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# The Ethics of Environmental Holism and the Democratic State: Are they in Conflict?

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**ABSTRACT:** Environmental holism, with its demands for universality, appears to undermine the democratic rights of individuals, and of nation states within the international community. But these rights may better be viewed as means towards justice or other goods, rather than as ends in themselves. Where basic survival issues are involved, environmental 'triage' may be morally essential, and some checks on 'populist' democratic politics inevitable.

**KEYWORDS:** Democracy, environmental ethics, holism, individual rights

Roderick Nash has recently argued that, ever since the time of the Magna Carta, the scope of the concept of 'rights' has expanded steadily to include more and more, starting from some noblemen, to all men, women, blacks, workers, animals, species, and finally, to ecosystems. Yet this final development is different in kind from the previous ones: to assert the moral considerability of ecosystems is to embrace eco-holism or biocentric holism, which appears to many to be in direct contrast with individual rights (Regan 1983; Aiken 1984; Shrader-Frechette 1986, 1989, 1990; Bartolommei, 1990), and even to represent a form of 'fascism'. Some have defended biocentric holism against that charge (Rolston 1988; Callicott 1989; Westra 1993). My defence claims that it is a category mistake to assume that what is morally appropriate in regard to environmental wholes must be equally appropriate in purely human/social ethics.

My own proposed 'principle of integrity' (Westra 1989) makes the ecosystem both morally considerable and *primary*, at least in respect to other human preferences and rights, beyond the right to life. The ecosystem is viewed as the basic 'survival unit' (Rolston 1988), and the basis of all life support. Thus, if primary moral considerability lies with ecosystems and the life support they provide, then our first obligation transcends both individuals and groups, and

both nationalism and democracy (as implemented majoritarian preferences and choices) may have to be re-evaluated (Meadows et al. 1992).

Recent literature on sustainable agriculture, for instance, as well as current and proposed public policy and legislation, appear to move in that direction: witness for example the emergence of 'world reports' and the recent international meeting to design an 'Earth Charter' (Rio de Janeiro, June 1992). In the light of these differences of emphasis, between the voiced primacy of democratic choices and preferences, and the increasing importance of ecological measures that need to be globally adopted in order to have validity, I analyse and discuss holistic environmental concern in relation to the state. Section 1 deals with the internal governance of the democratic state, while section 2 addresses the question of international relations. Section 3 presents some concluding remarks; and although precise answers do not emerge from the discussion, serious questions will be raised about the viability of national states in the context of the present environmental crisis, and a proposal will be advanced.

## 1. THE GOALS OF ENVIRONMENTAL HOLISM IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOCRACY

Environmental holism, with its demands for universality, is politically revolutionary. We tend to assume that democracy represents the best possible system of government, the only one capable of supporting and defending the civil liberties we believe represent the ultimate value in national states. Further, we believe these to possess the right to self-determination, precisely as democratic states. Yet, the belief in the right to self-determination of autonomous democratic states is open to several counter-claims, two of which are particularly damaging. First of all, "Self-determination is a means to the end of social justice," (Beitz 1979) so that it cannot be viewed as an end as such, nor to be beyond criticism. Second, self-determination implies a group's decision to act as one, and to be viewed as a separate autonomous entity. But it is obvious that groups can join together by consent or for the "pursuit of common ends" (Beitz 1979), without thereby being exempt from the moral judgment of the human community beyond their borders, or confines. For instance, a group such as the Ku Klux Klan, even if it is in fact unanimous in the pursuit of its goal (a rare occurrence among national states, where a narrow or at best a comfortable majority supports their leadership), could not justify its goals as 'moral' on those grounds. Thus, even in the case of independent states, Beitz argues, "...the weakness of the argument from consent to legitimacy also undermines the argument from consent to autonomy" (Beitz 1979); the state is not immune to moral criticism.

If one adopts biocentric holism as the major principle to guide one's moral thought and action, without abandoning some tenets of interhuman ethics, further adoption of two second order principles is indicated. These are:

The *Harm Principle* which indicates that (a) direct harm to persons, (b) harm to persons through ecosystem damage, and (c) harm to ecosystems as such is not permissible.

The *Equity Principle* which requires that such rights as those to “equal protection” (U.S. Constitutional Amendments 5 and 14), or “rights to the security of persons” (Canada Charter of Rights), or other strong rights to life and freedom from harm as set out by the United Nations Declaration, be equally available to all without consideration of gender, age, or other differences among humans. Further, it mandates that our actions also be governed by the principle of intergenerational equity, as specified by Edith Brown-Weiss (Westra 1991).

Now, basing ourselves upon these two principles which embody commonly held values, our approach to correct environmental and agricultural practices will need modification. Some changes, suggested by all three of the principles taken together, are:

- (a) Economic factors should not be considered paramount when human fatality/morbidity are at issue.
- (b) Economic, industrial and agricultural activity must be brought into harmony with the limits of sustainability of the ecosystem we inhabit.
- (c) Governments should view environmental contamination and degradation as demanding priority action, rather than simply requiring ongoing research (Westra 1991).

and, in general

- (d) Divisive regional and even national policies which are now “ecologically blind” in their conception, funding and implementation, must be given “ecological eyes” (*Food 2000* 1987).

The final paragraph, (d), raises some questions, which are also discussed in the final chapter of Hargrove’s *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Hargrove 1989). In his “Afterword”, Hargrove talks about moving toward a “balanced view system”. His starting point is Passmore’s worry about all attempts to define an environmental ethic. Passmore not only sees environmental ethics as such as pointless, since the problems they address require political/social not individual action; but he also sees it as almost subversive, as a first step toward “the overthrow of Western democratic institutions” (Passmore 1974). Hargrove disagrees with Passmore’s position, arguing that we need to re-emphasize values, traditional, intrinsic and aesthetic, so that our aim of “complementary action at both levels” (that is, ethical and political) can ensue.

In this sense then, Passmore’s worry can be laid to rest. Yet Hargrove’s confidence in the desirability and effectiveness of the ‘complementarity’ of

ethics and politics within the present Western democratic scenario may be somewhat premature, given his own concerns. Hargrove is correct in insisting on the primacy of intrinsic/aesthetic value, beyond economic and other instrumental considerations. On the other hand it seems then necessary to question and qualify the endorsement of both 'democracy' as such and even more, the existence of separate, individual states with absolute power within their borders.

Although the authors of *Food 2000* do not recognize the implications of their conclusions, the problem is implicitly present within their assessment. "Laws must be given ecological eyes" is essentially correct, but it is a claim whose implications need serious consideration. It entails that: (a) laws and regulations be chosen according to an ideal goal or 'good', rather than represent the haphazard implementation of voters' preferences, be they popular, or those of specific interest groups, and (b) individual states ought not to be the ultimate arbiters of which laws and regulations are chosen.

Now, at the risk of impugning the 'sacred cow' of democracy, there appears to be a direct conflict between it and the above position. Hargrove also, to some extent, addresses the problem of the environmental viability of the *status quo* when he says:

...the democratic state must educate its citizens so that they have the environment-values needed for both ethical and political action (Hargrove 1989: 207).

Given that there is still controversy over whether or not it is appropriate to teach values, as Hargrove himself admits, is it right to have uneducated voters ultimately decide questions that might affect all life on earth? Further, voters are, at best, limited to questions within their own borders. How can one design and implement policies that are transboundary and transnational within the present divisive and atomistic political reality?

Hargrove recognizes the 'pragmatic' aspect of the utilitarian base of much of today's political discourse:

Utilitarianism may most appropriately be thought of as the democratization of ethical values. Unfortunately in order to speak to everyone, the utilitarian converted all good into degrees of pleasure, a good that is not a higher good but has the merit of being a good everyone can understand (Hargrove, 1989: 208).

I agree with Hargrove here, and changing 'pleasure' to 'happiness' or 'good' in this context, will not really change the emphasis on the individual (even in aggregates), and on preferences. And if his argument indicts utilitarianism, it also pinpoints precisely the parallel problem with democracy. The discipline of economics may not have actually defended its own values, but too many people are now convinced by its unproven assumptions:

...(the) inordinate emphasis on money and getting good value, considered despicable in the last century, is now the standard in our own (Hargrove 1989: 209).

But if utilitarianism based on economics is not the best way to approach environmental problems, and if the majority is convinced of the soundness of that approach nonetheless, then it seems to follow that majoritarian rule, in its present (as yet uneducated) state, is inimical to environmental values. The majority can only vote to support its preferences; as Hargrove says:

In summary, the instrumental resource value of nature, expressed in economic terms, will always, in principle outweigh, its aesthetic and intrinsic value (Hargrove, 1989: 209).

In this case, we may need to return to Passmore's point, not to agree with him and dismiss everything that may conflict with 'Western democracies' as a given, but rather, having recognized and admitted the primacy of environmental concern, in order to stop and take a hard look at the impact of 'democracy' as it stands, and of fragmented, divisive states. The world-wide study cited earlier correctly points out the necessity to transcend the latter, yet it fails to draw out the implications and the spirit of the author's position. To some extent, I believe, this 'spirit' can be found in Hargrove's "Afterword".

The practical implications and the difficulties of adopting this position are staggering, and the theoretical and ideological ones no less extreme, but I am not at all sure that the alternative, that is, the continued reliance on institutions and practices insufficient to cope with the present acute problems, can be moral. Take, for example, the local acceptance of toxic wastes or even radwaste dump sites by impoverished people who tend to view the economic (immediate) benefit as negating the adverse health impacts (future) of these facilities, ranging from poor areas in the Canadian shield (e.g., Atikokan, Ontario was proposed as a 'safe' storage site, amid great controversy in 1985) to locations in Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and other areas with pockets of high unemployment. Unfortunately, the consequences of such decisions will have deleterious effects not only on the population 'choosing' the better economic alternative, but also on many others in areas affected by the facility, but not proximate enough to cast a veto.

A serious commitment to the public interest forces us to undertake a *moral* rather than simply a *social* audit of our activities and policies. The difference is that a majority of people will often prefer short term gain, over long term safety, especially since the trade-offs are often not clearly explained or publicly discussed in the media. Clearly, governments, professionals and institutions have an obligation, as Hargrove pointed out, to 'educate', to clarify, to be candid about issues involving risk. Even during this process, however, they have an obligation to be paternalistic, that is, to implement the less dangerous choices as *morally right*, even if (temporarily) unpopular and thus not perceived as a social 'good' by 'informed' citizens.

Now some, for instance Kristin Shrader-Frechette, have argued against the absolute power of 'expert opinion' in deciding public policy issues. She has

recently advocated allowing populist expression to balance the perceived ‘absolutes’ of the experts. This appears to contradict my own position, at least the practical claims I have advanced. The answer to this problem can be found, I believe, in her *Nuclear Power and Public Policy* (1983). There, she suggested a modified ‘jury system’ as the best solution for difficult policy decisions. This approach would have the merit of incorporating the ‘education’ requirement proposed by Hargrove. Juries must be presented with *all* expert evidence, and the best possible ‘case’ from both sides. Nor can a jury’s deliberations be dismissed in favour of a majoritarian decision. In this manner, a more balanced decision might be reached, avoiding both the dangers of exclusive reliance on ‘scientists’ and ‘experts’, and that of unprepared or uneducated populism. Clearly this proposal requires a lot of work on the practical side to be viable: I offer a broad sketch, rather than a detailed proposal. However, generally speaking, the only other form of governance that might be envisioned as an alternative, would appear to be the return to some sort of Platonic philosopher-queen instead.

## 2. ENVIRONMENTAL HOLISM AND INTERNATIONAL EQUITY

The argument of the last section showed that if (a) all serious environmental concerns (and solutions) are global; and if (b) laws, policies and regulations must therefore be given ‘ecological eyes’; then, (c) no uninformed, limited, national democratic vote can serve to deal adequately with the problems we are facing. Even if it were possible to ensure that information were made available to a specific national group, that might not be sufficient to ensure that an international ecological policy would be chosen (Meadows et al. 1992).

What militates against that possibility is the very existence of nationalism, that dictates the centrality of ourselves and our next of kin and our interests over and above those we perceive as ‘others’. In the *Republic*, Plato makes a similar point in his outline of the ‘best’ society. Not only did he deem it necessary to ensure that all decisions were to be made in the light of the ‘good’, and that only someone competent to understand the ‘good’ (i.e. the philosopher-king/queen) could be leader, but he also designed a specific training for the guardians, from whom the philosopher-king was to be chosen. In a move far more radical even than the present day Rawlsian requirements for a ‘veil of ignorance’ and the ‘original position’ to safeguard the determinants of justice from any form of partiality (e.g., knowledge of our position in society, our talents, capacities, and even gender or ethnic origin should, ideally, be kept from influencing our deliberations), Plato demanded even more. What is demanded in the *Republic*, is that the guardians’ and auxiliaries’ life-styles manifest an almost monastic quality, intended to prepare them for the moral/intellectual deliberations ahead of them and effectively distancing them from the ‘normal’ citizenry of the time. This approach suggests vividly the corruptive force not only of the financial

motive (they were allowed neither money nor possessions), but also of clan membership.

If you knew who 'yours' were, Plato thought, it would be natural to want to favour them. Pushed to an extreme today's ethical discourse would not accept, Plato's position is also a holistic one, albeit from different motives. It is also a position suffering from the 'fascism' flaw mentioned earlier, and rightfully rejected in a context that is purely interhuman and social. But the environmental ethics enterprise forces us to look beyond specific interests of any sort, family, group or nation, even purely human interests (beyond that of survival). It also requires that we do not view ourselves as absolute owners of our territory (unlike other species in the wild), a position the Athenian Plato would never have accepted.

Still, if our life-style is such that it affects the very viability of life on earth, then unlike wild species whose life-styles cannot have that consequence as far as we know, we need to pursue a universal goal, a global 'good'. On that ground, it seems as though nationalism in its present form should be obsolete, and that competitive, divisive laws and regulations should no longer be supported. But in that case, the very basis of international relations may be brought into question. Once again, what about state autonomy, the principle of non-intervention, and the relation between respect and tolerance for cultural and group differences? How would these fare in regard to questions of global justice, for instance? In essence, does nationalism still have a role to play in today's global moral difficulties? Biocentric environmental ethics suggest a goal based on the value of survival. If states and nations are viewed as discrete individual entities, then their status as autonomous entities is based, as some say, on the "moral principle of national survival" (Beitz 1979). Yet 'national survival', as Charles Beitz notes, is an ambiguous notion. It is only fully defensible in the sense of "survival of the nation's citizens", but not otherwise:

When 'national survival' extends further (for example to preservation of forms of cultural life or to the defence of economic interests) the view's *prima facie* acceptability dissipates precisely because the survival of persons is no longer at issue. In such cases the invocation of the national interest does not necessarily justify disregard of other moral standards (Beitz, 1979).

Hence the 'autonomy of states' is not sufficient to justify immoral action, nor is the argument that no acknowledged moral principle of international justice exists at this time. Moreover the near-'sanctity' of individual nations is currently perceived as the only 'just' political form of government, and their autonomy is seen on a par almost with individual autonomy, and equally hard to impugn on any grounds, including moral ones. Beitz points out that in earlier times, states were not perceived as 'self-sufficient' units. Rather,

Previously a different conception of international order had been ascendant; in that



conception, exemplified by Grotius, states were regarded as elements of a larger moral order and their boundaries were not viewed as barriers to external moral assessment or political interference. (Beitz 1979)

Of course, in Grotius' time the analogous 'inviolability' of individual autonomy within a state was not accepted either, whereas a universal moral, metaphysical and theological order was accepted without question. In fact, it is easier to support universal survival, than it is to attempt to decide what constitutes 'immoral activities' in states from other standpoints. If there is nothing 'sacred' about any specific social order as such, then there is nothing immoral about interfering with it, when it appears to contravene universal moral principles, particularly one as easy to accept as that of the primacy of life support systems on earth (thus all life). Therefore, if citizens' survival (rather than the survival of the social order) is at stake, then interference with national autonomy is permissible, regardless of the wishes of the national government in power (Beitz 1979).

Now intervention with national governments does require serious justification, but the survival of the nation's citizens is warrant enough to justify interference. In other words, the analogy between individual autonomous persons and discrete, self-sufficient autonomous states, does not hold. Nor should a state legitimately resist intervention aimed at ensuring citizens' survival, on the grounds that the government exists by consent, and was democratically chosen, as argued in the previous section. States, unlike individuals who are thought to retain their right to autonomy no matter what their moral status, provided their activity does not harm or affect negatively the rights of others, "can legitimately demand to be respected as autonomous sources of ends", only if their "institutions satisfy appropriate principles of justice" (Beitz 1979). Benn and Peters, in their classic treatment of international relations, state: "In the end, moral duties are owed to men; they are owed to states only insofar as they are organizations which serve men." (Benn and Peters 1959.)

At the time their work was published, most international problems and laws had to do with war, although they cite Sidgwick on an international problem germane to the one addressed here: "Sidgwick for instance denied that a particular community had an exclusive and unqualified right to the 'utilities from any portion of the earth's surface'." (Benn and Peters 1959.) Beitz himself, in his illuminating discussion of Rawlsian doctrine, shows that unlike persons' 'natural talents', 'natural resources' are not such that anyone can have a 'natural' or prior claim to them. No special rights attach to the soil under our feet, or the air above us (Beitz 1979).

To take an example from the recent Gulf war, Iraq's action of deliberate sabotage of the earth (that is, the spilling of immense quantities of oil in the sea), which can only be termed an act of 'ecosabotage', was universally deplored (Martin 1990). Whatever one's position in regard to the Arab/Western politics

involved, the ecosabotage was condemned by all. It is worth noting that the whether or not the oil and the areas of the spill were in Hussein's own domain, and even if the former had been his state's property, would not help him deflect universal moral censure.

This indicates a universal acceptance of the holistic approach, emphasizing the question of interdependence. It is not the case that autonomous, self-sufficient states, voluntarily come together to agree on conditions for interaction. On the contrary, their interdependence, as coexisting entities within the same planet, and thus as individuals totally dependent on a joint life-support system, is primary, and this basic fact must be taken in consideration for international justice. Nor is it sufficient to change social systems. Although changes in the balance of power between more and less developed countries, and within these between powerful and wealthy and disempowered groups, are desirable on other grounds, environmentally, no guaranteed success would ensue. As long as the emphasis remains on atomistic, individualistic rights, even the desirable change of power among present holders of power and those who lack it, will not suffice. There is nothing to prevent an individual in a less developed country to want desperately to enjoy not only freedom from famine and deprivation, but also parity with the life-style of more developed countries, with all their wasteful and unsafe practices. Nor is there any ground or mechanism to prevent such occurrences, if civil liberties (desirable as they are) remain primary. As no easy solutions present themselves, in the concluding section I will summarize the arguments presented, and offer a tentative proposal.

### 3. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS: A POSSIBLE SOLUTION, ENVIRONMENTAL TRIAGE?

We noted that the most far-reaching ethics of environmental concern, biocentric or ecocentric holism, suggested choices, policies and even moral imperatives in direct conflict with some present day social and political goals. Space constraints will not permit a detailed analysis of all possible environmental ethics position, nor a defence of the specific one chosen. It is worth noting not only that it is the most radical one, demanding moral considerability for whole ecosystems and ascribing intrinsic value to them, but also that it is the approach of such documents as the Clean Air and Clean Water Act (1972), and that binational (U.S. Canada) legislation, such as the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (1978; rat. 1988), also adopts the goal of 'ecosystem integrity' (Westra, 1989).

It might appear paradoxical that such documents and regulations would not choose to defend a more moderate position, and a clearly anthropocentric one would represent a much easier project to recommend. But, the closest such institutional and government statements come to anthropocentrism is to state clearly the moral considerability and even the rights of future generations, which

is surprising in light of the acknowledged theoretical and practical difficulties inherent in the ecocentric approach.

In an important recent statement of the differences between consumers' preferences and citizens' values, Mark Sagoff has shown the centrality of the latter, and the corresponding duty on the part of governing bodies to support and implement such moral choices (Sagoff 1988). Hence, ecocentric holism is not only preferable because: (a) one can base upon it policies that are just as global in import as are the degradation and pollution they are meant to curtail, but also (b) it tends to be *already* implicitly embedded in much of the current legislative efforts to attempt a recovery from the possibly fatal crisis we face. Yet the very holistic thrust that promises the possibility of solutions also comes into conflict with other strongly held beliefs in the social and political realm. It may conflict with the primacy of democracy in national governments as well as with state autonomy, in the international scene. It would also entail the downgrading of all other social causes/obligations if a conflict with survival were present, and life-support systems were seriously at risk.

What might be required is, first, the establishment of a supervisory organization, UNEP perhaps, with some power and clout in this regard, and then, the practice of a sort of environmental 'triage'. For example, an international body might be endowed with a large grant to attempt to redress several serious problems, such as: (a) ecosabotage, (b) racism, and (c) sexism. A 'triage' approach would demand spending one's resources *first* on safeguarding life on earth for all (that is, all parts of the biota, including humans of all races and both genders), before even attempting to gauge the relative merits of the two remaining causes (i.e., (b) and (c)), and the severity of their respective problems. Like all 'triage' practices, this entails adopting a ruthless 'bottom line' mentality, as in all cases of limited resources and multiple threats and perils.

This does not, however, indicate a lack of concern or respect for the other two causes. In a similar vein, paramedics called to a multi-vehicle accident where several victims *all* appear to need attention and immediate intervention, would have to choose the worse cases from the standpoint of life-threatening conditions until further help/resources could be summoned. This is not to say that they would not consider the rest of the victims seriously, or not view them as worthy of respect or care. It would simply indicate that they would start by performing 'triage', that is, by assessing priorities, and do their best until help arrived.

Hence, the priority of life-support systems would dictate no specific choices in the social or political realms other than the selection of a governing body or institutional mechanism designed to deal authoritatively with one set of problems only: an EPA, or better yet a UNEP with more clout, power, and the accepted right to make and implement decisions. Individual cultural differences and behaviours that did not represent threats to life support systems would still be respected, and interference with civil liberties, life-style preferences and the like, would not be permitted.

In essence, such a body would acknowledge the lack of precision endemic to ecology, and possibly to most life sciences, but would not permit this 'argument from ignorance' (Shrader-Frechette 1983) to lead us to ignore serious possibilities, as it is within the capacity of present day science to indicate these. Nor would it demand that we return to absolute reliance on 'experts' and risk assessment procedures, acknowledging the careful critiques of these already in print which need no duplication at this time (Shrader-Frechette 1991).

An enlightened public, globally, ought to be permitted and in fact encouraged to speak out on global issues beyond the reach of the democracy or other political system within which they reside. The justification of placing such power in a United Nations style organization and in persons possibly removed from the location of a life-threatening problem to be rectified, lies both in the gravity of the threat and the fact that the reach of the threat far exceeds its national borders. Examples such as that of Chernobyl, or the extinction of species in the rain forest, both of which manifest a global rather than a national or geographically specific threat, indicate the justification for this approach.

The imperative of protection and interference ought to be in force only when life-sustaining systems are at peril, and would entail no 'right' to dictate policies or choices otherwise. Just as it is deemed fair and just that a whole nation participate in a vote the result of which will affect all citizens, so too all educated and aware cosmic citizens ought to have a voice in environmental questions that will affect them, no matter what their other citizenship, race, or political ideology. The problems are both grave and holistic. The recommended response is correspondingly categorical and holistic in turn. In conclusion, a stance compatible with the present proposal emerges from a consideration of international distributive justice as such. Beitz says (echoing John Rawls):

When as now national boundaries do not set off discrete self-sufficient societies, we may not regard them as morally decisive features of the earth's social geography. For purposes of moral choice, we must instead, regard the world from the perspective of an original position from which matters of national citizenship are excluded by an extended veil of ignorance. (Beitz 1979)

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