

Must a concern for the environment be centred on human beings?

What is the role of philosophy in questions about the environment? One helpful thing that philosophy can do, obviously, is to apply its analytical resources to clarifying the issues. This is excellent, but it is an aim not exclusively cultivated by philosophy; clear analytic thought is something offered by other disciplines as well. There are more distinctively philosophical lines of thought that bear on these issues, and it is some of these that I should like to pursue. They raise, for instance, questions about the nature of the values that are at issue in environmental discussion.

Questions of this kind are likely to be more distant from practical decision than many that come up for discussion in this area. They are, in particular, difficult to fit into the political process. They can indeed run the risk of seeming frivolous or indecently abstract when questions of practical urgency are at the front of political attention. Moreover, it is not simply a matter of urgent political decisions; some of the broader philosophical considerations are not immediately shaped to *any* practical decision, and it is a mistake to make it seem as though they were. They are, rather, reflective or explanatory considerations, which may help us to understand our feelings on these questions, rather than telling us how to answer them.

There is no special way in which philosophical considerations join the political discussion. They join it, rather, in various of the ways in which other forms of writing or talking may do: ways that include not only marshalling arguments, but also changing people's perceptions a little, or catching their imagination. Too often, philosophers' contributions to these questions seem designed only to reduce the number of thoughts that people can have, by suggesting that they have no right to some conceptions that they have or think that they have. But equally philosophy should be able to liberate, by suggesting to people that they really

have a right to some conception, which has been condemned by a simple or restrictive notion of how we may reasonably think.

If we ask about the relations between environmental questions and human values, there is an important distinction to be made straight away. It is one thing to ask whose questions these are; it is another matter to ask whose interests will be referred to in the answers. In one sense – the sense corresponding to the first of these two – conservation and related matters are uncontestably human issues, because, on this planet at least, only human beings can discuss them and adopt policies that will affect them. That is to say, these are inescapably human questions in the sense that they are questions for humans. This implies something further and perhaps weightier, that the answers must be human answers: they must be based on human values, in the sense of values that human beings can make part of their lives and understand themselves as pursuing and respecting.

The second issue then comes up, of what the content of those values can be. In particular, we have to ask how our answers should be related to our life. Few who are concerned about conservation and the environment will suppose that the answers have to be exclusively human answers in the further sense that the policies they recommend should exclusively favour human beings. But there are serious questions of how human answers can represent to us the value of things that are valued for reasons that go beyond human interests. Our approach to these issues cannot and should not be narrowly anthropocentric. But what is it that we move to when we move from the narrowly anthropocentric, and by what ethical route do we get there?

Many cases that we have to consider of course do directly concern human interests, and we shall perhaps understand our route best if we start with them. There is, first, the familiar situation in which an activity conducted by one person, A, and which is profitable and beneficial to A and perhaps to others as well, imposes a cost on someone else, B. Here the basic question is to decide whether B should be compensated; how much; by whom; and on what principles. A further range of problems arises when various further conditions hold. Thus there may be no specific B: the people affected are identified just as those who are exposed to the activity and affected by it, whoever they may be. When this is so, we have *unallocated* effects (all effects on future generations are unallocated). A different range of questions is raised when we ask whether B is affected in a way that essentially involves B's states of perception or knowledge. Thus B may be affected by the disappearance of songbirds or the blighting of a landscape. These are *experiential* effects. It is important that an effect on B's experience may take the form of a deprivation of

which, just because of that deprivation, B is never aware; living under constant atmospheric pollution, B may never know what it is to see the stars. Beyond this, and leaving aside the experiential effects on human beings, there are effects on animals other than human beings. These are *non-human* effects. Finally, what is affected may be neither human nor a member of any other animal species: it may, for instance, be a tree or a mountain. These are *non-animal* effects.

It is of course a major question in very many real cases whether an activity that has one of these other effects on the environment may not also harm human beings: the cutting down of rainforests is an obvious example. To the extent that human interests are still involved, the problems belong with the well-known, if difficult, theory of risk or hazard. This aspect of the problems is properly central to political discussion, and those arguing for conservation and environmental causes reasonably try to mobilize human self-interest as far as possible. But the human concern for other, non-human and non-animal, effects is misrepresented if one tries to reduce it simply to a kind of human self-concern. Since, moreover, the concern for those other effects is itself a human phenomenon, humanity will be itself misrepresented in the process.

Our attitudes to these further kinds of effect are not directed simply to human interests, and in that sense they are not anthropocentric. But they are still our attitudes, expressing our values. How much of a constraint is that? What is involved in the ineliminable human perspective itself? Where might we look for an understanding of this kind of human concern?

There is a point to be made first about the experiences of non-human animals. I have so far mentioned experiential effects only in the context of effects on human beings, but, of course, there are also effects on the experience of other animals to be taken into account. This is also important, but it is not at the heart of conservation and environmental concerns, which focus typically on the survival of species. An experiential concern is likely to be with individual animals rather than with the survival of species, and it is bound to be less interested in the less complex animals; in these respects it is unlike a conservation concern. It also, of course, has no direct interest in the non-living. In all these ways an environmental concern in the sense relevant to conservation is at least broader than a concern with the experiences of other animals. This particularly helps to bring out the point that an environmental concern is not just motivated by benevolence or altruism. (Inasmuch as vegetarianism is motivated by those feelings, it is not the same as a conservation interest.)

There is a well-known kind of theory which represents our attitudes as

still radically anthropocentric, even when they are not directed exclusively to human interests. On this account, our attitudes might be understood in terms of the following prescription: treat the non-animal effects, and also the non-human effects that do not involve other animals' experiences, simply as experiential effects on human beings, as types of state that human beings would prefer not to be in, or, in the case of what we call good effects, would prefer to be in. The badness of environmental effects would then be measured in terms of the effect on human experience – basically, our dislike or distaste for what is happening. It might be hoped that by exploiting existing economic theory, this way of thinking could generate prices for pollution.

This way of looking at things involves some basic difficulties, which bring out the fairly obvious fact that this interpretation has not moved far enough from the very simply anthropocentric. It reduces the whole problem to human consciousness of the effects, but people's preferences against being conscious of some non-human or non-living effect are in the first instance preferences against the effect itself. A guarantee that no-one would further know about a given effect would not cheer anyone up about its occurring; moreover it would not be an improvement if people simply ceased to care. A preference of this kind involves a value. A preference not to see a blighted landscape is based on the thought that it is blighted, and one cannot assess the preference – in particular, one cannot decide what kind of weight to give to it – unless one understands that thought, and hence that value.

A different approach is to extend the class of things we may be concerned about beyond ourselves and the sufferings of other animals by supposing that non-animal things, though they have no experiences, do have *interests*. This directly makes the attitudes in question less anthropocentric, but I myself do not think that it is a way in which we are likely to make progress. To say that a thing has interests will help in these connections only if its interests make a claim on us: we may have to allow in some cases that the claim can be outweighed by other claims, but it will have to be agreed that the interests of these things make some claim on us, if the notion of 'interests' is to do the required work. But we cannot plausibly suppose that all the interests which, on this approach, would exist do make a claim on us. If a tree has any interests at all, then it must have an interest in getting better if it is sick; but a sick tree, just as such, makes no claim on us. Moreover, even if individual members of a species had interests, and they made some claims on us, it would remain quite unclear how a species could have interests: but the species is what is standardly the concern of conservation. Yet again, even if it were agreed that a species or kind of thing could have interests, those interests would

certainly often make no claim on us: the interests of the HIV virus make no claim on us, and we offend against nothing if our attitude to it is that we take no prisoners.

These objections seem to me enough to discourage this approach, even if we lay aside the difficulties – which are obvious enough – of making sense in the first place of the idea of a thing's having interests if it cannot have experiences. The idea of ascribing interests to species, natural phenomena and so on, as a way of making sense of our concern for these things, is part of a project of trying to extend into nature our concerns for each other, by moralizing our relations to nature. I suspect, however, that this is to look in exactly the wrong direction. If we are to understand these things, we need to look to our ideas of nature itself, and to ways in which it precisely lies outside the domestication of our relations to each other.

The idea of 'raw' nature, as opposed to culture and to human production and control, comes into these matters, and fundamentally so, but not in any simple way. If the notion of the 'natural' is not to distort discussion in a hopelessly fanciful way, as it has distorted many other discussions in the past, we have to keep firmly in mind a number of considerations. First, a self-conscious concern for preserving nature is not itself a piece of nature: it is an expression of culture, and indeed of a very local culture (though that of course does not mean that it is not important). Second, the disappearance of species is itself natural, if anything is. Third, and conversely, many of the things that we want to preserve under an environmental interest are cultural products, and some of them very obviously so, such as cultivated landscapes, and parks.

Last of these general considerations, it is presumably part of the idea of the natural that kinds of creatures have 'natures', and we cannot rule out at the beginning the idea that we might have one, and that if we have one, it might be of a predatory kind. It is one of the stranger paradoxes of many people's attitudes to this subject (and the same applies to some other matters, such as animal rights) that while they supposedly reject traditional pictures of human beings as discontinuous from nature in virtue of reason, and they remind us all the time that other species share the same world with us on (so to speak) equal terms, they unhesitatingly carry over into their picture of human beings a moral transcendence over the rest of nature, which makes us uniquely able, and therefore uniquely obliged, to detach ourselves from any natural determination of our behaviour. Such views in fact firmly preserve the traditional doctrine of our transcendence of nature, and with it our monarchy of the earth; they merely ask us to exercise it in a more benevolent manner.

Granted these various considerations, the concept of the 'natural' is

unlikely to serve us very well as anything like a criterion to guide our activities. Nevertheless, our ideas of nature must play an important part in explaining our attitudes towards these matters. Nature may be seen as offering a boundary to our activities, defining certain interventions and certain uncontrolled effects as transgressive.

Many find it appropriate to speak of such a conception as religious. A sense that human beings should not see the world as simply theirs to control, is often thought to have a religious origin, and a 'secular' or 'humanist' attitude is thought to be in this, as in other respects, anthropocentric. In one way, at least, there must be something too simple in this association; while some traditional religious outlooks have embodied feelings of this kind, there are some religions (including many versions of Christianity) that firmly support images of human domination of the world. However this may be, an appeal to religious origins will in any case not be the end of the matter, for the question will remain of why religious outlooks should have this content, to the extent that they do. In particular, the religious sceptic, if he or she is moved by concerns of conservation, might be thought to be embarrassed by the supposed religious origin of these concerns. Other sceptics might hope to talk that sceptic out of his or her concerns by referring these attitudes back to religion. But they should reflect here, as elsewhere, on the force of *Feuerbach's Axiom*, as it may be called: if religion is false, it cannot ultimately explain anything, but itself needs to be explained. If religion is false, it comes entirely from humanity (and even if it is true, it comes in good part from humanity). If it tends to embody a sense of nature that should limit our exploitation of it, we may hope to find the source of that sense in humanity itself.

I end with a line of thought about that source; it is offered as no more than a speculation to encourage reflection on the question. Human beings have two basic kinds of emotional relations to nature: gratitude and a sense of peace, on the one hand, terror and stimulation on the other. It needs no elaborate sociobiological speculation to suggest why these relations should be very basic. The two kinds of feelings famously find their place in art, in the form of its concern with the beautiful and with the sublime. We should consider the fact that when the conscious formulation of this distinction became central to the theory of the arts, at the end of the eighteenth century, at the same time the sublimity and the awesomeness of nature themselves became a subject for the arts, to a much greater extent than had been the case before. Art which was sublime and terrifying of course existed before, above all in literature, but its theme was typically not nature in itself, but rather, insofar as it dealt with nature, nature's threat to culture: in Sophocles, for instance¹, or in

King Lear. It is tempting to think that earlier ages had no need for art to represent nature as terrifying: that was simply what, a lot of the time, it was. An artistic reaffirmation of the separateness and fearfulness of nature became appropriate at the point at which for the first time the prospect of an ever-increasing technical control of it became obvious.

If we think in these terms, our sense of restraint in the face of nature, a sense very basic to conservation concerns, will be grounded in a form of fear: a fear not just of the power of nature itself, but what might be called *Promethean fear*, a fear of taking too lightly or inconsiderately our relations to nature. On this showing, the grounds of our attitudes will be very different from that suggested by any appeal to the interests of natural things. It will not be an extension of benevolence or altruism; nor, directly, will it be a sense of community, though it may be a sense of intimate involvement. It will be based rather on a sense of an opposition between ourselves and nature, as an old, unbounded and potentially dangerous enemy, which requires respect. 'Respect' is the notion that perhaps more than any other needs examination here – and not first in the sense of respect for a sovereign, but that in which we have a healthy respect for mountainous terrain or treacherous seas.

Not all our environmental concerns will be grounded in Promethean fear. Some of them will be grounded in our need for the other powers of nature, those associated with the beautiful. But the thoughts which, if these speculations point in the right direction, are associated with the sublime and with Promethean fear will be very important, for they particularly affirm our distinction, and that of our culture, from nature, and conversely, the thought that nature is independent of us, something not made, and not adequately controlled.

We should not think that if the basis of our sentiments is of such a kind, then it is simply an archaic remnant which we can ignore. For, first, Promethean fear is a good general warning device, reminding us still appropriately of what we may properly fear. But apart from that, if it is something that many people deeply feel, then it is something that is likely to be pervasively connected to things that we value, to what gives life the kinds of significance that it has. We should not suppose that we know how this may be, or that we can be sure that we can do without those things.

As I said earlier, it is not these feelings in themselves that matter. Rather, they embody a value which we have good reason, in terms of our sense of what is worthwhile in human life, to preserve, and to follow, to the extent that we can, in our dealings with nature. But there are, undeniably, at least two large difficulties that present themselves when we try to think of how we may do that. First, as I also implied earlier,

there is no simple way to put such values into a political sum. Certainly these philosophical or cultural reflections do not help one to do so. It may well be that our ways of honouring such values cannot take an economic form. The patterns must be political; it can only be the mobilization, encouragement and expression of these attitudes, their manifest connection with things that people care about, that can give them an adequate place on the agenda.

The second difficulty concerns not the ways in which we might come to do anything about them, but what we might do. What many conservation interests want to preserve is a nature that is not controlled, shaped, or willed by us, a nature which, as against culture, can be thought of as just *there*. But a nature preserved by us is no longer a nature that is simply not controlled. A natural park is not nature, but a park; a wilderness that is preserved is a definite, delimited, wilderness. The paradox is that we have to use our power to preserve a sense of what is not in our power. Anything we leave untouched we have already touched. It will no doubt be best for us not to forget this, if we are to avoid self-deception and eventual despair. It is the final expression of the inescapable truth that our refusal of the anthropocentric must itself be a human refusal.

Note

- 1 As has been admirably shown by Charles Segal in *Tragedy and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).