Full citation: Shearman, Richard. "Can We Be 'Friends of the Earth?" *Environmental Values* 14, no. 4, (2005): 503-512. http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5951

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Can We Be ‘Friends of the Earth’?

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ABSTRACT

Reasons for protecting biodiversity are usually defined in terms of its instrumentality. Although there may be a number of ways to seek an alternative non-anthropocentric approach, I have chosen to develop an Aristotelian response that draws upon his conception of friendship and self-love. In doing so, I argue that a person living according to moral virtue will recognise that the nonhuman world should be valued and thus protected (at least in part) for its own sake.

KEYWORDS

Aristotle, biodiversity, friendship, self-love

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘biophilia’ has been used by E. O. Wilson to refer to an innate human urge to affiliate with other forms of life emerging from a unique mixture of evolutionary association and culture (Wilson 1984). This affiliation need not be of an arcadian or mutually beneficent sort given that some creatures evoke a complex set of responses including revulsion or fear (as is the case for snakes). Wilson also makes clear that biophilia can (perhaps must) be used for the purpose of creating a more powerful conservation ethic:

> It is time to invent moral reasoning of a new and more powerful kind, to look to the very roots of motivation and understand why, in what circumstances and on which occasions, we cherish and protect life. The elements from which a deep conservation ethic might be constructed include the impulses and biased forms of learning loosely classified as biophilia (p. 138–9).

Environmental Values **14** (2005): 503–12
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Beyond any implications Wilson's hypothesis may have for analysing the relationship between science and ethics, I was made curious by his choice of 'biophilia' as the term to describe our regard for other living things and thus how we come to value them. Clearly, Wilson is describing the value of the nonhuman world in terms of their significance in meeting either our physical or spiritual needs. As Kellert (1997) says in a more recent discourse on the subject, 'our inclination for affiliating with life functions today as it has in the past as a basis for healthy human maturation and development'. This is consistent with traditional conservationism and represents a powerful justification for the protection of biodiversity.

Yet 'biophilia' is a word that can evoke a different way of considering the value of the nonhuman world that is not based upon its instrumentality. Removing the term from the context of Wilson's biophilia hypothesis, we could define it more literally to mean 'being a friend to life' or 'having a friendly feeling for life' or perhaps a 'loving regard for life'. Doing so ushers in a completely different perspective on the value of, and our relationship to, the other forms of life residing with us on the Earth. And if we were to regard our association with the nonhuman world as a variety of friendship, then considering its value only in utilitarian terms becomes less seemly. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning says in her 14th sonnet:

> If thou must love me, let it be for nought
> Except for love's sake only.

What I want to accomplish in this essay is to introduce an alternative conception of our relationship to the nonhuman world that offers us a basis for advocating the preservation of biological diversity for its own sake. I intend to do this by drawing upon the philosophy of Aristotle, particularly his discussion of friendship and self-love. I hope to demonstrate, at least in outline, how our efforts at achieving happiness not only gives shape to friendships established among people, but may also provide an important base for considering our relationship to other forms of life and perhaps to the Earth as a whole. The specific task at hand is to illustrate how our relationship to the nonhuman world can be described in a manner similar to that of friendship in an Aristotelian sense. Phrased differently, I will attempt to reveal how efforts to protect biological diversity for its own sake can be justified as a component of a moral life.

THE NATURE OF FRIENDSHIP

Aristotle's account of friendship has not been resolved definitively. As Schollmeier (1994) discusses in his introduction, there remains the problem of the 'what' and 'why' of Aristotelian friendship. In other words, is it derived ultimately from altruistic or egoistic motives? Allied to this is our interpretation of *eudaimonia*

and the role contemplation plays relative to moral virtue. Is a contemplative life complete in itself (or most complete), or just one of many activities that, taken together, constitute happiness? If we accept Aristotle's claim that friendship is critical to any person seeking to lead a virtuous life, then how we answer these questions will be no small matter.

With respect to the role played by contemplation in moral virtue, my own reading is sympathetic to the argument made by Kraut (1989). On this interpretation, Aristotle expresses a unified vision of moral virtue that considers a contemplative life to be the archetype for happiness. This is not to say that the only path to *eudaimonia* is a life devoted to contemplation, but it does represent a way of life that is the best and most complete.

To the question of motivation, the message appears to be mixed. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (referenced as *NE*. Note: all references and translations of Aristotle provided by Barnes 1985) Aristotle claims that it is important for the virtuous man to have friends in part because of their instrumental value in contributing to a good life. Being social animals, we need interaction with others of good character in order to become good ourselves; and friends can be important to that end. But the value of friends is not exhausted by their usefulness to us in our effort to live well. In fact, I think his main emphasis is to show why we should value our friends for their own sake independently of any advantage their relationship may have for us. In some circumstances, we may even be required to sacrifice our lives in order to preserve the well-being of our friends (*NE* IX.8, 1169a17–25).

In *NE* IX.4, Aristotle lists five characteristics of friendship. To be a friend to another, one must: (1) wish and do good for a friend for his sake, (2) wish his friend to live and exist for his own sake, (3) wish to associate with his friend, (4) live the same kind of life as his friend, and (5) share the same pleasures and pains as his friend. That this is intended to be an active association is indicated in (1) above by stating that a friend will do good for another. One must go beyond simply wishing that your friend lives well; you should be willing to take action on your friend's behalf for his sake. The beneficent nature of friendship is underscored by Aristotle when he distinguishes friendship from goodwill:

> Goodwill is a friendly sort of relation, but is not identical with friendship; for one may have goodwill both towards people whom one does not know, and without their knowing it, but not friendship. This has indeed been said already. But goodwill is not even friendly feeling. For it does not involve intensity or desire, whereas these accompany friendly feeling; and friendly feeling implies intimacy while goodwill may arise of a sudden, as it does towards competitors in a contest; we come to feel goodwill for them and to share in their wishes, but we would not do anything with them; for, as we said, we feel goodwill suddenly and love them only superficially (*NE* IX.5, 1166b30–1167a3).

In stating the superficiality of goodwill, Aristotle is asserting that friendship represents an expression of a meaningful and loving regard for another. In fact, he states that friendship seems to lie in loving rather than in being loved (*NE* VIII.8, 1159a26–27). This is because some people take delight in the good fortune of others even when they do not or cannot expect love in return. Such is the case, Aristotle believes, for mothers in regard to their children who have been given into the care of others. So long as she knows that her children are prospering, then it does not matter to a mother that she also be loved by them, for her satisfaction is found in doing well by them for their own sake (*NE* VIII.8, 1159a28–32).

FRIENDSHIP AND THE NON-HUMAN

It is evident that some people are similarly disposed to love other organisms and ecosystems and actively engage in efforts aimed at protecting their well-being or integrity, even if they cannot or should not expect anything in return. Advocates for animal rights or liberation, for example, are motivated to assist that portion of the animal kingdom thought to have rights or sentience. But they are hard pressed to consider the full range of biological diversity given the challenge of rights based or utilitarian moral theory to address non-sentient entities and/or ecological systems. I would further argue that animal rights/liberation advocates are ultimately moved to act from a sense of duty or utility and not from the kind of relatedness found in friendship. Yet it also seems clear that such concern on the part of people does actually exist, and goes well beyond what could be described as expressing goodwill for the nonhuman world. If true, then it stands to reason that if we want to adequately characterise the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world, then we must investigate it as a phenomenon that goes beyond the passivity of goodwill but is not contingent upon mutual affection.

For the sake of discussion and consistency with Aristotle, I will simply refer to this kind of regard as friendly-feeling, and will categorise friendship as a form of friendly-feeling that occurs among people. This, I think, is in keeping with Aristotle's line of reasoning in that he says there is a point beyond which friendship ceases:

> ...it is not possible to define exactly up to what point friends can remain friends; for much can be taken away and friendship remain, but when one party is removed to a great distance, as God is, the possibility of friendship ceases (*NE* VIII.7, 1159a3–5).

Our arms are too short to hug God, so to speak. But apparently we cannot become friends with beings on the other side of the hierarchical line either. For Aristotle also says that there can be no friendship toward a horse or an ox (*NE*

VIII.11, 1161b2–3). Yet, with respect to our relationship to God, I interpret Aristotle to be saying that virtuous people still have certain responsibilities that derive from the debt owed to God for making life possible. As to our parents, we are indebted to God in a way beyond our ability to fully compensate (for who can return life?). If virtue dictates that we have a responsibility to superior beings, can it not also require a similar concern for the welfare of beings on the other side of the hierarchical line (e.g. other biological species)?

As mentioned above, a mother giving her child into the care of others could well be acting virtuously provided it is done for the right reasons (i.e. to better provide for her child, and not from the expectation that she will derive any personal utility in return). This does not mean, however, that there is nothing to be gained in such other-regarding behavior. In fact, Aristotle says that benefactors can receive a great deal just for beneficence itself (*NE* IX.7, 1167b33–1168a9). This is because an ethical life is constituted by virtuous activity:

> … those who have done a service to others feel friendship and love for those they have served even if these are not of any use to them and never will be. This is what happens with craftsmen too; every man loves his own handiwork better than he would be loved by it if it came alive; and this happens perhaps most of all with poets; for they have an excessive love for their own poems, doting on them as if they were their children. This is what the position of benefactors is like; for that which they have treated well is their handiwork, and that existence is to all men a thing to be chosen and loved, and that we exist by virtue of activity (i.e. by living and acting), and that the handiwork is in a sense, the producer in activity; he loves his handiwork, therefore, because he loves existence (*NE* IX.7, 1167b31–1168a8).

In the example presented previously, a mother can derive great pleasure by acting for the sake of her child since virtuous activity is good in itself. Indeed, she may take action as much for the sake of virtue as for the sake of her child.

With respect to biodiversity, we can easily make the case for preserving or conserving it for utilitarian reasons. The fabric of conservationism as expressed by Gifford Pinchot (1967) is based on valuing nature as a resource. It is utter foolishness to destroy natural resources since they can either improve the quality of our lives, or more fundamentally, may be required for survival. Even when we consider the preservationism of John Muir or Aldo Leopold, the reasons given frequently relate back to the value nature has for humanity even if that value cannot be expressed economically. The essay ‘Goose Music’ by Leopold (1966), for example, is an ode to the social or spiritual value wild creatures provide to people. The difficulty is in finding a justification to protect (at the least) the nonhuman natural world for reasons beyond their instrumentality, or more specifically to the value they may have for (or in) themselves.

According to Aristotle, inter-human friendship is made possible by the existence of a common bond shared among men. The truest friendship is based upon

mutual loving concern between men of good character (*NE* VIII.4, 1157a29–31). It is the goodness of each person that is both loved and desired among friends, and is what each shares in common. By loving his friend, a man of good character is loving both what is good for himself, and what is good for his friend, at least to the extent that all good men need friends. In unequal relationships (as between parent and child) one can still express a loving concern (friendly-feeling) toward a being incapable of returning that affection as an element of human virtue. We can and should act for the benefit of others even when the common bond making friendship possible may be lacking. What, then, of the nonhuman world? Can a loving regard be extended to the full range of species or ecological communities for their own sake as an expression of friendly feeling or virtue?

SELF LOVE

To answer this question, I think it necessary to consider a concept closely associated with that of friendship. In IX.8 of the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle asks whether a man should love himself most of all, or someone else.

> The question is also debated, whether a man should love himself most, or some one else. People criticise those who love themselves most, and call them self-lovers, using this as an epithet of disgrace, and a bad man seems to do everything for his own sake, and the more so the more wicked he is – and so men reproach him, for instance, with doing nothing of his own accord – while the good man acts for honour's sake, and the more so the better he is, and acts for his friend's sake, and sacrifices his own interest. But the facts clash with these arguments, and this is not surprising. For men say that one ought to love best one's best friend, and a man's best friend is one who wishes well to the object of his wish for his sake, even if no one is to know of it; and these attributes are found most of all in a man's attitude towards himself … (*NE* IX.8, 1168a28–1168b9)

I think Annas (1989) is quite correct in saying that self-love is of fundamental importance for the person seeking to live well. If one does not love one's self, then there is no basis for friendship, and thus little hope for happiness. Casting doubt upon the common conception of self-love, Aristotle appears to maintain that we are our own best friend in that we wish well for ourselves most of all. This further indicates that friendship is not strictly altruistic in the sense that we should be completely selfless in our actions toward others. There is something about our own selves that is worthy of deep respect and represents the prototype kind of relationship that we should also have toward our friends.

Aristotle maintained what I think can be described as an ecological approach to ethics. The good or moral life was one that was defined in terms of living according to nature (or according to one's nature). To determine what constitutes an ethical life, Aristotle thought it necessary to understand what it is to be a human being. In other words, what is it about our species that sets us apart from

other species of life? What makes us unique among animals and thus defines our nature or function in relation to the rest of the natural world? I think his answer is that we have intellect together with a desire to understand the world around us. Our essence as a living being is constituted by the urge to explore and research the world; to make sense of it and contemplate its meaning. The best possible life a man could lead, therefore, is one devoted to learning.

> … that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest (*NE* X.7, 1178a5–8).

I interpret Aristotle to be saying that a self-lover is one who loves his understanding or intellect most of all and not his discrete individual and composite being. In loving his understanding he obeys and gratifies the authoritative element of human soul and expresses right desire (*NE* IX.8, 1168b29–34). It is thus a mistake to call materialist and selfish individuals who lead undisciplined lives self-lovers, for it is not their genuine self that is their object of desire. Living lives contrary to their own nature, they are in no position to have the proper regard for themselves as rational beings.

One of the more remarkable aspects of Aristotle's philosophy is the connection between an ethical life, the divine life, and the nature of reality (see Lear 1988). By dedicating ourselves to a life of understanding, we are not only living a good life, but also asymptotically approaching the divine life and immortality. This is because it is the intellectual activity of the unmoved mover that gives actuality to the world. In other words, the structure of reality is made possible by the eternal process of God's contemplative activity. Consequently, by making the effort to understand the world around us, we are attempting not only to fulfil our unique niche among animals, but go beyond our material and mortal existence:

> If intellect is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything (*NE* X.7, 1177b30–1178a1).

Divine contemplation of the world makes it so. It is also that which imparts 'soul' to living things or provides the cause for its existence. All life is moved to fulfil its true nature, and ultimately participate in the divine life made possible by God's eternal contemplative activity (On The Soul II.4, 415a23-b1) . Humans are unique only to the extent that we have intellect and can thus engage in rational activity (providing for Aristotle's claim that human beings are superior to the other species of life on Earth). Yet all life is still drawn toward understanding irrespective of their capacity to achieve it (On the Soul II.4, 415b3–5). For most

of Earths' living things this involves activities that seek to insure the perpetuation of the species (e.g. nutrition and reproduction). In this way life is able to achieve a kind of immortality through the continuance of the species (On the Soul II.4, 415b3–8). This perspective is expressed in one of Aristotles' more famous quotes in his defence of biological studies:

> We ... must not recoil with childish aversion from the examination of the humbler animals. Every realm of nature is marvelous: and as Heraclitus, when the strangers who came to visit him found him warming himself at the furnace in the kitchen and hesitated to go in, is reported to have bidden them not to be afraid to enter, as even in that kitchen divinities were present, so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; *for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful* (my emphasis) (Parts of Animals I.5, 645a15–23).

I think the above quote reflects Aristotle's conclusion that all life partakes of the divine (i.e. has soul). To ignore other animals, even if we initially find them repellent, is to ignore the inherent goodness found in all living things.

Perhaps more significantly, I also interpret Aristotle to be saying that the order of the world as a whole is also an expression of desire for God. This is stated in the *Metaphysics* where he asserts that all things are related and contribute toward the good of the whole (*Metaphysics* XII.10, 1075a11–24), and also in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where he says that all systematic wholes are identified with the most authoritative element within them (*NE* IX.8, 1068b29–32). Since God's eternal contemplative activity provides the basis for reality, then understanding must be the authoritative element defining existence. And if it is true that a self-lover loves his understanding most of all, can he or she not also love the rest of the world that is the realisation of Divine understanding?

I am led to conclude that by acting for the sake of others, even if the bond of reciprocal friendship is missing, can be justified for two fundamental and related reasons within the Aristotelian tradition. First and foremost, all species of life expresses an inner or natural force moving it towards the fulfilment of its particular nature. Aristotle defines this as a unitary force emanating from the unmoved mover through his eternal contemplative activity. All life is driven by the same desire (or formal cause) to partake in this activity (understanding) irrespective of its ability to realise that desire. By acting for the sake of others, including nonhumans, we act in a way consistent with the acknowledgement that in all life there are 'divinities' present. In other words, all life is inherently valuable because all life is an expression of the goodness that is God. I am convinced that Aristotle is committed to the view that to love one's self is to love not only the life of understanding, but all life made possible by God's understanding.

Second, benefiting others for their sake can also be justified as an element of human virtue. We are willing to make sacrifices for others in part because

we choose and love the virtuous life. Since a virtuous life is one constituted by activity and is in a sense productive of itself, then we love the things we do according to virtue irrespective of the utilitarian value it may generate. In other words, virtuous activity is its own reward because it is the good life, and a source of greater pleasure than actions aimed strictly at personal utility. In so far as we have reason to love the diversity of life as it exists on Earth, so too can we take pleasure in doing what must be done to protect it, even if that comes at personal or material cost.

Clearly, this interpretation of the value held by the nonhuman world within the Aristotelian tradition is at odds with the instrumentalist view uttered by those peering through the lens of *Politics* I.8 (e.g. Hughes 1975 and Hargrove 1989). A portion of this famous (infamous?) section reads:

> In like manner we may infer that, after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of man, the tame for use and food, the wild, if not all, at least the greater part of them, for food, and for the provision of clothing and various instruments. Now if nature makes nothing incomplete, and nothing in vain, the inference must be that she has made all animals for the sake of man (*Politics* I.8, 1256b15–22).

This section has led some to conclude that Aristotle viewed plants and animals (and presumably the other life forms presently recognised) as being valuable purely as instruments to the needs of people. But I fail to see how this view can be sustained. As I have argued previously (Shearman 1999), to conclude that this meagre section found in a chapter discussing household management is representative of Aristotle's attitude toward the nonhuman natural world is a serious error. I suggest that the burden rests with those who interpret Aristotle as holding an instrumentalist view of nature to find support for their position beyond what can be gleaned from *Politics* I.8.

BIOPHILIA AND THE CONSERVATION OF SPECIES

I am willing to speculate that a number of people concerned with the preservation of biological diversity are motivated to preserve it for reasons other than human selfishness, even if the rationale for doing so may not be well formed. I suspect many are less than satisfied, if not uneasy, at continually searching for anthropocentric values (economic or otherwise) to justify their actions. Having said that, the difficulty with holding a nonanthropocentric value system can raise a similar uneasiness, especially if derived from inherent or intrinsic values. This discomfort may arise more easily among folks in the scientific community who are necessarily concerned with empirical reality.

I would remind the reader, however, that even within the scientific domain of conservation biology we must go beyond empiricism. Scientific members

of the discipline do not study species, ecosystems, genetic information, etc. strictly for the sake of scientific inquiry, but for the sake of conserving diversity. Conservation biology is thus both a scientific discipline seeking an objective understanding of ecological forms and processes *and* an advocate for a biologically diverse world. In acknowledging this, we acknowledge the importance or role that moral value plays in this and any other applied science. As it is for other forms of practice or policy, we must be willing to assess our underlying and motivating values – whether those values are anthropocentric or not.

The form of biophilia I have tried to develop is an attempt to make a rational argument in favour of the idea that the value to be discovered in the natural world need not begin and end with human beings. I am also trying to make better known an ancient voice, generally unrecognised or misunderstood among environmental philosophers, that may be able to offer us a rich and meaningful perspective as we consider our place and purpose in this world. Whether or not we are swayed by an Aristotelian approach in our reflections, we should not be discouraged from pursuing the full range of value systems, especially if they can give us insight into challenges we must face as one species among many.

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