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Environments and environmental ethics

OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you should:

- Appreciate some different aspects of the meaning of 'environment'.
- Have a grasp of what it means to ascribe independent moral status to a being.
- Understand the division between 'lighter' and 'deeper' green approaches to environmental ethics.

ENVIRONMENTS

There is no such thing as the environment. As its derivation suggests (see any standard dictionary) the term is a relative one, meaning 'surroundings'. There is always to be understood some thing that is surrounded. An environment is always the environment of ... Consider the environment of a domestic cat. Its immediate environment is the household in which it spends most of its time, awake or asleep (when vets recommend environmental flea control they mean spray the house, not just the cat), but its environment is, more accurately, the area over which it ranges and the features of that area that affect the cat in some way, providing sources of food, opportunities for mating, challenges (rival cats, cars), safe places to sleep, and exciting places to prowl, skip and generally brisk about the life.¹ Strictly speaking, two cats in the same area do not have identical environments because each is part of the other's. Less strictly they can be said to share an environment because most of the features of the area affect each of them in the same way.

To speak of an environment in this way is to speak of it as a set of resources. That is to emphasise one side of a two-way relationship. The other side is the

impact that individuals or populations have on their environment, and unavoidably – since that environment contains other living things – on the environments of those living things. When we speak of the environment we need to have in mind whose environment we mean. This is important because what improves a locality as the environment of one kind of organism, may spoil the environment of another. Draining a pond may be good for human beings but bad for mosquitoes.

The distinction between a creature's effect on its environment and the environment's effect on the creature is not the only one we can make. Two aspects of an organism's relation to its environment are adaptation and familiarity. By 'adaptation', I mean the greater or lesser extent to which its surroundings are ones in which it is equipped, as a biological entity with a particular evolutionary pedigree, to flourish. This emphasises the environment as a set of resources; an organism depends on its environment for the provision of its needs – a cat needs an environment in which there are small rodents and/or dollops of cat food – and any place with these resources will do as well as any other. But familiarity is importantly different. Animals that move around and whose movements are guided by their perception of their surroundings need to know their way around. A cat's environment, in an important sense, is not just the area in which its needs are met, but the area that it knows its way around. This relationship is a very particular one: it is to this place, not just to a place with these features.

How are the boundaries of an environment to be fixed? Where do environments end? Where does my environment end? The answer depends on which aspect one has in mind. The area in which I feel at home, move around with ease, knowing its landmarks, may be quite small, say a few square miles. At the other extreme the area on which I depend for continued existence is very large, extending to the earth, with its atmosphere, soils, waters and living things – the biosphere – and beyond. This comes close to saying that there is such a thing as the environment, but not quite. For one thing, this all-inclusive sense does not supersede the restricted local environments which remain important for the lives of particular individuals and groups. For another, we are still using 'environment' as a relative term, relative to particular individuals or groups. The biosphere is many environments, for the relation in which any individual, population or species stands to the biosphere is particular to it.

Throughout this book I shall try to keep in mind the relative nature of the term by avoiding the expression 'the environment' except in contexts where it refers to the global system which all living things share.

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

What is environmental ethics? Ethics is concerned with individuals and groups as subjects and objects of actions, that is as doers and as things to which things are done. Traditionally, it has been most concerned with human beings as subjects and objects of doings. Many accounts present recent developments as extending this concern in stages, first to non-human animals, next to living things generally, and on to wholes such as populations, plant communities, ecosystems, lakes, streams and mountains; the move to each stage being more radical and problematic than the last. On this account environmental ethics begins where the ethics of concern

for animals leaves off. But that is somewhat arbitrary: are not animals part of one's environment? Is it not more sensible to say that environmental ethics incorporates the ethics of animal concern?

Having accepted that, one might be struck by the thought that other human beings are also part of one's environment. Does that mean that environmental ethics incorporates the ethics of human concern? If so, environmental ethics becomes indistinguishable from ethics. But in practice it is convenient to recognise a sub-division of the field of ethics that is concerned with the rights and wrongs of our treatment of the non-human.

There is, however, another point that is worth bearing in mind. We have become in the recent past increasingly aware of the way in which living things form intricate relationships of interdependence within their shared environment. The saying, 'it is impossible to do only one thing', draws attention to the often unpredictable ramifications of the effects of our actions. The implication for ethics that I want to point out is this: an environmentally informed ethics is one that takes full account of the fact that an individual organism, of whatever kind, is embedded in its environment, and gives full weight to this in deliberating about actions that are likely to affect the organism.

Thus environmental ethics considers not only natural but also urban environments: how human beings are affected physically, mentally and spiritually by the design and materials of the buildings in which they live and work, the layout of cities, provision of public services, and so on. Cities, it should be remembered, are not only human environments, so a more comprehensive environmental view considers their effect on foxes and plane trees.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

The variety of environments is matched by the variety of problems that can be termed 'environmental'. Someone playing loud music near by can be an environmental problem if it is heard as an unwelcome intrusion. It is a problem because it causes distress and prompts the question, 'what is to be done about it?' For there to be a problem there needs to be some feature of an environment that is seen as undesirable, and someone for whom it raises the practical question, 'how can it be removed?' The spread of bracken on the Cumbrian fells is a problem (at least in part) because it reduces the area that can be grazed, and because it raises the question, 'how can it be halted or reversed?'

Environmental problems can be quite local, like that one; indeed, even more local, like a loose slate that allows unwanted rainwater to spoil the fabric of my house. They can also be far-reaching, like the smog produced by large-scale forest fires. And, at the extreme, they can be global in extent like the effects on the earth's atmosphere of the emission of carbon dioxide. Such far-reaching problems constitute problems because of the harmful effects on human beings, though not only on human beings. Other species may be, and almost certainly will be in most cases, adversely affected, and that may be seen as part of the problem. Many of the most threatening environmental changes are brought about, intentionally or otherwise, by human agency. Intentional changes include such things as the rerouting or damming of rivers, the drainage of marshes, forest

clearance for agricultural purposes, and so on. Unintentional changes include the pollution of air, soil and water by industrial emissions (where the act of emitting certain substances into the atmosphere or into a river is intentional, but its consequences not intended, or even foreseen), and the destruction of animal and plant populations (by forest clearance, for example). But changes not brought about by human activity at all can be seen as undesirable from some point of view. Whatever brought about the destruction of the dinosaurs – some cataclysmic change in their environment – was certainly a bad thing from the dinosaur point of view. It is debatable how much effect human activities have on climate changes, but certainly there are large-scale environmental changes, of which climate changes are one kind, which are independent of human activity. Such change may none the less raise problems for human beings. The causal origin of a change – whether or not it was brought about by human action – is irrelevant.² The relevant considerations are whether a change has harmful effects on human (or non-human) beings, and whether human beings can do something about these effects. It is important to note here that the problem consists of three questions: (a) are the effects really harmful? (b) can we do anything about them, either by controlling the changes or by remedying their effects? (c) if we can is it morally incumbent on us to do so?

I think it is fair to say that environmental ethics has been unduly crisis-oriented. Its growth in recent years has certainly accompanied rising consciousness of, and anxiety about, the serious threats to human well-being and, on the part of many, to the well-being of other species, posed by pollution and the destructive exploitation of natural resources. At least in the public consciousness, there has been a tendency to concentrate on supposedly imminent catastrophes. (But not only global catastrophes; there is also gloom at the degradation of the countryside, the encroachment of concrete, as expressed in Philip Larkin's despairing poem 'Going, Going' (see Reading 17).) It is certainly good that people should become more aware of the ways in which humans and other beings can be harmed by actions which in themselves may be beneficial, but which disturb the unobvious mechanisms by which living things are supported. It may be a good thing that people should be scared into changing their behaviour by the threat of catastrophe (though there are dangers in crying wolf). But environmental ethics, though stimulated by crises, is not fundamentally concerned with what ought to be done in critical situations. What then is it concerned with?

THE RANGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN

So far I have characterised environmental ethics as concerned with the relationship between morally aware subjects and the objects in their environments; with the latter considered as themselves having environments, that is, as beings-in-environments. But it will not do to leave it there. There is a significant narrower conception that needs to be recognised. So far I have said nothing to delimit the objects with which environmental ethics is concerned. Human beings, yes, other animals, yes, living things generally, yes – but nothing so far has been excluded. But for some of its practitioners, environmental ethics is conceived of as concerned with the natural world, with what is of value in nature, and with how

the recognition of value in nature should regulate human behaviour. This is a narrower conception of environmental ethics, and one which raises some difficult questions. 'What should we understand by "nature"?' is one. This is a question that will be discussed at some length later in the book (especially in Chapter 6). For the present we can say that nature or the natural world is often understood to be the world of living things other than human, and their non-living setting.

Thus conceived, environmental ethics has to do with working out the principles that should govern human dealings with the natural world – what duties we have to refrain from harming or to protect from harm or to actively promote the good of ... – of what? I am going to borrow from Mary Midgley a convenient list of kinds of things, besides other normal adult human beings, concerning which we may have duties.

<i>Human sector</i>	Posterity
	Children
	The senile
	The temporarily insane
	The permanently insane
	Defectives, ranging down to 'human vegetables'
<i>Animal sector</i>	Embryos, human and otherwise
<i>Animal sector</i>	Sentient animals
	Non-sentient animals
<i>Inanimate³ sector</i>	Plants of all kinds
	Artefacts, including works of art
	Inanimate but structured objects: crystals, rivers, rocks, etc.
<i>Comprehensive</i>	
	Unchosen groups of all kinds, including families and species
	Ecosystems, landscapes, villages, warrens, cities, etc.
	Countries
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	The biosphere
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	Oneself
	God

(Midgley (1983) in Elliot, R. (ed.) (1995: 97))

This list of objects regarding which we may have duties, or have some sort of responsibility to treat as if they matter in some way and for some reason, raises a question that is answered in different ways by different parties within the ranks of those interested in working out the principles of environmental ethics (not confined to professional philosophers). The question is: 'Which of these kinds of thing have a claim to be considered in their own right?'

INDEPENDENT V. DEPENDENT MORAL STATUS

An example will help to introduce this distinction. If you ask me to post a letter

for you, and I undertake to do it, I have a duty to post the letter, but not because I have a duty to the letter. It is to you that I have a duty. One might explain this by saying that the letter matters only because it matters to you. Now for an example that comes much closer to the subject of this book. In the past many philosophers discussing the morality of our treatment of animals, while conceding that we have duties *regarding* animals, such as the duty not to treat them with cruelty, have denied that these duties are straightforwardly *to* animals. In some way they can be derived from our duty to other human beings. Thus, for instance, we have a duty not to be cruel to our fellow humans, and consequently a duty not to do anything that will nourish a cruel disposition. Treating animals cruelly may nourish a cruel disposition, and so is a failure of our duty to our fellow humans.

The point of such an argument is to show that animals can enter the moral arena only on the back of human beings, not on their own feet. In the absence of some relationship to human beings, letters and cats would not claim my attention from a moral point of view. The point may be made in this way: when I contemplate some action there is a whole array of other beings which it may affect. Some of these other beings matter: that is, how they are affected determines whether the action is right or wrong. Beings of some sorts matter in a way that can be explained only by reference to the way in which beings of some other sort are affected; but some matter in a way that requires no such further reference to explain why they matter: they matter in themselves. A list of the beings I need to consider in deciding whether to go ahead need include only items of the second sort, for in considering them I will automatically take account of what matters about the way my action affects beings of the first sort. The beings in this necessary list – those whose claim to be considered is independent of the claims of any other beings – are the ones that have a claim to be considered in their own right. Philosophers use various quasi-technical, and slightly portentous, phrases to describe such beings, they may be said to be ‘morally considerable’, to have ‘moral standing’, or have ‘independent moral status’.

The first two of the phrases I have just mentioned have some currency and you may well come across them in your further reading on the subject, but both have drawbacks. Take ‘considerable’: if you say that something is a considerable weight or has considerable importance, you imply that it is really quite heavy or of more than slight importance. To call a being morally considerable however is not intended to convey any degree of importance, but only to identify the being as one to be considered in a particular way. ‘Considerable’ means ‘eligible for consideration’, or perhaps more strongly, ‘deserving of consideration’. Since this distinction is an important one, it is a pity to use a term that blurs it. ‘Standing’ has gained currency, I believe, because of the work of the American lawyer and philosopher Christopher Stone (Stone 1974). The term has a particular use in the legal parlance of the USA. To have standing is to be recognised by the court as entitled to make pleas in person or through a representative. Stone argues that it would be a good idea to grant legal standing to natural objects, for then it would not be necessary to show, for example, that other users of a stream are harmed in order to get a court to grant an injunction against someone who was polluting it. The notion of ‘moral standing’ is a metaphorical application of this legal term. It has the merit of suggesting that a being is an independent source of claims; it has

the defect, for many, of being an extension of an unfamiliar technical term. In what follows I shall use the phrase ‘independent moral status’, for which I make no claim to neatness.

Terminology apart, the important thing to note about being independently eligible for consideration is that it is not the possession of some degree of value, it is not a matter of being more or less eligible. Something is either independently eligible for consideration or it is not.

The question now is: ‘to what categories of being is it correct to ascribe independent moral status?’ We need some reason for attributing it. There must be some characteristic (a ‘status-conferring’ characteristic) or set of them that makes direct moral consideration appropriate. To illustrate the point, it will again be helpful to consider the moral status of non-human animals, a topic that has been much debated in recent years. Debate has centred on three quite different views. According to one, the view of the majority western tradition, human beings are the only animals to have independent moral status; according to a second, all and only sentient beings – those capable of experiencing pain and pleasure – have it; according to a third, all and only beings who are self-conscious and aware of themselves as having a past and a future have it (‘experiencing subjects of a life’ in the phrase coined by a contemporary exponent of this view). Each view identifies a status-conferring characteristic, respectively, humanity, sentience, and self-consciousness.⁴ The first view needs to be clarified: being human is not usually offered as the status conferring characteristic; rather it is supposed that human beings are the most commonly encountered beings who possess some status conferring characteristic such as rationality. On any of these views, most of the items on Midgley’s list are excluded and can be considered only in relation to those beings that possess independent status. So, for instance, someone who regards sentience as the status-conferring characteristic will consider non-sentient things such as trees as having moral significance only insofar as they contribute in some way to the well-being of sentient things.

Is it important to draw this distinction? At one point Mary Midgley seems to say it is not:

To speak of duties to things in the inanimate and comprehensive sectors of my list ... expresses merely that there are suitable and unsuitable ways of behaving in given situations. People have duties as farmers, parents, consumers, forest dwellers, colonists, species members, shipwrecked mariners, tourists, potential ancestors, and actual descendants, etc. As such, it is the business of each not to forget his transitory and dependent position, the rich gifts which he has received, and the tiny part he plays in a vast, irreplaceable and fragile whole.

(Midgley 1983: 101)

Consider the duties someone has as a farmer. Let us suppose that these include the duty to maintain the fertility of the soil, not to reduce biodiversity by grubbing up hedges, not to spoil the quality of the landscape by removing old buildings or erecting structures that are not in harmony with it (a list that would perhaps appeal more to conservationists than to farmers). If we ask what are the grounds for these duties, it is apparent that the reasons for concern are different

and not all related to human interests in the same way, or perhaps not at all. Maintaining the fertility of the soil is important because soil is a human resource, preserving landscape character is important for our sense of the historical continuity of a lived-in place. Biodiversity: why is that important? Does the maintenance of diverse animal and plant communities serve some interest of human beings (because of the possibility, for instance, that some inconspicuous plant species may turn out to have medicinal properties)? That such reasons are often urged against actions that result in loss of biodiversity implies that concluding something ought to be done because it benefits human beings has sufficient force to make it a justifying reason that will be widely recognised as such. But some conservationists would claim that we should care about biodiversity independently of its benefits to human beings, and this seems to imply that such non-human communities are owed consideration in their own right.

So it is not enough to say that speaking of duties to things merely expresses that there are suitable and unsuitable ways of behaving in given situations. This is to overlook the fact that behaviour can be suitable or unsuitable in different ways. Mary Midgley makes the point herself two paragraphs later when speaking of the duties one has to one's country:

Here the language of *fatherland* and *motherland*, which is so widely employed, indicates rightly a duty of care and responsibility which can go very deep, and which long-settled people commonly feel strongly. *To insist that it is really only a duty to the exploiting human beings is not consistent with the emphasis often given to reverence for the actual trees, mountains, lakes, rivers and the like which are found there.*

(Midgley 1983: 102; my italics in the final sentence)

So it seems that it does matter that we not only have a duty not to pollute a lake – that this is unsuitable behaviour – but that it is to the lake that we owe this duty.

If this distinction between beings that have and beings that lack independent moral status were not important, it would be difficult to understand the fact that philosophers and activists within the environmental movement have divided over the question whether our responsibilities towards our environments are ultimately responsibilities to human beings or are to non-human entities directly. One important reason for this division is that there is a division over what entities have independent moral status.

SHADES OF GREEN

We will now look at this division within the environmental movement. In 1973 one of the founding fathers of environmental philosophy, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess published a short paper called 'The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement' (Naess 1973).

As a result of Naess's influence, the terms 'shallow' and 'deep' have become common currency amongst environmentalists. A shallow position is one that reduces concern for the environment to concern for the interests of human beings. A deep view is one that is committed to 'the equal right to live and blossom' of all forms of life. The use of this pair of terms is unfortunate. As

applied to thought, shallow is bad and deep good, so anyone who wishes to defend a shallow view seems self-condemned by the very label. Alternative labels that are sometimes used are 'reform' and 'radical' environmentalism. But another alternative ready to hand is the term 'green', which allows us to speak of light green and deep green variants. This has the advantage over the shallow/deep terminology of having less prejudicial overtones, and the advantage over the reform/radical terminology of suggesting the possibility of degrees, intermediate positions between light and deep green ones.

First, the shallow or, less prejudicially, the reform or light green approach, as a practical approach to environmental problems, can be summarised in four propositions:

LIGHT GREEN ENVIRONMENTALISM

- LG1 Environmental problems are identified as changes in some environment, local or global, whether brought about by human action or not, that pose a danger to human health, comfort or even survival – in short, to human well-being.
- LG2 Where these changes can be controlled or reversed, any human being has reason to act in ways that will help avert the threatened harm; these will include changes in personal behaviour and supporting collectively adopted measures.
- LG3 Human well-being is intimately tied up with the well-being of many other individual things, either because they are useful to us or because we care about them directly; consequently, they are protected by actions designed to secure human well-being.
- LG4 Since only human beings have independent moral status, the protection afforded to non-humans as a consequence of their mattering to humans is all the protection it makes sense to demand.

A note of explanation is needed of the phrase 'has reason to act' in LG2. If some change poses a danger to my well-being, then the reason I have to act is a self-interested or prudential reason. If it poses a danger to others but not to me then I may have a moral reason, but not a prudential reason, to act. It is possible to have both kinds of reason for the same act, for instance when some practice harms all the members of some group of which I am a member.

The four propositions define a position at one extreme end of the light green–deep green range. Its most fundamental feature is its restriction of independent moral status to human beings. At the opposite extreme is a position which accords independent moral status to all living things, not merely to individual living things but to populations and species; and even to comprehensive entities that include both living and non-living elements ('rivers (watersheds), landscapes, cultures, ecosystems, "the living earth"' (Naess 1989)). This deepest position may be characterised in three propositions:

DEEP GREEN ENVIRONMENTALISM

- DG1 Problems are identified as changes in some environment that pose danger to anything within this unrestricted field.
- DG2 Action to prevent these dangers requires that human agents recognise duties much more extensive than those recognised by traditional moralities which accord independent moral status only to human beings.

Exponents of deep green positions – ones near the extreme – often maintain that traditional morality is inadequate as a resource for solving environmental problems. The reason they give is that LG4 of the light green position is false. In its place they propose:

- DG3 Living things and natural systems (at least those which contain living things) matter in themselves: that is, have independent moral status.

THE LAST MAN

In the same year in which Naess's paper was published, 1973, the Australian environmentalist and philosopher Richard Routley published a paper asking, 'is there a need for a new, an environmental, ethic?'⁵ His answer was that there is. The reason for insisting on the need for a new ethic is that, according to Routley, the dominant ethical tradition in the Western world holds, as a core belief, that only human beings have independent moral status, matter in themselves. This belief is often called 'anthropocentrism'⁶ or – Routley's preferred expression – 'human chauvinism'.

The Routleys quote, as a representative expression of human chauvinism, and 'a core principle of Western ethics', the following:

The liberal philosophy of the Western world holds that one should be able to do what he wishes, providing (1) that he does not harm others and (2) that he is not likely to harm himself irreparably.

(Routley and Routley 1980: 117)

The Routleys concede that this principle (which for convenience I shall refer to from now on as 'the harm principle') imposes real restrictions on the freedom of human beings to deal with the environment as they please: for example, the farmer's polluting of a community stream may be ruled immoral on the grounds that it physically interferes with others who use or would use the stream. But they argue that the restrictions it imposes are not sufficient for an environmental ethic. Those restrictions are not for the sake of any non-human object directly. The harm principle itself entails a denial of independent moral status to non-human beings. If only harm to human beings need limit a human agent's freedom to do as he or she pleases, then only human beings matter in themselves, and other things matter only insofar as harming them is in some way harming human beings. The following principle (call it the 'value principle'), which spells out this

implication of the harm principle, is also said by the Routleys to be a core principle of Western ethics:

Only those objects which are of use or concern to humans (or persons), or which are the product of human (or person) labour or ingenuity, are of value; thus these are all that need to be taken into account in determining best choice or best course of action, what is good, etc.

(Routley and Routley 1980: 119)

Their argument for the dominant ethical tradition of the West being insufficient for an environmental ethic consists in the presentation of counter-examples, actions which are wrong – and which are manifestly wrong – but are not condemned by these anthropocentric core principles. They offer several counter-examples, of which I shall quote two.

The *last man* example. The last man (or person) surviving the collapse of the world system lays about him, eliminating, so far as he can, every living thing, animal or plant (but painlessly if you like, as at the best abattoirs). What he does is quite permissible according to basic chauvinism, but on environmental grounds is wrong. Moreover one does not have to be committed to esoteric values to regard Mr Last Man as behaving badly and destroying things of value (the reason being perhaps that radical thinking and values have shifted in an environmental direction in advance of corresponding shifts in the formulation of fundamental evaluative principles).

(Routley and Routley 1980: 124)

The *vanishing species* example. Consider the blue whale, a mixed good on the economic picture. The blue whale is on the verge of extinction because of his qualities as a private good, as a source of valuable oil and meat. The catching and marketing of blue whales does not harm the whalers; it does not harm or physically interfere with others in any good sense, though it may upset them and they may be prepared to compensate the whalers if they desist; nor need whale hunting be wilful destruction ... The behaviour of the whalers in eliminating this magnificent species of whale is accordingly quite permissible – at least according to basic chauvinism.

(Routley and Routley 1980: 123ff)

On being presented with these examples, the Routleys expect most of us to agree that the last man and the whalers act wrongly. The method of argument used here is a common and important one: if from a general moral principle it is possible to infer a particular moral judgement that is false, then the general principle must be false.

So the argument, if sound, refutes both principles, shows them to be false or untenable. But does it have any positive result, that is, establish that something is true? It does, by virtue of a very elementary piece of logic. If some proposition is false, then its denial or negation must be true. So if an argument demonstrates the falsity of a proposition, then it also demonstrates the truth of the negation of that proposition. Put 'it is not the case that ...' in front of each of the principles claimed to be refuted by the Routleys' argument, and you have the propositions whose truth is established by the argument, if it is sound.

What does the Routleys' argument establish if it is sound, what does it commit us to?

That some actions are wrong even though they harm no human being (the negation of the harm principle).

That some things are of value and must be taken into account even though they are not of use or concern to human beings (the negation of the value principle).

So we have to move beyond human chauvinism and grant that some non-human beings have independent moral status, but how far beyond? The Routleys' examples display one of the fundamental concerns of environmentalism: the preservation of diversity of species, plants and animals. This concern for biodiversity leads them to go well beyond independent moral status for humans, and to include all living things (see pp. 24f).

RESISTING THE ARGUMENT

The Routleys' claim, in brief, is that Western ethics, or at least the dominant tradition of Western ethics, is human-centred, and because of that cannot provide grounds for condemning the actions of the last man. But what the last man does is wrong, so a new ethic is needed.

According to the Routleys the dominant Western ethical tradition is committed to the following arguments, the first premise of each being a core principle, expressing that ethic's human-centredness.

Argument A

- Premise 1* No human action is wrong unless it harms some human being (the harm principle).
Premise 2 The last man's action harms no human being.
Conclusion So the last man does nothing wrong.

Argument B

- Premise 1* Only objects of use or concern to humans are of value (the value principle).
Premise 2 The last man destroys nothing of use or concern to humans.
Conclusion So the last man destroys nothing of value.

Their own argument – the counter-example argument – can be summarised as follows.

Argument C

- Premise 1* The last man acts wrongly.
Premise 2 The last man's action harms no human being.

- Conclusion* So it is not the case that no human action is wrong unless it harms some human (the negation of the harm principle).

Argument D

- Premise 1* The last man destroys something of value.
Premise 2 The last man destroys nothing of use or concern to humans.
Conclusion So it is not the case that only objects of use or concern to humans are of value (the negation of the value principle).

EXERCISE 1

HUMAN-CENTRED RESPONSES TO THE LAST MAN ARGUMENT

How might a defender of a human-centred ethics respond to the Routleys' use of the last man argument? Briefly note down as many responses as you can. Then consider the five responses below and, along with the ones you have noted, assess how effective they are as a challenge to the Routleys' claim.

- 1 Western ethics is not chauvinist. One of its principles is that we should care for nature.
- 2 The situation of the last man is a completely fantastic hypothetical situation. No useful moral lessons can be derived from such unreal situations.
- 3 What the last man does is wrong, even though there are no more human beings to be harmed, but not because the plants, animals and natural systems he destroys are of value: it is an act of vandalism – wanton destructiveness – so not something that any virtuous or right-thinking person would do, even in that extreme situation.
- 4 The counter-example is not a counter-example. The arguments attributed to Western ethics are both sound – they are valid and have true premises – so their conclusions are true: the last man does not act wrongly, he destroys nothing of value.
- 5 It is not the case that the last man harms no human being, for he harms himself, or that he destroys nothing of use or concern to human beings, for what he destroys is of use or concern to at least one human being, so it is not true that on a human-centred ethic he does nothing wrong.

DISCUSSION

I now discuss each response in turn.

- 1 This response is a rejection of a factual, historical, claim. The claim that we need, to address environmental rights and wrongs, a 'new' ethics – new that is in being a departure from traditional Western ethics – depends upon the truth of the claim that at least the dominant strand of that tradition is human centred, and

supporting this claim would require historical evidence. But the Routleys' philosophical argument can be stated in a way that is independent of historical claims: an environmental ethics (an ethics that is adequate to guide our behaviour towards the non-human world) cannot be based on human-centred principles. If the philosophical argument is sound, then if the historical claim is true, they are justified in saying that the ethic that is needed is new. So this response is a weak one.

2 This response is debatable. Philosophers are divided over the relevance of so-called 'desert island' examples, asking what it would be right or wrong to do in some far-fetched hypothetical situation. Some hold that moral principles are designed to guide us in the common run of situations and should not be expected to give a definite answer to what is the right action in extraordinary situations. Others, on the contrary, hold that moral principles, as general principles, can be tested by asking what decisions they dictate in hypothetical situations, and that artificially devised situations can provide good test cases. Creating such artificial situations is often called a thought experiment. The point of hypothetical examples is usually to isolate some factor in order to discover whether it is relevant to a moral judgement. In the last man case, the point is to eliminate effects on human beings in order to see whether that removes any reason for saying that the last man does anything wrong. If it does not, then there is some reason to think that in everyday cases where similar destructiveness is judged to be wrong, its effects on human beings are not the only reason for so judging it. Perhaps uses of artificially devised examples should be judged on their individual merits. In this case it does seem that the last man example concentrates the mind on the different reasons we may have for deploring the destruction of features of the environment. If we are perplexed by the question whether he does wrong, that may be a productive perplexity. So I think it would be a mistake to refuse to consider the question because it is far-fetched.

3 This response needs some discussion. It may be suggested that a traditional principle of Western ethics forbids wanton destruction and condemns those who indulge in it as vandals, and that 'it is very natural to extend [this principle] to the destruction of nature as well as to works of art or forms of property. The man who cuts his name on a redwood is being a vandal, just as much as the man who scratches his initials on the portico of Wells cathedral' (Passmore 1974: 125). The defender of human-centred ethics might then point to this principle, the no destruction principle, as one that condemns the actions of the last man without the need to introduce 'new' principles. She would be claiming that the harm principle covers only one way in which an action can be wrong – acts of vandalism, even if they do no harm to human beings, are wrong as manifestations of a vicious disposition. She thus rejects Premise 1 of Argument A, the harm principle, and she can therefore deny that the argument establishes its conclusion that the last man does nothing wrong. In response, the exponent of a 'new' ethics can ask whether the objection to vandalism is independent of the value of the things that the vandal destroys. Typically, the cry of 'Vandal!' goes up when newly planted trees in a park are mutilated, when paintings in an art gallery are slashed, and

similar atrocities. These are cases in which what is destroyed is undoubtedly of value to human beings. We may also deplore mindless acts of destruction when what is destroyed is of negligible value; for instance, we may discourage children from swiping the heads off buttercups, despite the fact that the damage is hardly noticeable and not lasting. But perhaps our only reason for discouraging such harmless destructiveness is that, as a habit, destructiveness is likely to be indiscriminate, and so lead to the destruction of things of value. But if so, then can we really think it matters how destructive the last man is, when there is going to be no one to regret the loss of what he has destroyed, nor to suffer the consequences of his spoiling his character? If we still condemn him, is this not on the basis of a principle whose point has lapsed in the last man's extraordinary circumstances? The exponent of a new ethics can then urge that if we persist in claiming that wanton destructiveness is still wrong in these circumstances, we must believe that the plants that the last man destroys have a kind of value that does not depend upon their being of use or concern to human beings. So it is not clear that this is an effective response.

4 This response might seem to be the best for the defender of a human-centred ethic. He does best to bite the bullet. The last man does not act wrongly. He destroys nothing of value. Notice that the Routleys' argument starts from moral premises that contradict these two claims. The defender of a human-centred ethic can simply refuse to accept that there is anything absurd in the conclusions drawn from the two 'core' principles. To counter this the exponents of the new ethic need to bring to bear some argument to support the unfavourable judgements they make of the last man's behaviour.

5 The final response may seem unpromising. In making this response the defender of a human-centred ethic commits herself to arguing that the last man does destroy something of value to human beings, and even that at least one human being is harmed by his action. However difficult an undertaking this may seem at first sight, it is a principal aim of this book to indicate the lines on which this position may plausibly be argued.

GETTING BEYOND HUMAN CHAUVINISM

If the Routleys' arguments are successful, how far beyond human chauvinism do they take us? It is important to note here that it is not enough, for the success of an argument, that the conclusion follow from the premises, that is, that the conclusion must be true if the premises are. That makes an argument valid, but more is needed before an argument can be said to prove its conclusion. It is also necessary that the premises should be true. An argument is said to be sound if, but only if, it passes both tests.

Suppose that the Routleys' Arguments C and D are merely valid, but their soundness remains uncertain because the crucial second premises may be false; suppose, that is, that one refuses to concede that the last man's action harms no human being, and that he destroys nothing of use or concern to humans. Then their argument fails to provide counter-examples to human-centred principles.

Their argument does not establish any new moral principles. A sound argument, remember, is one which is valid and which has true premises. But an argument can be valid even if it has one or more false premises, and in that case the conclusion may be true, but cannot be asserted on the basis of the argument. The last man example, however, serves one useful purpose even if the second premises are not conceded. It clarifies the distinction we have been considering between human-centred and non-human-centred approaches to environmental ethics.

Let us suppose, however, that the Routleys' argument is sound; where then does it get us? The Routleys themselves note that the last man example can readily be modified to take account of the extension of moral status to sentient animals. On a deeper green environmental ethics, the last man does wrong even if he harms no sentient animal, human or non-human. The next two paragraphs amplify this point.

Those who defend the moral status of animals have moved beyond a strictly human-centred view, but their position does not commit them to allowing that anything non-animal has independent moral status. Indeed, if either sentience or consciousness is taken as a necessary condition of independent moral status, their position rules out allowing moral status to anything non-animal. On the greenness scale this position is mid-green at best, and not nearly green enough for many environmentalists.

Suppose that the two core principles of Western traditional ethics were modified to take account of the extension of moral status to sentient animals (this being the more generous of the two entrance tickets to moral status). The harm principle would be modified by interpreting 'others' to mean not 'other human beings' but 'other sentient beings'. The value principle would replace 'human (or person)' with 'sentient being'. So the hunting of blue whales would now be contrary to the harm principle, and considering only their economic value would be contrary to the value principle. The vanishing species example would no longer be a counter-example available to the Routleys. The last man example, however, can readily be modified to sustain it as a counter-example to the modified principles. Suppose that the last man is also the last sentient creature on the planet. He sets about destroying, as far as he can, every living thing – plants and non-sentient animals. The deep green argument now is that what he does is permitted by the modified principles, but is wrong according to an environmental ethic.

The modified argument does then take us further beyond chauvinism than the sentience-based, or – even more obviously – the consciousness-based pro-animal position, and represents a radical break with them. For the proponents of both argue that the reasons we have for granting independent moral status to (most) human beings oblige us, in consistency, to grant it to (some) non-human animals also. So although in practice it may make a huge difference if we accept and act upon the conclusions of their arguments, those arguments rely upon drawing out unexpected consequences from moral ideas that we already have. Their strategy is to show that a more adequate understanding of what is valuable about human beings makes us recognise that some non-human animals are valuable in the same way. The Routleys, by contrast, do not attempt to show that principles we already have will be seen, when properly understood, to cover a new range of cases. All

the animal liberation theories have done, the Routleys might claim, is to tinker with and retune our existing moral ideas, whereas they look to new moral principles to ground our new concerns in environmental ethics.

This still leaves open the questions about the range of things that will be allowed to have independent moral status on their view. The argument, as we have seen, has only a quite general positive conclusion: that some non-human and non-animal beings must be counted as having independent moral status. We do not know yet which they are, nor on what grounds the claim to this status might be based. Besides human and non-human animals, the Routleys indicate the range as follows: 'the broader class of natural items such as trees and forests, herbs, grasslands and swamps, soils and waterways and ecosystems' (Routley and Routley 1980: 109). That list includes both individuals and collectives, both living things and items which are non-living (though they may contain living things). There is one very deep green theory; other deep green theorists are less inclusive, as we shall see in later chapters. For the purposes of this book, the most important division of the green spectrum is threefold:

- 1 *Light green*: the world of non-human beings, living and non-living, has no independent moral status, but only matters insofar as it matters to human beings (which do have independent moral status).
- 2 *Mid-green*: non-human animals of some species have independent moral status, whether or not they matter to human beings.
- 3 *Deep green*: some or all of the broad class of natural beings have independent moral status, whether or not they matter to human beings. A position that accords moral status to all living things is termed 'biocentric'; one that accords that status also to comprehensive entities that include non-living components is termed 'ecocentric'.

THE JUSTIFICATION PROBLEM

Deeper green positions ask us to accept a radical departure from traditional moral attitudes and beliefs. So they raise in an acute form three questions: (a) how can moral principles, or systems of moral principles be validated? (b) on what grounds is a principle acceptable? and (c) how can we adjudicate between rival principles or systems?

One way to answer these questions would be by appealing to our most deeply entrenched intuitions. We form general principles on the basis of particular cases and test them by seeing how appropriate they are when applied to new cases. When presented with some general principle we see what judgements it implies in particular cases. If the particular judgements are counter-intuitive, we reject the principle. In some instances, however, we may be so confident about a principle that we will put up with judgements of particular cases that seem counter-intuitive: we may not like what the principle commits us to but we bite the bullet. The argument we have been considering, the last man argument, makes just such an appeal to intuition. The Routleys take it that their judgement of the last man's behaviour will be shared by many people, noting that 'radical thinking and values have shifted in an environmental direction in advance of

corresponding shifts in the formulation of fundamental evaluative principles'. Richard Routley, under the name of Richard Sylvan, in *The Greening of Ethics*, speaks of 'deep moral attitudes, drawn out ... by decisive examples, such as that of the Last Person'.⁷ The assumption that the shift is in the right direction, that water from a deep well must be pure, seems too confident. As I suggested in discussing response (4) to the Routley argument, some (perhaps many) people will not share the intuition that what the last man does is wrong, in which case there is no need to call into question the harm and value principles. Even if some are initially disposed to share the intuition, they may reject it because they regard the harm and value principles as unassailable. If their sharing that intuition is necessary to their accepting the new principles of an environmental ethic, then their failure to share the intuition means it fails to justify those new principles.

If only because of the difficulty of justifying new principles, it seems wise to see how far we can get with old ones. It may be that many practical results that would be obtained by adopting new principles which recognised direct obligations to environmental items, including non-sentient ones, could be obtained equally well by applying traditional principles, even if these are human centred, or at best sentient-animal centred.

In taking this cautious approach, we need not prejudge the question of whether the deep green position is correct and the only ultimately satisfactory basis for environmental ethics. It certainly seems worthwhile to consider the extent to which it is necessary for human well-being to treat the environment with care and respect because, even if there are other reasons so to treat the environment, this would remain one amongst these others.

READING

The question whether a human-centred approach would yield the same practical consequences as the proposed new ethic is given different answers by the authors of the first two readings. Reading 1 is from the Routleys' paper that we have been discussing in this chapter. In this extract, they move from grounding their claims on hypothetical (possible world) examples such as the last man to real world examples and argue that traditional (human-centred, instrumental) ethics and new ethics would lead to different actions and policies. The author of Reading 2, Bryan G. Norton, while not denying that a new ethics may be correct, doubts its necessity from a practical point of view because it would not lead to very different actions and policies.

These readings should reinforce your grasp of the difference between the traditional human-centred approach, and the 'new' biocentric (or ecocentric) approach. But they also look forward to questions that will be discussed in the next chapter. Norton's defence of a human-centred position here depends upon the account he gives of the human or cultural reasons that there are for preserving wildlife and natural ecosystems. As you read the Norton extract, note down the varieties of human or cultural value that he distinguishes.

In both readings you will notice the phrase 'intrinsic value', and the view that natural things have intrinsic value. Norton points out that this view is 'extremely difficult to explain clearly', and mentions at least two possible things it could

mean. One of them is 'that other species had value even before any conscious valuers emerged on the evolutionary scene'. Recall that the Routleys' last man example is intended to force on us the conclusion that other species would have value after any conscious valuers had disappeared from the evolutionary scene. Intrinsic value, understood in this way, is value that something can have even if the world in which it exists contains no beings capable of valuing it. But this is only one of the meanings that can be attached to 'intrinsic value', as explained in the final section of the Introduction.

Now read readings 1–2.

CONCLUSION

There is a division among the exponents of environmental ethics between those who think that traditional forms of ethical thought, if refined and critically developed, are all we need to guide our behaviour towards the natural world, and those who think that those traditional forms, at least in the West, are unsatisfactory because they are irredeemably human centred, and that, consequently, a radical departure from traditional forms – a new ethic – is required. I am proposing that in view of the problems involved in establishing new principles it is worthwhile questioning the view that a human-centred ethics is incapable of recognising environmental values and prescribing appropriate behaviour towards natural objects.



Reading

1: p. 139

2: p. 143

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Speaking of the environment can disguise the fact that it is a relative term. It is better to think of an environment as someone's or something's. Several distinctions are important, in particular between a being's effect on its environment, and the effect of its environment on it, and between the environment as that on which a being depends for sustenance and its environment as its particular familiar place.

In its broadest sense, environmental ethics is the study of our relations with everything that can be a part of the environment of a moral subject, someone for whom questions of right and wrong can arise. That includes other human beings and the things human beings make, such as machines and cities. A narrower sense is often adopted in which environmental ethics is concerned with only that part of the environment which is called nature; itself a problematic concept.

Philosophers have asked which beings have and which do not have a claim to be considered morally important in their own right. An ethical theory is human centred if it denies such importance – independent moral status – to any but human beings. Some philosophers maintain that no ethical theory can be satisfactory as an account of our moral relations with nature if it restricts independent moral status to human beings.

How green an ethical theory is depends on how far it extends independent

moral status beyond the human. The ethics of animal concern escapes human centredness because it accords that status to at least some non-human animals, but deeper green theories extend it to living things in general, or even to collective entities such as species, forests and rivers.

The last man argument, introduced by Richard and Val Routley, is intended to demonstrate the need for new ethical principles: the judgement that the last man's destruction of natural things is wrong would be endorsed by a large number of people nowadays, but what he does seems not to be wrong according to traditional principles of Western ethics. There is however more than one possible response to this argument, including stubborn refusal to agree that there is anything wrong in what the last man does.

In view of the difficulty of justifying wholly new principles it is reasonable to reserve judgement on new, deep green ethical principles until there has been an assessment of the resources of traditional ethical thinking.

FURTHER READING

David E. Cooper is very good on changing ideas of what an environment is in 'The Idea of an Environment', one of the essays in *The Environment in Question*, edited by David E. Cooper and Joy A. Palmer (Routledge, 1992). Mary Midgley's essay, referred to in this chapter, is included in *Environmental Ethics*, edited by Robert Elliot (Oxford University Press, 1995). The classic work exploring the resources of traditional ethics in approaching environmental issues is John Passmore's *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (Duckworth, 2nd edn, 1980). Richard Routley's essay in which the last man makes his entrance (and destructive exit), 'Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic?' is included in *Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Michael E. Zimmerman (Prentice Hall, 1993; 2nd edn, 1998).

NOTES

- 1 The phrase is from Christopher Smart's fine tribute to his cat Geoffrey.
- 2 Irrelevant, that is, to whether a change constitutes a problem. That is not to deny that, as some suppose, there is an important moral difference between change that happens naturally and similar, or even identical, change brought about by human agency.
- 3 Midgley's categories suggest a distinction between 'animal' and 'inanimate', and include both living things (plants) and non-living things in the inanimate category. This agrees with one common use of 'inanimate', but there is another use in which the pair animate/inanimate corresponds to the pair living/non-living. According to this use plants would be classed with other living things, not with rocks.
- 4 The view that it is sentience that confers moral status is implicit in utilitarianism, and was stated with passion by its nineteenth-century pioneer, Jeremy Bentham. Its most influential contemporary exponent is Peter Singer, whose book, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (1975) has been widely read, and not just by other philosophers. The view that moral status belongs to all beings who are 'experiencing subjects of a life' has been developed, partly in opposition to Singer's utilitarian position, by Tom Regan in *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983).
- 5 I cite this paper, which was delivered to an international philosophical congress, for the historical record. In what follows I refer to and quote from a much expanded version: Richard and Val Routley, 'Human Chauvinism and Environmental Ethics' (Routley and Routley 1980).

6 'Anthropos' is Greek for a human being; 'human-centred' is a precise equivalent of 'anthropocentric'. 'Human chauvinism' may be regarded as equivalent to either 'anthropocentrism' or 'human-centredness', except that it has a pejorative flavour that is absent from either of the other terms. The pejorative flavour has been transferred, perhaps, from male chauvinism, which inherited it from the original chauvinism, an extreme nationalistic fervour.

7 Sylvan and Bennett (1994: 34). Richard Sylvan is the same author, under a different name, as the Richard Routley whose work in collaboration with Val Routley we have been discussing. Val Routley has also changed her name. Work by her, written under the name Val Plumwood, will be discussed in Chapter 7.