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CONCENTRIC CIRCLE PLURALISM: A Response to Rolston

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I have always profited from reading the work of Holmes Rolston III and find his review of my book both helpful and stimulating. More than anything else, I see in Rolston's comments a challenge to clarify the meaning and implications of my Concentric Circle Theory and to defend ethical pluralism against the charge that "it is tacitly a confession of ignorance and failure of nerve." Since the Concentric Circle Theory is my form of pluralism, I will attempt to vindicate pluralism in part by showing that my Concentric Circle Theory provides solid guidance and reasonable answers to the specific moral issues that Rolston raises.

I begin by thanking Rolston for pointing out that my Concentric Circle Theory is more a theory of ethics than merely of justice. Especially where non-sentient beings (e.g. plants) and holistic entities (e.g. ecosystems and species) are concerned, the notion of justice seems strained, or metaphorical, at best. And, as Rolston notes, "love, not justice, seems the richer category for the maturing ethic." This suggests to me that I could enrich the



DISCUSSION

Concentric Circle Theory by explicitly including in all the concentric circles consideration of ethical matters outside the domain of justice in the narrow sense.

Rolston worries, however, that the Concentric Circle Theory will in any case bring confusion to our moral deliberations. This is due to the ego-centric reference that the theory employs. Each moral agent is the center of her own set of concentric circles. "Could this mean," Rolston asks, "that at the same event in Earth history ... I operate pulled by positive rights theory while you feel no such pull but operate with utilitarian theory?" I reply in the affirmative, and common sense concurs. Just as my daughters have legal rights to support from me but not from most other people, it is normally assumed that my daughters have positive rights to help from me (e.g. for cosmetic orthodontia or educational benefits above the standard minimum) which most others could justify providing to my daughters only on the basis of a different principle, such as the utilitarian principle. Because relationships among human beings often affect not only the strength of obligations but their underlying rationales, this is the kind of case that the Concentric Circle Theory handles well, especially when love is added to the list of available rationales.

On the Concentric Circle Theory, then, Rolston asks, "Does one have more obligations to endangered grizzlies in one's home state than to elephants in Kenya?" This is a good question. I answer that with animals, as with people, obligations follow from the nature of one's actual and possible relationships. Often the number and complexity of such relationships vary indirectly with the distance between the relata. But this is not always the case. For example, if I were the director of a zoo or an importer of jewelry made in Africa, my actions may have greater bearing on the Kenyan elephants than on the grizzlies of my home state. In that case (all other things being equal) I should conduct myself with greater care concerning the elephants than concerning the grizzlies. If, on the other hand, I have no special ties to either animal, my duties would be greater concerning the grizzlies because I have more opportunity, due to physical and political proximity, to have a positive effect on the grizzlies' welfare.

Another question about the placement of animals on concentric circles concerns the animals' inherent capacities. Rolston reasons, "Since the capacity for experience (the degree to which an animal is a subject-of-a-life) varies widely, one might expect this to affect their locations" on concentric circles. I believe that this is correct and now maintain that although all subjects-of-a-life have negative rights, the strengths of those rights vary with the animals' capacities. Thus, as Rolston suggests, fish have less commanding negative rights than do seals. Rodents are similarly related to chimpanzees, and chimpanzees to people. This represents a change in my view and makes it easier for me to explain why, when push comes to shove, as in the case of Inuit hunting seals, the human way of life may justly take precedence over the lives of the seals.

Rolston is probably correct that I have at certain points in the book been unduly influenced by legal thought. This may be a case in point. Rights in the law are typically (though not always) all or nothing propositions; e.g. one either has the right to vote or one does not, the will is valid or it is not, etc. I now believe that in morality, even where rights are concerned, matters of degree are almost always important. (This is recognized, too, in those parts of the law which are most sensitive to moral considerations. Thus, in the criminal law, for example, we speak of degrees of culpability and of mitigating circumstances.) So I now think negative rights obtain in different degrees of strength, varying with the inherent capacities of different species.

I also believe that all subjects-of-a-life with the same inherent capacities, i.e. of the same species, have the same negative rights, and negative rights of the same strength. Negative rights are in this respect still different, in my view, from positive rights. The pull on me of someone's positive rights varies with the nature of our relationship. I illustrated this earlier. My daughter may be able to claim from me, but certainly not from most other people, the positive right to the provision of cosmetic orthodontia. But because positive rights apply only to members of one species, human beings, they do not vary with the inherent capacities of rights-holders. They vary only with interpersonal relationships. Negative rights do not vary with interpersonal relationship but do vary with the

capacities inherent in typical members of different (subjects-of-a-life) species.

Rolston wonders what I would do about feral goats who were endangering rare plant species on San Clemente Island. My position, as explained in my treatment of what I call Biocentric Individualism, is that individual plants are of only small worth in their own right. However, species, both of plants and of animals, are extremely important. I do not provide separate place for them on the concentric circle, though, because I share the view of Alistaire Gunn¹ and Bryan Norton² that the best approach to species preservation is the preservation of complex ecosystems. Such ecosystems are essential for natural evolution. They have what Rolston nicely terms "systemic value." By thus concentrating on preserving diverse ecosystems, I believe that my model does adequately address issues of endangered species. So, for example, I would recommend removing the feral goats (without killing them, if possible) in order to preserve the diversity of the ecosystem and therewith the endangered plant species.

I now turn to Rolston's skepticism concerning the intellectual legitimacy of any pluralist ethical theory. He fears that such pluralism "is tacitly a confession of ignorance and failure of nerve." The individual judgment that all such theories call for "will often be little more than a euphemism for 'muddling through'."

It seems to me that unless and until we can find a single master principle from which we can *actually derive the particular* moral judgments that we must make in life, some form of pluralism is inevitable. No single master principle that meets these specifications is even so much as under discussion by contemporary philosophers. Utilitarians claim to have a single, worthwhile master principle, but none among them can seriously claim that they can in difficult situations actually derive particular moral judgments from that principle. R.M. Hare, for example, admits candidly that superhuman intellectual abilities are needed for the direct application of utilitarianism. Indirect utilitarianism is in no better shape because equally superhuman abilities are required to derive from the utilitarian principle subsidiary rules, principles and/or rules-of-thumb of sufficient specificity as to enable people reliably to know in difficult cases of conflict

exactly which of the conflicting rules or principles utilitarians are required to follow.

At least for the time being, then, the use of pluralism is inevitable. Martha Nussbaum argues (convincingly, I think) in *The Fragility of Goodness*³ that such pluralism is a permanent feature of the human condition. Be that as it may, we are all currently practicing pluralists of one sort or another. There is some gain in recognizing this fact. If relying upon good judgment, which pluralism requires, is muddling through, as Rolston suggests, at least those who realize that they are practicing pluralists are less muddled than others. Being less muddled, they can choose carefully the form and nature of their pluralism, rather than rely upon unconscious, unexamined, and possibly inconsistent, cultural imperatives.

Allowing that there is some truth in Rolston's characterization of good judgment as "muddling through" does not commit me to the view that pluralist theories are worthless. They explain options to us, thereby mapping the ethical landscape without telling us where to go. Some maps are better and (what is not the same thing) more detailed than others. I believe that the Concentric Circle Theory presented in *Environmental Justice* provides a great deal of helpful guidance, as I hope its use earlier in this short paper has already shown. The Theory's full development requires, however, that I provide much more of what Rolston has so helpfully elicited, *viz.* concrete applications of the theory to situations and conditions that we meet in life.

Notes

¹ Alistaire S. Gunn, "Preserving Rare Species," in Tom Regan, ed., *Earthbound* (New York: Random House, 1984): 289-335.

² Bryan G. Norton, *Why Preserve Natural Variety* (Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 1988).

³ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

