ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND THE EXPANDING PROBLEM OF EVIL

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The problem of evil is that morally gratuitous suffering and destruction is evidence against a benevolent and potent god. Often cases of this evil are restricted to human suffering, but if the moral universe is expanded in the fashion associated with environmental ethics, the scope of morally significant suffering and destruction grows. Consequently, the wider the scope of the moral universe, the problem of evil becomes harder for theists to solve.

There is a deep tension between environmental ethics and religion. Theses such as these are not uncommon. Lynn White Jr., for example, famously criticized Christian theology for being the core viewpoint leading to the current environmental crisis, and he suggested a Franciscan revision of Christian viewpoints, one that takes that there is a divine mandate to care for animals and nature ('The Historic Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' in *Science;* March 10, 1967). My claim, however, is stronger. It is that the moral considerability of animals, groves of trees, and environments and their correlate suffering and destruction is inconsistent with the existence of a good, capable and creative god.

In broad outline, my case will be a convergence of two lines of thinking. First is that environmental ethics has a trajectory of expanding the bounds of morally considerable entities. Humans are certainly entities with moral standing, but environmental ethics drives us to consider the bounds of moral standing more expansively: animals, trees, and ecosystems can be objects of moral concern. Their

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suffering and destruction, then, is a morally bad thing. Second is that the problem of evil is harder to solve when there is a wide variety of entities suffering. These two thoughts converge with the thesis that as we consider the suffering and destruction of animals, trees, and ecosystems as morally significant, we make the problem of evil progressively harder to solve.

1. Environmental ethics

A good deal of work in environmental ethics is an attempt to answer the question: *what beings are worthy of moral concern*? One place to start is with the *anthropocentric* perspective: that humans surely are worthy of moral status, as they have reasons, projects, desires, and so on. They, then, deserve moral respect.

A weak point for anthropocentrism is the consideration we pay to sentient animals, beings capable of feeling pleasure and pain. Puppies, for example, clearly suffer if tortured or if left to starve, and that is moral reason enough not to torture or starve them. And so the moral universe extends beyond humans to entities capable of feeling pain, and thus, anthropocentrism regularly yields to *sentientism*, the view that beings capable of pain are morally considerable.

However, the capacity to feel pain seems too restrictive when we consider the value of a grove of trees or a field of wildflowers. It seems that though they do not *suffer* when chopped or mowed down, a harm has nevertheless been done to them. And the harm is considerable enough for us to want to preserve them and protect them from that harm. From the fact that they are *living things, we see them as having a status.* And so *sentientism* yields to a further expansion of consideration to living things, and so *biocentrism.*

A wilderness, or mountain stream, or a wetland yet seem themselves things worthy of our consideration. It is not just

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the individual animals and plants comprising these places, but them as wholes that seem significant. Ecosystems, as functioning wholes are morally considerable. And so we work to save streams, wetlands, and mountains for their own sake. As such, biocentrism yields to a further extension, *ecocentrism.*

The basic thought here has been to show that there is a demonstrable tendency for environmental ethical thought to broaden the class of moral consideration such that there is a plurality of entities with moral standing beyond the human. And importantly, from this perspective, human goods and purposes must be moderated to respect the moral standing of the other morally considerable beings in the universe. And so we are obliged to mitigate suffering in animals, protect living things from destruction, and care for environments and promote their proper functioning. Those who fail to do so are morally blameworthy.

2. The problem of evil

The problem of evil derives from the inconsistency of the following handful of commitments:

1. There is evil in the world. (Let 'evil' mean morally significant and unjustified suffering and destruction.)
2. God exists, is good, capable, and made the world.
3. If God made the world and is good and capable, then the world would not have evil.

This inconsistent set of commitments is an old problem in philosophy. Epicurus (approvingly paraphrased by David Hume) reasoned as follows:

> Is God is willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing?

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> Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

Given the options as laid out by Epicurus, the only tolerable option is to deny that God exists, and so atheism is regularly a stalking horse for the problem of evil.

The problem of evil originally was cast in the form of Job's travails. A human suffers evil and asks how God could allow such things to happen. And this same frame is used for most versions of the problem: *humans* suffer significant moral harm, and then seek justification. And we use this frame even today, as most attempts to address the problem of evil are spurred by *human* tragedy. It was after 9/11, the Southeast Asian Tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina, and most recently the Haitian earthquake that people openly wrestled with the problem.

Theodicy is the project of solving the problem of evil in a way that preserves God's traditional attributes of supreme goodness and power. The Greek roots of 'theodicy' reflect that: *theos* = god, *dike* = justice – so *God's justice*, or *God's justification*. The overriding project of theodicy is to show that (1) above is false – that there is a justification for human suffering. Theodicy has two dominant programs: the Free Will Defense and Soul-Making theodicy. I will review them briefly.

The free will defense is, in outline, that God allows suffering in the world because the cases of suffering are consequences of the use of our free will. Our actions would not be responsible and we would not be moral agents unless we were free, and so we must be made free in order for us to be moral. And because we can be moral, we can also be immoral. Evil comes with the territory of living with beings possessing moral agency. God's justification for suffering, them, is that we have been made free and suffering comes as part of the package of being with other free beings.

The soul-making defense is, again in outline, that while we are made in the image of God, our travails in this world give us chances to make ourselves into the likeness of

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God. We can develop virtues, know the cost of errors, refine our minds, and hone our finer capacities to tell right from wrong. The evils of the world serve the purpose of being a training ground for the development of souls worthy of being in communion with God.

So the strategy with traditional theodicy is to make the case that, despite our suffering, the world is a place where the best comes out. Either freedom is something worth bearing suffering for, or suffering is a feature of the world that prepares us for (and makes us worthy) of the next.

Note, now, that both arguments are *comparative* in nature, and they are addressed only to *humans.* First, a point about comparative arguments. The structure of traditional theodicy is the following balance of goods: a certain degree of suffering can be justified in light of the goods achieved by allowing it. But, now, this requires that the suffering not exceed what it is compared to. Else the trade-off is a bad one. And so it seems that *the more suffering and destruction* (e.g., a genocide every other month, say), then the balance would be tipped. Is the divine protection of human freedom worth *twenty times* more suffering we face now? We, ourselves, have very little tolerance for the trade-off with our fellow humans. We take freedom away from people we know will hurt others (we lock them up). So freedom most certainly is not an untrumpable good, and so it seems that if it was clear there was a lot more suffering as a consequence of freedom, we should curtail freedom. As a consequence, the more suffering there is in the world, the harder it is to justify God's letting it happen.

Now, a second point about how traditional theodicy is addressed exclusively in terms of *human* values. It is for the sake of *our freedom* and improvement of *our souls* that God allows suffering. These are *human-specific* values.

3. Convergence of the two lines

Now I will bring the two lines of thought together. The first is that environmental ethics broadens our perspective

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of what morally matters. From this perspective, the world is a place that has considerably more morally significant suffering than if only humans mattered. Animals suffer needlessly every day. They are run over by cars, die of thirst when rivers are diverted, and live with horrific deformities as a consequence of pollution. Further, groves of trees and wider ecosystems, too, suffer needless destruction in the form of being plowed under for parking lots, being polluted to the point where they cannot function, and being baked by decades-long droughts caused by climate change. The view of reality only through the lens of human goods blinds us to the harms suffered by the non-human world. Once we see them, we see just how expansive pointless suffering and destruction is in the world.

The second line of thought was that the more morally significant suffering there is in the world, the harder the problem of evil is to solve. If suffering is to be justified by some good accomplished by it, the suffering cannot be morally worse than the goods achieved. Traditional theodicy has been that human freedom and the perfection of human souls are worth the suffering. But this reasoning is entirely out of proportion; and as there is more suffering, the justification for it becomes weaker.

Note, now, the conflict between the two lines of thought. The perspective of environmental ethics attunes us to the moral significance of pointless destruction of non-human entities. There is considerably more suffering in the world than humans experience, but there is no other good to weigh that suffering against. Ecosystems and groves of trees cannot have free will, and so when they are degraded and destroyed, they are harmed in the service of goods they cannot have. That is unjust. Animals do not have souls made to emulate God, and so when they suffer, they are not improved and tooled in God's image. They merely suffer and die, and they do so for goods they cannot have. That is unjust.

The lesson is that environmental ethics makes the problem of evil harder to solve. The moral considerability of

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animals and ecosystems is inconsistent with God's capacity, justice, and in the end, his existence.

Religions are human constructions. They were patched together millennia ago out of native customs, ancient superstitions, and tribal prejudices. Modern religion is the institutionalization of such Bronze-Age mythology. The gods of those mythologies do not exist. They cannot save us in hours of need, and their commandments bind us no more than the commandments of any other fictional entity. Consequently if we have an obligation to preserve the environment, mitigate animal suffering, and respect nature's splendor (which I believe we most certainly do), it cannot be because a god has commanded it. It is because these natural entities are entities that deserve our moral consideration. Animals should live free from harm, trees should grow, and forests should flourish. This is not because a god has said so, but because they are so.

And so we are impelled: if we are to develop a responsible environmental ethics, we must do so from a non-theistic perspective. We must develop a non-theistic environmental ethics wherein we have an obligation to care for animals, living things, and environments for moral reasons independent of any religious dogma.

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