

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.02 Moral Problems and the Good Life  
Fall 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

## Intrinsic Value and the Environment

### I. Environmentalist strategies

- *Affirm the intrinsic value of the environment, and endorse a moral view that requires us to maximize (consequentialists) or respect (deontologists) intrinsic value.* (See Paul W. Taylor's piece in DMI)
- *Connect the disposition to respect the environment with other human excellences or virtues:* "Rather than argue directly with destroyers of the environment who say, "Show me why what I am doing is *immoral*," [instead] ask "What sort of person would want to do what they propose?" (Hill, 544)<sup>1</sup>

### II. Environmentalism and Intrinsic Value (Taylor)

"The ethics of respect for nature is made up of three basic elements: a belief system [the 'biocentric outlook'], an ultimate moral attitude, and a set of rules of duty and standards of character." (527)

1. If something has intrinsic worth, then we are morally obligated to protect it and further its good *for its own sake*. (523)

2. The environment and living things within it have intrinsic worth.

⇒ Without reference to any other entity, a living thing can be benefited or harmed. Living things have *interests*, and morality concerns a respect for things' interests. (523)

⇒ The biocentric outlook is consistent and reasonable. This outlook consists of the following claims:

- Humans and other living things are equally members of the Earth's community of life. (527)
- The sound biological functioning of each part of the ecological web depends on the sound functioning of all other parts. (527)
- "Each individual organism is conceived of as a teleological center of life, pursuing its good in its own way." (527)
- The claim that humans are superior to other living things is groundless. (528)
  - To judge the value of something, one must not evaluate its merits, but its *worth*.
  - To evaluate the worth of something, one must consider it in its own terms.
  - To evaluate living things in human terms does not establish their worth.
  - It is arbitrary to view other living things as less worthy than humans, for each part of the ecosystem has its own good and its own worth.

"We begin to look at other species as we look at ourselves, seeing them as beings which have a good they are striving to realize just as we have a good we are striving to realize. We accordingly develop the disposition to view the world from the standpoint of their good as well as from the standpoint of our own good." (531)

3. Therefore, we ought to protect and further the good of all living things *for their own sake*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas E. Hill, Jr. "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments." In DMI, p. 542. Recommended, not required reading.

### III. Environmentalism and Extrinsic Value (Thomson)

An acceptable ethics must be consistent, non-vacuous (not everything can be intrinsically valuable), and provide us with a way of deciding what we ought to do.

Environmental ethics fails on two of these criteria.

- 1) It fails to draw a clear line between what is intrinsically valuable and what is not, so anything and everything could be intrinsically valuable. (535-537)
- 2) It fails to give us clear guidance about how we should treat things that are intrinsically valuable, especially if we cannot further the good of all intrinsically valuable things. (538-540)

Instead, we can build our ethics around the value of individuals *who have a point of view* and interests, needs and preferences of those individuals. We can extend this ethic to care for the environment because “We might be able to argue that something is valuable and therefore ought to be preserved because our lives and our conception of ourselves will be enhanced – in a spiritual sense – if we learn to appreciate it for what it is and learn how to live with it in harmony...this approach permits us to define a new conception of what we are as individuals and what a good life is.” (541)

### IV. Virtue and the Environment (Hill)

We may think it a virtue to appreciate nature. The question is why? Is this defensible?

Hill suggests:

...though indifference to non-sentient nature does not necessarily reflect the absence of virtues, it often signals the absence of certain traits which we want to encourage because they are, in most cases, a natural basis for the development of certain virtues. (544)

What virtues?

- 1) *Proper humility*
- 2) *Self-acceptance*
- 3) *Aesthetic sensibility*
- 4) *Gratitude*

Hill is clear to note, however, that:

- The appreciation of the environment that provides evidence of these virtues is not merely a matter of scientific knowledge of the natural world.
- The connections between respect for the environment and these virtues are not logically necessary, but may be psychologically almost universal.