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The problem of respect in environmental philosophy

Summary

The term respect is frequently used in ordinary communication however it also has a significant role in philosophical discussions focused on environmental ethics. This essay deals with the ambiguity of the term respect. The author analyzes respect from a philosophical point of view claiming that several possible interpretations of what the word respect means and what standards of behavior to which it is to be related. It is pointed out that the issue of whether respect should be understood as an attitude or behavior. The author highlights the problem of constraints imposed by respect and the relation of respect to intrinsic and instrumental value. The approach is analyzed also from the point of view of Kant's ethics, nevertheless the author examines it also from the standpoints of various contemporary environmental ethicists (e.g. Taylor, Goodpaster, Katz, Lo). However, author concludes that understanding respect as a virtue appears to be a most promising approach in contemporary environmental ethics because it can solve the problem of finding balanced interpretation of respect.

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1. Introduction

Respect seems to be a significant attitude (as well as behavior) in our everyday lives. We respect our parents, children, older people, the dead; we respect opinions of our friends; we respect our history, culture, law, and our enemies. Respect can be related to etiquette but also connected with ethics. I will focus mainly on the ethical dimension of respect, especially in environmental philosophy and ethics.

Although the analysis of respect will be the matter of the whole article, let us try at least to find a useful preliminary definition of the concept of respect. In general, it can be presupposed that respect imposes certain limits on our behavior (and/or feelings); it contrasts with neglect, and it is related to granting positive values to the object of respect. It is frequently understood similarly to awe or reverence. Respect, in environmental ethics as well, is often connected to the problem of values, namely to so-called intrinsic value.² Many authors claim that intrinsic value of some entity implies respect for it. We should respect things that have intrinsic value.³ For instance, living beings thanks to some property (e.g. being alive) possess intrinsic value that can be a reason for giving them respect. We should value them intrinsically (non-instrumentally) for their own sake not merely as means. Valuing them intrinsically then seems to be strongly connected with the attitude of respect.

If we value a thing intrinsically we have a strong reason to respect it. Nevertheless, it is also possible to respect things that do

² There is still very fruitful discussion about the nature of this value in environmental philosophy. But I will skip the problem here. I will just mention that although I will use the term intrinsic value in this text, I understand it more in a Kantian sense than in a Moorean sense, because the former is related to the notion of it as non-instrumental, final value and the latter is more related to understanding it as based on intrinsic properties. However, some extrinsic properties as, e.g., rarity or uniqueness can be seen also as basis for value in the first sense. The latter is also not relevant for the concept of respect because we respect objects like, e.g., beings, not states of affairs. (See: e.g. Bradley 2006; Korsgaard 1983; O'Neill 1992).

³ That is, e.g., beings, but of course not for instance pleasure, etc.

not possess⁴ any intrinsic value. This stems from different notions of the term respect. For instance, we can respect an entity in ethically irrelevant sense, e.g., respect just as an expression based on some norms of etiquette, e.g., politeness. Or respecting, for instance, lightning because of fear but not for its own sake. I think that the notion of intrinsic value here should be then related to the direct moral status and to intrinsic value in the sense of implying valuation for its own sake. Thus, in my essay, I am interested in the respect that stems from valuing entities for their own sake.

2. Respect as an attitude and/or behavior

But what kind of obligations or duties do we have in the case of respect? Do we have a duty to hold an attitude of respect? Or do we have a duty to act in a respectful way? We could say that respect can be an *attitude* and a *behavior*. An attitude of respect is then more related to feelings, and also intentions. On the other hand, a respectful behavior seems to be connected to a respectful action⁵ (as well as the omission of action) and consequences of the action. How we judge a certain case depends than on what kind of ethical theory we have adopted. If I oversimplify it, a deontologist judges intentions and on the other hand a consequentialist judges consequences of the action. However, respect seems to be typically connected with deontological approach. But it seems that the attitude of respect should be expressed in behavior and that respectful behavior should be based on the attitude of respect.⁶ This seems to be also related to the mind and body problem and problem of action and reasons for action.

⁴ This is also related to the metaethical question of the nature of values.

⁵ However, for instance philosophy of action distinguishes behavior and action, but I will not deal with this problem here.

⁶ This can be related to the *virtue ethics* that is focused on the character of moral agent. For instance, P.W. Taylor in his *Respect for Nature* (1986) combines virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism.

R. Sandler has pointed out that in the practical level of solving environmental problems society is more focused on the controlling right actions than attitudes: “we legislate regarding behavior, not character; policy concerns actions, not attitudes; and the courts apply the standards accordingly.” (Sandler 2007: 1). But he claims that this should not be seen as so straightforward because: “it is always people, with character traits, attitudes, and dispositions, who perform actions, promote policies, and lobby for laws.... How a person interacts with the environment is influenced by her attitudes toward it.” (Sandler 2007: 1). Thus it seems that the attitude of respect matters because it affects the action of the agent.

Similarly, the truly respectful behavior should be motivated by the respectful attitude. According to R. S. Dillon,

To be form or expression of respect, behavior has to be motivated by one’s acknowledgement of object as calling for that behavior, and it has to be motivated directly by consideration that the object is what it is, without reference to one’s own interests and desires. On the other hand certain kinds of feelings would not count as respect if they did not find expression in behavior or involved no dispositions to behave in certain way rather than others and if they did not spring from the beliefs, perceptions, and judgments that the object is worthy of or calls for such behavior. (Web-01)

Here we can find also the idea related to the intrinsic value that I mentioned above as valuing object for its own sake, in Dillon’s words: directly by consideration that the object is what it is, without reference to one’s own interests and desires. This is also related to the problem of identity, self, telos, and good of its own. There is also the problem of so-called instrumental value that seems to be related to the reference to one’s own interests and desires.

In Dillon’s text we can also find similar idea as expressed by P. Taylor (1986) who understands respect as based on belief system. Thus I will not count behavior that is outwardly respectful (that is motivated by a will to reach something else, not for the sake

of the object of respect) as the expression of respect. For instance, a case when I show to other people that I “respect” animals but the only reason why I do so is because I want be popular and for instance I want win elections, etc., but I do not do it for the sake of animals.

There is also a question of how we judge the case when people (especially as moral agents) hold respectful attitudes towards living beings but they act in ways that are not respectful to these beings. The reason why may be that they are forced to act in non-respectful ways. This case seems to be the one we cannot judge from a moral point of view because we must admit that there is (at least limited) freedom of choice if we want to judge the action from moral point of view. However, it is not so straightforward, because we can still in this case say that the action is wrong and at same time that the agent is not responsible and blameworthy.

More problematic is a case when the reason why people do so is because they are unaware of the right way how to act. They can have attitude of respect, they want to act in respectful way, but they do not express it in behavior because they do not know what kind action will be appropriate. Then they simple do not act respectfully because they are aware of their ignorance. The other case can be that they do not know about their ignorance and they act wrong without knowing that. For instance, they feed pigeons but this leads to overpopulation of these animals and so on.

As I already mentioned the attitude and behavior should be properly interconnected. According to P. Taylor the attitude of respect should be expressed in character as well as in behavior. He claims: “when moral agents have the attitude of respect for nature they subscribe to set of normative principles and hold themselves accountable for adhering them. The principles comprise both standards of good character and rules of right conduct. The attitude of respect is embodied or expressed in their character and conduct to the extent that their character fulfills the standards and their actions are in accordance with the rules.” (Taylor 1986: 169).

3. Constrains related to respect

However, although I have already started to write about respect I still have not expressed clearly what I actually mean by respect although I presupposed that respect imposes certain limits on our behavior, it contrasts with neglect and it is related to granting value to the object of respect. Thus let us start with seeking the limits of respect. Are there some constraints in the behavior that express the attitude of respect? One might think that respect for some entity is incompatible with interfering, using, harming or destroying a given entity. And one might also think that while respect is based on intrinsic value of an entity it is incompatible with valuing given entity also instrumentally. Thus according to this view it seems that speaking, e.g., about respectful intervention and respectful use is meaningless. Respect can be seen then merely as a hands-off approach.

There are then numerous dilemmas that stem from this approach and also many trials how to solve them. For instance, K. Goodpaster points out on the issue that “the clearest and most decisive refutation of the principle of respect for life is that one cannot *live* according to it... We must eat, experiment to gain knowledge, protect ourselves from predation (macroscopic and microscopic)... To take seriously the criterion of considerability being defended, all these things must be seen as somehow morally wrong.” (Goodpaster 1978: 324).

Thus we may refuse the idea of respect for all living beings because we cannot live according to it. The other solution may be some form of hierarchy of living beings and also hierarchy in respecting them. For instance, lower prokaryotic organisms will have lower intrinsic value and will deserve less respect than higher organisms and, e.g., sentient and rational beings will have the highest value and highest right for life. Or we may claim that wild beings are more valuable than domestic, and we should respect wild living beings however we may not have a duty to respect domestic animals.⁷

⁷ This has been proposed by T. Regan (1992) in his article Does environmental ethics rest on a mistake? However, I do not think that is the right approach because

But does not there still remain room for reconsidering the approaches to the notion of respect? Because, although the term is often used it is not always clear whether all authors mean by respect the same.⁸ For instance Dillon (2007) has pointed out various notions of respect (Web-01). There emerges also a question: should we understand the notion of respect in environmental philosophy in a same way as in human philosophy and ethics, e.g., in biomedical ethics or social and political philosophy? Is it just another metaphor that should be modified for the aims of environmental philosophy or can we directly apply some of the concepts of respect from human ethics to environmental philosophy?

Some authors claim that interfering is an expression of disrespect. Therefore, according to this view, respect is incompatible with interfering. This approach offers for instance E. Katz (1997). This view is often connected with the respect for wild living beings etc., and it often includes also not using and in to some extent also not harming and destroying. But it is also possible to harm entity by not interfering, for instance by not helping. I agree with Yeuk-Sze Lo who argues against an interpretation of respect as incompatible with interfering: “First of all, human intervention in nonhuman nature is not necessarily destructive, and it is in fact benign to nonhumans in some cases. Second, the intervention of others is not always a sign of disrespect to one’s autonomy, nor does the imposition of external control always constitute oppressive domination.” (Lo 1999: 265). Lo compares it to relationship between friends and interventions within friendship (Lo 1999: 265-266). But of course I should note that the idea of friendship cannot be understood literally in the same way as between human friends but more or less metaphorically.

we have special bonds to domestic animals, therefore we cannot simply sacrifice them for the sake of wild animals.

⁸ Similarly, Helena Siipi has pointed out in her papers that the term naturalness is ambiguous. See, e.g., her article “Is Neuro-Enhancement Unnatural and Does It Morally Matter?” (2011).

As I have already mentioned, respect can be also understood as incompatible with using a given entity. But we can ask then for instance does it mean that I should never harvest fruit from some tree that has intrinsic value? We can also ask whether the respect that follows from the intrinsic value should lead only to prohibition of using living entities.⁹ For instance J. Claude Evans claims that the fact that an entity has intrinsic value that implies respect does not mean that it should not be used as a means and thus has instrumental value¹⁰ (Claude Evans 2002: xiii). J. Claude Evans claims also that a living being without any instrumental value towards other living being in the “real world” cannot exist¹¹ (Claude Evans, 2002: xiii). However we should not reduce instrumental value just to use value, because there can be also instrumental value that is not use value. For instance, existence value is non-use instrumental value (Koricheva, Siipi 2004: 38).

Similarly, R. Sylvan and V. Plumwood have pointed out that “The conventional wisdom of Western society tends to offer a false dichotomy of use versus respectful non-use... of using animals, for example, in the ways characteristic of large-scale mass production farming... *or* on the other hand of not making use of animals at all... What is left out of this choice is the alternative the Indians... recognized... of limited and respectful use.” (Callicott 1986: 413-414).

This kind of using seems to be related also to harming and destroying a given entity. Can it be that we respect a thing and we destroy it and harm it in a respectful way? R. S. Dillon for instance writes, “There are very many ways to respect things: keeping our distance

⁹ This is quite often presented in environmental literature as respectful. For instance, V. Davion criticize Kawall’s idea of reverence for life because they interpret it merely as a hands off approach. (See: Davion 2006; Kawall 2003).

¹⁰ He thinks, therefore, that the authors like A. Schweitzer, B. Devall, G. Sessions, P. Taylor, J. Sterba, A. Leopold, are not right (Claude Evans 2002: xiii) Nevertheless I am not sure if we can include all authors there, for instance A. Schweitzer’s opinion is not so clear.

¹¹ However, it seems to be appropriate to distinguish between instrumental value in descriptive sense and normative sense.

from them, helping them, praising them, obeying or abiding by them, not violating or interfering with them, destroying them in some ways rather than letting them be destroyed in others, protecting or being careful with them [...]” (Web-01). But while I am destroying a thing that I respect is it then respectful attitude and disrespectful action? Or is it respectful attitude and also respectful action?

P. Taylor claims that: “The fact that we have a duty not to destroy or harm animals and plants in natural ecosystems does not mean that, all things considered, we must never do such things under any circumstances whatever. It only means that we must not do them without a valid moral reason that justifies our overriding the duty to refrain.” (Taylor 1986: 171).

4. Respect and instrumental valuation

As we have already seen respect can be understood much wider and it seems that it allows also that the entity has intrinsic value and at the same time also instrumental value. Similar idea can be found in Kant’s ethics. According to K. Lee’s interpretation:

Kant and Kantians do not say *always* regard them as ends in themselves, *never* as means to one’s ends. Instead they say: *do not* merely regard them as means to one’s ends, but also as ends in themselves. Kantians realize that the former is quite unworkable as, inevitably, situations exist where it is impossible to avoid treating another intrinsically valuable being as a means to one’s ends.... To recognize that they are intrinsically valuable is to admit that contexts exist where it would *not* be right to treat them as mere means to our ends. To claim none exist amounts to denying that they are intrinsically valuable thereby implying they have only instrumental value for humans. (Lee 2003: 161-2)

I should add that the being that possesses intrinsic value should not be used merely as a mean but always *at the same time* as an end.

But can we really straightforwardly apply Kant's ideas of respect for persons to environmental philosophy? Of course Kant's philosophy is not very appropriate for environmental ethics in its unmodified classical form. But the idea of values and respect seems to be still significant source of inspiration for environmental philosophers and their idea of intrinsic and instrumental values of natural entities.

But if we admit that entities can be used in a respectful way does it then mean that everything is allowed? Or what is for instance limited respectful use?¹² Maybe the answer can be inspired by Aristotle's ethics as the golden mean – a desirable middle between extremes,¹³ for instance between care¹⁴ and destroying. Some authors also related the problem of respect to virtue ethics.¹⁵ But if the respect does not mean merely not interfering¹⁶ what is then intrinsic value good for? What is the difference between treating living entity that has only instrumental value to humans and treating living entity that has instrumental value and at the same time intrinsic value?

For instance, we can imagine harvesting fruit from a tree from the point of view when it has merely instrumental value. Then we imagine harvesting fruit from the tree that has at the same time

¹² There is also an important question who/what the bearer of intrinsic value is and from that it follows answers whom/what can we sacrifice, etc. There can be individualistic or holistic approach to the problem of respect.

¹³ I think that similarly understands it also Yeuk-Sze Lo (1999).

¹⁴ For instance, Dillon (2007) claims that care is the most relevant sense of respect in environmental philosophy. (Web-01).

¹⁵ See for example J. Kwall (2003). But he understands respect mostly as not compatible with harming etc., and then tries to solve the dilemma claiming that in his virtue ethics respect for life is just one virtue among others. P. Taylor (1986) speaks about respect for nature also as virtue. It seems to be more significant and wider understanding of respect as virtue, than respect that stems merely from duties and is understood more or less as hand-off approach.

¹⁶ Of course I am not saying that we can do whatever we want to because I admit that respect can lead to (1) negative constraints – respect involves refraining from treating entities in certain ways; (2) positive duties – how we ought to treat them, for instance to care. (see Dillon 2007, Web-01) However, I will not deal with certain concrete norms, here.

both kinds of values. What is the difference between the two cases? Of course we can simply say that there is a difference because first is anthropocentric and second non-anthropocentric approach. But that is obviously not a sufficient answer. We can see the difference maybe in the attitude, maybe in feelings as some authors¹⁷ has pointed out. Maybe we can see the difference in the consideration that the object is what it is e.g. that it is a tree not just a source of fruits.

However, there remain still many questions. For instance, is this notion of respect as attitude and feeling sufficient for respect in environmental ethics? Or are the instrumental values in the two cases of different quality? Can we speak about good reasons not to respect (in the narrow sense) for instance living entities in some situations? And one of the most important questions could be is for environmental philosophy more appropriate the understanding of respect in the narrow sense (that is e.g., a hands-off approach) or in the wider sense (that is compatible with using etc.)? Or can we use both approaches? On the other there is important to note that respect does not mean only negative constrains but also positive duties like care. It can be in some sense related to love and also to friendship as I have already mentioned.

5. Conclusion

Appeal to respect is often used not only in our ordinary communication however it has a significant role also in philosophical discussions focused on environmental ethics. In this text I tried to point out on the ambiguity of the term respect. I realized that it is not easy to know how to correctly read what different environmental ethicists mean by respect for natural entities. Therefore, I left open several questions. The main problem of respect in environmental ethics is how to find a balance between inevitable instrumental use of natural entities and displaying sufficient protective respect to them. However, I think that the most promising approach to respect seems

¹⁷ See e.g., K. McShane (2007).

to be to interpret it as a virtue, according to this approach the virtuous person knows what the best expression of respect in given situation is. This approach is currently proposed by many authors like J. Sandler, P. Cafaro (2005), D. Dzwonkowska (2013), some features of virtue ethics approach can be found also in P. W. Taylor's texts. Despite the fact that some critics have pointed out that virtue ethics does not provide us with any concrete moral duties (as for instance deontology), it does mirror the moral reality far better than other approaches. It is not so vulnerable to mistakes of other theories that have to face moral dilemmas thanks to too strict moral rules. On the other hand, the approaches of deontology and virtue ethics do not seem to be mutually exclusive and they can benefit from enriching each other also in environmental ethics.

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