CONTEMPORARY MORAL PROBLEMS

LECTURE 24

THE ENVIRONMENT

SOME PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS
- Is it prima facie morally wrong to cause a species to go extinct?
- Is it prima facie morally wrong to destroy, develop, or pollute a natural environment?
- Is it prima facie morally wrong to reduce the diversity or stability of ecosystems?

If the answer to the previous questions is affirmative, what (if anything) counts as a sufficiently good overriding reason?

THE CENTRAL QUESTIONS

THE MAIN QUESTION
- Are there moral requirements governing our treatment of “the environment”?

SUBSIDIARY QUESTIONS
- If so, what are they?
- If so, what explains them?
- What is the environment?
In many cases it is clear that the actions will produce bad consequences for (a) human beings or (b) other animals. (E.g. render the environment unusable (food, air, water, medicine, recreation), less useful or dangerous, or render certain experiences impossible or less pleasant).

- Here and now.
- Further away in space.
- Further away in time. [Non-Identity Problem!]

**CONVENTIONAL RESPONSES 1**

X has **intrinsic value** = X, itself, matters morally.

Possible Candidates

Pleasure, Desire-Satisfaction, Having Goods

Rational Agents

X has **instrumental value** = X matters morally because of its relation to something which has intrinsic value.

Conventional responses claim (very roughly) that the (non-sentient or non-rational) environment has instrumental or derivative value.

**CONVENTIONAL RESPONSES 2**

**Weak Version**
- The (non-sentient) natural environment **has some** intrinsic value.

**Strong Version**
- The (non-sentient) natural environment has **more** intrinsic value than the non-natural environment.

**Extreme Version**
- The (non-sentient) natural environment is the **only** thing with intrinsic value.

**RADICAL RESPONSES 1**

**Weak Version**
- The (non-sentient) natural environment **has some** intrinsic value.

**Strong Version**
- The (non-sentient) natural environment has **more** intrinsic value than the non-natural environment.

**Extreme Version**
- The (non-sentient) natural environment is the **only** thing with intrinsic value.
RADICAL RESPONSES 2
These responses leave open the morally correct way to RESPOND in action to such value …
Different theorists respond differently.

SOBER’S INITIAL DISTINCTION
Sober suggests that we should distinguish

Environmentalism = the view that ecosystems or species have non-instrumental (i.e. intrinsic) moral status or value.

AND

Animal Liberationism = the view that some non-human animals have non-instrumental moral status or value.

AN INITIAL PROBLEM 1
Animal liberationists argue that the fact that non-human animals can feel pain, or have interests, or are rational, means they have intrinsic moral importance.
- Hedonistic Utilitarians
- Desire-Satisfaction Utilitarians
- Kantians
AN INITIAL PROBLEM 2

BUT

Species (as opposed to the creatures in them), mountains, salt marshes and the like are not sentient (feel nothing), have no desires, and are not rational beings.

So, how could they have anything more than instrumental value?

THE IGNORANCE ARGUMENT

We should not allow species to go extinct because we never know what future instrumental benefits they might provide.

The Idea: We are ignorant of the possible uses of certain species of plant or animal and so we ought to preserve them because they might eventually prove useful.

SOBER ON THE IGNORANCE ARGUMENT

Problem 1: If we are truly ignorant of the probability that some species will be valuable to us, then we cannot make a rational decision about preserving vs. driving to extinction. After all, the species might also be harmful in the future.

Problem 2: Even we say that there is a small probability of future value, it won't follow that rationality requires saving every species since there might be a greater probability of some more modest gain.
Some environmentalists hold that every species matters a great deal because they wish to avoid the following slippery slope argument:

1. Given that there are 10 million species, each species matters only a little.
2. There is nothing seriously wrong with reducing the number of species by one.
3. So, there is nothing seriously wrong with reducing greatly the number of species.

A better response to this argument is to suggest that diversity is what matters and so the value of each species increases as the number of species decreases.

So, it may not be too serious to lose a number of species, but each subsequent extinction requires greater justification.

Some think it more (even much more) important to preserve what is “natural” (e.g. mountains, rain forests, lions) rather than what is “artificial” (e.g. highways, cropland, dogs).

Some suggest that morality generally requires accepting and promoting what is “natural.”

[See Callicot Quote]
SOBER ON THE APPEAL TO "THE NATURAL"

[1] Either "natural" means "part of nature" (or "produced by natural processes") or it means "desirable or good."

[2] If it means "part of nature," then since we are part of nature, so are the actions we perform and the things we make.

[3] If it means "desirable" or "good," then much of what happens in nature is not, contrary to some radical or "deep" environmentalists, desirable or good. [See Darwin]

THE APPEAL TO DESIRES AND INTERESTS

Hedonistic utilitarianism can't grant intrinsic value to mountains and species.

Some suggest that desire-satisfaction utilitarianism does better here.

E.g. Stone – "Natural objects can communicate their wants (needs) to us … The lawn tells me that it wants water by a certain dryness of the blades and soil…"

SOBER ON THE APPEAL TO DESIRES

Problem 1: It seems quite implausible that something without consciousness could have genuine desires or needs.

Problem 2: What could it mean to say a non-sentient creature or object has morally relevant desires or interests?
- How could a mountain have needs?
- What are the wants of a species?
- How could such things have desires or interests in a way in which highways and subdivisions do not?
Some environmentalists seem to claim that the only thing with intrinsic value is ecosystem diversity and stability.

[See Leopold, Callicott, Hardin]

Problem 1: Even if we could make sense of the intrinsic value of ecosystems, why should we think the creatures in them have no intrinsic value?

Problem 2: This produces morally objectionable consequences.

The fundamental problem, according to Sober is

The Demarcation Problem: The problem of saying what creatures, objects, or states of affairs are intrinsically important, how they matter and why they and only they matter.

Radical environmentalism must provide a minimally plausible solution to this problem.
THE "LAST MAN" ARGUMENT
1st Version: Last person.
2nd Version: Last conscious creature.

Would these actions be morally wrong?
If so, should we conclude that (1st V) non-human sentient creatures have intrinsic value or (2nd V) non-sentient organisms or species have intrinsic value?