

## **Can We Have Absolute Moral Obligations Towards The Environment?** **by Brenda Johnson**

I will argue that we can have absolute moral obligations towards the environment. Firstly I will critically examine a virtue ethicist challenge to a deontological approach to environmental ethics and look at ways we might formulate a workable principle. Secondly I will enlarge on my contention that the components of the environment have intrinsic value irrespective of human interests. Thirdly I will discuss ideas about rationality and conceptual understanding vis a vis their implications for our duty towards non-human animals.

By absolute moral obligation or deontological approach I mean that we find out what is the right thing to do by reference to an overriding principle which we are obliged to follow. We obey this because it is our duty to do so, not because of the suffering it might reduce (a consequentialist approach), nor because we want to, nor because it will add to our well-being in the sense of our possessing virtue (a virtue ethicist approach). Of course, I agree that having a virtuous character is desirable but, in itself, it is not enough to bring about the changes in behaviour necessary if we are to stop the now obvious environmental damage caused by humans. However the deontologist needs to explain what makes the moral must, a must. I will argue that the constituent parts of the environment and its life forms each have telos or own life purpose - they are, like us, of intrinsic value, ends in themselves, not merely means to our ends, and it is this which impresses the moral must upon us.

Paul W. Taylor (1) argues that the claim of inherent worth cannot be proved, but by adopting the attitude of respect for nature we recognize that living things do have inherent worth, borne out of their membership of Earth's Community of Life, and it is this which underpins the ultimate moral attitude. Being a deontologist, Taylor seeks to establish inherent worth as a foundational premise.

Rosalind Hursthouse (2), a virtue ethicist, criticizes Taylor on three grounds, all of which I will dispute. Firstly, she argues, simply adopting an attitude due to the call of reason does not equip you with the practical wisdom needed to bring about the complete change in lifestyle necessary. Instead if we regard being rightly oriented to nature as a virtue acquired through feeling, training and habit, it becomes a feasible proposition and we can drop the problematic idea of a foundational premise. Secondly, which beings have the most inherent worth? To have a sliding scale would inevitably put humans at the top thereby defeating the idea of community based on individuals each with telos.

Thirdly, Hursthouse wishes to extend being rightly oriented towards nature to inanimate nature.

In response, I think humans, unless damaged in some way, are naturally able to appreciate that the rest of nature has inherent worth whether it be, for example, our admiration of the accurate navigation of migrating birds, or our instinctive delight and terror at the overwhelming power of the sublime. The practical wisdom required for living in community with other creatures also comes naturally given that we are animals ourselves.

Hursthouse's point about a sliding scale of worth is difficult to argue against although it is not an insurmountable challenge. Each creature has its own life process which engenders interests for its well-being - so that it can be what it is. How would we prioritize the interests of one species, say, over those of another? We could avoid the issue and argue with Arne Naess (3) that organisms are knots in the biospherical net - a field of intrinsic relationships, to damage a part is to damage the whole; or with Albert Schweitzer (4), that all will-to-live is to be revered. However admirable these ideas are, I think they lead to a *reductio ad absurdum* - there must be a hierarchy of interests if there is to be any life at all. Lawrence E. Johnson (5) offers this possible formula for the principle the deontologist is looking for: "Give due respect to all the interests of all beings that have interests, in proportion to their interests" (1991, 118). Their interests are well-being in accordance with telos.

Lastly, Hursthouse wants to include inanimate nature in our concerns. If we are to accept James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (6): the planet's biosphere is a self-regulating entity - a homeostatic, organic unity, then, arguably, it is included in Taylor's community of life.

I will now examine a view put by Mary Midgley (7), then a paper by Richard Routley and Val Routley (8). Midgley argues that the language of Kantian morality which divides the rational (human) sphere which is of intrinsic value from the non-rational (rest of nature) which does not have intrinsic value, cannot express the full range of duties that we feel are binding as duties even though non-contractual. To speak of having duties to the natural environment is to say that in the roles we play as parts of an interdependent whole, there are suitable and unsuitable ways of behaving in given situations. We need a

language of morality which helps us to prioritize our concerns, not one which excludes most of them. Midgley is right but does not go far enough. If there are suitable and unsuitable ways of behaving, there must be a principle which makes them so; a sensitivity or awareness does not seem to me to be adequate.

In their paper Routley and Routley make a series of counter-claims to some arguments in favour of human chauvinism. I will summarize their main points. It is claimed that, by definition, the logic of moral language restricts its application to the interests of humans. A question-begging justification of this discrimination is made by reference to the self-validating rules of the Moral Club; but surely the Club's rules are open to challenge. Furthermore it is logically unsound to restrict Moral Club membership to a particular species based on physical characteristics which are not morally relevant - non-humans who nevertheless have identical morally relevant features to humans are logically possible. Logical necessity between only human features and morality could only be validly shown if it were logically necessary that non-humans did not possess these features, and this cannot be the case for morally relevant features.

Furthermore, human chauvinists would have much difficulty in showing that as a matter of contingent fact all and only humans have certain features and these features logically qualify only humans (because they alone possess them) for moral consideration - that there was a logical connection between these features and membership of the Moral Club. Take rationality as an example a so-called feature which (as I mentioned earlier in this essay) purports to privilege the human. Routley and Routley ask what we mean by this term. If it is connected with linguistic reasoning skills, it will exclude many humans; if connected with problem solving, then non-humans have it; and to privilege these over other skills for membership of the Moral Club is itself chauvinistic.

I would add that as we are animals ourselves and that Cartesian ideas about a non-physical human mind are no longer philosophically credible, we must admit non-humans into the Moral Club. Thus my moral duty to try to save the planet for the benefit of surviving non-human species stands.

Routley and Routley go on to consider variations on the chauvinistic argument that values must be determined through human interests: a) values are determined through the value rankings of valuers; b) valuers' value rankings are determined through valuers' interests; c) valuers are humans; therefore d) values are determined through human interests. The argument as it stands is valid, but not all the premises should be accepted.

For example, premise (b) is compatible with the egoism argument which states that one's choices are always determined by self-interest. Routley and Routley claim that it does not follow that because one selects one's own value rankings, they are selected in one's own interests - one could be altruistic. Perhaps altruistic action is a form of self-interest because it is a choice which implicitly confers some kind of benefit on the chooser. If I say I value something, I have weighed up its worth in my capacity as a rational thinker and self-interest is built into this process. However, as Routley and Routley point out, if we accept premise b under these circumstances, ie to include cases of altruism, conclusion d values are determined through human interests - loses its intended force which was that in determining values, we need only regard human advantage. On the other hand, if human interest is taken to mean human advantage, then premise b - valuer's value rankings are determined through valuer's interests fails due to the case of altruism.

I am arguing (i) that components of the environment have intrinsic value ie they are not merely of instrumental value to humans, (ii) that our moral language must extend Moral Club membership to other species, (iii) that humans can genuinely act without self-interest, and (iv) that we need to frame our obligations to the environment in terms of overriding duties, even though formulating workable principles is problematic. One might reply that to be a member of a club usually involves one in reciprocal dealings, a kind of social contract of rights and duties each member owes to each other, and it is this which is the basis of much thought about morality. Consequently one might ask what duties do other species have towards humans? Does a carrier of bird flu have a duty not to infect the human population? It will be obvious that this type of question is absurd since animals do not have human conceptual understanding. To imagine they might is just another form of human chauvinism, and this is what has infected moral thinking. Midgley makes the point that the social contract model has glorified the human as the object of value and the judge of value, and that this idea is rather mystical and stems from the religious notion that the individual human soul is transcendent; whereas it is surely clear that in the context of the whole, the human is only a part and utterly dependent. What we do have in common with other animals is the capacity to suffer and it is this together with their intrinsic value which, I think, entitles them to membership of the Moral Club, Our moral duties include duties of

compassion, intensified because we are causing most of the environmental damage which is affecting the fate of other species.

I now want to move to the third part of this essay and examine how mind relates to world and the implications this line of thought has for our treatment of other species. Perhaps there are those who insist in the narrow view that absolute moral obligations can only be owed, if at all, to other rational beings, and as non-human animals are not rational, we do not have such duties towards them. I am not saying that this view entails no ethical commitment to the environment, only no absolute commitment based on animals as ends in themselves on a par with humans. I would like to address this position by discussing the Kantian thesis: concepts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind (9) as interpreted by John McDowell (10).

On the one hand there is the human ability to conceptualize and here we have a certain freedom - a spontaneity of understanding, and on the other hand there are our passive, raw perceptions - our receptivity of the world. McDowell diagnoses the problem with this dualistic picture. If our freedom to conceptualize is not constrained then our claims to knowledge are not grounded in sensory content; the more we connect reason and freedom, the more we lose our hold on external reality, and the whole idea of concepts is that they conceptualize something, otherwise they would be empty. When we have reasoned all we can we still have available the final step of pointing to the manifold elements of the Given (raw perception) from which we abstract the right element to form our concept.

However, the Given cannot justify our beliefs because there is always the possibility that we are mistaken in our sensory perceptions. McDowell, following Kant, offers a way to dismount what he calls the seesaw between the mind's freedom to conceptualize on one end and its passive receptivity on the other, by claiming that "the relevant conceptual capacities are drawn on in receptivity" (p9). Intuitions, ie experiential intake, already contain concepts - we see how things are, that they are thus and so. We can still be mistaken but when we are not, we experience things as they are (for us as humans). One can judge freely whether an appearance is credible or not. Although experience is passive in one sense, the element of conceptual judgement makes it active in another because we judge the veracity of things in the light of other judgements and contexts; we are free to reflect. McDowell's point is that we see (for example) that the world is thus and so, and in that conceptual seeing we have responsible freedom, so thinking about the world and experiencing it are interdependent. Bare perceptions would be "blind" - not experience at all. It is through the spontaneity of our understanding that self as subject and world come into view.

For McDowell, "mere" animals have no conceptual capacities, no self-consciousness and, therefore, no experience of an objective reality. Their lives are shaped by biological imperatives and coping with the problems and opportunities which are thrown up by the environment. They do not conceive problems as problems but deal with them, not as automata, but nor as subjects oriented towards the world. I could rest my case here and argue that newly born human babies have no conceptual apparatus and are driven purely by biological needs, yet we treat them as ends in themselves so why not treat mere animals in the same way? The reply will be that babies have the potential to mature into thinkers and, as McDowell argues, it is through being initiated into the tradition and the learning of language that we are introduced into the rational connections between concepts, by analysing language we analyse thought. Language gives an orientation towards the world and differentiates one concept from another. Mere animals do not have language, therefore, do not have a world where they can be ends in themselves; they inhabit only an environment.

My response to this argument is that all animals, including human animals, express themselves via body language, and this is often the truest display of self. An animal has the conceptual understanding it needs to experience the world, and that understanding will be different for different species. To imagine that human understanding is the only understanding on offer amounts to yet another form of human chauvinism.

In conclusion, we can have absolute moral obligations towards the environment not only because its destruction affects human well-being, but because it affects the thriving of other species. Furthermore, we can have such duties even if no human is affected because other animals are also ends in themselves.

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