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The Morality of Ecosabotage

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ABSTRACT

Environmental ethicists rarely discuss the morality of using illegal tactics to protect the environment. Yet ecosabotage (or monkeywrenching) is the topic of numerous articles and books in the popular press. In this paper I examine what I consider to be the three strongest arguments against destroying property as a means of defending the environment: the social fabric argument, the argument for moral consistency, and the generalisation argument. I conclude that none of them provides an a priori obstacle to a consequentialist justification of particular acts of ecosabotage. Then I sketch a version of constrained utilitarianism, which is capable, at least in principle, of justifying some acts of strategic ecosabotage in a democratic society.

KEY WORDS

Ecosabotage, justification, argument, consistency, utilitarianism

The morality of ecosabotage is largely ignored by environmental ethicists. One exception – ‘Ecosabotage and Civil Disobedience’¹ by Michael Martin – examines three objections to a utilitarian defence of monkeywrenching; he concludes ‘there is no a priori reason to suppose that some acts of ecosabotage could not be justified on utilitarian grounds’.² However, as Martin acknowledges, they are three ‘of the most obvious general arguments against ecosabotage’,³ more precisely, that it involves violence, that participants display contempt for the law by attempting to avoid punishment, and that it damages the social fabric of society. In this paper I continue the discussion, first by taking a closer look at one of them (the ‘social fabric argument’), then examining two persuasive arguments not considered by Martin – what I call ‘the appeal to moral consistency’ and ‘the generalisation argument’. I conclude that each poses a formidable

though not an insurmountable obstacle to justifying ecosabotage; hence the morality of ecosabotage must be judged on a case-by-case basis. I close by indicating the type of utilitarian theory best suited to providing a justification of particular acts of ecosabotage.

I. THE SOCIAL FABRIC ARGUMENT

According to this argument, ecosabotage ‘erodes respect for the law, thus deteriorating the social fabric of civilised society’.⁴ The social fabric argument (SFA) is the most promising objection to monkeywrenching that Martin considers, and later – in this paper – is strengthened when broadened to include the values of consistency and universalisability (arguments #2 and #3). First, however, it is important to see where the SFA goes wrong.

Martin has two responses: (A) ‘it is pure conjecture to suppose that ecosabotage with its carefully circumscribed scope and targets has contributed or will significantly contribute to this disrespect’,⁵ and (B) *even if* it does erode respect for the law (and produces undesirable consequences, such as equipment replacement costs, loss of jobs, and hostility) it is possible that in the long run the benefits will outweigh the costs; that is, defenders of ecosabotage ‘might maintain that respect for the law will be of little importance in a world with polluted air and water, devoid of natural wildernesses, and depleted of most of its natural variety’.⁶

Response A is irrefutable, though in a trivial sense: it is ‘pure conjecture’, of course, because monkeywrenching is a fairly recent development, and studies confirming that it does or does not contribute to a deterioration of our social fabric are not available. Still, those who use the SFA to condemn *all* acts of ecosabotage (at least in a representative democracy) must produce empirical evidence.⁷ Until they do, this argument can be dismissed. What if, however, in the future ecosabotage becomes more prevalent, and is correlated with a deteriorating social fabric? Will social scientists possess a methodology capable of proving or disproving (beyond reasonable doubt) a causal connection? There is room for scepticism, here, given the staggering number of possible causal factors involved in a complex phenomenon like social deterioration. (Witness the statistical uncertainty over whether pornography causes violence or whether the death penalty is a uniquely effective deterrent.) Nevertheless, a consequentialist defender or detractor of monkeywrenching must acknowledge that, at least in principle, causal hypotheses are testable.

Finally, even if it could be proven that acts of ecosabotage significantly contribute to a deteriorating social fabric, such acts nonetheless may be morally justified because they maximise expected utility – Response B. I will return to this cost-benefit defence of ecosabotage later, as it plays a key role in undermin-

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ing the generalisation argument. For now, it is enough to note that the SFA, though intuitively appealing, fails to support the conclusion that all acts of monkeywrenching are morally unjustified.

The next two arguments must be taken seriously by anyone contemplating strategic monkeywrenching. They are familiar lines of reasoning, but I am not aware of either appearing in the literature on ecosabotage. The argument for moral consistency (AMC), in addition to relying on a value essential to moral reasoning, attempts to avoid the empirical issues plaguing the social fabric argument; the generalisation argument broadens and significantly improves the social fabric argument, by asking, essentially, what if everyone did that?

II. THE ARGUMENT FOR MORAL CONSISTENCY

The AMC proceeds as follows:

- If X believes that it is morally permissible for her to perform acts of sabotage (e.g., destroying bulldozers) to further a cause which she values highly (protecting the environment), then, by parity of reasoning, she must acknowledge that it would be morally permissible for Y to perform acts of sabotage (e.g., bombing abortion clinics) to further a cause which he values highly (protecting fetuses). Worse, X must acknowledge that it would be morally permissible for Z (a logger) to perform acts of sabotage (e.g., disabling ecosaboteur vehicles) to further a cause that he values highly (preventing tree spiking). And, if X believes that Y's and Z's actions are morally wrong, then she must believe that her own actions are morally wrong.

The AMC, then, appears to force X to conclude either that acts of sabotage in defence of the environment are morally wrong or that acts of sabotage in defence of other deeply valued causes are morally permissible.

If X wants to retain her belief that ecosabotage is morally permissible, she must select one of the following options: (1) locate a relevant difference between acts of ecosabotage and other acts of sabotage, such that the former are justified but not the latter, or (2) acknowledge that any act of sabotage is morally permissible so long as those involved believe their cause is justified.

Option 2 is clearly the least attractive alternative. First, it forces X to admit that it is all right for antiabortionists to bomb abortion clinics and loggers to destroy property of ecosaboteurs. Surely, most defenders of ecosabotage are reluctant to embrace a self-defeating principle of tolerance. More importantly, it is vulnerable to the following objection (the generalisation argument), the final argument designed to prove that ecosabotage is always wrong, regardless of circumstances. Option 1 – locating a relevant difference – will be crucial to the rebuttal of the generalisation argument.

III. THE GENERALISATION ARGUMENT

- If X believes that it is morally permissible for her to perform acts of sabotage to further a cause which she values highly, then, by parity of reasoning, she must acknowledge that it would be morally permissible for Y to perform acts of sabotage to further a cause which he values highly. But if everyone who believed their goals were of great value resorted to violence against property (after exhausting legal channels), respect for the law would erode and the social fabric of society would deteriorate.⁸

The generalisation argument (GA) differs from the AMC in that consequentialist considerations are introduced. And it is a more powerful objection to ecosabotage than the social fabric argument. That argument focuses only on the probability of *one type* of sabotage producing undesirable results; yet, if ecosabotage cannot in principle be distinguished from other types of sabotage, one must consider the probable consequences of *all* such acts. Thus, to successfully counter this objection (as well as the AMC), X must attempt to locate a relevant difference between ecosabotage and most other acts of sabotage (option 1), such that the former are justified and the latter are not.⁹

POSSIBLE DIFFERENCES

(1) X could claim that the typical goals of ecosaboteurs (protecting species, ecosystems, and wilderness) are extremely important, whereas the goals of other types of saboteurs (antiabortionists or Animal Liberation Front members, for example) are of less value.

Of course those engaging in sabotage for reasons other than protecting the environment *believe* that their goals are of great importance. So, for this strategy to succeed, not only must X draw a distinction between subjectively and objectively valuable goals, she must show that the goals of typical ecosaboteurs are, objectively speaking, of great value whereas the goals of most other types of saboteurs are not, or at least much less so. But can this be done? Since goals (like saving old growth forests and saving fetuses) are based on values and beliefs, a possible defence would involve attempting to justify the relevant value judgments and empirical beliefs motivating the ecosaboteur, whereas those motivating most other types of saboteurs would have to be condemned as false or irrational. (In Rule Utilitarian terms, one might say the rule maximising expectable utility would look something like this: sabotage – eco or otherwise – is morally permissible if all legal channels have been exhausted and the motivating value judgments and empirical beliefs are rational.)

More specifically, X must defend this type of claim: ecosabotage is morally justified whereas (say) bombing abortion clinics is not morally justified because

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the ecosaboteur's value judgments about the worth of nonhumans, species, ecosystems, etc., are reasonable whereas the militant antiabortionist's views regarding foetal status, potentiality, self-determination, etc., are unreasonable. This 'we're right, you're wrong' approach is a tempting way to locate a relevant difference (and thus draw a line between ecosabotage and other forms of sabotage). And ecosaboteurs like X must draw a line to defend themselves against the generalisation argument and escape the dilemma posed by the AMC.

One obvious problem with this strategy is that not all ecosaboteurs accept the same value judgments. For example, anthropocentrists and biocentrists differ on a number of fundamental issues. Suppose biocentrism is correct (in some sense). Does this strategy commit one to the view that acts performed by an anthropocentric ecosaboteur are always wrong because one or more of the normative beliefs on which that position is based are false or irrational, yet those *same* acts performed by a biocentric ecosaboteur are morally permissible (in some cases)?

(2) To get around this and other significant problems (such as justifying value judgments), X might try a different approach distinguishing ecosabotage from other types of sabotage. Rather than doing so on the basis of the rationality or irrationality of the empirical and normative beliefs underlying the saboteur's goals, X could appeal to probable consequences: ecosabotage (done properly) maximises utility, other forms of sabotage (usually) do not. This, you may recall, was Response B (advanced by Martin) to the social fabric argument. If this consequentialist strategy is successful, the AMC is not an obstacle to justifying ecosabotage. But what about the generalisation argument?

Let us slightly modify that argument to reflect the above attempt to locate a relevant difference between ecosabotage and most other forms of sabotage:

- If it is all right for X to engage in ecosabotage on the grounds that she believes those goals are valuable enough to justify the means used to achieve them (that is, she believes doing so maximises utility), then it is all right for others, such as antiabortionists, to engage in sabotage on the grounds that they believe their cherished goals justify the means used to achieve them; but if everyone who believed this resorted to violence against property (after exhausting legal channels), respect for the law would erode and the social fabric of society would deteriorate. In other words, even if some acts of ecosabotage (taken individually) would maximise utility, the collective effect of many acts of sabotage – eco or otherwise – would not do so. Therefore, any form of sabotage is morally indefensible.

This argument presents a significant challenge to justifying ecosabotage, for it relies on two obvious facts: many saboteurs *strongly* believe that their ends justify violence against property and society cannot withstand too many acts of sabotage during any period of time without serious disorder resulting. Thus, X must show that for some acts of ecosabotage it is *reasonable* to believe – in the

midst of ecological crisis – that utility will be maximised, whereas this is rarely if ever the case for other types of sabotage. Demonstrating that, of course, is no easy task. But, if accomplished, X both undermines the GA and escapes the dilemma posed by the AMC.

One objection to this consequentialist strategy is that too many people will erroneously believe that particular acts of sabotage will maximise utility when in fact those acts will not do so. Thus we are back to the problem addressed in the generalisation argument: large numbers of conscientious lawbreakers performing acts of sabotage (eco and otherwise) would produce much more harm than good – so it is preferable, given the hazards of calculating utility, that no one perform such acts.

This is a well-travelled objection to all types of utilitarian theory. Let us consider three counterarguments.

- i) X could claim that she has drawn (on the basis of utility) a nonarbitrary line between justified and unjustified sabotage and that she is not responsible for saboteurs whose actions fail to maximise utility because of inadequate information, hasty decision-making, miscalculations, and rationalisations.

This will not do. Though X is not responsible for those who act on the basis of indefensible utility judgments, as a utilitarian she must consider such harms as costs, and decide whether the benefits of sabotage outweigh these and other costs. This takes us to the next counterargument.

- ii) X could argue, as does Dave Foreman, that we need to balance the possibility of misuse against the severity of the crisis to which most ecodefenders are responding. We need to compare the potential harm done by strategically unwise monkeywrenching with the harm that would occur if responsible monkeywrenching stopped. The balance sheet solidly attests to the need for responsible monkeywrenching.¹⁰

This is identical to Response B (page 2), and is, in my opinion, how ecosaboteurs like X must proceed, though in this passage Foreman is concerned only with principled versus unprincipled *ecosabotage*; the problem I am addressing is broader than that, namely, acts of sabotage (eco and otherwise) which practitioners *think* will maximise utility and those which are reasonably expected to maximise utility. Foreman's argument, however, can be easily broadened in scope by substituting 'saboteurs' for 'ecodefenders' and 'sabotaging' for instances of 'monkeywrenching'.

- iii) X might try reducing this version of the generalisation argument to absurdity, substituting 'civil disobedience' for 'sabotage' (and its cognates), leading to the counterintuitive conclusion that civil disobedience is *always* wrong. To avoid that, the GA must be modified so that civil disobedience, as well as violence against property, are morally permissible in 'extreme situations'

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(however defined), just as nearly all utilitarians believe that promise-breaking is morally permissible in extreme situations (because such acts, when done infrequently, pose no threat to the valued institution of promise-keeping yet often achieve great good). Modifying the argument in this way, however, opens the door to saboteurs claiming that the injustice which they hope to redress is indeed extreme and grievous, and if a number of them reason in this way (rightly or wrongly) we are back to the problem raised by the generalisation argument: society cannot sustain very many acts of sabotage during any one period of time. Pursuing this route, then, ultimately leads X back to dissimilarity ii (alias, Response B), and the balance sheet metaphor.

To summarise, I have argued that the GA and the AMC require ecosaboteurs to distinguish ecosabotage from other types of sabotage, such that the former is justified and the latter rarely if ever justified (in a representative democracy); and I presented two methods capable of achieving that result – one based on the rationality of the normative and empirical beliefs underlying the ecosaboteur's goals, the other based on probable consequences. Though a complete analysis of each method is not possible here, I have tried to show that neither the GA nor the AMC lead to the conclusion that all acts of ecosabotage are unjustified; this opens the door to a utilitarian justification of some acts of ecosabotage.

CONCLUSION

Even if some acts of ecosabotage can be justified, we need to know which ones. Often defenders of ecosabotage – even biocentrists like Foreman – attempt to make such determinations on utilitarian grounds (rather than, say, appealing to a higher-law). Two problems, then, emerge. First, as Martin argues, ecosaboteurs have *not yet* provided a complete consequentialist defence of ecosabotage in concrete cases. He reaches this conclusion because he believes that they must show, yet have failed to show, that civil disobedience (a preferable tactic) cannot work and that acts of ecosabotage can. This is a legitimate demand, though it is not clear how much evidence and exactly what sort of evidence the ecosaboteur is supposed to produce to satisfy this demand. This, of course, is a familiar problem facing conscientious lawbreakers: how long must legal channels be pursued before plausibly concluding that such a strategy is ineffective? I will not address that question here, only note that there are historical instances in which legal channels have, by any reasonable standard, been exhausted. Peter Singer cites an example involving the law regulating animal experiments in Britain dating back to 1876: 'After more than a century of unsuccessful attempts by legal means to have it strengthened, militant opponents of uncontrolled experimentation can plausibly claim that legal means have been tried and have failed'.¹¹

That aside, I believe there is another, even more fundamental problem confronting a utilitarian defence of ecosabotage. I doubt that standard versions of cost-benefit reasoning are capable of providing a defence of particular acts of ecosabotage in today's climate (simply because there are too many people who prefer economic growth, jobs, and development over preservation and restoration). In such a world, then, the only way cost-benefit reasoning can supply a justification of some acts of ecosabotage is if the preferences of sentient beings and of future generations are included in cost-benefit analyses, and irrational human preferences are excluded (e.g., frustrated and satisfied speciesist preferences should not be included as costs and benefits).¹² Though controversial, the three main elements of this view ('rational preference utilitarianism') are attractive. First, there is widespread support for the sentience criterion of moral standing. Second, in all likelihood future generations will exist and they will desire an inhabitable planet. And third, some preferences are clearly irrational; thus a case can be made that frustrated and satisfied irrational preferences (those resulting from false beliefs, logical errors, psychological insecurities, drugged states, etc.) should be excluded from utility calculations.

Cost-benefit reasoning based on these beliefs is, in my opinion, a reasonable decision-making procedure and is capable – at least in principle – of justifying some acts of ecosabotage. Though defending this approach goes well beyond the scope of this paper, I think it is significant, nonetheless, to ask: if the main absolutist arguments against monkeywrenching – the three Martin examines and the two introduced here – are unsatisfactory, what type of utilitarian theory provides the best chance of justifying (what Foreman calls) 'responsible monkeywrenching'?

NOTES

¹ Martin 1990.

² *Ibid.*, p. 291. Unless the context indicates otherwise, 'sabotage' refers to destruction of property not motivated by environmental protection; thus it does not include ecosabotage (pouring sand in bulldozer crankcases, destroying billboards, modifying dirt roads in wild areas to prevent vehicle access, etc.).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 300–1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 301. The label 'social fabric argument' is used by Cohen to designate a similar argument often used against civil disobedience. See Cohen 1971, pp. 148–55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁶ *Ibid.*.

⁷ For purposes of this paper I'm assuming that proposed acts of monkeywrenching will occur in a representative democracy, and that the majority approves of the goals the ecosaboteur is attempting to achieve; thus the ecosaboteur is not attempting to coerce the majority into accepting something against its will.

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⁸For a helpful exposition and criticism of this type of argument, see Brandt 1979, pp. 278–85. Rawls examines this argument in the context of civil disobedience: ‘If a certain minority is justified in engaging in civil disobedience, then any other minority in relevantly similar circumstances is likewise justified. . . . But if they were all to act in this way, serious disorder would follow which might well undermine the efficacy of the just constitution’ (Rawls 1971, pp. 313–14). Rawls’ solution to this problem, however, is inapplicable to sabotage: a political understanding among the dissenters, which would help co-ordinate their actions, thus ensuring that not too many groups strain the system at once.

⁹I say ‘most’ because ecosaboteurs must acknowledge that some acts of sabotage other than ecosabotage could be morally permissible. But their criteria cannot be so broad that numerous such acts turn out to be morally permissible or else the social fabric argument and the generalisation argument become difficult to refute.

¹⁰Foreman 1991, p. 130. Worth noting here is the apparent inconsistency of biocentrists, like Foreman, using cost-benefit reasoning to defend ecosabotage. They could argue, I suppose, that with so much at stake there is no sense being a slave to (what Wordsworth called) ‘foolish consistency’.

¹¹Singer 1979, p. 188. In this case, opinion polls have consistently shown that the majority in Britain wants the law strengthened.

¹²For a discussion of two methods of excluding irrational preferences from utility assessments, and a defence of one of those methods (similar to the defence offered by Brandt in *A Theory of the Good and the Right*), see my paper, ‘Rational Preference Utilitarianism: Can it Justify Dissimilar Treatment of Animals and Marginal Humans?’.

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