

Do ecosystems have ethical rights?

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Ecosystem Services

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The value of nature: economic, intrinsic, or both?, by Anne W Rea and Wayne R Munns Jr

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DO ECOSYSTEMS HAVE ETHICAL RIGHTS?

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In response to Selck et al. (2017), the question was asked whether ecosystems should have ethical rights, and if so, on what philosophical grounds these rights can be justified. This Learned Discourse addresses this question.

Traditionally, ethics has primarily focused on human beings and how they should act. But since the late 19th century, philosophers have tried to extend the circle of “moral considerability” to entities other than human beings. And with growing environmental awareness, environmental ethics has become an important branch within the broader field of ethics, focusing on the moral aspects of nonhuman nature.

By saying that something is morally considerable (or “has moral standing”), philosophers mean that something is of

intrinsic value. The core debate in environmental philosophy is therefore about what it is that makes something intrinsically valuable, in other words, valuable in and of itself.

In an anthropocentric view, only human beings are intrinsically valuable. All other things, including other forms of life, are valuable only to the extent that they are means or instruments that may serve human beings. Although anthropocentrism denies nonhuman beings or entities explicit ethical rights, it does not mean that human beings have no duties to nonhumans. The 19th-century philosopher Kant (1997), for example, argued that destructive and violent behavior toward nonhumans would go against human nature and human beings have, for that reason, a duty to refrain from destructive and violent behavior to the environment.

Against the traditional anthropocentric view, several non-anthropocentric accounts of value have been developed in the past 2 centuries, all criticizing the anthropocentric starting point that only human beings are deemed intrinsically valuable. What is it, for example, that makes human beings intrinsically valuable and other, nonhuman, animals not valuable?

Some philosophers try to bestow ethical rights on nonhuman animals as well, and they do so by criticizing the basis from which human beings derive their intrinsic value. This basis is often sought in human self-consciousness or rationality. However, this basis can be criticized for being both too demanding and not demanding enough. Some animals appear to have self-consciousness and should thus also be considered intrinsically valuable. Additionally, some human beings, such as newborns or comatose people, are not considered self-conscious, but no one would seriously deny them intrinsic value. Philosophers who recognize animal rights therefore emphasize that there should be some other criterion that makes something intrinsically valuable. One of the most widely defended criteria is the capacity to feel pain or pleasure (Singer 1975). Those animals that have this capacity (i.e., sentient animals) would then also be considered to be intrinsically valuable and, correspondingly, to have ethical rights.

However, extending the scope of moral considerability to nonhuman animals does not result in ecosystems being intrinsically valuable. A second branch of non-anthropocentrism goes a step further and argues that philosophers who try to extend moral considerability to animals actually make a mistake similar to that of the anthropocentric philosophers they criticize. Grounding ethical rights in the capacity to feel pain and pleasure is as arbitrary as grounding them in human self-consciousness. Instead, these environmental philosophers argue that we should grant intrinsic value to ecosystemic wholes. Defenders of this view argue that we should leave behind the individualistic view in which we think only in terms of rights bestowed on individual beings—be they human or not—but instead should extend our ethical sensibility to encompass our relationship to the biotic community (Leopold 1949). In this ecocentric view, ecosystems have ethical rights, but this view is in turn criticized for granting too much moral status to ecosystems because individuals have no value independent of the ecosystems that they are part of. For that reason, this view is sometimes referred to as “environmental fascism” because it could require the killing of human beings for the greater good of ecosystemic integrity (Regan 1983).

This debate in environmental ethics, which dominated the field until the beginning of the 1980s, left a rather unsatisfactory picture for the rights of ecosystems: Either ethical rights can be bestowed only on individual living beings (humans or other animals), or the ethical rights of ecosystems come at the expense of individual living beings. Neither seems constructive.

In the course of the 1980s, a new group of environmental philosophers looked for theories that would work instead of engaging in endless discussions on intrinsic valuation. Recognizing that there is not just one moral framework within which we articulate our thinking about the rights and wrongs of our dealings with nature, these environmental pragmatists argued for moral pluralism. Anthropocentric

and nonanthropocentric arguments are likely to converge in roughly the same environmental policy, given that human beings are embedded in ecological systems and human flourishing is contingent upon the flourishing of those ecological systems (Norton 1995). If anthropocentric arguments are more effective in convincing nonphilosophers and persuading people to change to environmentally friendly behavior, environmental ethicists should resort to these arguments and not look for further nonanthropocentric foundations of ecosystems’ rights.

This overview of some debates in environmental philosophy suggests that the philosophical foundation of ethical rights is on the one hand not trivial, but also that ecosystems are not dependent on being granted ethical rights. From an anthropocentric view, people have duties to act responsibly and make sure not to destroy and deplete ecosystems, even if only as an obligation toward future generations (Kempton et al. 1997). The appeal of environmental pragmatists to persuading people to actually solve environmental problems may in the end better serve our ecosystems’ interests than does the search for intrinsic value.

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THE VALUE OF NATURE: ECONOMIC, INTRINSIC, OR BOTH?

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This Learned Discourse complements Doorn’s (this issue), in which she recounts the history of philosophical and ethical thought concerning the value of ecosystems. She notes that anthropocentrists do not acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature, but points out that environmental pragmatists acknowledge that anthropocentric approaches often lead to positive environmental results that different philosophies can agree on. Here, we argue that changing our paradigm of