Ethical Dimensions of Human Attitudes to Nature

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In this paper I intend to pursue the question as to how ethics can make a contribution to human efforts to protect, or rescue the environment. A complementary question is how the continuing environmental crisis can influence the development of ethical theory itself.

Historically speaking, the exclusive task of ethics has been the moral regulation of human behaviour towards society – including action in relation to others and also towards ourselves. The main aim of morals was the influencing of human behaviour in accordance with the aims of society – to secure its maintenance and integrity. It is obvious that in such a system of morals, attitudes and behaviour towards nature were not and could not be included within its proper scope. Human behaviour towards nature was thus treated as morally irrelevant. Rather, ethics focused immediately on values and behaviour in relation to their impact on society.

The development of civilization itself brought an important change to this system. Man can be dangerous towards others and also to himself and to society as a whole both *directly* by murdering, adultery, stealing, breaking promises, and so on, but also *indirectly* by misusing nature. By damaging the environment human action damages society and its integrity, as well as humans themselves and their health. This state of affairs was brought about by the rapid increase in means of production, knowledge and technology, enabling humanity to win the age-old struggle for survival with nature. In this new situation it was clear that human action towards nature had to be brought under moral regulation and so become the concern of ethics. Acts against nature were now acquiring a moral dimension, and ethics had to start to deal with this problem.

The responses of ethical theory have so far been very diverse. The sources of diversity are not confined merely to particular norms and values, but include differences of general approach. At one extreme, these approaches might consist solely in the introduction of a new criterion – impact on nature – for distinguishing between good and bad acts. The formalism of this type of simple reasoning aroused a lot of criticism, however. This dissatisfaction with merely relying on subjective judgment for what is good for nature and what is not led the critics to search for deeper, more fundamental criteria for evaluating the moral quality of an act in relation to nature. This effort can be subsumed under the concept of 'deep ecology'. Its unifying feature is an attempt to overcome the standpoint of human interest and utility, and to put humanity and nature into a broader ontological system. Among the leading ideas of deep ecology are a broadening of the realm of purposes from humans to nature, or, at least, to some of its part, and the idea of nature as a system, of which humanity is only one element. The key point is thus not man and his utility but the stability of the system and all its elements and relations.

In the above considerations, I have started from the role of morals in society and its historical development. From that standpoint moral norms and values should influence human behaviour towards the environment not primarily because of the damage that might otherwise be caused to nature itself, but rather because of the *mediate* impact of such damage on humans themselves. This mediation has, of course, a temporal dimension in that the results of our behaviour now may not be apparent until the rather distant future. With little exaggeration we may say that our environmentally destructive behaviour of today may cause harm not to ourselves, but to future generations. So far as the present generation is concerned, there may be virtually no 'feedback' from our anti-environmental behaviour.

Here it will be useful to define what I mean by such concepts as 'pro-ecological', 'moral ecological', 'environmental' (etc.) behaviour. To be very brief, we may say that by these concepts we understand behaviour based on a consideration of the equilibrium of the various systems comprising the environment: such behaviour presupposes acquisition of such knowledge as is obtainable and the establishment of norms of conduct which take into account this knowledge. Consequently moral ecological behaviour is feeling and taking these ecological norms as obligatory for ourselves.

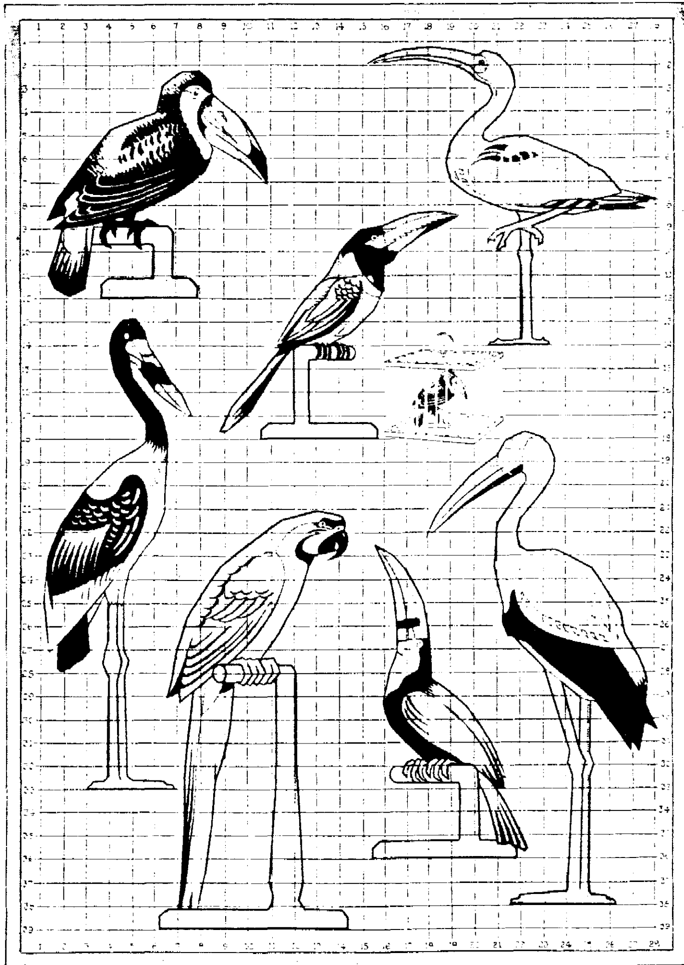
Let us now turn to a second aspect of this mediation of human action in relation to the environment. At first sight it seems that nature has become an object for moral action – contrary to the historical limitation of the scope of morality. But this change of object or focus is only apparent. The final aim of our action remains humanity and society: its welfare, harmony, health, dynamic balance and the survival of future generations. The moral relations between humans and nature are thus ultimately moral relations to humans themselves, as well. Nature is placed as a mediator between humans and their goal: human survival and health. Only now does human action towards nature gain its moral dimension. The aim of moral regulation is not primarily the protection of nature for itself, but rather protection of nature as a basic, necessary and natural condition for the harmonious life of humans and society. The aim is to protect, or to re-establish, a harmony in the relations between humanity and nature as two aspects of one system.

My point of view – that of seeking out social aims in the moral aspects of ecological behaviour, a utilitarian approach – is likely to be criticised for its anthropocentrism. According to those who would make such a criticism, human interests should not be considered in environmental protection. Such criticism is generally based on what might be called 'cosmocentrism', of one sort or another.

However, for the following reasons, I see the cosmocentric view as rather problematic:

1 A concept of value existing independently of humans and society is unacceptable. The existence of value is grounded in the meaningfulness of the world to humans, and so it cannot have its own independent existence. This could, of course, give rise to a long discussion for which I have no space here.

2 A cosmocentric theory will usually require a concept of nature as it is in itself, independently of any influence from human action. But this concept is a rather hypothetical one. How can we distinguish a 'pure nature' from one influenced by human activity? Nature as we know it – as a biosystem – is the result of thousands of years of massive interaction between humans and nature. Nature is undergoing a slow but steady process of evolution: it is not the same as it was only one thousand years ago. Why should we single out the present state as optimal when it is one of many forms in a continuous course of development? Moreover, nature as it is now is a human creation, so how could we now re-establish a 'natural' evolution? Who knows whether the direction of evolution itself has not yet been changed? Posed at such a general level the discussion seems to be rather subtle, but it issues in many considerations and problems at a more practical level. For example: all my readers will surely agree with protecting elephants from ivory traders. But if they ought to be protected *simply because* they are creations of nature and thus intrinsically valuable, why not protect rats in the city underground? They are creations of nature as well. And I do not speak about bacteria, parasites and so on.



3 The difference between an anthropocentric attitude towards nature and a cosmocentric one is usually – and falsely – connected with a distinction between a 'predatory' and a 'partnership' approach towards it. It is true that a cosmocentric point of view is incompatible both with a predatory approach and with the idea that nature must be overridden by human beings in order to save them. But the anthropocentric point of view, whilst it may be consistent with such approaches and attitudes, does *not strictly imply them.* Human needs – when we understand them on the basis of reflection on our present situation in the world – may be satisfied in different circumstances *either* by exploitation *or* by protection of nature. This ambiguity in the anthropocentric attitude to nature can be summed up in Francis Bacon's famous expression that 'we can defeat nature only by subordinating ourselves to it'. We can conclude that humanity is an inseparable part of nature, that we need an undestroyed nature as our necessary living condition, and so that there is a human interest in finding a balance between humans and nature which would maximally protect and preserve it.

4 The last argument concerns human practical activity in the world. There is little opportunity to change the course of human civilization, as twentieth century red – and later green – attempts prove. It is not possible to restore a state of pristine nature, nor even to protect nature in its present state. A high level of dynamic change seems to be essential for the survival of society, and this dynamic is always ambiguous – a unity of progressive and regressive forms. Let us take the case of the generation of electrical power as an example. Coal power stations cause acid rain, and contribute in other ways to the destruction of nature. Nuclear power stations are notoriously dangerous, with possible breakdowns as at Chernobyl, and unknown side-effects such as radiation (as in Britain). Hydro-electric generation is possible in most countries only at the cost of immense alterations to large areas of landscape, with consequent impacts on the biosphere (Donau in Czechoslovakia and Hungary). And can anybody think responsibly about stopping the production of electrical energy?

I want to use these examples to show that civilization must continue to develop, and that in doing so an equilibrium must be found between the known laws of nature and our own aims. Many critics suppose that our technological and scientific approach is not able to deal with such problems. The only solution, according to them, is to be based on human feeling and common sense. But, for example, the Yugoslavian coastal mountains were deforested not by our science but by Venetian 'common sense'. Nevertheless, it is clear that science cannot solve these problems alone: the necessity of connecting scientific knowledge with wide public discussion will be my theme later on in this text.

To acknowledge the moral relevance of our actions towards nature is only a first step. Other conditions must also be fulfilled if we are to create an effective system of moral regulation of ecological behaviour. One of these conditions is the establishment of a general philosophical framework. Ethics, however, cannot usually be decisive by itself. Every system of moral norms and standards is based on more general ideas about society and its aims. Ideas about the social structure, its functions and aims have always been decisive in shaping moral values and the ordering of priorities: witness the ancient Greek 'polis', the Christian religion, the rationalistic enlightenment, economic liberalism and socialism. In this sense, ethical theory is not independent and its premises are based on broader philosophical, religious or political ideas.

Every analysis of the moral regulation of pre-ecological behaviour must be based on a certain theory of the ideal interaction between humanity and nature: the above discussion of the opposition between anthropocentric and cosmocentric approaches

exemplifies this. Nevertheless, a practical framework, combining general aims with concrete knowledge and possibilities, is also important, providing the necessary mediation between aims and practical behaviour. Only within such a practical framework can practical norms of moral behaviour concerning the environment emerge in the longer term.

As I mentioned above, moral reasoning concerning ecological behaviour is distinguished from the rest of moral reasoning in that there is no direct feedback from the kinds of actions with which it is concerned. Information about the results of our anti-ecological behaviour is given to us mainly by scientific research. In the absence of such results or prognosis, the grounds for a modification of ecological behaviour are missing. Thus, the way we deal with information about the environment becomes a morally important matter.

But, equally, the scientific results, even when they are available, are not able to directly provide solutions. Sometimes a solution which involves no damaging impact on nature does not exist. It is then a matter for decision-makers and public opinion to establish the lesser evil. Moreover, a scientific view, because of specialisation, often has only a partial character. It is not able to answer the question of the mutual relations of different public interests: economic, ecological, educational, recreational and even 'humanizing' ones. An especially difficult question is to find a reasonable balance between economic and ecological demands and the level of living standards. Public discussion, properly informed, and led or supported by environmental ethics, will be crucial to the formation of appropriate norms.

But public discussion has yet another important purpose. It removes the appearance of 'certitude' from ecological questions, or, in other words, it overcomes a narrowly economic and technocratic view of problems. It exposes to view the extraordinarily difficult and even confusing network of human interests. It may lead to the formation of a new, more personal, emotional attitude to environmental protection. All these factors are important for the gradual establishment of moral attitudes towards the environment on a wider scale.

Let us see, now, how the ecological challenge can influence the concept of moral responsibility. Speaking about moral responsibility in connection with environmental problems requires answers to two questions – responsibility *for* what? and responsibility *to* whom?

A simple answer to the first question is that humans are responsible for their ecological – or anti-ecological- behaviour and its impact on the immediate environment. But, at the individual level, humans may appear not to be responsible for nationwide or world-wide ecological problems unless they sit in some decisive body in industry, agriculture, or are otherwise professionally involved in ecological activities or policy. But moral responsibility is broader than this, and there are many other ways in which individuals have the capacity to affect things, even if often very mediately. We have responsibilities for the upbringing of our children, how we behave as consumers, how we deal with anti-ecological behaviour which we encounter, and so on. In this sense our responsibility is much broader than it at first sight seems. Of course, I am not advocating an absolute responsibility of everyone for everything. This approach would lead only to holy orders or the psychiatric hospital. It is necessary to distinguish levels of competence and thus of responsibility but it is still essential to keep in mind our responsibility in the broader sense as individuals. Asking everyone to accept some responsibility does not mean to excuse the decision-makers. There, moral responsibility is connected with a political and legal one. Social organisations like the state must be obliged to provide space for citizens' ecological responsibility.

In societies, such as ours, where the aims of production and efficiency are uppermost, there may be conflict between the moral responsibility for pro-ecological action and powerful demands from economy and business. In a clash between moral attitudes and economic interest, the former will usually prove to be too weak: nevertheless, it is indispensable. Courageous personal action carried out from a moral ecological point of view can help to make a problem transparent and stimulate public pressure. This shows how *both* legal measures *and* moral attitudes are important. Legal measures may be worthless without moral backing, whilst moral attitudes may be powerless without legal support. Informed public interest is the guarantee of their unity.

Our second question was, '*to whom* are we responsible?' Historically, answers to this question have involved a search for an absolute, usually heteronomous authority – God, or class. But environmental problems have given rise to questions about a new range of objects of moral responsibility – about our responsibility towards the future, towards our descendents, or to humankind itself. The idea of a responsibility to our descendents as parts of ourselves is especially deeply rooted in people's minds.

Of course, for many people, a rational analysis is insufficient to stimulate moral activity. It does not follow from the fact that a responsibility can be demonstrated that people will be able to recognise it. We must, then, distinguish between objective and subjective (or ontological and gnoseological) aspects of responsibility. The former is based on the fact that humans have a capacity for self-reflection, and are able to consciously control their own activity. The human species is capable of changing its surroundings, the whole of nature and the world. This capability is of such an extent as to be potentially disastrous to both nature and to humanity itself. But humans are not able to overcome their biological nature. They have the power either to destroy or protect themselves. This ability is the basis for human responsibility in the world.

The other side, or aspect, of responsibility is consciousness of it. Such a consciousness has two necessary conditions:

- to have some relationship to that for which we have responsibility;
- to have the freedom to determine one's own activity.

As to the first condition, it is clear that for something to be an object of our responsibility it must become valuable to us in some way. In the first place, it is nature which confronts us as a desirable value. The usual basis for taking something as valuable is to have some emotional relation to it, to love it. Together with Anthony Weston, we can call this a positive experience with nature. Here we must distinguish a positive or pleasant experience with nature, and a consequent positive attitude towards it, from the same experience as a positive basis for moral obedience. Pleasant experiences of nature can certainly enhance the development of pro-ecological behaviour and moral norms and attitudes, but an absence of such experiences cannot be an excuse for evading the appropriate moral requirements. Moral duties are not derived from pleasant experience.

However, this fact that we try to establish a pro-ecological moral duty on the basis of an analysis of the human position in the world, and not on subjective experiences, does not mean that we deny the important place that positive experiences can have in the formation of individual moral values. Some research has shown that pro-ecological feelings are stronger in the towns than in the countryside, where nature retains its character as a power which can make life more difficult, and therefore must be overcome. In the towns, pleasant experiences of healthy conditions, and undestroyed nature, together with the general tendency of civilization to diminish such experiences (by the destruction of nature) give rise to a desire to maintain or re-establish the

conditions for such experience. This personally felt need may transform itself into a love of nature for its own sake, independently of utilitarian considerations. The same research shows that this kind of non-utilitarian motivation is typical among ecological activists. This information about pro-ecological motivation leads some thinkers to conclude that this form of consciousness should be disseminated throughout the population to solve environmental problems. My view, however, is that the enhancement of special moral norms in society is much more complex than this, and will require a combination of rational and emotional elements, and intrinsic values, with self-interest and utility. Positive feelings for nature, and love of it, are important, but they are not an exclusive means for establishing pro-ecological attitudes or a sense of personal responsibility, since only a part of society has the opportunity to develop such feelings.

The second condition for promoting a consciousness of responsibility for nature is the opportunity to participate in pro-ecological activity and, to some extent, in ecological decision-making. It is important to know that a personal effort in this area is not just a hopeless individual stand, but can be related to a nation-wide or world-wide effort. Of course, the efforts of individuals can always be cancelled out by the misbehaviour of other individuals, but it is important that such individual efforts should not be overridden by systematically mistaken state policies, or by the abuses of the rich and powerful. A basic condition, then, for the creation of a sense of personal responsibility for nature is real freedom, including the opportunity to participate in public decision-making – in other words, functioning democracy.

For many, the reduction of consumption, and so a limitation of our needs, is essential for an end to the exploitation of nature. For them, the cause of our present problems is to be found in a blind belief in social and technical progress, the character of science in the modern period, and the technical basis of our civilization. According to this argument, what is regarded as essential to current human cultural development is at the same time destructive of nature and the future of society. The only solution is seen to be a limitation of needs. But historical experience teaches us that it is much easier to make changes in economic arrangements, or in technology, than in the sphere of human needs. The failure and fall of communism with its declared aim of creating a 'new man' with new needs is a good example. Short of this aim, there are many technical measures which can be introduced in order to improve the environment. Nevertheless the problem of reducing our needs will not go away. It poses the question of the extent to which it is possible or justifiable to restrict human rights where their exercise may be dangerous to the environment. Such questions are posed when certain areas are designated as preserved for conservation purposes, and may extend, for example, to possible restrictions on the numbers of children in families. One thing is clear: that solutions to these problems cannot be given from the philosopher's study, since they could never be effective. Solutions can only emerge in the minds of the people on the basis of broad public discussion. At this stage, it seems unlikely that people will choose to regulate and limit their own needs, but the recognition of ecological problems is rather new, and the elaboration of a moral outlook strong enough to constrain some needs will take a long time.

I have tried to show how, with the emergence of an ecological crisis which is dangerous to the life of humankind, human action towards nature is acquiring a moral dimension. This new situation requires an alteration of ethical concepts and thinking, even though the main aim of moral regulation – the well-being of human society – remains the same. Against this background, I defended the idea that an anthropocentric world view is a suitable and practical ground for elaborating an environmental ethics. The example of moral responsibility was used to illustrate a shift in meaning and emphasis as a result of environmental demands. In common with John Passmore, we do not suppose it to be possible to create a new theory of environmental ethics which would have a real impact on people's value-system and behaviour. But neither do we rely solely on environmental feelings and emotions. The main route to a widespread understanding of the disastrous consequences of anti-environmental behaviour, and the psychological grounding of the necessary moral norms must be to put the results of scientific ecology into the broad discussion of a free people.

The author is obliged to Ted Benton for substantial help with the final draft of this paper.

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