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Against Grand Theory in Environmental Ethics

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ABSTRACT: Environmental ethics has been strongly influenced by biological ideas. This essay traces a number of these influences. Unfortunately, environmental ethicists have tended to produce moral theories on a grand scale. This tendency is criticized. It is argued that environmental ethicists should allow the ecological conception of the complexity of biological communities to influence their conception of the moral community. If this were to happen, it is argued, they would have to turn away from grand theories to 'theories of the middle range' while adopting a more 'empirical' approach to moral philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Moral community, moral considerability, evolution, environment, ecology, grand theories.

People become interested in environmental ethics for two different reasons. On one hand, some people turn to environmental ethics to discover what this academic discipline can tell them about how they should respond to the environmental crises that we now face. Concerned with such problems as the population explosion, the depletion of natural resources, the destruction of relatively undisturbed natural habitats such as the South American rainforests – together with many of the species that live therein – or with the climatic changes that might endanger the entire biosphere, these people look to environmental ethics for practical advice concerning their obligations, to help guide their response in these problematic situations. They look to environmental ethics, that is to say, to determine our duties to nature. On the other hand, other people become interested in environmental ethics to discover what these environmental crises can tell them about ethics. Those who take this approach view these environmental crises, at least in part, as an opportunity to gain some theoretical insight into the nature of our duties.

This last question will be the primary focus of this essay. At first this question might seem somewhat peripheral and overly academic. After all, given the severity of the environmental problems that we now face, it is easy to argue that what we need most is a sound guide to action, not theoretical insights into this marginal domain of academic study. However, although I would agree that the

question of what environmental crises might tell us about ethical theory is a question that only philosophers would ask, it is not necessarily a trivial question. In fact, I believe that a consideration of this question may help us better answer the first, more practical, question. Therefore, we might have good practical reasons to ask this theoretical question. However, before I go on to consider it, I would like to suggest an answer to the question concerning the kind of contributions that environmental ethics might make toward solving the various environmental crises that we now face.

I believe that the correct answer to this question is, “Not much; and what it can do is limited in scope, and dependent on current institutions.” This answer will probably doubly disappoint many environmental ethicists. Of course, everyone wants to be useful – particularly environmental ethicists who emerged from the ivory tower of standard academic philosophy precisely because they were concerned with the diverse problems of environmental degradation. However, a good case can be made for the proposition that, just because of the massive scale of these environmental problems, we don’t need the acute analytical abilities of philosophers to perceive them. Although most environmental problems are rife with great technical and political difficulties, they involve only minor philosophical puzzles.

Environmental ethicists will also be disappointed by my answer, because it would have them focus their attention on narrow and limited questions. There is a striking tendency in environmental ethics – which it shares with ethics generally – toward the creation of what used to be called in the social sciences, ‘grand theories’, that is, theories that would explain the fundamental nature of an entire field of study (Skinner, 1985, 1-31). In the social sciences, the development of such theories led to the development of a number of intellectual ‘schools’ of thought, the partisans of which would bitterly attack members of other such schools, while standing watch over their own side for any hint of ideological deviation. Much the same has happened in environmental ethics. Various schools of environmentalist thought have sprung up, from deep ecology to eco-feminism, and from environmental holism to neo-Aristotelianism. United only by a common opposition to anthropocentrism, enthusiasts of these schools spend their time, in the words of Christopher Stone, “volley[ing] onto ... academic foes hypothetical quandaries that their principles cannot handle, or that they can solve only in a way that seems intuitively unsatisfactory” (Stone, 1987, 117). The effects of this internecine warfare are predictable. For example, it is becoming increasingly obvious that debates in this field have become overly (and spuriously) sophisticated to the point that they are almost impossible for the layman to follow. Even worse, many of these debates are almost entirely unrelated to the practical crises that we currently face.

If they wish their work to be relevant to current problems, I believe that environmental ethicists must turn away from grand theories. If they want to be more effective, they must adopt what Peter Winch has called “the underlabourer

conception” of their work. (Winch, 1958, 3) Winch found this term in a passage in Locke’s *Essays* that deserves quoting in full:

The commonwealth of learning is not at this time without master-builders, whose mighty designs, in advancing the sciences, will leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity: but everyone must not hope to be a Boyle or a Sydenham; and in an age that produces such masters as the great Huygenius and the incomparable Mr. Newton, with some others of that strain, it is ambition enough to be employed as an underlabourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge. (Locke, 1969, 6-7)

The clearing of intellectual rubbish might seem to be an appropriate task for environmental ethicists. Moreover, it is clear that a great deal of this rubbish stands in the way of progress on environmental issues. For example, an opportunity to do this kind of conceptual policing can be found in an issue currently before the United States Supreme Court. Over the next several years, the Court will likely rule on a number of cases concerning the ‘taking’ of private property through government regulations and legislation. If it rules in favour of the property owning plaintiffs, it could severely undermine the government’s ability to respond to environmental problems by requiring the government to reimburse property owners for any loss that might come about as a result of environmental regulations.

This problem is ideally suited to the environmentalist underlabourer. Environmental ethicists, through an examination of concepts and defences of private property, might be able to clear away some of the intellectual rubbish that has come to surround our conception of the moral right to property upon which the plaintiffs’ cases ultimately rest. Specifically, environmental ethicists could mount an attack on the idea of an absolute moral property right that is so popular on the libertarian right (Nozick, 1968, 150-183). Clearly, the disposal of this conceptual rubbish would make the task of developing and enforcing environmental legislation easier. Environmental ethicists might also render valuable underlabourer service by analysing such policy tools as cost-benefit analysis (Sagoff, 1988) and risk analysis (Shrader-Frechette, 1991) or by examining the value of natural beauty (Hargrove, 1989, 77-104).

Such work may not have the sweep of a grand theory, nor would it “leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity”, but it would be immediately useful and, because of its relevance to ongoing policy debates, it might actually help protect parts of the environment. Of course, given the entrenched economic interests opposed to environmental legislation and their hired guns, both from the academy and from Madison Avenue, these efforts may in the end come to naught. Moreover, compared to the task of creating grand theories, this rather mundane policing of the conceptual environment is not very exciting. However, if environmental ethicists are interested in protecting the environment, this is this kind of work which, I believe, shows the most promise.

If we turn our attention from the question of how ethicists might influence environmental policy, to how the environment can influence ethics, the picture becomes much more complex. However, if we understand 'the environment' to include not only the various practical issues raised by environmental crises, but also the sciences and scientific theories needed to understand those crises – especially ecology and the theory of evolution – I believe that we can distinguish three different possible or actual avenues of influence. First, ecology and the theory of evolution have already called into question the extent of what is often called, 'the moral community'. Second, environmental crises can serve as test cases for ethical theories. Third, ecology might provide us with a new model for understanding the moral community. Let us examine each of these influences in turn.

Modern biology has been influencing ethical theory for over a century. The most obvious example, of course, is the development of Social Darwinism at the beginning of this century. This 'influence', however, in which a biological theory was simply transported (with some distortion) into the field of ethics, is an exception. Usually, the influences are both more subtle and more profound. Potentially, evolutionary theory may have a revolutionary effect on moral theory, not because the idea of the survival of the fittest has a direct application to ethics, but because it calls into question a fundamental assumption of most ethical theories, namely the uniqueness of humanity.

Evolution teaches us that we are closely related to the animals, indeed, it emphasizes the obvious, but often forgotten, fact that we are animals. However, because many moral theories are premised on the idea that human beings are radically different from all other creatures, by calling this distinction into question, the theory of evolution seems to challenge these theories at their anthropocentric foundation. Historically, there have been two responses to this challenge. First, some have claimed that by undermining claims to human uniqueness, the theory of evolution has undermined morality itself. This position is, of course, most famously held by some religious fundamentalists. However, a similar position has been adopted by a number of radical environmentalists whose intellectual genealogy can be traced back to the eighteenth century romantic movement (Shrader-Frechette, 1984, 107-146). According to these romantic environmentalists, the roots of the current environmental crisis are to be found in what Max Weber called 'the disenchantment of nature', which came about as a result of the growth of science and the success of its 'mechanical world view' (Weber, 1958). By promoting a view of nature that takes it to be nothing more than a large, complex machine with no intrinsic purpose or value, science made possible the kind of treatment of nature that led to our current environmental crises. Moreover, the argument continues, if the social sciences develop along these same lines, we risk the 'disenchantment of people' as well. If the social sciences ultimately show that people are nothing more than complex machines, then there would be no moral agents, and no moral community. If this happens, the march of science would have made ethics impossible.

Other environmentalists have understood the implications of evolution quite differently. Instead of arguing that we should reject modern science due to its fundamental incompatibility with ethics, these environmentalists argue that we should *use* some of the results of science to revise our ethical theories. One such group of environmentalists have based their arguments primarily on evolutionary theory, physiology, and ethology. They have argued that if humanity is nothing more than another species of animal, then we must expand the scope of our moral concern to include our fellow animals. If, to be more precise, there is scientific evidence that (some) animals have (some of) the capacities – such as sentience, linguistic abilities, rationality, or self-consciousness – which were once thought to be the defining properties of human beings, upon which claims of moral considerability were based, then those animals with whom we share these capacities must also be morally considerable (Singer, 1990, 9-17).

An even more radical expansion of the moral community is urged by ‘environmental holists’, who argue that the moral community should be expanded to include plants, species, ecosystems, and even nature itself (Rolston, 1988, and Nash, 1989). Holists are less influenced by the theory of evolution than they are by the science of ecology. According to environmental holists, the central insight of ecology is that there is an essential relationship between the organism and its environment. Generalizing this insight into the metaphysical principle that all things are essentially related to all other things, holists draw a radical ethical conclusion. As one holist has put it,

... the central axiological problem of environmental ethics, the problem of intrinsic value in nature, may be directly and simply solved. If quantum theory and ecology both imply in structurally similar ways in both the physical and organic domains of nature the continuity of self and nature, and if the self is intrinsically valuable, then nature is intrinsically valuable. (Callicott, 1985, 275)

As a result, the moral community should be expanded to include virtually everything.

As these examples show, the major influence that these biological sciences have had on environmental ethics has been on the conception of the size or scope of the moral community. Environmental ethicists have used ideas taken from the biological sciences to make arguments for the expansion of the moral community. These arguments have, I believe, reinforced the tendency toward the development and use of what I have been calling ‘grand theories’ in environmental ethics. In effect, environmental ethicists who have adopted this expansionist position see their task to be one of extending existing grand moral theories, such as, utilitarianism, neo-Aristotelianism, and feminism, beyond their traditional limits so as to apply them to the new, larger moral community, thereby creating even grander theories.

These moves can be criticized on a number of grounds. Most importantly, these theories are often based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the scientific theories that inspired them. Modern ecology, for example, is simply

not the science that many environmental ethicists think it is. (Worster, 1985) This misunderstanding has, I believe, helped to exacerbate the existing split within the environmental community, between its romantic and scientific sides. This split, which is every bit as deep as – and partially reflects – the division in the academic community condemned by C.P. Snow in *Two Cultures*, has, I suspect, already led to a reduction in the political effectiveness of the environmental community.

One positive effect of this expansion is that it will allow us to test these grand theories in new domains. In fact, I believe that environmental crises have already played an important role in the testing of these ethical theories. For example, in a series of articles inspired by the population crisis and focused on the question of our duties to future generations, Derek Parfit has uncovered a number of paradoxes that might demonstrate that utilitarianism is either fundamentally inadequate or, perhaps, more limited in scope than is usually thought (Parfit, 1976, 100-115).

Population policies present problems for utilitarianism by calling into question utilitarianism's most basic principle. The principle of utility would have us act so as to maximize net expected happiness. However, there are two ways to increase happiness; we could make existing people more happy, or we could make more happy people. Although this second option only arises when we consider such questions as our duties to future generations and/or population policies, it serves to problematize the 'counting rules' that utilitarians use. There seem to be only two possible counting rules; one – the prior existence rule – that counts only people who exist or would exist independently of our actions, and one – the total rule – that would also count those people who come into existence as a result of our actions. Parfit argues that the application of either of these rules to population policies results in unacceptable, even paradoxical, recommendations. Although Parfit is not yet willing to give up on utilitarianism as a guide to population policy, it is entirely possible that he has uncovered a fundamental flaw in utilitarianism. At the very least, he might have shown that utilitarianism is limited in scope and should not be applied to these kinds of questions (Narveson, 1967, 62-72).

Ethics has long been influenced by the biological sciences, and already many ethical theories are being tested by environmental crises. However, I believe that an even more significant influence still lies on the horizon. In addition to providing a possible foundation for the expansion of the moral community, the biological sciences – particularly ecology – might provide a model for the reconceptualization of the nature of that community. To understand this point, however, it is first necessary to understand a bit more about the relations between grand theories in ethics and the moral community.

Traditionally, grand theories approach the moral community from an idealistic perspective. That is to say, grand theorists usually take the size and scope of the moral community to be a function of the theory itself. On this view, what counts as a morally considerable being depends on what theory is being

employed. A creature is morally considerable, that is to say, if it possesses characteristics which are taken to be morally relevant by the theory in question. Thus, a utilitarian will hold that any and all creatures capable of feeling pleasure and pain – or of having preferences – are members of the moral community; a Kantian will hold that rationality is a necessary and sufficient condition of membership; and an Aristotelian will admit all creatures with intrinsic purposes. For each, the horizon of moral concern is determined by the theory itself. Moreover, not only do moral theories carry with them implicit membership criteria, but they also specify the nature of the moral relationships that should obtain between all members of the community, whether they are ones of mutual use, mutual autonomy, or the complex subordination of intrinsic purposes. Moral theories, therefore, not only determine the extent of the moral community but they specify its structure. As a result, the moral community is, on these views, extraordinarily homogeneous and simple. It is made up of one kind of creature and structured in one dimension by one kind of relationship. Of course, the paradigm example of such a community is the modern liberal nation state, in which all citizens are equal, all citizens have the same duty to obey the law, and all laws are fair. It might be thought, therefore, that the model upon which this view of the moral community is based is a legal one. However, an equally good case might be made that the model comes from physics.

This description of the moral community could not be more different from the description that an ecologist would give of a biological community. According to ecologists, biological communities are typically made up of a large variety of creatures possessing vastly different characteristics. These creatures can stand in a number of different kinds of relationships with each other, e.g., predator/prey, host/parasite, food source/seed dispenser, etc. Moreover, there are a variety of different types of biological communities which are structured in vastly different ways. Finally, although theories of succession continue to be controversial, ecologists agree that biological communities undergo great changes through time (Brennan, 1988, 47-48). Biological communities, that is to say, are made up of a number of different kinds of creatures engaging in complex sets of slowly evolving interactions. Compared to the diversity of this community, the moral community of the grand theorist, would most resemble the mono-cultural farms of the American midwest. This latter kind of community, to continue the metaphor, is not only artificial, difficult to maintain, and endangered by change, but it is also not very aesthetically pleasing. These two different conceptions of community arise out of two different methods. While the grand theorists have adopted a rationalistic, even idealistic, approach, ecologists have adopted a more empirical approach. Rather than derive the essential form of a community from abstract theoretical considerations, ecologists set out to observe the structure of existing communities.

If environmental ethicists were to adopt the empirical methods used by ecologists to study biological communities, they would have to approach the

moral community in a completely different way. The empirical study of actual moral communities would focus less on the necessary conditions of morality, and more on what I will call 'moral practices', that is, on existing moral relationships and their contexts. Environmental ethicists of this sort – let us call them 'ecological ethicists' – would examine existing communities to discover which goods are recognized by the community for which creatures in which contexts. They would have to discover which creatures are granted moral status for what purposes, and, most importantly, which reasons are taken to be convincing in which situations. In doing this, it is important to pay attention to the context – the niche? – of each practice. It is important, that is to say, not to generalize from one practice to whole community. It is even more important to understand that one practice by itself cannot reveal the essential nature of the moral community. In fact, given that a variety of practices may exist in each moral community, it may be a mistake even to suppose that the moral community has an essential nature.

If we were to apply this biological model of study to moral communities, I believe that we would find that they resemble biological communities in many ways. First, I believe that we would find that most moral communities recognize a number of different kinds of creatures as morally considerable. For example, I think that in our community we recognize some creatures as morally considerable because they are rational (sapient); others, because they are able to feel pleasure and pain (sentient); still other, because they are intrinsically purposeful; and others, perhaps, because they are beautiful. That several different kinds of grand theories are found to be plausible in our community may indicate not only that the moral community is very heterogenous, but also that, *qua* grand theories, these moral theories are wrong. Given this diversity of membership, that is to say, it would not be surprising to find that the structure of the moral community is complex and, therefore, incomprehensible from the perspective of any single grand theory. What counts as moral in one kind of relationship may not be moral in another. My duties to sapient animals, for example, may be vastly different from my duties to sentient animals. It may be, therefore, that no one moral theory can comprehend all of my duties. Moral theories, that is to say, should not be 'grand', rather they should be limited in scope.

The complexity of the moral community may present a number of problems to ecological ethics. The pluralistic nature of the moral community probably entails that we are subject to a number of incommensurable duties. An ecological ethics would, therefore, probably reveal the existence of moral dilemmas as well as areas of moral confusion. This is not to say that all situations are morally problematic, but, unlike grand theories, an ecological ethics cannot guarantee a clear answer to every moral problem. Moreover, an empirical approach to morality will almost certainly entail a kind of relativism which would further complicate moral deliberation (Callicott, 1990, 99-124). Whether it would make such deliberation impossible, only further study will show. However, this raises

the question as to whether an empirical approach to morality is appropriate to the study of morality. For example, it might be argued that such an approach is inappropriate for a prescriptive discipline (Singer, 1974, 490-517) or it might be argued that this approach is inherently conservative and uncritical. These are important but not insurmountable challenges. However, I believe that they can be faulted for their overly simple and therefore inadequate conception of the moral community – a conception that reveals their origin in grand theories. If the complexity of the real moral community is kept in mind, the possibility of an internal critique in which one set of practices is used to call another into question is obvious. The precise nature of that internal critique needs to be spelled out, obviously, but this cannot be done until a more adequate description of the moral community is developed. It is always a mistake to put prescription before description.

Such a descriptive approach to environmental ethics – and moral philosophy generally – which would require ethicists to pay more attention to the details of the moral community would probably have the added advantage of making ethics more relevant to contemporary political debates. Ecological ethics would probably be more useful than grand theories in the battle for environmental protection, because it would require ethicists to focus on the kind of narrow theories that people actually hold and the practical problems which they actually encounter. Because ecological ethics would direct connect with everyday concerns, it might influence everyday behaviour. An ecological approach to environmental ethics, that is to say, would lead to a moral practical environmental ethics. To become practical, however, environmental ethicists must engage in the kind of philosophical underlabour that I recommended previously.

I have argued that environmental ethicists should focus their attention on developing what Robert Merton called in another context, ‘theories of the middle range’ (Merton, 1967, 1-39). While these theories would not explain all of the relationships between all of the members of the moral community, and while they may be open to certain lines of criticism, they might more accurately comprehend our various moral practices. By understanding the many ‘niches’ of the moral community, we might ultimately come to better understand the community as a whole. Moreover, as we come to understand these niches, we might be able to better serve the environment by being able to construct narrow, but convincing moral arguments. Finally, if we do develop an ecological ethics, we might not only be better able to fulfil our duties to nature, but we also might come to understand better the nature of our duties.

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