METHODOLOGY IN APPLIED ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS:
Comments on Dombrowski and Finsen

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In preparing these remarks, I have assumed that the individual commentators for the papers by Professors Dombrowski and Finsen would focus on specific details of the arguments, leaving me the luxury (and the responsibility) of making some kind of general comparative remarks. So I will begin with some general comments, and then I will try to show how these general remarks can illuminate some specific problems in both papers.

These two papers represent extremely different methodologies of applied ethics. Professor Dombrowski's paper is an example of what I call a "metaphysical" approach to ethical issues. This kind of argument attempts to draw the "proper" ethical conclusions from a specific metaphysical view of
the universe; in Dombrowski's case, it is a
view that emphasizes or even sanctifies the
"individual" in its various modes as the
basis of all ethical thinking. (Obviously,
other metaphysical positions might be taken
by somebody else.) Professor Finsen's paper,
in contrast, seems to avoid wherever possible
any metaphysical claims. It is a "nuts and
bolts" paper on ethics, almost a practical
casuistry of environmental and animal related
ethical principles. It attempts to show us
that two apparently conflicting ethical prin-
ciples can operate in rough harmony on the
level of practical action. An apparent theo-
retical incompatibility between animal right-
ists and environmental holists dissolves in
the hands-on work of practical environmental
affairs.

Even without looking at these two pa-
pers, my initial bias leans me towards the
practical "nuts and bolts" approach to ap-
plied ethics. After all, applied ethics is
meant to be applied--that is, it is meant to
help us understand and (it is hoped) solve
real problems of human activity in the world.
What I want, and what I think we can develop,
are practical principles of action that, so
to speak, transcend metaphysical positions.
If we are required to hold off on practical
decisions until the metaphysical decisions
have been made (and agreed upon), then we are
in deep trouble: Metaphysical principles are
not the kind of things on which people (espe-
cially philosophers) usually agree. But
sometimes we are lucky when it comes to more
mundane practical ethical principles: many
of these strike us as eminently reasonable,
like face value, despite our uncertainty about
or disagreements about, the metaphysical
underpinnings of the ethical principles. It
is the business of applied ethics, and speci-
fically environmental ethics, to search for
these eminently reasonable principles that
are obviously certain, as simple and as obvi-
ous as the ordinary virtue of truth-telling
and promise-keeping.

My initial bias is only confirmed when I
look more closely at these two papers. Pro-
fessor Finsen's work is an attempt to cut
through a swamp of controversy regarding the
nature of animal rights and environmental
ethics, to transcend the theoretical diffi-
culties or incompatibilities of the opposing
camps and address the specific issues of
practical concern. The real issue here is
the balancing of opposing (or at least dif-
ferent) kinds of value, and this is accom-
plished, it seems to me, in a reasonable
manner. Although I am not entirely convinced
that the theoretical problems have been
solved—that there really is complementarity
and not incompatibility—I am able to put
aside my theoretical reservations and see how
Finsen's view works to alleviate serious
practical problems.

Unfortunately, I cannot say the same
thing about Professor Dombrowski's paper.
Although willing to "bracket" my reservations
about his ontological theory of individuals
and sentence, I find that when I do, I am
not presented with any clear practical prin-
ciples for action. I cannot find the primary
value in Dombrowski's (or is it Hart-
shorne's?) system. For first, there seems to
be a real practical incompatibility between
individuals (in the ordinary sense of animals
and humans) and the "superanimal" individual,
the divine S3. Second, there is an obvious
implication that humans themselves are super-
ior to both animals and systems. These two
problems leave me without any practical guide
to action. When do I value whom is what I
want to know. If S3 is the ultimate entity/
consideration in our obligations, then why
aren't our specific (less than ultimate)
obligations directed towards systems and
collections (species) that will preserve the
divine S3? In short, I just don't get it.
Dombrowski wants to be able to protect every-
body and everything. But this is an ethical
position that simply cannot be defended;
practically, we cannot do everything, please
everybody. Thus—and this is my main point—
Dombrowski's position does not seem to be
worth the detour into a dubious and contro-
versial ontology of individuals. Even if we
buy the Hartshorne/Dombrowski view of real-
ity, we still do not know what to do in the
concrete environmental situation. Only Fin-
sen's precise casuistry of environmental and
animal conflicts can accomplish that practi-
cal task.

More specifically, Dombrowski goes wrong
by overemphasizing sentence as the primary
fact of individual existence. This forces
him to defend the view that all individuals,
even atoms, cells, etc., are sentient, and
that the world/universe as a whole is sen-
tient in some divine, superpersonal way.
Even if we put aside our metaphysical qualms,
we find that the position has unacceptable ethical results. We are left with a thoroughly anthropocentricism: entities are valued and protected to the extent that they resemble human beings or possess mental experiences similar to human beings. This does little good for either animals or the natural environment.

Consider Dombrowski's claim that we must interpret nonhuman nature by analogy with human nature, after all, our own human natures are all that we really know. As a claim about the nature of consciousness, this might be acceptable, but as an ethical claim, I believe it is trivial or dangerous. I could argue that my understanding of other human natures must be based on an analogy with my own white, male, Jewish-American, middle-class experiences, after all, that is all I really experience and know. But if I interpret all experience, all value, from this perspective, I am going to tend to downgrade the experiences of humans different from me, a potentially dangerous view. What really happens is that I attempt to transcend my human individuality and understand other humans as they are; similarly, I can attempt to transcend my humanity and understand other natural entities as they are. As Aldo Leopold wrote over forty years ago, the key to environmental ethics is our ability to "think like a mountain." In deciding what is good for the mountain, I think myself in its place. I can do this with other humans; e.g., I can think like a woman and see that a lifetime sentence of housewifery is a waste of my human potentials. So why can't I do it for other, nonhuman entities?

Also, I think Dombrowski goes wrong when he tries to use aesthetic considerations as the reason to protect holistic systems. This kind of justification will not produce any kind of consensus on problematic environmental issues. The aesthetic beauty of many natural systems (and individuals) is not obvious; indeed, many natural entities and systems are not beautiful, yet we still ought to protect them. Of course, Dombrowski can argue that the divine consciousness S3 considers all natural entities and systems to be beautiful, but we cannot really know that S3 feels that way. Moreover, by claiming that everything is beautiful (for S3) we are really stretching the notion of "beauty" beyond reasonable limits; if everything is beauti-

When we return to Finsen's paper, we find that the problems are on a different level; they involve, as I said earlier, "nuts and bolts" issues. This does not mean that they are not serious; it only means that we can address them, I hope, without an expedition into the realm of metaphysics.

First, I am not sure that Finsen's use of the "rights" view of animal liberation will do the job it is supposed to do, i.e., alleviate the problems of the Benthamite/sentience view. The rights view, it seems to me, is based on some model of sentience or, what is even worse, a more restrictive criterion such as "subject of a continuous life." So we are still faced with the problem that troubles holistic environmentalists: non-sentient beings do not have rights or moral value.

Second, there is an overemphasis on "stability" as being a desired value for

"Environmentalism is now well on its way to becoming the third great wave of redemptive struggle in Western history, the first being Christianity, the second modern socialism. All three movements began with a desire to restore 'a sacred age of the remote past.' For Christians it was Adam and Eve before the Fall; for Marxists it was primitive communism, the original state before private property. For environmentalists it is 'the immaculate continent' before humanity."
environmentalism. After all, a concrete parking lot is relatively stable. Of Leopold's three criteria for moral rightness in the environment (beauty, stability, and integrity), only natural integrity seems to make sense. If we consider a forest that is ravaged by a fire caused by a bolt of lightning, we see a simplified system that results from a loss of stability. Moreover, it sustains a major loss of sentient life. Yet, all this is a result of natural processes, and so I see no real loss of value here. I think that this kind of case reflects the compromise criteria that Finsen is trying to develop. The key to understanding natural environmental value is not in stable environments that tend to produce K-selectors; the key to understanding environmental value lies in the idea of natural change.

Finally, let me say that both views, animal rights individualism and ecohism, continue to have problems with seriously endangered species. Proponents of the former cannot say why individual rare animals are more important than plentiful ones, especially when they are ugly. Holists cannot say why non-functioning species (as most rare ones are) are important at all. I have, therefore, developed a theory (or an excuse) based on the idea of reparations. Human society owes compensation to those survivors of any extinction process begun by humans. If this view is correct, then there would be no reason to prevent naturally occurring extinctions, i.e., extinctions that do not result from human interference in the environment. If the koala bear species eats all the leaves off the eucalyptus trees, thereby dooming both the tree species and itself, then it is simply too bad for the koala bear. They will be extinct, and humanity does not have to feel the least bit guilty.

In conclusion, let me repeat my claim that we are presented here with two different methodologies of applied ethics. The most important issue thus facing us is which approach we will take as we try to solve ethical problems regarding animals and the environment. I vote for examining the resolution of problems in the concrete situation and for postponing metaphysical speculations, however interesting they may be, because they rarely lead to pragmatic solutions.

ANIMAL RIGHTS AND ECOHOLISM ARE NOT COMPATIBLE

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In her admirable paper, Professor Finsen succeeds in clarifying the views of some of the leading ecohists, and she also succeeds in showing that their views are not terribly far from those of the animal rights people. Nevertheless, there are important differences between the philosophy of ecohism and that of animal rights that cannot be minimized. Professor Finsen is too ambitious in supposing that she can supply a theoretical reconciliation of the two positions.

I take it that the essence of Professor Finsen's paper is that those who calls ecohists—for example, Rodman and Leopold—love not any old biotic environment but those that show "integrity, stability and beauty." These are precisely the environments that are particularly kind to the organisms that animal rights proponents favor. As she put it, the ecohist "values the very systems which give rise to the sentient beings valued by