

ARTICLES

Is There a Place for Animals in the
Moral Consideration of Nature?

I

The compatibility of an "animal liberation" ethic and an environmental ethic depends primarily on how one interprets the meaning and moral structure of a theory of environmental ethics. In part this is because the meaning and moral structure of an animal liberation ethic is fairly straightforward: it focuses on the absence of morally relevant differences between humans and animals, and on the moral significance of animal pain and suffering.¹ But the form of an environmental ethic is not so clear. Does an environmental ethic advocate moral concern for natural individuals, for species, for ecosystems, or perhaps for nature as a whole? An answer to this question is required before one can judge the relationship between animal liberation and environmental ethics, but an answer, unfortunately, is not easily discernible. In what follows I will argue, first, that several versions of an environmental ethic yield problematic environmental and moral conclusions; second, that an environmental ethic must be interpreted as a complex balancing of different kinds of moral concern—i.e., moral concern for individuals, for species, and for natural ecosystems—and third, that this balancing will produce moral results that are troubling to the advocate of an animal liberation ethic.

An analysis of the form of an environmental ethic can proceed most easily if the potential objects for moral concern are divided into three major groups: individuals, species, and ecosystemic communities. Thus one interpretation of an environmental

ethic will hold that moral obligations, duties, or rules are applicable to all natural individuals—animals, plants, bodies of water, soil, rocks, minerals, etc. Another interpretation of an environmental ethic will consider natural species as the proper object of moral concern. A final interpretation of an environmental ethic will hold that moral concepts are applicable to ecosystems or natural communities as a whole. Restricting the discussion to these possibilities will greatly facilitate the analysis, and the cost in terms of conceptual clarity will not be significant. The form of an environmental ethic that considers obligations to nature as a whole, for example, can easily be assimilated into the ecosystemic interpretation, once one considers the earth's biosphere as one large and complex ecosystemic community.

In analyzing the meaning and form of an environmental ethic, two central points need to be considered. First, is the formal structure of the ethic coherent, reasonable, and in general agreement with normal ethical practice? Of course an environmental ethic is different from traditional ethical theories that consider only human actions, concerns, and institutions the primary objects of moral value—but nonetheless, an environmental ethic cannot be so radically different from traditional ethical theories that it defies credibility. It must be a plausible revision in the meaning and justification of moral concepts. Second, the interpretation of an environmental ethic must be in accord with the general policies of environmentalism, i.e., of environmental protection. Although it might seem strange to cite this as a significant consideration in the

analysis of an environmental ethic— isn't it obvious that an environmental ethic is in accord with a policy of environmentalism?—the fact is that certain interpretations of the meaning of an environmental ethic actually undermine environmentalist principles. These interpretations of an environmental ethic will thus be rejected on the practical ground that they fail to achieve the goal of environmental protection.

II

Perhaps the most obvious interpretation of an environmental ethic is the moral consideration of the ecosystem, or the natural community as a whole. Aldo Leopold's oft-quoted definition of the moral rightness of human environmental action is generally used as a thematic signpost for this position: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."² In the more recent literature, J. Baird Callicott and Don Marietta, Jr., have each argued for this model of an environmental ethic. Callicott describes Leopold's vision in this way: "the good of the biotic *community* is the ultimate measure of the moral value, the rightness or wrongness, of actions." Or in other words: "the effect upon ecological systems is the decisive factor in the determination of the ethical quality of actions."³ Similarly, Marietta writes that "morally acceptable treatment of the environment is that which does not upset the integrity of the ecosystem as it is seen in a diversity of life forms existing in a dynamic and complex but stable interdependency."⁴ Thus, in this version of an environmental ethic, the natural ecosystem or community is the primary object of moral concern. The morality of human deliberative action will be judged by various criteria of

ecosystemic goodness—the stability, integrity, health, and diversity of the natural biotic community. Actions which affect an ecosystem as a whole—e.g., the damming of a river, the clearing of forest land, the draining of a marsh—will be morally judged by their relation to ecological concepts concerning the entire natural community under consideration. Even actions directed towards individual natural entities will be judged by ecosystemic criteria: shooting a deer or chopping down a single tree will be morally evaluated by the effect the action has on the natural community.

A number of comments can be made about this interpretation of an environmental ethic. First, it is clear that this model of moral concern in an environmental ethic is incompatible, as such, with an ethic of animal liberation. An ethic which evaluates action in terms of communal health and stability cannot be seriously interested in the welfare of individual entities—such as animals—unless these individuals are particularly important to communal functions. As Bryan Norton has recently argued, "the relationship between the individual interests of organisms, individual plants, and nonliving objects, on the one hand, and the healthy functioning and integrity of the ecosystem, on the other hand, is a contingent one."⁵ The overall healthy functioning of the natural community may require the death, destruction, or suffering of individual natural entities, animals included. From the perspective of the natural community, the sacrifice of individual entities may be the morally correct course of action. Callicott thus argues that a major thesis of an animal liberation ethic—the moral significance of the suffering of animals—is irrelevant in the moral evaluations of an ecosystemic environmental ethic. "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 . . . If nature as a whole is good, then pain and death are also good."⁶ Or rather, if the well-being of the natural community or ecosystem is the primary good of moral judgment, then pain and death that contributes to this overall good cannot be judged as a moral evil, as an animal liberation ethic would require. Because an animal liberation ethic is concerned with the welfare of individual animals, while a community-based environmental ethic may require the sacrifice of individual animals, the two ethical systems cannot be compatible.

The second point to notice about the interpretation of an environmental ethic that focuses on the natural community is that it may also require the suffering or death of human individuals. The attempt to determine the moral worth of animals in a system of environmental ethics includes the determination of the moral worth of human beings. Callicott, again, notes that in an environmental ethic "the moral worth of individuals (including, n.b., human individuals) is relative, to be assessed in accordance with the particular relation of each to the collective entity," i.e., the natural community.⁷ Thus, humans are not to be given their traditionally special moral status based on rationality, moral autonomy, or whatever. Instead, human individuals, just as all other natural entities, will be morally evaluated by their contribution to the welfare, the healthy functioning, of the natural community. This revision of the traditional lofty moral status of human individuals is a source of serious criticism of an environmental ethic. Why, it might be argued, should humans accept a system of moral rules that may require harmful consequences to human individuals or human projects and institutions? One need only consider the existence of species—such as the smallpox virus or disease-bearing mosquitoes—which

threaten human individuals. Must the species still be protected at the cost of human life? It does no good to respond to this criticism by arguing that in the long run restricting human activity or sacrificing human individuals for the protection of the natural community will benefit human society. Although this is a popular argument of many environmentalists, it is only a contingent possibility. Indeed, a different point seems more probable: since the primary goal of moral action is the good of the natural community, and since human technology and population growth create many of the threats to environmental health, an environmental ethic may demand the elimination of much of the human race and human civilization. This consideration casts serious doubts on the plausibility of the environmental ethic based on the welfare of the natural community as a whole.

The only possible method of defending an environmental ethic from this criticism is to insist that human life and institutions are part of the natural community whose good is the primary end of all action. Human flourishing is important because it is an essential component of the natural community. An environmental ethic that *excluded* humans from the natural community would clearly threaten the continuation of all human projects and activities—whatever humans did would have an adverse effect on the moral unit, the natural community. An environmental ethic that excluded humans from the natural community, for example, would prohibit humans from filling in a small marsh area in order to expand a pre-existing housing development on its border. But an environmental ethic that considers human well-being as *part* of the natural community (not, of course, the supreme part), as part of the moral end of action, *might* permit the expansion of the housing development after a comparison of the benefits and

harms to the human population and the natural environment (the marsh).

At best, however, including humans in the natural community is only a partial deflection of the criticism of an environmental ethic based on its anti-human tendencies. An environmental ethic with an appropriate perspective on the place of humanity in the natural system will save a few human projects and activities, but it will still require major changes in human activity, major human sacrifices for the sake of the overall community. Unfortunately, specifying these changes and sacrifices by means of concrete examples is a difficult and perhaps impossible task. The making of environmental decisions is not a job for the armchair philosopher: a proper environmental decision requires a multitude of scientific and sociological data as a factual basis. Nevertheless, even if humans are included in the natural community so that their interests are taken into account in the determination of communal well-being, it should be clear that dumping toxic pollutants into a lake—a lake that is not used in any other way by humans—would be a moral evil, an injury to the natural environment. Whether humans would be permitted to dam a river for electrical power is a more problematic case, since the harm to the natural environment as a whole is less severe; in this kind of case specific facts would be needed to make the moral determination. The crucial point to remember is that this form of an environmental ethic claims that humans are no different than any other species; the measure of their worth and the worth of their activities is decided by the overall well-being of the natural community. If I plan to dig a well on my property in the country I will have to consider the effect of my drawing water not only on my human neighbors and their water supplies, but also on the

surrounding countryside and its non-human inhabitants. An environmental ethic thus requires a major revision in traditional human moral practice. In an environmental ethic moral decisions transcend inter-human relationships to consider the natural community as a whole. Moral decisions cannot be made by simply considering consequences to human life. But this revision in moral practice is not easily granted; humans must relinquish their special place in the moral universe. Thus an environmental ethic may not be acceptable to humans because it implausibly revises traditional moral practice.

A final comment concerning this interpretation of an environmental ethic undermines its validity even more. The fact is that an environmental ethic that considers the overall well-being of the community as the primary goal of all action cannot explain the moral rightness of all the policies desired by the contemporary environmentalist movement. This version of an environmental ethic is unable to explain the protection of rare and endangered species, species so threatened that they play little or no part in the ecology of their natural communities. In this regard, Lilly-Marlene Russow cites as an example the David deer, a species now preserved only in zoos, a species whose original habitat or natural ecosystem is unknown to humanity.⁸ Similarly, the snail darter or the bald eagle are examples of species which have little or no ecological function in their natural habitats. In a sense, then, these species are not members of the natural community, not functioning parts of the ecological system. Their preservation, therefore, cannot be guaranteed by simply securing the moral goal of communal or ecosystemic well-being. An environmental ethic designed to treat communal welfare as the primary good cannot explain the preservation of species so rare that

they no longer serve an ecological function. But since the preservation of rare species is an important goal of environmentalists, this interpretation of an environmental ethic must be rejected.

The problem of the role of endangered species in ecological communities leads to a second possible interpretation of an environmental ethic: perhaps an environmental ethic is an ethical system that considers species as the primary object of moral concern. An advocate of this version of an environmental ethic could argue then that rare and endangered species ought to be preserved because natural species are the primary recipients of moral obligation. Destroying a species would be morally wrong, because it is equivalent to the traditional prohibition against killing an individual human being. In addition, a species-based environmental ethic could also explain obligations to ecological communities as a whole, since these communities contain species of living things or they are the habitats necessary for the survival of species. This interpretation of an environmental ethic might therefore be more attuned to the needs of the environmentalist, i.e., to the protection of rare and endangered species and the preservation of natural ecological communities and habitats.

The first point to notice about this "species" interpretation of an environmental ethic is that, like the community model, it is basically incompatible with an animal liberation ethic. Although it restricts moral concern to a much smaller group of entities than the natural community, it still focuses on a *collection* of entities rather than on individuals. Since the primary moral goal is the well-being and survival of species, the pain or death of individual members of the species is of secondary importance. It may be necessary, for example, to manage or

"harvest" an animal species that is overpopulating an area and threatening its own food supply. The death (even if painless) of individual animals in order to insure the continuance of the entire species would be a moral evil in a system of animal liberation ethics.

In addition, there are conceptual problems with this interpretation of an environmental ethic. In a practical sense, the moral consideration of species does not provide direct reasons for the protection of the nonliving environmental background, the natural objects that form the material structure of ecosystems. Environmentalists, for example, seek the preservation of beautiful natural rock formations, free-flowing rivers, and undeveloped wetlands. They seek this preservation, not simply because of the life forms which live in and around these natural areas, but because of some direct interest in the nonliving objects themselves. But this concern for nonliving natural objects cannot be explained by a moral consideration of species.

A more serious problem is the justification of an environmental ethic that focuses on species as the primary object of moral consideration. Why should species count so much? Why should species be so important? Joel Feinberg, for one, discounts species entirely as the proper objects of direct moral concern: "A whole collection, as such, cannot have beliefs, expectations, wants, or desires . . . Individual elephants can have interests, but the species elephant cannot."⁹ For Feinberg, at least, an entity without interests cannot have moral rights or be an object of moral consideration. Now although I am not suggesting agreement with Feinberg's views, he does emphasize the *oddity* of considering a whole species a morally relevant entity. Indeed, this interpretation of an environmental

ethic has rather an *ad hoc* aura to it: since environmentalists desire the protection of rare and endangered species, they create an ethic that considers species in themselves as morally valuable. But on what can this moral value be based? Either a species is important because it fulfills an ecological function in the natural community, in which case the community model of an environmental ethic will explain its preservation; or a species is important because the individual members of the species are valuable, in which case an individualistic model of an environmental ethic will explain the act of preservation.¹⁰ In itself, a species-based environmental ethic seems to be an uneasy, groundless compromise between the broad view that the natural community is the environmentally appropriate moral object and the narrow view that natural individuals are themselves the bearers of moral worth.¹¹

Thus one arrives at the third interpretation of an environmental ethic: an environmental ethic is a system of ethical rules and obligations pertaining to individual natural entities directly. Natural entities have moral value in themselves, and so they must be protected by environmentally correct policies of action. Human deliberative action will be morally evaluated by its relationship to the individual natural entities in the environment. Draining a marsh or damming a river will be judged by the effects produced on the individual entities in these natural areas. The ecosystem or natural community as a whole will be protected because the individuals who make up the community will be protected in themselves. At first glance, this interpretation has much to recommend it. It has a structure similar to traditional moral theories that consider human individuals the primary objects of moral concern. Since natural individuals are being considered, there is no need to

introduce peculiar ontological questions about the interests or desires of collections or communities. Moreover, Leopold suggests an analogy with various historical extensions of moral consideration and rights to groups of human individuals: blacks, women, children, etc.¹² And Christopher Stone has argued that the legal concept of guardianship can be used to provide this moral conception with a substantive content: i.e., the consideration of individual natural entities as the beneficiaries (in themselves) of human action.¹³ In sum, the third interpretation of an environmental ethic considers natural entities in themselves, as individuals, the proper objects of moral concern to whom moral rules and obligations apply. As morally valuable entities they deserve protection and preservation.

Several comments can also be made about this version of an environmental ethic. First, it is clear that this environmental ethic is the most similar to an ethic dealing with the moral status of animals. An animal liberation ethic considers the moral worth of animals in themselves as individuals; this individualistic environmental ethic considers the moral worth of all natural entities. An animal liberation ethic considers as morally relevant certain properties of the animals themselves—e.g., sentience—rather than merely the relationship the animals have to morally "superior" autonomous humans. Animals have intrinsic or inherent value based on some aspect of their existence and not simply an instrumental value for humans. Similarly, an individualistic environmental ethic considers natural entities as inherently valuable because of some objective property they possess in themselves; they are not valuable simply because of their instrumental value to human society and human interests.¹⁴ Thus an environmental ethic conceived on the model of individual rights or moral consideration

for natural objects is most similar to an animal liberation ethic; the two ethical theories have identical formal structures.

But there are problems with this version of an environmental ethic. As with the species-based interpretation of an environmental ethic, the problem of justification proves to be insolvable. If one grants that an environmental ethic must find some objective property of natural entities as the source of intrinsic moral value, then one is hard pressed to discover a coherent and plausible candidate. Clearly, the criterion most often chosen by advocates of an animal liberation ethic, sentience or the ability to feel pleasure and pain, is largely irrelevant to an ethic that considers the moral significance of plants and other natural entities that do not feel pain and pleasure. Kenneth Goodpaster has thus argued for the moral considerability of all living entities, and he makes a powerful case in that he does not argue for the moral equivalence of all such living beings.¹⁵ Nevertheless, a reverence for all life criterion cannot justify an environmental ethic. Even assuming that a non-arbitrary or unbiased scale of moral worth could be developed to show when it was morally acceptable to kill other forms of life (Goodpaster, e.g., postpones this extremely difficult task), the ethical consideration of all living entities does not extend the moral boundaries far enough. An environmental ethic that is true to the principles of environmentalism must be able to explain the moral consideration of nonliving natural entities as well as living ones. An environmental ethic that considers the moral worth of all natural entities is considering rocks, bodies of water, and the shifting sands of a beach to be morally considerable. This moral consideration cannot be based on the moral criterion of life, since these natural entities are not alive. On what, then, can the

moral consideration be based?

It is at this juncture that one begins to question the entire plan of finding a morally relevant property of all natural objects as the basis of an environmental ethic. As even Goodpaster discovers, in a revision of his earlier views, the extension of moral consideration beyond humans reaches a "breaking point" where talk of morally relevant interests and properties seems highly implausible.¹⁶ The breaking point, of course, is the moral consideration of inanimate natural objects. Can rocks or streams be morally considerable? Unless one postulates an ethical doctrine of the sacredness of all nature, there does not seem to be any method of justifying the moral worth of individual nonliving natural entities. But a doctrine of the sacredness of all nature is highly problematic. Does it mean, for example, that disease organisms or disease-carrying insects cannot be exterminated? What about domesticated animals and plants? Do these require an additional moral principle? Basically, the idea that an individual natural nonliving entity has inherent moral worth is too implausible to be seriously considered. Although one may wish to develop a theory that will protect all animals and plants, a moral criterion based on all of natural existence is so broad that it excludes virtually nothing.

The problem with inanimate natural entities forces a return to a community or ecosystemic approach to an environmental ethic. Only if nonliving natural entities are considered as ecologically significant parts of a natural community can they be plausibly judged as morally worthwhile. They do not possess intrinsic or inherent value as such, but as functioning parts of a morally valued natural community. The analysis has thus returned to its starting point, and with disappointing results: all of the

interpretations of an environmental ethic considered so far prove to be problematic.

III

Despite the problems encountered in all three of the interpretations of an environmental ethic, it may be feasible to attempt some kind of compromise or combination of the various alternatives. Perhaps a blending of the differing interpretations will yield an environmental ethic that combines the strong points of each version and avoids the implausibilities and areas of contention and criticism. Therefore, I would like to suggest the following version of an environmental ethic, as an outline of a comprehensive and plausible system of ethics to insure the protection of the natural environment.

A meaningful and practical environmental ethic must be composed of two principles or two kinds of moral consideration. The primary form of moral consideration is the moral regard for the ecosystem or the natural community, as discussed above as the first interpretation of an environmental ethic. This must be the *primary* principle of an environmental ethic because environmental protection means more than just the protection of natural individuals and natural species—it means the protection of complete ecological systems. Environmentalists and wilderness preservationists (for example) are interested in protecting *environments*, i.e., ecological systems and natural communities. The preservation of individual natural entities or natural species in isolation from their natural habitats and communities is at best a last ditch effort to prevent extinction; it cannot be the primary goal of a policy of environmentalism. Thus the preeminent goal of action in a theory of environmental ethics is the

well-being, health, or stability of the ecological community. Moral rules, obligations, and duties, or the moral evaluation of consequences of action, will be developed and determined by a concept of the *ecological good*, i.e., the good for the ecological community as a whole.

Nonetheless, this primary goal of ecosystemic well-being must be augmented by a secondary goal of the protection of natural individuals. This secondary goal will serve to limit the excessive use of the primary principle in cases where it should not apply. What I have in mind are cases such as the rare endangered species that is no longer a functioning part of the natural ecosystem, or even disease organisms such as the smallpox virus that are on the verge of being totally eradicated. If ecosystemic well-being were the *only* principle of moral action, then it would seem permissible to eliminate the disease organisms or to let the endangered species become extinct. But if an environmental ethic has a secondary moral principle which is activated, so to speak, after questions of ecosystemic well-being are decided, then rare and endangered species can be protected despite their irrelevance to ecosystemic health and stability. Thus in cases where the health or welfare of the natural community is not at issue, human action affecting the environment should be judged by its relationship to natural individuals and species. As long as they do not adversely affect the well-being of the natural ecological community, all individuals and species ought to be preserved and protected. This is the second and subsidiary principle of a practical environmental ethic.

At the risk of repeating myself, let me be a bit more specific about the ordering of these two principles. The primary principle must be the moral consideration of natural communities as

a whole, for this is the only method of protecting environmental systems and the inanimate and nonsentient components of these systems. If, on the contrary, the moral consideration of natural individuals was primary, then a coherent and plausible explanation for the protection of inanimate natural objects would have to be given to insure the basic tenets of environmental policy. But it is not at all clear what theory of value could show how inanimate natural entities—stones and streams—are inherently valuable. It seems that only as parts of an ecologically healthy well-functioning community (that is itself valuable) do these inanimate and nonsentient entities become valuable. Moreover, if the consideration of natural individuals was primary, it is not obvious how or why one would protect ecological systems or communities. As long as the individual animals, e.g., were healthy, there would be no need to protect their natural habitats. One could create artificial habitats—parks and preserves—that would maintain the well-being of the individual animals but would not, of course, be consistent with environmentalist principles of preservation. Thus, I have suggested that the moral consideration of ecosystemic communities is the moral principle most compatible with environmental policies; augmenting this principle with a secondary concern for natural individuals—e.g., endangered species of animals—will yield a complete environmental ethic that is plausible and in agreement with environmentalist intuitions.

Although this ordering of two kinds of moral consideration for the environment—i.e., consideration for the natural ecosystemic community and consideration for natural individuals and species—yields a fairly precise practical system of moral action and evaluation, it is not without its hard cases. Perhaps the most intriguing is the case in which the existence of a

particular species (or individual) actually threatens the natural community as a whole. Despite environmentalist beliefs about the preservation of species, the use of the two principles in this type of case requires the elimination of the threatening species. Since the primary principle of an environmental ethic, the primary goal of all action relating to the environment, is the health, stability, and well-being of the entire natural community, the community must be protected from the threat. Of course it is likely that in an actual instance the well-being of the ecosystem could be preserved by transferring the species to a different ecosystem where it would not be harmful, or by controlling the size of the species population; nevertheless, if ecosystemic health or stability requires the elimination of the species, the species must be eliminated. If an environmental ethic permitted the destruction of natural environments, natural ecosystems and communities, it would be meaningless or incoherent.

In sum, then, an environmental ethic should be interpreted as a complex balancing of two forms of moral consideration regarding natural entities and systems. Moral consideration should first be directed toward the natural community or ecosystem as a whole, so that the overall good for the ecosystem is the primary goal of action. But this communal good should be supplemented by a consideration of natural individuals and species, so that in cases where ecosystemic well-being is not an issue, the protection of endangered species or natural individuals can be morally justified. This supplementary or secondary moral consideration of individuals will yield a much richer environmental ethic than the mere consideration of ecosystemic good, and it will help avoid the objections to the first community-based environmental ethic discussed above. Augmented by

a secondary consideration of natural individuals, this theory will be able to explain the protection of rare endangered species that are no longer functioning members of a natural community. It will also help to soften the revolutionary character of an environmental ethic that considers the ecosystemic good superior to the good of human individuals; because of the secondary principle natural individuals (including humans) will not be excluded from direct moral consideration. Thus, the balancing of these two kinds of moral consideration yields the most plausible and practical environmental ethic, an environmental ethic that is essentially in accord with environmentalist intuitions about the protection of the natural environment, and that is reasonable enough to be accepted by human moral agents.

IV

Finally, then, a comment on the relationship between this environmental ethic and an animal liberation ethic. It should be clear that if the primary ethical goal or principle of an environmental ethic is the well-being of the ecosystemic natural community *as a whole*, then the well-being of individual animals in the community will sometimes be sacrificed for the communal good.¹⁷ The problem is that ecosystems function, develop, and survive by means of the life and death struggle of competing natural forces, competing living beings. Humans cannot act to prevent the suffering and death of all animal life and remain true to an *environmental* ethic. Indeed, there may be times when human action to improve the health of the ecosystemic community will require the death, destruction, or suffering of individual animals or animal species. Humans may have to eliminate disease organisms, insects, or even higher animals—rabbits, deer,

or wolves, e.g.—which have overpopulated their natural communities and threaten ecosystemic stability. But an animal liberation ethic holds that the death and suffering of animals is a moral evil, because it violates the moral worth of individual animals. When this death and suffering is a result of human action, even for the sake of ecosystemic well-being, it is a direct violation of the principles of an animal liberation ethic. Thus, as I noted above, an animal liberation ethic and an environmental ethic based on the good of the ecosystemic natural community will tend to be incompatible.

The advocate of an environmental ethic has, I believe, only one method for removing this incompatibility: a revision of the basic structure of an environmental ethic. An environmental ethic can be made compatible with an animal liberation ethic if it is conceived as an ethic primarily concerned with the satisfaction of sentient beings—the higher animals and humans. Natural entities and ecological communities would be preserved, not because of any intrinsic value, but simply because they provide satisfaction or pleasure to sentient beings. But this model of an environmental ethic will not operate as a preserver of environmentalist policies; it makes an environmental ethic compatible with an animal liberation ethic by destroying the essence and the practical application of the environmental ethic. The fact is that the existence of any natural entity or ecological system is only contingently related to the satisfactions of sentient beings. Animals can survive and flourish in habitats that are not their natural homes. Humans, of course, have developed such a multiplicity of artificial enjoyments that there is no real need for the pleasures of the natural world.¹⁸ Now I am not arguing that humans receive no pleasure from the natural environment; my point is that this

pleasure is only contingently related to the existence of the natural environment. If the natural environment is only protected, e.g., because it provides humans with aesthetic and recreational satisfactions, then if human interests in aesthetics and recreational activities change (as they seem to be in this increasingly artificial and technological world) there will be no reason to protect the natural environment.¹⁹ The interests of sentient beings cannot provide a secure basis for environmental policies, and thus they cannot be the primary principle of an environmental ethic. The contingent relationship between the existence of the natural environment and the satisfaction or interests of sentient beings prevents the merger of an animal liberation ethic and an environmental ethic. Because an animal liberation ethic only requires the consideration of sentient life, while an environmental ethic requires the preservation of nonsentient entities and systems as well as sentient life, the two systems are basically incompatible.

However, a number of factors serve to modify this bleak picture. First, the environmental ethic here proposed is not based solely on the good of the ecological community as a whole; there is a secondary principle which bases moral evaluation on the good of individual natural entities, including sentient animals. As long as the welfare of the community is not at stake, individual natural entities—including animals—must be protected. Because I have argued for a balanced set of principles as the structure of an environmental ethic, it is possible to save much of an animal liberation ethic. Individual animals (or species of animals) cannot be harmed, unless there is an overriding and serious need on the part of the entire natural community.

A second factor is the problem of domesticated animals. Advocates of an

animal liberation ethic, of course, seek many practical changes in human action affecting domesticated animals. Now Callicott, for one, finds this concern to be almost incoherent from the perspective of an environmental ethic. Since domesticated livestock are a human artifact, their effects on the natural environment should be judged as any other human artifact.²⁰ Sheep grazing in a meadow, for example, may do as much harm to the natural cycles of the region's plant life as the dumping of toxic chemicals. From Callicott's ecological perspective, the fact that the sheep are animals rather than the instruments of human deliberative action would not justify or excuse the harm done to the natural environment. But I do not think that the advocate of an environmental ethic needs to worry about domesticated animals causing ecological damage. At worst, domesticated animals, *because they are not part of the natural community*, are simply an *irrelevancy* from the standpoint of an environmental ethic. Sheep, for example, do not generally graze in natural wilderness areas, but in pasture land that has already been itself domesticated. Their effect on natural ecological cycles is minimal.²¹ At best, using a two-principle environmental ethic, humans are able to judge the pain and suffering and moral worth of individual domesticated animals as morally significant; as long as questions of environmental health or well-being are not involved, then even domesticated animals can be treated as objects of moral concern.

Finally, it is important to realize that in *practical* terms, a more environmentally appropriate human social policy will greatly benefit animal life. Although from the perspective of ecological theory it may be necessary to sacrifice some animals for the ecological well-being of the natural community, in actual practice more animals are harmed by human actions that

violate ecological principles. More animals are harmed by humans destroying and degrading ecological communities than by humans attempting to improve them. Adopting principles of an environmental ethic should,

in the long run, benefit the lives of animals, for humans will begin to recognize all natural entities as members of a morally relevant natural community.

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Notes

¹ I take as prime examples of an animal liberation ethic the work of Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review/Random House, 1975), and Tom Regan, "The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1975): 181-214.

² Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River* (1949; rpt. New York: Ballantine, 1970), p. 262.

³ J. Baird Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 320.

⁴ Don E. Marietta, Jr., "The Interrelationship of Ecological Science and Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 1 (1979): 197.

⁵ Bryan G. Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Nonhuman Rights," *Environmental Ethics* 4 (1982): 32.

⁶ Callicott, pp. 332-333.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

⁸ Lilly-Marlene Russow, "Why Do Species Matter?" *Environmental Ethics*

3 (1981): 103.

⁹ Joel Feinberg, "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations," in *Philosophy and Environmental Crisis*, ed. William T. Blackstone (Athens, Georgia: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1974), pp. 55-56.

¹⁰ Russow, for example, argues that species are important because of the individuals that comprise them.

¹¹ Space limitations prevent a full discussion of the role of species preservation in a system of environmental ethics. Clearly an environmental ethic must recognize that the extinction of species through natural processes—evolutionary defeat by a more successful competitive species—is a morally acceptable event. An environmental ethic does not require humans to prevent naturally occurring extinctions. But of course in reality most of the endangered species that concern environmentalists have been brought to the edge of extinction by human activity, i.e., by human disruption of natural communities. There is thus a duty to attempt to correct our mistakes and to preserve these victims of negligent human actions in the natural environment.

¹² Leopold, pp. 237-239.

¹³ Christopher D. Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing? Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects* (Los Altos, California: William Kaufmann, 1974), pp. 17-34.

¹⁴ For a discussion of intrinsic value see Tom Regan, "The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981): 30-34, and Evelyn B. Pluhar, "The Justification of an Environmental Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983): 47-61.

¹⁵ Kenneth E. Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable," *The Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 308-325.

¹⁶ Kenneth E. Goodpaster, "From Egoism to Environmentalism," in *Ethics and Problems of the 21st Century*, ed. K. E. Goodpaster and K. M. Sayre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1979), p. 29.

¹⁷ Note again that the well-being of individual animals to be sacrificed includes the well-being of human animals. If an environmental ethic limits human projects and activities, then some humans will undoubtedly suffer discomfort, pain, and even death. There may be less energy to be used for recreation or labor-saving devices in the home. Buildings may be colder in the winter and hotter in the summer. Some humans may even die for the sake of environmental well-being: if the mosquito population is not controlled by pesticides, some humans could die from encephalitis, for example.

¹⁸ Although some small percentage of the human population may yearn, for example, for the "wilderness experience," it is not clear why this recreational pleasure cannot be satisfied in some other way. As Martin Krieger has argued: "Artificial prairies and

wildernesses have been created, and there is no reason to believe that these artificial environments need be unsatisfactory for those who experience them." ("What's Wrong with Plastic Trees?" *Science* 179 (1973): 453.)

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the "human interest" arguments for environmentalism, i.e., the arguments based on the instrumental or utilitarian value of the natural environment, see my "Utilitarianism and Preservation," *Environmental Ethics* 1 (1979): 357-364; Mark Sagoff, "On Preserving the Natural Environment," *Yale Law Journal* 84 (1974): 205-267; Sagoff, "Do We Need a Land Use Ethic?" *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981): 293-308; Laurence H. Tribe, "Ways Not to Think About Plastic Trees," in *When Values Conflict*, ed. Laurence H. Tribe, Corinne S. Schelling, and John Voss (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1976): 61-91; and William Godfrey-Smith, "The Value of Wilderness," *Environmental Ethics* 1 (1979): 309-319.

²⁰ Callicott, p. 330.

²¹ I realize that the issue of domesticated animals and an environmental ethic cannot be adequately discussed in a brief summary paragraph: it requires an entire essay in itself. All that I wish to suggest is that the animal liberationist's concern for the proper treatment of domesticated animals is neither condemned nor condoned in a theory of environmental ethics. The fate of domesticated animals, as such, is not a subject area of environmental ethics. Of course if domesticated animals begin to intrude upon and harm a natural ecological community, then they would be treated like any other human artifact (machines, chemicals, etc.) that harmed the environment. Or if a human began to kill wild natural animals in order to protect his

domesticated sheep he would be violating an environmental ethic, just as if he polluted a stream to "protect" his recreational pleasure in speed-boating. But the vast majority of cases involving domesticated animals—the morality of factory farming, for example—are in a realm of substantive ethics completely removed from

the concerns of an environmental ethic. The question of the compatibility or incompatibility of an environmental ethic and an animal liberation ethic when dealing with the treatment of domesticated animals as such is thus unanswerable and misconceived: these are simply two different subject matters.