



Summer 1984

The Ethics of Environmental Concern, Robin Attfield

Eugene C. Hargrove

Recommended Citation

Eugene C. Hargrove, *The Ethics of Environmental Concern, Robin Attfield*, 24 Nat. Resources J. 827 (1984).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol24/iss3/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

THE ETHICS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN

ROBIN ATTFIELD

New York: Columbia University Press. 1983. Pp. xi, 220. \$25; \$11 s.c.

This is the first book-length treatment of the issues in environmental ethics by a philosopher who is supportive of the field as a discipline within professional philosophy. It is divided into two parts: one involves the history of ideas behind environmental concern and the other deals more directly with the philosophical and ethical issues that make up the primary subject matter of environmental ethics. Attfield's primary aim in writing this book seems to have been to answer John Passmore's *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, an earlier book-length treatment of environmental ethics by a philosopher who argues that little, if any, change in traditional ethics is required to deal with environmental problems. American readers familiar with Passmore's book will sometimes find Attfield's quarrel with Passmore difficult to follow, because Attfield refers to a second edition of that book, which has never been published in the United States, where Passmore has made a number of concessions, admitting with reluctance that perhaps some aspects of traditional ethics need to be changed after all.

Very nearly half of Attfield's book is devoted to a discussion of whether Western traditions are compatible or incompatible with concern for the environment. The issue arose initially with Lynn White, Jr.'s claim that Christianity was the cause of our ecological crisis. Attfield, however, is more concerned with refuting Passmore's version of the thesis: specifically, that a despotic tradition toward nature is the dominant theme in Christianity and Western civilization, even though there are two minority positions, stewardship and cooperation with nature, which offer "seeds" for some reconstruction of our environmental attitudes. In the end, Attfield's position differs only slightly from Passmore's: stewardship and cooperation with nature are now more dominant than the despotic tradition, a conclusion which is really of only academic importance, since Attfield, along with Passmore, insists that changes in our ethical attitudes toward nature should be as conservative as possible.

Let us hope that Attfield's interpretation of the role of Christianity and Western civilization in shaping environmental attitudes will at last free us from any further debate over the subject. Like Passmore, Attfield provides an extensive array of obscure remarks and positions from Christian and humanistic writers and thinkers. Ultimately, however, the issue

boils down not to who said what, but what emphasis these stray remarks ought to be given in a historical analysis of the Christian and Western influences on contemporary attitudes. Granted, Passmore and Attfield are probably correct in believing that new ethical attitudes toward the environment will be acceptable only if they are compatible with Western traditions, but if the issue is whether or not an environmental ethic will "play in Peoria," it seems very unlikely that citing statements by Basil the Great, St. Bonaventure, or even St. Issac the Syrian will do much to alter the average person's ethical perspective.

In part two Attfield moves on from the history of ideas to applied ethics with a series of chapters on future generations, the population problem, the moral standing of nonhumans, and the problems of what he calls interspecies morality. He then concludes the book with a very short chapter summarizing his positions on pollution, resources, population, preservation, and moral traditions. As in part one, Attfield remains conservative in his approach even when he tries to break new ground.

The first two chapters do not propose any radically new principles and are primarily modifications of positions taken by a number of philosophers in recent years. Like Passmore, Attfield considers the problem of future generations to be a conservation problem—conserving for future people. Attfield invokes the "Lockean standard" suggested by Gregory Kavka: that the present generation has done enough morally if it leaves enough and as good for the next generation. This position is for all practical purposes identical to Passmore's and those he embraces as allies, for example, John Rawls and Martin Golding. Attfield's treatment of the population problem, on the other hand, is a good deal better than Passmore's, if for no other reason than that he is more willing to admit that there is a problem. Here Attfield's approach is utilitarian: he tries to determine whether increases in population should be viewed in terms of average or total happiness. In the end Attfield concludes that total happiness is preferable and he argues that while we must aim at zero-population growth, we should only reach this objective gradually. He is also opposed to any major reduction in the size of the world population of humans, favoring a population as large as the current one provided happiness in the Third World can be improved and the interests of nonhumans are taken into consideration.

In the next two chapters Attfield turns to the problem of concern for the environment, in contrast to the concern for humans expressed in the two previous chapters. Attfield accepts the position of the animal liberationists that all sentient entities—animals—have moral standing and deserve moral consideration. He differs from them in only two important respects: (1) he rejects the idea that any nonhumans qualify for moral rights and (2) following Tom Regan's characterization of what minimally

counts as an environmental ethic, he insists that some nonconscious entities—plants—also have moral standing.

Although Attfield apparently believes that he has produced a position which qualifies as an environmental ethic, few people who are currently in search of one will find his to be compatible with their environmental intuitions. Many may even wonder whether Attfield is really a closet animal liberationist or worse yet a latent human chauvinist. First of all, Attfield rejects the idea that species as such have any moral standing or significance, insisting that whatever value species may have must reside in the individual entities that make up each species. Thus, although the individuals comprising a species may not have any rights, they do have interests which under proper circumstances may figure into moral decision making. Second, he balks at incorporating any holistic elements into his position—specifically discussing and rejecting Aldo Leopold's land ethic and related positions developed by J. Baird Callicott, John Rodman, and Stephen R. L. Clark. To include holistic elements would, Attfield seems to believe, require him to award moral standing to parts of nature which are not distinct, individual entities, a step which he is unwilling to take. According to Attfield, "to represent the biosphere as a moral community serves as an evocative metaphor of the consilience of self-interest and morality, but does not add extra grounds for respect to the 'ecobiocotic components' (p. 158)."

In resolving inter-species conflict Attfield adopts a position held by Donald VanDeVeer called "two-factor egalitarianism." The position is, in fact, similar to Peter Singer's in *Animal Liberation* in which Singer argues that all sentient entities deserve equal consideration, but not equal treatment—entities with superior psychological capacities deserve better treatment than those with lesser ones. According to two-factor egalitarianism, "it is morally permissible, *ceteris paribus*:"

- (1) to sacrifice the interest of A to promote a like interest of B if A lacks significant psychological capacities possessed by B;
- (2) to sacrifice a basic interest of A to promote a serious interest of B if A substantially lacks significant psychological capacities possessed by B, [and]
- (3) to sacrifice the peripheral interest to promote the more basic interest if the beings are similar with respect to psychological capacity (regardless of who possesses the interests).¹

In accordance with this schema human interests will triumph over the interests of animals in nearly all cases and the interests of animals will triumph over those of plants, who, of course, have no generally accepted psychological capacities at all. Plants, nevertheless, do, Attfield insists,

1. P. 173. Quoted from Donald VanDeVeer, "Interspecific Justice," *Inquiry* 22 (1979): 64.

individually have goods of their own, and their interests taken collectively may be enough to tip the balance in their favor now and then.

Attfield is aware that many people will conclude that he has not gone far enough in developing an ethic of environmental concern. As he puts it: “. . . I have arrived at a position at once deeper than the shallow environmental movement and shallower than the mystical depths of the deeper movement of [Arne] Naess' characterization (p. 160).” He believes, nonetheless, that he has provided a position which is compatible with the stewardship tradition he found in part one to be dominant in Christian thought and in Western civilization and which, moreover, is conservative enough to win general acceptance. While he may be correct in his belief that his position is compatible with Christian stewardship, his rejection of moral considerability for species and his refusal to accept any holistic principles is so counterintuitive from an environmentalist standpoint that his views will most certainly be generally regarded as much too conservative to be a major contribution to environmental ethics. Attfield has taken a small step beyond Passmore. Several more need to be taken.

EUGENE C. HARGROVE
Editor, *Environmental Ethics*
University of Georgia