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Holism, Atomism, and Aesthetics in Modern Environmental Ethics

Most readers are aware of the growing movement to extend moral consideration to non-human animals. What fewer may realize is that there is another movement which has grown parallel but also in opposition to traditional animal liberationism. This more radical philosophy is the holism to animal liberation's atomism. While animal welfare is concerned with the treatment of animals as individuals, environmental holism is concerned with second order biological wholes: ecosystems. This paper will examine in detail what it in fact means to morally consider ecosystems. Ought we to value them for their own sake or for the sake of their components? We will see that while the way environmental holists formulate their theory is problematic, it is still possible to value ecosystems for their own sakes - but not in the same way we value individuals.

In his essay "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," Baird Callicott provides two interesting analogies intended to illustrate why it is viable to place second order wholes like ecosystems in a moral framework. In his first example, he asks us to consider the human body. While it is certainly true that on one level a human being is an individual, on another level it is a collection of distinct cells, each operating as an individual in its own right. "The interests of a person" says Callicott "are not those of his or her cells summed up and averaged out." (Callicott 190) We routinely cause harm to particular pieces of our bodies in order to facilitate the health of the whole, for example when exercising. In the same way, we can develop a moral theory that allows (or even requires) us to sacrifice the wellbeing of some members of a biotic community in order to preserve the stability of the whole ecosystem.

His second analogy is a human society. Just like a body in relation to its cells or an ecosystem in relation to its various components, a human society is a second order whole in relation to its citizens. Callicott points out that we have moral responsibilities not only to other members of society, but also to society as a whole. Analogously environmental holism asks us to accept that we have responsibilities not just to individual animals but to the second order whole of the biological community.

In both of these analogies, Callicott draws a distinction between acting in the interests of a community *itself* and acting in the interests of a community *for the interests of its members.* That is, he is claiming that the interests of a community are more than the sum of the interests of its parts. What would it mean to act in the interests of a community *only* so far as its interests are the sum of the interests of its members? Presumably it would mean trying to maximize the wellbeing of each and every individual in society. The difference Callicott seems to see between this type of communal responsibility and a responsibility to the community itself is that in the latter case we may have to sacrifice the wellbeing of some members of the community for the sake of the whole.

This distinction does not stand up to further scrutiny. It is valid only so long as we consider interests in the very short term. But if we take a more mature and complex definition of interests, it is easy to see that the interests of a society *are* the interests of its members summed up. Harming society harms the long term interests of its members. If society is destroyed, *everyone* will suffer. In the same way, the long term interests of the cells in a body are served by sacrificing some of the cells to avoid *all of them* being sacrificed. It is not a matter of preserving the whole for the sake of the whole, but rather a matter of optimizing outcomes for everyone involved. It is *impossible* to maintain an organic mass as complex as a human body without sacrificing numerous individual cells. It is impossible to have a society that perfectly supports every one of its citizens. Yet, we strive for the optimal outcome, which is the benefit of as many members as possible. So in fact, maximizing outcomes for each and every member of society will involve some members suffering more than others, lest they all suffer to a much greater degree.

A possible objection here is that we do not optimize outcomes for the cells in a human body for the sake of the cells, but for their instrumental value in preserving our selves. Analogously, perhaps the interests of an ecosystem are the interests of its members only in so far as they serve an instrumental value of some sort, and thus the ultimate goal is the wellbeing of the ecosystem itself. It is entirely true that we value our cells for instrumental purposes only, and that in the end we are looking out for the interests of the second order whole (the human being) itself. However, it is unclear how we might extend this principle to societies or ecosystems. It seems absurd to suggest that we in any way consider individuals as having only instrumental value for preserving society itself, when society itself is intended to promote the health of its members. In a similar way it makes little sense to speak of promoting optimal outcomes for animals and other components of ecosystems for the ecosystems themselves - we care about the ecosystems only because of their components. The reason for this disanalogy between the human body and larger second order wholes is this: a human body is pretty clearly not only a collection of cells and the cells taken as a whole, but also a further emergent layer above these - that is, consciousness. I can think of no analogous entity relating to societies nor ecosystems.

At this point it seems entirely possible to construct a version of environmental holism that does not rely on the debatable metaphysical claims discussed above. This theory would require us to preserve the health of ecosystems for the sake of the organisms which live in them. We may posit responsibilities to protect non-sentient and even non-organic components of ecosystems for their instrumental value in preserving the sentient components. Of course, the problem of extending moral considerability to sentient non-humans remains, but is distinct and lies within the realm of traditional animal liberationism. Why do environmental holists resist this kind of reductionism? In Callicott's case at least, the resistance seems to stem in part from a misunderstanding of the utilitarian principles employed in animal liberation theories. I have already pointed how his simplistic definition of interests undermined the validity of his earlier society-ecosystem analogy. Another example: in a later section of the paper he is attempting to undermine the axiomatic value judgments "pain is bad" and "pleasure is good." He says "Pain and pleasure seem to have nothing at all to do with good and evil if our appraisal is taken from the vantage point of ecological biology." (194) He goes on to discuss how pain can benefit us by alerting us to injury and in other ways, and how pleasure is simply a reward mechanism that urges us towards self-preservation.

If Callicott could in fact usurp these fundamental value judgments, it would strengthen his theory immensely. However, he is attacking, if not a straw man, then an old man - a version of utilitarianism that is extremely simplistic and no longer taken seriously. In more mature utilitarian theories, the principle is not pleasure is good and pain is bad, but rather "utility" (defined as long term happiness or thriving) is good and suffering (again, in the long term as well as the short) is bad. So of course momentary pain can be good if it preserves our long term health.

All this is intended to illustrate that Callicott's arguments in many cases miss the mark. He is attacking something which no one in their right mind would defend - a simplistic, hedonistic utilitarian theory useful only for demonstration in introductory philosophy seminars. A more complex utilitarian theory is, as has been discussed, more than capable of surmounting all the problems that Callicott sees in traditional animal liberationism. Yet it would be unwise to dismiss environmental holism entirely. If nothing else, it strikes a chord psychologically. It seems to me that most of us concerned with environmental ethics think not only of preserving the sentient members of an ecosystem, but also of preserving the ecosystem itself - it's stability, diversity, and also its non-sentient components. Perhaps environmental holism, while logically problematic, can better capture our moral intuitions than a utilitarian theory.

Consider the so-called "n + m" argument. In animal liberationism it doesn't matter whether an animal is species n or species m; as long as they have roughly equal levels of sentience (or whatever criteria is being used to establish moral considerability), they ought to receive equal consideration. In environmental holism, on the other hand, if species n is as plentiful as rabbits while species m has only a few hundred individuals and is on the verge of extinction, a member of species m is far more valuable than a member of species n. Given the choice between saving a member of n or a member of m, it would be right to save the member of m in order to preserve the diversity, stability, etc. of the ecosystem. I think that this strongly aligns with our moral intuitions - at least to my mind, it is worse to kill a black rhino than a common deer.

We *could* fit this into our utilitarian theory - preserving species diversity protects the health of the ecosystem overall, which as previously discussed is the optimal outcome for all individuals in the ecosystem. Yet I feel that this fails to capture our actual reasons for valuing the member of m over the member of n. Consider another case: that of a beautiful natural formation that is not sentient and does not support sentience, for example, a crystal cave. This is much harder to work into our utilitarian theory, but we would still like to be able to say that it would be wrong to blow up such marvel. Even if we were to argue that doing so would in some way indirectly harm the health of an ecosystem, it would again feel unsatisfying when our moral outrage stems from such a different source. In both of these examples, our value judgments are based far more than environmental holists seem to want to admit on aesthetics.

For most humans, nature is beautiful in some way. The loss of a species is the loss of a unique and wondrous aesthetic object (note that we care far less about endangered beetles than endangered rhinos, because beetles are, for most people, a great deal less aesthetically interesting). The loss of a crystal cave likewise offends our aesthetic sense. I think that it would capture our intuitions much more directly to establish a moral system in which the environment as a whole, both sentient and non-sentient components, is valued for its own sake in the same way that we value a painting for its own sake - because it is beautiful. Environmental holists may wish to avoid this for several reasons. Perhaps they feel that aesthetic judgments are not strong enough to engender the kind of concern for the environment that they desire. Perhaps they feel that valuing the environment for aesthetic reasons misses the point in some way. But they underestimate the strength aesthetic judgments can have. Anyone who has spent a great deal of time in nature will understand just how powerful our concern for the beauty around us can be. As to the second problem, if we wish to value ecosystems as wholes for their own sake, what choice remains but to value them for their aesthetics? We have already dispensed with the idea that we can in same way have moral duties to them analgous to the duties we have to individuals. We could certainly value them instrumentally, but most environmental ethicists wish to avoid basing theories on the instrumental value of nature, and for good reason - what happens when an ecosystem no longer serves us? More importantly, such a judgment does not match our moral intuitions.

Environmental holism wants us to 1) value ecosystems as wholes rather than focusing on their individual components and 2) value ecosystems *for the sake* of the whole itself. While it is impossible to do this in a way analogous to how we value individual people or sentient animals, it is possible to do so if we take a different tact and assign ecosystems standing as aesthetic objects. As with all matters in morality, we must always balance our judgments between individual creatures in great need and the health of the whole system; neither atomism nor holism can give us a complete solution to the many moral dilemmas we face in environmental ethics.