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## Environmental Ethics and the Need for Theory

### Etyka środowiskowa i potrzeba teorii

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**Abstract:** Environmental ethics calls into question whether moral obligations invariably arise within relationships and communities, and whether wrong can only be done if some identifiable party is harmed. The aim of this paper is to appraise these assumptions, to argue for negative answers, and to draw appropriate conclusions about the scope of moral standing (or moral considerability). Its findings include the conclusions that our moral obligations (or responsibilities) extend to people and non-human creatures of the foreseeable future, as far as the impacts of present actions and policies can themselves be foreseen, that moral standing attaches to the possible people and other living creatures of the future, and (with Derek Parfit) that ethics is to some degree impersonal, being concerned with future quality of life for whoever lives in future centuries, whether they are currently identifiable or not. This in turn requires sustainable forms of social practice and of the human population. Another conclusion is that these findings are compatible with the approach of stewardship which the author has defended elsewhere, since stewardship need neither be anthropocentric nor managerial, and precludes current and future human agents treating the natural world as we please.

**Keywords:** environmental ethics, obligations and communities, obligations and harm, future human interests, future non-human interests, sustainability, issues of moral standing, stewardship

**Streszczenie:** Etyka środowiskowa stawia pytania o to, czy w relacjach i społecznościach pojawiają się niezmiennie zobowiązania moralne oraz czy zło można popełnić tylko wtedy, gdy poszkodowana zostanie jakaś możliwa do zidentyfikowania strona. Celem tego artykułu jest ocena tych założeń, argumentacja na rzecz negacji tego stanowiska oraz wyciągnięcie odpowiednich wniosków na temat zakresu stanowiska moralnego (lub moralnej doniosłości). Opracowanie to wskazuje, że nasze moralne obowiązki (lub odpowiedzialność) rozciągają się na ludzi i przyrodę pozaludzką w dającej się przewidzieć przyszłości, o ile można przewidzieć wpływ obecnych działań i polityk, że takie stanowisko moralne może dotyczyć ludzi i innych żywych stworzeń w przyszłości oraz (za Derekiem Parfitem), że etyka jest do pewnego stopnia bezosobowa i dotyczy także przyszłej jakości życia każdego, kto będzie żył w przyszłości, niezależnie od tego, czy można te istoty obecnie zidentyfikować, czy nie. To z kolei wymaga trwałych form praktyk społecznych i populacji ludzkiej. Kolejnym wnioskiem jest to, że odkrycia te są zgodne z podejściem zarządzania (stewardship), którego autor bronił w innym miejscu, ponieważ zarządzanie nie musi być ani antropocentryczne, ani kierownicze, i nie musi wykluczać obecnych i przyszłych ludzi traktujących dowolnie świat przyrody.

**Słowa kluczowe:** etyka środowiskowa, zobowiązania i społeczności, zobowiązania i krzywda, przyszłe interesy ludzi, przyszłe interesy przyrody pozaludzkiej, zrównoważony rozwój, zagadnienia moralne, zarządzanie

## Introduction

The study of environmental ethics is not just the application of ethics to environmental issues, even though this is what it might seem at first glance. Environmental issues, it might seem, concern amenity values such as the value of good views and landscapes, and the provision of parks and open spaces, plus the timely removal of rubbish and toxic substances; and what this calls for is better planning and decision-making, grounded in a broader view of human good and harm, an application of aesthetics to the natural world (and not only to the world of art and artifacts), and better consultation of those affected by decisions, possibly along the lines suggested by a Rawlsian social contract (Rawls 1971) or in a so-called ideal speech situation as commended in the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas (Edgar 2005). And there is much truth in these first-glance impressions; environmental issues do call for better decision-making, better aesthetics, and better understandings of human good and harm. But this is far from all that they involve.

Rather, the study of environmental ethics calls into question some of the standard assumptions of ethics, whether normative or conceptual. For example, it calls into question whether moral obligations invariably arise within relationships and communities, and whether wrong can only be done if some identifiable party is harmed (Parfit 1984). My own answers to these questions are, in each case, 'no'; but there is no unanimity among practitioners of environmental ethics about the answers to these questions, and I am not suggesting that one set of answers is necessary for contributions of value to be made to the subject. I do want to suggest, however, that reflection on ethical theory is necessary in the face of many (possibly most) of the issues with which environmental ethics is confronted; and one of the ways to support this is to supply arguments that suggest that certain issues are only likely to be taken seriously if these assumptions

are either discarded or at least radically overhauled.

So in the second section of this paper, I will address issues that question the assumptions just mentioned, the ones about relationships, communities and harm to identifiable individuals. I finish with a very brief third section, on stewardship, to avert certain possible misunderstandings. I am not, however, seeking here to defend the particular theory of normative ethics that I have put forward elsewhere (Attfield 1995a; Attfield 1999); this has the advantage that readers who might disagree with that theory may still be able to go along with at least some of my present case.

## 1. Future Interests

It is increasingly recognised that we human agents have obligations to future generations, or at least *with regard to* future generations, to preserve for them the natural systems on which we ourselves depend, together with resources comparable with those that we received. Indeed Bryan Norton contends that the interests of the future are sufficient to underpin environmental concern overall<sup>1</sup> (Norton 1991, 240f).

Now sometimes, when we think of future generations, we think of our children and possibly grandchildren; and this approach allows us to think of our responsibilities arising out of relationships or at least out of the community to which we belong, and also as being owed to individuals whom we can affect for better or for worse, and whom we can thus benefit or harm. This is already problematic if either our children or our grandchildren do not yet exist, or if we are hoping to have more than at present in the course of time; but these place-holding expressions ('our children' and 'our grandchildren') appear to allow us to persevere with the standard assumptions just mentioned. Many people would in fact, allow that we have obligations with

<sup>1</sup> A brief reply to Norton can be found in (Attfield 1999, 160-162).

regard to other people's children and grandchildren too; but we might imagine that we are related to these individuals too, at least by proxy (via the said other people), or at least potentially. This move includes among the subjects of obligation those people who have no children and do not mean to have any either; they are usually taken to have much the same obligations as the rest of us with regard to the future. Obligations to plant trees and to plan open spaces, as well as to hand on good schools and hospitals, would often be regarded as having this kind of grounding.

However, the impacts of the present generation on future people are much more extensive than this. While the roads and tunnels and bridges that we build may be intended to last for a century, the nuclear power stations that we use or decommission are likely to have impacts for half a million years; and much the same applies, in terms of more beneficial impacts, when we preserve species, as long as our successors do the same. So too does our use of natural resources, for good or for ill. Further, concern for future generations, such as (for example) Norton expresses, is typically intended to include impacts not only on the next two or three generations, but on the further future; our responsibilities, most people are prepared to agree, extend as far into the future as the impacts of current action (and possibly inaction too) are foreseeable (Nolt 2015).

But if so, various questions can reasonably be asked. To whom do we owe these obligations? No one, apparently, with whom we have or can have relationships, or who in that sense belongs to our community. Besides, are the people concerned ones that we can advantage or harm? There is a particular difficulty here, to which Derek Parfit has given prominence. For, beyond the individuals who have already been born or conceived, different individuals will come into being depending on different social policies adopted from now onwards, for such policies (transport policies and housing policies and education policies, for example)

affect which people meet and mate. Also, since personal identity depends on the timing of conception, depending as it does on the particular gametes that coalesce, acts and policies that slightly retard or bring forward the timing of conception are sufficient to bring about a different new generation. Hence most future people are not advantaged or harmed by much that we do, because if we had acted otherwise they would not have existed at all, and others would have existed in their place (Parfit 1984, part IV).

These reflections have led some philosophers to adopt what Parfit calls 'the Person-Affecting Principle', and to say that we only have obligations to actual people that either exist already or are already identifiable in some other way (and not just through placeholder expressions); indeed some have even claimed that we have no obligations to future generations that will not or would not belong to our community, or with whom we have no relations (Golding 1972; Golding and Golding 1980)<sup>2</sup>. However, as Parfit has argued, such positions do not account for certain judgements that we would not hesitate to make. Since one of his examples concerns conserving or depleting resources, it is relevant here.

Imagine that we have a choice of policies, and that one of them (Depletion) produces a very high quality of life for a hundred years by consuming and depleting resources, after which quality of life will drop (as a result of resource depletion, or, we might imagine, of pollution) to a tolerable but very much lower level, a level which would then continue indefinitely. The alternative policy is a policy of Conservation, that means a lower quality of life than the other policy (but still a decent quality of life) for the first hundred years, but also means that this quality of life continues indefinitely thereafter, involving a much higher quality

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<sup>2</sup> Without going as far as this, Avner De-Shalit holds a related communitarian position (De-Shalit 1995).

of life for many centuries than the other policy would deliver<sup>3</sup>. When we compare these policies, it seems clear to most people that the second policy (of Conservation) is ethically preferable. However, no one after the first hundred years is affected for better or worse, whichever policy is adopted, as there are no particular people who would be alive whichever policy is adopted. Thus if we adopt the Person-Affecting Principle, we cannot criticise adoption of the first policy (Depletion); for holders of this Principle are concerned for already-identifiable-individuals only, and these would, on average, be better off if Depletion is adopted.

But this stance is altogether unsatisfactory; for current agents can make a difference to the quality of life that is led more than a century hence, even if we cannot make individuals better or worse off. What we can do is to bring it about that whoever then lives has a better quality of life than might have befallen others who might have lived instead; and, as Parfit recognises, this remains important. Accordingly ethics should be recognised to be (in his words) 'impersonal' to some degree; not all obligations are owed *to* anyone at all, let alone anyone already identifiable. In addition to having concern for existing people, we can and should be concerned for whoever there will be, within the period that we can affect, even if this comprises more than one alternative population, or, as this could be re-expressed, alternative futures.

Another way of putting this, which (as far as I am aware) Parfit has not used himself, is that the possible people that we or others currently alive could bring into being have moral standing in the present (Goodpaster 1978)<sup>4</sup>. When we are reviewing policies with foreseeable long-term effects, we should take into account the foreseeable impacts on the various sets of people who

could be brought into being. Sometimes (as with population policies) one set might foreseeably be more numerous than another; at other times (as with energy and pollution policies) one set might foreseeably be more healthy or longer-lived than another. Because we could be making this difference, both sets should be taken into account, and thus both sets have moral considerability or moral standing. Normally we would not need to reflect on alternative populations separately, because we can instead use ambivalent language and ask 'What would the affect be on the next two centuries?' But this phrasing is in fact shorthand for talk of more than one set of people, and the different qualities of life that current policies might facilitate for them. (We would not, of course, in any case determine their quality of life, as they would make a good deal of difference to that themselves, but we might easily set the constraints with which they would operate in moulding their own lives, particularly in environmental matters.)

This suggestion about the moral standing of a certain subset of possible people should be clarified in two respects. First, I am not suggesting that all possible people have moral standing. What endows the possible people that current agents could bring into being with moral standing is that they could come into being in a stretch of the future on which current actions could have impacts, and this is why they should be considered. In this they are completely different from possible people of the past or of the present, who are not going to come into existence at all, even though their coming into existence was once possible at times before now. The lives that matter for purposes of decision-making are the ones that remain open possibilities.

The second clarification concerns why possible people of the future are to be taken into account when only some of them will be actual. Would our decision-making not be distorted by taking into account possible individuals many of whom will never exist? Only, I suggest, if we envisaged them as

<sup>3</sup> This is a simplified version of Parfit's example, which can be found at (Parfit 1984, 362f).

<sup>4</sup> For detailed discussions of the notion of moral standing or moral considerability, see (Goodpaster 1978; Attfield 1995a, chapter 2).

existing alongside and together with all the other possible people of the same generation or of the same century, or maybe all coexisting in some timeless eternity. Decision-making will not be distorted as long as we take into account all the alternative future populations over which we exercise any discretion. This is very much like the situation of two parents thinking of starting a family, and reflecting on whether to have five children within eight years, or two children well spaced out, or one child but not for (say) five years. All the children of this reflection are possible people, but it remains responsible to consider about them all whether they can be provided for, and whether their dates of birth and likely circumstances at that time will affect their life-prospects.

This granted, the people of the twenty-second century are almost all, I suggest, in the same position as the possible children of this example, at least with respect to being unidentifiable at present, and yet vulnerable to and affectable by foreseeable impacts of current action, for this very vulnerability (I suggest) makes them morally considerable. They are also alike in that obligations in their regard are not owed to particular individuals, but concern whoever there will be who could be affected by what we do. And as they are not identifiable individuals, these obligations do not arise from relationships that we already have, nor from our or their membership of a community (except that they, like ourselves, will form part of the human community). Further, our obligations cannot simply consist in advantaging them or in not harming them, since their very existence would depend on some courses of present action, and they would not exist otherwise. We are limited to making things better for whoever there will be in their area at that time; and I concur with Parfit that that is what we should do (other things being equal).

It will not have escaped attention that (granted the moral standing of nonhuman creatures) there will be parallel issues

concerning the treatment of nonhumans, and the different possible nonhumans (including animals bred for food) that humans can cause to exist. These issues now include which kinds of nonhumans should be brought into being, now that genetic engineering makes it possible to transpose characteristics from one species to another. However, issues of this latter kind are issues that have to be encountered whatever we say about the moral standing of possible creatures, and I mean to say nothing more about it here, except that for the position that I have been upholding all the different possible creatures that we might call into existence should be taken into consideration before people go ahead and generate them<sup>5</sup>. A parallel point also seems an asset in a theory for the realm outside genetic engineering; the moral standing of possible creatures means that, for example, the lives that animals would lead in factory farms are relevant to whether they should be brought into existence with a view to living those lives. I now set aside issues about possible nonhumans, granted that it is difficult enough to be clear about the human future, or rather about human futures.

Now one of the policies that is widely recognised as desirable is, as was mentioned earlier, the sustainability of natural systems; indeed this policy seems likely to be in the best interests of whoever lives in coming centuries (Brundtland 1987). If so, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that a sustainable level of human population across time is also important, for otherwise many natural systems cannot remain intact. There again, it is likely to be in the interests of most future people not to live in an overcrowded world, and this consideration supports the same conclusion. So we should not regard issues of global population as morally indifferent; governments and many individuals probably have obligations to stabilise population levels as soon as proves to be compatible

<sup>5</sup> My position has been developed elsewhere; see (Attfield 1995b; Attfield 1998).

with the foreseeable and inevitable current population increase. This is in part an environmental issue, which makes it relevant here; I suggest that, once again, we need to reflect on how to theorise it, and that one way to do so is to take into consideration the quality of life of whoever there will be, of the alternative possible populations, that is, in the centuries that lie ahead.

To mention one final example, the issue of global warming also requires us to consider the good of the possible people of coming decades. Given some futures, there will be no people in a few decades living on Mauritius, or on the sandbanks of the Ganges Delta in Bangladesh and India, or in most coastal settlements worldwide; on other scenarios, global warming will be controlled, and even the communities of Mauritius and the Ganges Delta will have futures and thus future members. Parfit seems right in suggesting that if we can make a difference to this, we should do so responsibly, even though many of those affected are (as of now) possible people, and even though almost all are or will be strangers with whom we have no relationships and few ties of community. Thus in this case, as with many other environmental issues, the familiar rhetoric of saving the planet turns out to involve (among other things) treating future people seriously. My own view is that this also means recognising their moral standing or considerability; but even if I am wrong about this, it certainly means reflecting on the grounds and the basis of our responsibilities in their regard. For we cannot resolve these matters by simple analogy with interpersonal relationships in the present, just as we cannot resolve issues about biodiversity preservation in that manner either.

## 2. Stewardship

Before I finish, puzzlement may be dispelled if I mention the belief that I have defended elsewhere that human agents can be seen as stewards of the natural world, answerable either to God or to the community of moral

agents for its care (Attfield 1999, chapter 3; Attfield 2014, chapters 1-2; Attfield 1994, chapters 3-4).

Puzzlement might arise either because stewardship is sometimes construed as concerned solely with human benefit, or because it is sometimes associated with a managerial stance, difficult to reconcile with the kind of preservation required for the sake of the people of the distant future.

So I want to make it clear that the kind of stewardship that I have defended, and which the Judaeo-Christian scriptures appear to uphold, does not regard the natural world as mere resources, and has often found independent value there; so stewardship need not be anthropocentric. This granted, it is not committed to managerialism either; while it does not reject some amount of management of natural resources, it is not committed to regarding them as resources only. It also takes seriously the good of the generations of the further future; indeed this emphasis is one (but not the only one) of its adherents' reasons for rejecting the view that we are free to treat the natural world as we please. For example, we are not morally free to continue burning coal, since the resulting carbon emissions could well plunge all future generations into an irreversible sequence of extreme weather events such as storms, floods, droughts and wildfires (Houghton 2015).

Far from promoting narrow instrumental attitudes, stewardship beliefs are capable of motivating adherents to transcend their individual interests and to play their part in the larger task of caring for nature and handing it on to our successors to play their part (Berry 2006). While stewardship beliefs are not a necessary condition of being motivated along these lines, I have no doubt that they help to show how, even when moral standing is recognised to extend as far as non-human creatures and to possible people and other creatures of the future, those who recognise this can be or become motivated to act accordingly. Capacity to motivate is not restricted to the ethics of relationships,

communities or contracts; hence there is no need to fear that reflections on the theoretic implications of environmental ethics will generate the kind of theory that renders its adherents inert, dispassionate, or alienated from the springs of action and of sensitivity. Thus universalist or cosmopolitan stances can inspire and motivate as well as communitarian ones.

### Summary

Ethical theory is indispensable in addressing many of the issues with which environmental ethics is confronted. We should reject the assumptions that moral obligations invariably arise within relationships and communities, and that wrong can only be done if some identifiable party is harmed, not least because our moral obligations (or responsibilities) extend to people and non-human creatures of the foreseeable future, most of whom are currently unidentifiable and with most of whom we have no current relationships. Thus the so-called Person-Affecting Principle should be discarded, and we should accept that ethics is to some degree impersonal, being concerned with future quality of life for whoever lives in future centuries (human or non-human). This in turn highlights the importance of sustainable forms of social practice, and the need to forego unsustainable ones, such as dependence on coal. All this is shown to be compatible with a stance of stewardship, which need neither be anthropocentric nor managerial; this approach is consistent with respecting the intrinsic value of the flourishing of non-human creatures. Besides, universalist or cosmopolitan stances such as this one can inspire and motivate action just as well as communitarian ones.

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