

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: WHY DO WE CARE?

P. Aarne Vesilind

AUTHOR: Professor and Chairman, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering; Director, Program in Science, Technology and Human Values, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina 27706.

REFERENCE: *Proceedings of the 1991 Georgia Water Resources Conference*, held March 19 and 20, 1991 at The University of Georgia. Kathryn J. Hatcher, Editor, Institute of Natural Resources, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks the root cause of our environmental ethic; our reverence and caring for non-human life. The anthropocentric form of the environmental ethic is dismissed as hollow and unsatisfactory because it does not explain our deep feelings for the environment. The argument used in this paper starts by noting our ethical concerns for preserving human life, and then by analogy, this concern is related to environmental ethics.

HUMAN LIFE AS A GOOD

Of all the values which we hold dear, the preservation of human life seems to be the most important. And yet we routinely kill people. War is a systematic way to kill, and capital punishment is society's means for retributive justice. How is it then that while we hold the preservation of human life to be a major good, we also consciously and willfully take other people's lives?

Consider the argument that human life is, in every individual person's view, some quantitative good. Each individual has some personal sense of that intrinsic value. We call this quantity that each person places on human life "W".

The value of a human life is not an abstract notion. It becomes important when we have to make the decision to kill or not to kill. This decision can be depicted as a value judgement where a series of conditions might exist which must be weighed in the making of this decision. These conditions can be called "objective attributes" and each such attribute can be assigned a value of "X".

Because every situation where a value-laden decision is to be made concerning human life contains many of these objective attributes, the total value is summed as:

$$T. O. A. L. = \sum_{i=1}^n a_i X_i$$

where TOAL is the total objective attribute level and:

a = 1 if the objective attribute is present in the situation
a = 0 if this objective attribute is absent, and
n = total number of objective attributes in the specific situation

This argument clearly leads to a ratio of value quantities, or a decision function defined as:

$$\text{Decision Function} = \frac{W}{\sum_{i=1}^n a_i X_i}$$

If we are able to calculate the quantity of "W" and " $\sum X$ ", we can calculate the decision function, and if this number for a given value-laden situation is greater than 1.0, then we will choose not to kill. If the decision function is less than one, then the decision will be to kill or to consent to killing.

NON-HUMAN LIFE AS A GOOD

It is not too difficult to establish an analogy between the value of human life and the life of other creatures. Just as we have an inexplicable sense of the value of human life, I believe we also have a sense of the value of the life of other organisms. That is, I want to propose that non-human nature has an intrinsic value by itself and for itself, and that we recognize this value to a greater or lesser extent. Just as we do not need to prove that human life is of value, I suggest that non-human life also has intrinsic value.

Assuming we can indeed consider the possibility of an intrinsic value for non-human life, we might call this quantity "Y", and label it the value of non-human life, analogous to the quantity "W", the value of human life. Because there are many species, each species which enters into our ethical decision making may have different values of "Y".

Continuing the analogy, we also have objective attributes which relate to the specific value-laden condition or situation in which a decision must be made. The taking of a life (whatever the species) must be described in terms of the objective. For example, if I am

cold, I need fuel to burn to stay warm. I may consider cutting down a tree (killing an organism) in order to satisfy my desire to stay warm. If I am hungry, I may cause chickens to be killed in order to satisfy my desire for food. Another desire might be the enjoyment of seeing how many squirrels I can shoot. In these cases the objective attributes are human desires, and we kill non-human life in order to meet these desires.

As before, it is useful to assign a value "Z" to each of these objective attributes. Any given value-laden situation may have numerous objective attributes, so the values of "Z" are summed as before, yielding a ratio:

$$\text{Decision Function} = \frac{Y}{\sum_{i=1}^n a_i Z_i}$$

The assumption is that it is possible to quantify these terms and to calculate the value of this decision function, and use it to make value-laden decisions where nature is involved.

The difficulty in this approach, of course, is that although we might agree on the sum of the objective attribute ("Z") terms, we would not be expected to agree on the value of nature ("Y"). This explains why scientific information alone will not produce agreement among various concerned parties regarding developments impacting nature. We might all agree on the "Z"s, but it's our "Y"s that are different. For some people the decision function for a flood control reservoir will be greater than one, and others will calculate it as less than one. People will generally not argue about the sum of the "Z"s. It's their "Y"s that are different, and no amount of objective data or subjective argument will cause people to change their minds.

This argument does not, of course, explain why there is an environmental ethic; why do we care. It does, however, begin to explain why we all perceive the environmental ethic differently. That recognition is perhaps the first step in the formulation of a more comprehensive and universally acceptable environmental ethic.