

Alastair S. Gunn, "Traditional Ethics and the Moral Status of Animals", *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Summer, 1983, pp. 133-153.

Gunn argues that environmental problems (including the moral status of nonhuman animals) cannot be solved by either utilitarianism or rights of theory; instead he recommends a theory of human stewardship to solve these problems.

The numerous criticisms Gunn makes of utilitarianism, however, do not add up to a decisive refutation, and none of them shows that utilitarianism is of no use in solving environmental problems, or deciding the moral status of animals. He claims, to begin with, that utilitarianism "is unable to ascribe value to nonsentient beings." (p. 135) But utilitarianism as a theory about the right can be distinguished from theories about the good (such as hedonism) which ascribe intrinsic value only to sentient beings. Even though classical utilitarians such as Bentham were also hedonists, it is not logically necessary to saddle utilitarianism with hedonism or any other sentient-centric view of intrinsic value. It is possible for a

utilitarian to ascribe value to nonsentient beings. Furthermore, even if utilitarianism is formulated in such a way that only sentient beings can have value, as Singer does following Bentham, it does not follow that such a theory has no useful application to moral problems about the environment or nonhuman animals. The natural environment would still have instrumental value because it satisfies interests, and this would provide a good reason for preserving it. And animals would definitely have a moral status, as Singer has shown. Gunn does mention Singer's utilitarian approach to animals, and surprisingly enough, he seems to agree with it except for a couple of reservations. He says, "I believe that utilitarianism can present a good case for ceasing to exploit captive animals." (p. 140) So it looks like utilitarianism does establish something important about the moral status of animals after all, namely that it is morally wrong to exploit captive animals.

As it turns out, Gunn's main complaint about utilitarianism is not that it leaves animals with no moral status, but rather that it does not provide us with a satisfactory environmental ethic. The reason is that developers could use it to defend the destruction of natural ecosystems; for example, defenders of the B. Everett Jordan Dam in North Carolina have claimed that it would provide benefits to humans and animals that would outweigh the harm done to the environment and a few wild turkey and deer.

Gunn is right about this: utilitarianism can be used to justify the destruction of some natural ecosystems. But does this mean that utilitarianism must be rejected as an ethical theory? If this destruction really does benefit both humans and animals, if it satisfies important sentient interests, and not just trivial desires, why then it would be morally justifiable. At least this does not conflict with my moral intuitions. It is environmental fanaticism to insist that every and all natural ecosystems should be preserved even where this provides no benefit to sentient beings and even harms them. I do not see, then, that Gunn has given us any good reasons for rejecting utilitarianism as a moral theory about animals and the environment.

As for rights theory, Gunn discusses the view that nonhuman animals have a right to life and a right not to be made to suffer, where these are held by individual animals (not whole species or ecosystems), and are largely negative rights requiring us not to interfere. He makes two main objections: (1) Moral rights require reciprocity: a person cannot have rights without also having duties; but animals do not have duties, and so they cannot have rights. (2) It is impossible to base an environmental ethic on individual rights.

Neither of these objections is convincing. There are plenty of cases where a being can have a right and not have duties, e.g., fetuses, infants, the retarded, the senile, the sick, and so on. If these humans have rights without duties, then why can't animals have similar rights? Gunn's reply is that persons cannot have civil rights such as the right to vote without having duties. But this is just beside the point; the rights at issue are basic rights such as the right to life and the right not to suffer, and not civil rights. Even if animals and marginal humans do not have civil rights, they can still have basic rights.

Another difficulty for Gunn's view is the fact that animals seem to be capable of acting as moral agents, and this suggests that they could have duties and be members of the moral community. Rhesus monkeys, for example, exhibit compassion, and this means that they are capable of moral goodness, even if they are unable to form an intellectual concept of right and wrong.

The second objection is puzzling. Gunn claims that even if individual animals and trees have rights (that is, basic rights such as the right not to be injured or damaged), we would still have no reason for preserving whole species or whole ecosystems because these collections do not have rights, only individuals do. What puzzles me is how one could save individual animals or trees and *not* save species and forests as a result. Maybe a species is not merely a collection of individual animals, but still if one preserves the individual animals and allows them to reproduce, this will result in the species being preserved too.

Finally, let us turn to Gunn's own view of stewardship. This amounts to little more than the traditional

Christian view. (Non-Christians are told that they should act *as if* they were God's stewards.) According to this familiar homocentric doctrine, human beings are superior to all other creatures and have a God-given responsibility to rule over God's creation in His place, that is, humans are supposed to act as stewards or trustees for God, taking care of His creation for Him. But since God's creation is good (Gunn emphasizes this at more than one place) all we need to do is leave it alone. This duty, Gunn says, can be inferred from the Bible: "The Bible is not very specific about this, but certainly the deliberate (or careless) extermination of species, the poisoning of lakes, rivers, and air, the destruction of soil fertility and land stability seem *quite incompatible* with a recognition of our stewardship over God's creation." (p. 152)

But why don't we have a positive duty to reduce suffering of animals (and humans) or to protect their rights? Gunn's answer is quite clear--this is not part of God's plan. He says that God's plan is "certainly

not designed to reduce suffering or to protect rights." (p. 152) So we ought to do nothing to reduce animal suffering--"Mostly we should leave them alone." (p. 150)

It is obvious to me that this approach to suffering is morally objectionable. It would mean that we shouldn't feed domestic animals and pets, we shouldn't treat their infections and diseases, we shouldn't provide them with shelter, we shouldn't set broken limbs, we shouldn't kill injured animals, and so on. And what about humans? Does this mean that we shouldn't treat human diseases, that we should make no attempt to reduce human suffering, since this suffering is part of God's plan? No doubt there are fundamentalist Christians who do not go to doctors or seek medical help, who expect to be healed by God or die, but this is hardly a reasonable view to take, either for humans or animals. If this is what the Christian view comes to, and it does seem to come to this on Gunn's view, then humans and animals are much better off with utilitarianism or rights theory.

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