated conclusions. For anti-speciesists do not in fact seek to establish that non-human animals have *all* the rights of humans. They do not, for example, worry about animals lacking political or cultural rights. The rights that matter to anti-speciesists are mainly rights against certain sorts of ill treatment. It is not clear how very *general* arguments for the unimportance of the differences between human and non-human animals can be used to establish a very *selective* parity of rights and obligations.

Perhaps one could look for a more selective argument from analogy by emphasising that the boundary between (human) agents and (non-human) non-agents is pretty fuzzy. Although we do not hold non-human animals morally responsible in the ways in which we try to hold one another responsible, we do think of them as acting, and apply a wide range of evaluative vocabulary to them. We take a considerably different views of violent and destructive behaviour by non-human animals and of their peaceful behaviour; we take a considerably similar view of pain and distress in non-humans and humans. Perhaps then there is nothing implausible in the thought that quite specific obligations, for example not to do bodily injury, might hold between humans and great apes, or between

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humans and certain animals with whom they work and live. Where the boundary of such thoughts lie, and whether they could be used to put into question all the forms of cruelty to animals that anti-speciesists condemn is a harder question. As with all arguments from analogy, much will depend on the specificity and completeness of the comparisons.

Let us suppose that obligation-based thinking can be stretched only a certain distance towards the anti-speciesist goal, in that it offers no convincing arguments for a wholly general prohibition on, say, limiting animals' liberties or reducing their habitat, although it may offer quite good specific arguments against certain cruelties, or against cruelties to certain non-human animals. Would that be the end of the story?

There would be no reason for it to be the end of the story *either* if there are indirect arguments deriving from human obligations for extending animals wider protection, *or* if people choose to establish positive obligations to do so. For example, it might be that basic obligations to protect species and biodiversity will carry with them many derivative reasons to protect or benefit individual non-human animals. Or it might be that the ideals of certain cultures will provide reason to accord (some) non-human animals (some) further protections or concern. An anthropocentric starting point does not entail speciesism, and need not have relentlessly speciesist conclusions.

Still, many friends of non-human animals will think that this is simply not enough, because it will not establish fundamental rights for all individual non-human animals. (Utilitarians can hardly complain at this selectivity, since their own conclusions are highly selective for differing reasons). Yet, as soon as one considers the project of showing that all animals should have the same fundamental rights as humans it becomes evident that many of the rights that would be part and parcel of an obligation to reject injury to other humans are irrelevant for non-human animals. For example, rights to free speech or to a fair trial have no place in the lives of non-human animals. More generally, very many personal, political, economic, social, and cultural rights appear to have no useful place in the lives of non-human animals. Only a few personal rights such as a right not to be tormented, or a right not to be killed without reason, and possibly some analogues of (more controversial) economic or social rights, such as a right to an adequate habitat or to food, could even make sense for non-human animals; that they make sense does not, of course, show that any of them is a fundamental right.

Perhaps in the end we should ask whether all animal rights need be fundamental or moral rights, or whether all or many of them should be understood as the positive and institutional rights of a particular social order. For an obligation-based approach does not stand in the way of constructing institutional or positive rights for individual non-human animals, or for the individual non-human animals of certain species, even if it does not establish that all non-human animals have fundamental rights. (This thought might be congenial to some friends of non-human animals because it would allow us to think differ-

ently of animal killing by (say) subsistence farmers and pastoralists and by affluent societies, for whom vegetarian diets may be more feasible.) These are further reasons for thinking that an anthropocentric starting point clearly need lead to relentlessly speciesist conclusions.

No doubt this limited conclusion about animal rights will seem inadequate or disappointing to some. I take a more optimistic view. I set it against five considerable advantages of an obligation-based approach to ethical reasoning about the environment. The first advantage is that with this approach we do not attempt the Sisyphian metaphysical labours of showing that there are real environmental values embedded in the natural world. The second is that we do not have to approach environmental issues in terms of a subjective metric of value and the system of trade-offs which are implied in subordinating action to that conception of value, with all the risks for the environment and for individual non-human (and human!) animals that this can imply, even where 'environmentally sensitive' ways of costing results are used. The third is that we approach environmental issues in a sufficiently broad way to be able to take serious account of abstract and dispersed aspects of the environment. The fourth is that we do not lead with the confused anthropocentrism of a rhetoric of rights, so do not leave it perennially vague just who is obliged to do what for whom (even a comprehensive anti-speciesism will not be particularly attractive if its status is largely rhetorical). The fifth is that an obligation-based approach allows that individuals and groups may advocate and follow more comprehensively anti-speciesist ways of life than its basic arguments can establish.

To this I would like to add one consolation for those who are still sad at the thought that animal rights might be no more than positive and institutional rights, and that arguments for their importance could not demonstrate that sentient animals had complete moral standing. It is that this is where we would hope that all the best rights would end up, and that a derivative place in a process of justification need not entail a derivative place in our lives. It means only that good arguments for the construction of positive rights for non-human animals may not shadow arguments for constructing accounts of positive rights among (human) agents. There are plenty of other arguments that could be offered for constructing positive rights for certain non-human animals: some might derive from the positive obligations and rights of humans, others might be internal to ways of life, or invoke certain ideals or virtues. If we call to mind the systematic problems of realist, utilitarian and rights-based reasoning in addressing environmental issues, we may find merit in obligation-based reasoning, and welcome its various eco-friendly implications, even if they do not sustain the unrestricted conclusions anti-speciesists would most welcome.

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

NOTES

This paper arises from a presentation in the Allied Domecq public lecture series organised by Dr J. Smith for the Cambridge University Committee for Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies in the Lent term, 1996. I am grateful to him and to a lively audience, as well as to Dr T. Hayward, for searching comments.

¹ Without the realism, appeals to environmental values are reifications which explain nothing. Just as we fail to explain why opium has its well known properties by citing its dormitive virtues, so we fail to show why we should value the environment if we merely invoke but do not establish environmental values.

² The term anthropocentrism, rather than the more obvious humanism, has become conventional for ethical views that take human life as the starting point of ethical reasoning. The older term humanism is inappropriate for this purpose, since it is taken to refer specifically to a set of claims about the human rather than divine basis of ethical relations.

³ I am grateful to Tim Hayward, who refereed this paper, for sending me a copy of his paper 'Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem', *Environmental Values* 6(1), in which he sharpens distinctions between anthropocentric and speciesist claims. I have found his thinking constructive and suggestive, and have drawn on it at several points.

⁴ Bentham, 1967, Ch. 17, p. 412 n. The position has its limits for environmental ethics: it puts the entire non-sentient world at the disposal of sentient beings.

⁵ The term liberation seems adrift in utilitarian waters: what is there in utilitarian right conduct to animals which would not be covered by the term animal welfare?

⁶ 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied', Mill, 1962, p. 260.

⁷ Unless, of course, non-utilitarian considerations are introduced. Cf. Goodin, 1992, who introduces the non-subjective value of organic wholes into a broadly utilitarian account of environmental ethics in order to explain what is wrong about the destruction of wilderness that nobody is enjoying.

⁸ David Pearce et al., 1989, 1991, 1993, and 1995.

⁹ The pushing and shoving is usually accomplished by stressing the analogies between some non-human animals and some humans, while minimising the disanalogies between other non-human animals and other humans. Cf. Singer, 1976; Clark, 1977; Regan, 1983; Regan and Singer, 1989; more recently Singer and Cavalieri, 1993.

¹⁰ Cf. Aiken, 1992.

¹¹ For more extensive argument on these points see O'Neill, 1996. Ch. 5.

¹² The sole and for these purposes unimportant exceptions are so-called 'mere liberties' or 'unprotected rights', such as rights to pick up a coin from the pavement where there is no obligation on others to desist from picking it up if they can do so first.

¹³ See O'Neill, 1996, Ch. 7 for discussion of imperfect duties and virtues.

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