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Environmental Ethics – Values or Obligations? A Reply to O’Neill

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ABSTRACT: Onora O’Neill recently argued that environmental ethics could and should be reformulated in terms of a search for the obligations held by moral agents towards each other, with respect to the non-human world. The more popular alternative, which seeks to establish the intrinsic value of the non-human, is plagued with various theoretical difficulties attaching to the concept of value. It is here argued that O’Neill’s attempt to determine fundamental obligations of moral agents on the basis of a non-universalisability criterion does not succeed. It is further claimed that such an approach, in spite of the advantages which O’Neill sees it as having, is itself open to serious objection from the viewpoint of environmental ethics, especially as human beings are able in principle to release each other from mutual obligations. It is concluded that, in spite of the difficulties involved, postulations of (intrinsic) value to non-human nature do seem to be indispensable to environmental ethics.

KEYWORDS: Environmental ethics, obligations, values, universalisability.

A common approach to formulating a position in environmental ethics is to look for some reason to attribute intrinsic value to the non-human. Onora O’Neill has, however, recently canvassed an approach to environmental ethics which she believes to be less problematic than this axiological route.¹ She argues that the trouble with value theories, especially ones which attribute intrinsic value to phenomena, is that they are either realist and posit objectively-existing values, in which case they are metaphysically puzzling, or they are anti-realist and interpret values in terms of interpersonal validity, in which case they have the problem of showing how such validity may be established.

O’Neill suggests that all ethics is inevitably anthropocentric, not in the sense that such ethics posits that only human beings have intrinsic value, but in the sense that all ethical prescriptions are directed only to beings capable of moral agency. On the planet Earth the only such beings are human beings. She therefore suggests that the basic form of ethics which environmentally-concerned moral philosophers should try to develop is one based on the elucidation of the

fundamental moral obligations of moral actors. Such an obligation-based ethics, she says, can proceed

...without assuming either that there are real values embedded in the environment or that there is some generally valid subjective metric of value.²

How, then, do we go about elucidating what moral obligations we have without making any of the above assumptions about values?

The first step, she argues, is to ask what candidates for fundamental moral obligations could be 'taken seriously',³ and she goes on to suggest that any principle that is to be a serious candidate for being a *fundamental* obligation must be universalisable. That is, it must be one which '...could be accepted and adopted (not necessarily discharged) by all agents'.⁴ However, such universalisability is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition. Some universalisable principles are not obligations. The ones which are obligations are those which are '...required because their rejection is not universalisable'.⁵ What, then, makes a principle non-universalisable? The example she takes, of the principle of injuring others, is non-universalisable because it is self-defeating. If an agent injures another (she means another agent), then the injured agent may be unable to injure in turn, and thus be unable to discharge the obligation. Hence, the principle 'injure others' 'cannot be coherently thought of as a principle all can adopt'.⁶

This in turn entails that it is morally required that we should adopt the principle, or accept the obligation, to reject the obligation to injure others. This is not the same as accepting the principle not to injure others. Rather, it means that we are not to act so as to injure others systematically and gratuitously. This does not rule out our doing so for some superior moral reason, as in defence of the innocent against injury, for example. She then derives from the obligation not to accept the principle 'injure other agents' the indirect defence of the non-human, given the contribution made by the nonhuman to the well-being of human agents.

This argument does not appear to succeed, however. What it shows is that such a putative candidate for fundamental moral obligation as 'injure other agents' cannot be guaranteed to be universally discharged, but that does not show it cannot be universally adopted. As noted above, O'Neill herself makes the distinction, correctly, between the acceptance of a principle and its discharge and indicates that universalisability concerns the former, not the latter.

Of course, it will be urged in reply that this misses the crucial point that what is supposed to be preventing some individuals from being able to discharge their obligation to injure others is the universal acceptance and adoption of that very principle. It is this that makes the principle self-defeating and so non-universalisable.

This reply must, however, involve a contrast with cases in which some individuals are unable to discharge an obligation established by a principle

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which is universally accepted because of factors *unconnected* with the universal acceptance of the principle. These will be contingent factors of various kinds – such as the individuals concerned becoming paralysed.

However, if this contrast is necessary (and it seems necessary to make sense of the acceptance/discharge distinction) then we have merely pushed the difficulty back a stage. For it is only a contingent fact that when individuals seek to injure each other they succeed to the extent that those others cannot injure in turn. O'Neill claims it is 'unreasonable' to suppose that when individuals seek to injure others they universally fail to do so. This is plausible (although it should really be the hypothesis that individuals fail to injure others to an extent sufficient to stop them from harming others which she needs to assert to be unreasonable). However, what is really needed is not the claim that such a supposition is unreasonable, but that it involves a self-contradiction. Short of this, all we have is a contingency. There does not appear to be any way of justifying our treatment of that contingency differently from the kind of contingency which we conceded in the last paragraph to be insufficient to establish the non-universalisability of principles.

Thus, self-defeatingness, at least of the contingent kind involved in the 'injure others' example, is no barrier to universalisability, which leaves us with the unpalatable conclusion that 'Injure other agents' cannot be ruled out as a possible fundamental moral obligation. Of course, some other formulation of the principle 'Injure others' may be found in which it can be shown that it is logically, not contingently, self-defeating. O'Neill has to have some such argument, of course, because on the face of it the only way she has of determining fundamental obligations *without* relying on value-judgements ('moral agents are intrinsically valuable', for example) is by determining which principles are logically self-defeating when universalised and then making their rejection a fundamental obligation.

As an example of what is required here, consider a possible principle of etiquette, such as 'When one is in the company of another person approaching a doorway which both wish to pass through, and only one can pass at a time, always go after the other person.' If this is universally adopted, then no-one will ever pass through a doorway first in the circumstances specified. If no-one ever goes through a doorway first in those circumstances, then it is logically impossible for anyone to go through the doorway after another person, as the principle requires. Therefore, the attempt to universalise the principle is logically self-contradictory, which means that it is logically impossible to adopt the principle, let alone discharge it.

However, it does not seem obvious *a priori* that the search for logical contradictoriness will get us very far. For all we know there may be very few principles which are self-contradictory in this way, and those which are may not be of not much moral concern.⁷ More fundamentally, however, it may be asked

whether we can explain what is wrong with self-contradiction without appealing to a value-judgement, and thus resting the case on a basis which has already been rejected.

From the point of view of environmental ethics, however, the argument from self-defeatingness has another serious moral flaw. O'Neill notes that her argument gives non-humans only an indirect role. The obligation to reject injury to others applies only to other moral agents, for the self-defeatingness argument only works if we are supposing that not all *agents* could adopt a putative principle. This means that we are to extract from the argument an obligation *to* other agents *with respect to* the non-human, not to cause the kinds of changes to the natural world that are likely to cause systematic or gratuitous injury to human beings. We have no fundamental obligation directly to the non-human in this respect.

The problem with this is that if the key fundamental obligation is *to* our fellow human beings then there is nothing in principle to prevent us from jointly releasing each other from this obligation, for this is always possible with respect to an obligation.⁸ Human beings might decide to do this because they had found ways of living which dispensed with reliance, either physical, cultural or spiritual, on the non-human world.⁹

Yet most environmental ethicists, and others too, would be likely to hold that if human beings, or any other moral agents, did release each other from the obligation we are considering, and did begin systematically and gratuitously to injure the non-human, a great moral wrong would be done, and done precisely to the non-human. One way in which we might well attempt to explain our sense of this wrong would be to refer to the intrinsic value of the non-human as a reason not to injure it systematically and gratuitously. It is not obvious that this response is either avoidable or wrong, although it will require argument to establish its full intelligibility and defensibility.

I conclude, therefore, that an obligation-based ethic of the kind mooted by O'Neill does not enable us to get round the need to refer to values. There is a good point to asking the question what fundamental moral obligations moral agents have,¹⁰ and it is useful to note the sense of anthropocentrism which O'Neill has pointed out. However, in the struggle with the pernicious version of anthropocentrism which amounts to human chauvinism it appears to be unavoidable to resort to fundamental value judgements.¹¹ The difficulties with these, centring on the realist/anti-realist issue, are at least not peculiar to ecologism, and all other ethical approaches have their own distinctive theoretical dilemmas.¹²

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NOTES

¹ O'Neill 1997.

² O'Neill 1997: 134.

³ O'Neill 1997: 135.

⁴ O'Neill 1997: 135.

⁵ O'Neill 1997: 136.

⁶ O'Neill 1997: 135.

⁷ The only way to avoid both logical self-contradiction and the contingent kind of self-defeatingness of O'Neill's example is to find principles which are such that when universalised they may be discharged by individuals whatever happens to other individuals, or whatever those other individuals do. The only way to determine whether any principles can be formulated which meet this requirement and which also capture our sense of what morality is about is to consider candidate principles as they are produced. But given that human actions are so interconnected it may not be easy to find plausible examples.

⁸ It may be argued that since it is not the case that the basis upon which fundamental moral obligations apply to moral agents is that they have voluntarily undertaken them, they cannot be released from such obligations by mutual agreement. However, this position requires that the beneficiary of an obligation is in no position to prevent the undertaking of the obligation even where it would no longer result in a benefit. The point of obligations is obscure on such a hypothesis.

⁹ Of course, it is a basic claim of many environmentalist positions, such as political ecologism, that human beings, as natural beings, are indissolubly connected to the non-human in all these ways, and thus defenders of these views are inclined to argue that the possibility here entertained does not exist – at least for human beings as presently constituted. However, even the most fervent political ecologists must recognise that this 'indissoluble' connection is at best contingent. A nightmare other environmentally-concerned thinkers have is precisely that human beings may discover how to sever all these kinds of connection (some already seem to yearn to do so) and then not even human self-interest can be relied on to protect the non-human.

¹⁰ I am grateful to one of the referees for pointing out the following. In this paper I appear to assume, what may be incorrect, that the example O'Neill has given of a non-universalisable principle, and thus of a fundamental moral obligation, is meant to be a typical example of her version of anthropocentric ethics. If it is typical, then all the fundamental obligations of that ethics will be concerned for its own sake only with the welfare of the human agents who are supposed to have the obligations.

But it is not clear without argument that an obligation-based ethic, directed exclusively to human moral agents, must contain only obligations to such agents. On p. 129 of her paper she makes plain that she regards it as a possibility, to be settled by further argument, that an anthropocentric position might succeed in demonstrating that it is justified in granting only humans moral standing. This form of anthropocentrism, in which only the welfare of human agents counts, is not openly defended by O'Neill in the paper, but she appears open to the accusation that she is assuming some such version of anthropocentrism in her own arguments.

I would add that if that is the case, then it is not obvious that she can defend the assumption in the terms set by her own theory. For it is not obvious *a priori* that there could

not be principles which specify fundamental obligations of human moral agents to the non-human and which are derivable from her postulate that a universalisable principle, the rejection of which is not universalisable, specifies a fundamental moral obligation.

¹¹One of the referees has pointed out that there are other possible forms of ethics than the axiological, so that even if obligation-based ethics are rejected there are other possibilities to consider. This is correct, so that it certainly does need to be shown case by case that the making of fundamental value judgements, with all the difficulties involved therein, is unavoidable in all ethical systems which are otherwise not open to fundamental objection.

¹²I am very grateful for comments made on this paper by the two anonymous referees. I have endeavoured to take account of at least some of their responses and suggestions for clarification. The responsibility for what results is, of course, still mine.

REFERENCE

- O'Neill, Onora 1997. 'Environmental Values, Anthropocentrism and Speciesism', *Environmental Values* 6: 127-142.