

From The Times Literary Supplement

September 10, 2008

Right, wrong and green

Is it ever right to shoot goats, or spill raw sewage into a pristine stream?: the ethical complexities of saving the environment

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We spend large sums to preserve endangered species. We prevent development in mountains and wetlands that earlier generations considered wastelands. We kill exotic animals to protect native plants. We sacrifice present convenience to avoid forms of pollution that will have no effect on us, but will harm future generations. In doing these things, we are making ethical choices. What are the values at stake? When there is disagreement, how can we decide which view is right? Is there even such a thing as the right answer?

Until now, it has been difficult to find a good introduction to these questions. Many books on environmental ethics are more concerned to argue a case than to introduce the reader to the issues. Often they assert the need for a completely new, holistic approach to ethics, but it is difficult to know exactly what the proposed new ethic amounts to. Attempts to make the implications of these proposals more precise either fail to achieve clarity, or lead to conclusions different from those that most environmentalists want. For example, biodiversity is often regarded as a value – but spilling a little raw sewage into a previously pristine stream may do wonders for biodiversity, as long as we include microorganisms in the total. So is it only natural biodiversity that is good? But that takes us back to John Stuart Mill's warning, in his essay *On Nature* that the use of terms like "natural" is "one of the most copious sources of false taste, false philosophy, false morality, and even bad law".

Dale Jamieson, a philosopher, and now Director of Environmental Studies at New York University, has been writing about environmental ethics since the 1980s, when he was one of the first philosophers to turn his attention to climate change. Six years ago, he brought together some of his best writing in *Morality's Progress: Essays on humans, other animals, and the rest of nature* (2002), and he has edited, or co-edited, other collections of

articles on environmental ethics. But *Ethics and the Environment* is his first book, properly speaking, and it is a very welcome one, for it can be recommended with confidence to those who know little about ethics.

It is common for books on applied ethics, in their haste to get to grips with the practical issues, to skip quickly over difficult questions about the extent to which we can reason our way to an answer on any ethical issue. Jamieson, in contrast, takes the “ethics” part of his title very seriously. He sees himself as bringing together two complex bodies of thought, each liable to their own confusions, and each, in the end, benefiting from being considered together. Environmental problems should not be seen as purely technological, nor purely economic. They are also ethical, and we understand them better by appreciating all their dimensions. Equally, however, Jamieson contends that our moral and political conceptions are challenged by the environmental problems we face. They need to adapt to a wider range of values, and a scale, both geographical and temporal, that extends far beyond that of most ethical and political issues.

Jamieson begins by showing how ethics can withstand a range of popular challenges posed by theists, amoralists and cultural relativists, before going on to consider two philosophical views of the nature of ethics, “realism” (the view that moral judgements are about something that can be true or false) and “subjectivism” (the view that there is no objective truth in morality), as well as more recent attempts to combine the virtues of each. His purpose is not to convince us that one of these positions is indubitably correct about the nature of morality, but to display the range of options. He then assesses the import of his conclusions for the notion of “intrinsic value” that is often invoked in discussions about the preservation of natural entities, whether endangered species, a rock formation, or an ecosystem. His point here is that although the idea that value is “intrinsic” to something can mean many different things, we can use it properly without being committed to a realist view of the nature of ethics.

Moving on to normative ethics, Jamieson discusses consequentialism (which holds that the right thing to do is the act that will have the best consequences), virtue ethics, which focuses on what is required to be a virtuous person, and Kantianism, the core conception of which is an insistence on treating everyone as an end, and never merely as a means – although exactly what that amounts to is controversial. He notes that environmentalists have often regarded consequentialism with suspicion, perhaps because they associate it with cost-benefit analysis as practised

by economists, which has tended to ignore values on which we cannot easily put a monetary value – the loss of habitat for owls, for example. But Jamieson points out that this is a caricature of utilitarian consequentialism, which has a strong historical record of being on the side of moral progress, particularly when it comes to the moral status of animals.

When he turns to virtue ethics, Jamieson presses the point he made earlier, that environmental problems should have an impact on the way we do ethics. While it is true that many examples of environmental despoliation can be condemned as exemplifying vices like greed, others cannot. The “soccer mom” who drives her kids to sporting events and music lessons seems to be a model of virtue – yet she and millions of other equally virtuous people are, collectively, bringing about climate change. To take account of these large collective-action problems, we need a radically new set of virtues. The most serious problem Jamieson poses for Kantians is how they are to take account of the value of anything that is not an autonomous rational agent. Kant himself said unequivocally that animals are not ends in themselves, but mere means to our ends. The only reason he offers against cruelty to animals is that it may lead to cruelty to humans. That seems to miss the point. Jamieson notes that Christine Korsgaard, perhaps the leading contemporary Kantian ethicist, has stated flatly that Kant got this wrong, and we have reason for valuing animals as ends in themselves. Jamieson questions, however, whether this more benign view really can be derived from Kantian foundations.

Even after taking three chapters to develop this extensive account of ethics, Jamieson does not move directly to what is commonly thought of as environmental ethics. His next chapter is about the moral status of non-human animals. Since almost every decision we make about the environment will have an impact on animals, we need to know what weight to give those impacts. Jamieson agrees with what now seems to be a near-consensus among philosophers that “species-ism” – the view that we are entitled to take the interests of animals less seriously than we take human interests, simply because humans are members of our species – is not a defensible moral position. That still leaves many further issues to explore: does the principle of equal consideration of interests adequately ground the moral status of animals (as this reviewer has argued) or should we also attribute rights to animals, as Tom Regan contends? The way we answer that question may lead to different judgements about the wrongness of painlessly killing sentient beings who, because they lack self-awareness, have no explicitly future-directed preferences, and whose

death thus seems less of a tragedy than the death of a self-conscious being who does have such preferences.

This discussion of how we may treat animals is put to good use in the chapter on the “value” of nature; here we get to the heart of environmental ethics: what value do we place on “nature” – whatever that is – and to what lengths should we go to preserve it? Among the case studies Jamieson discusses is a dilemma that arose about how to preserve endangered species on San Clemente Island, off the coast of California. The island is under the control of the US Navy, which uses it for target practice, among other things. But the threat of extinction for several species of plants, two species of birds, and one species of lizard, came not from naval bombardment, but from goats, who had been brought to the island by the Spanish in the seventeenth century and had since multiplied until they numbered about 30,000. The Navy removed thousands of goats from the island alive, but when the remainder proved too difficult to capture, began to shoot them from helicopters. Animal welfare protests led to some goats being captured with nets and helicoptered off the island, at significant expense, although some shooting continued. Twenty-eight years after the last goat on San Clemente Island was shot, none of the endangered species has recovered sufficiently to be removed from the endangered species list.

Jamieson helps us to think about such a conflict by pointing out all the distinct values at stake: animal welfare, human interests, including our aesthetic values, and our concern for what is “natural”. Tentatively, he suggests that perhaps eliminating “exotic” animals may be worse than tolerating them. The scare quotes around “exotics” are his, indicating that the line between what is an exotic animal and a native one is not always as clear as it seems. (The dingo, for example, is now regarded as a native Australian animal, having been in Australia for thousands of years, although it was brought to the continent by humans.) Jamieson buttresses his view that we are not justified in extirpating exotic animals by citing a horrific account, by a former national parks superintendent, of the deaths of pigs that were being hunted down as exotics. Given how gruesome these deaths are, Jamieson’s judgement seems reasonable. But the consequences would no doubt be the loss of some species that now survive only because we have eliminated competition from introduced animals. What is one to say to those who regard the painful deaths of millions of animals as a lesser evil than the loss of an endangered species, even when that species is an inconspicuous plant? The bigger lesson to

draw from the San Clemente case is that when we are faced with a choice between such distinct, and arguably incommensurable, values, it is impossible to produce a compelling argument for one choice rather than another. The best that ethical analysis can do is make us more aware of the values we are choosing between.

In the final chapter, “Nature’s Future”, Jamieson departs from the balanced analysis of his previous chapters to give us an account of the global environmental crisis that we face over the next decade or two. He cites a study indicating that if everyone in the world lived the same way as the average American, it would take 5.3 planets with the resources of ours to support them. On that basis, he lays out three possibilities. The first is environmental catastrophe. The second is that the developed nations prevent developing people in China and India from achieving a standard of living similar to their own. The third is that the rich nations begin to live sustainably. No one wants the first option. The second is both unjust and, Jamieson argues, probably not feasible. That leaves only the third. How likely is it? Jamieson points to recent developments in Europe as giving some ground for hope, but he recognizes that what is really needed is a dramatic change of attitude in the United States.

With that the book ends – too soon. After such a solid preparation, it is a pity that the discussion of the ethical aspects of standard environmental issues is limited to a single chapter. Admittedly, actions relevant to the environment figure prominently as examples in earlier chapters, and the discussions of intrinsic value, and of what we owe to non-human animals, are highly relevant to environmental ethics. Nevertheless there are many topics that are only lightly touched on. Surprisingly, given Jamieson’s early and continued involvement in the debate about climate change, even that issue gets far less attention that it deserves – perhaps because he has written about it elsewhere. There is, for example, no detailed discussion of the ethics of the various bases that could be used for setting national carbon emission quotas. Should we use a historical principle that would require those nations that have put the carbon in the atmosphere to make the greatest cuts, or would it be fairer to allocate quotas on the basis of equal per capita shares of the atmosphere? Perhaps the deepest cuts should be made by those nations that are using the most fossil fuel for “luxury” purposes rather than to meet the basic needs of their people? Or should quotas reflect – much more favourably for the developed nations than any of the possibilities mentioned so far – the fact that the developed nations use less carbon to produce a given amount of goods than the

developing nations?

Another issue on which it would have been good to have more discussion is the discount rate to be applied to future costs and benefits. This discount rate may seem like a piece of arcane economics, but once we put aside the relatively uncontroversial component of discounting (discounting done on the basis of the return we could get on an alternative investment of resources), what remains – “pure time preference”, as economists call it – is a matter of ethics, not economics. Its fundamental ethical importance is evident from the difference between the conclusions reached by Nicholas Stern in his 2007 report on climate change – which rejects discounting based on pure time preference – and the conclusions reached by models put forward by economists like the Yale Professor William Nordhaus, who does not reject it. Dale Jamieson mentions this issue in his first chapter, where it serves as an example of the way in which the environment raises value questions, but there is no full discussion of the case for and against discounting the future.

Although *Ethics and the Environment* could have been more comprehensive in its coverage of environmental issues, it would scarcely have been possible to do a better job of introducing the subject without making the book much longer than its roughly 200 pages. The material covered in the chapters on ethics is essential to a proper understanding of ethics and the environment, and the chapter on animals is a clear and concise account of that very relevant topic. Add those elements to the illuminating discussion of the value of nature, and the result is a book that can be recommended with confidence to anyone interested in learning about ethics, the environment and the interaction between them.

Dale Jamieson *ETHICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT* An introduction 221pp. Cambridge University Press. £15.99 (US \$29.99). 978 0 521 68284 8

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