Introduction

The Ethics of Environmental Concern, though published in 1983, was mostly composed two years earlier, final touches being added in 1982. Since then, public awareness has increasingly been focused on growing problems such as the greenhouse effect, acid rain, holes in the ozone layer and the destruction of rainforests. Awareness has also increased of the impact on the Third World, as well as on nonhuman species, of pollution, deforestation, overfishing and the growth of deserts. Recently there has been a sudden realization of the way that Eastern Europe too is afflicted with ‘ecological disaster areas’.¹

Since those years, there has also been published a considerable number of philosophical essays, collections and monographs in environmental philosophy and ethics, and in cognate subjects such as the philosophy of animal welfare, the environmental bearing of theology and the history of environmental ideas, not to mention countless works on scientific ecology, greener processes of production and consumption, environmental planning and green politics. While it is impossible to take account here of these further fields, mention can be made of leading philosophical monographs and of a more recent work of mine in the area of ethical theory. A chapter has also been added in this edition which reviews some of the more recent work in environmental philosophy and the cognate subjects just mentioned, including some of the reviews of the first edition. It also depicts important recent work on environmental decision making, which some readers may find at least as important as the issues of high theory now to be discussed.²

It is sometimes asked what are the credentials and the status of remarks and claims about, for example, the intrinsic value of an animal’s flourishing or about our responsibility not to subvert the life-support systems of future generations. While I made no secret in the first edition of my presuppositions about all this, one foreseeable complaint was that (for the most part) I did not argue for them there.³
Despite my own cognitivist and naturalist views, acknowledged at page 89 below, I also expressed a willingness there to seek the agreement, in matters of normative ethics and its applications, of people with quite different meta-ethical positions, except where they undermine normative claims in general (as would, for example, instrumentalist accounts of value-language: see page 160). It is another aim of this Introduction to survey some of the meta-ethical positions put forward in recent works of environmental philosophy, though I shall not (for reasons to be explained) be presenting a full-dress defence of my own views here.

The view that no single normative theory is adequate to environmental issues has been put forward by Christopher Stone in *Earth and Other Ethics*, subtitled ‘The Case for Moral Pluralism’. Stone favours the application of diverse and unrelated principles to different areas of life and of decision making, for example, environmental issues, family issues and issues of social relations. His version of pluralism is thus quite distinct from the pluralistic respect and toleration appropriate to a multicultural society; each agent is encouraged to harbour a plurality of principles within her own head, and to cope with conflicts between them as best she may. A matching meta-ethic has been propounded by Andrew Brennan in *Thinking About Nature: An Investigation of Nature, Value and Ecology*; Brennan calls his position ‘polymorphism’ and advocates acceptance of a plurality of conflicting metaphysical and valuational frameworks, and the relativity of value-claims to one or more such frameworks. As Gary Varner has recognised, positions such as Stone’s represent a ‘fundamental ethical challenge’ to environmental ethics, and one with which Varner seems to sympathise; for most work in the field assumes (monistically) that principles and judgments may be found which are (in a nonrelativistic sense) rationally preferable to others, and this the pluralists now dispute. A fourth defence of such pluralism seems to be present in Peter Wenz’s *Environmental Justice*. Wenz defines the pluralist position he favours as follows: ‘A theory is pluralistic when it contains a variety of principles that cannot be reduced to or derived from a single master-principle’. Wenz, however, urges the modifying and blending of a variety of conflicting principles of justice, and may thus be in favour of reconciling and prioritising principles in such a way as tacitly to endorse after all what he appears to oppose, a monistic normative system.

J. Baird Callicott has well criticised such pluralism, although he may sometimes detect it where it is not to be found. Thus he points out that all such views are liable to generate hopelessly contradictory decisions. They also undermine any serious possibility of consistency
on the part of agents who adhere to such a position. It might be added that (at least in the form which accepts the equal validity of diverse perspectives) they are all self-undermining; everyone who accepts such pluralism would have to grant that there could be an equally valid perspective which requires rejecting it. This does not, of course, establish the correctness of monism, let alone of any particular monistic ethic; but it does suggest that anyone who takes any principle seriously is committed thereby to monism and to there being an ethic suited to monistic claims. Further, as Callicott goes on to point out, since pluralism offers no rational basis for resolving ethical conflicts, its adherents are likely, when pressed, to resort to the principle most in line with self-interest.  

It becomes all the more important to discover whether any one meta-ethical position is rationally superior to the other candidates (the issue to be considered next); and the same applies to positions in normative ethics (an issue to be addressed thereafter). Now Callicott’s own view, what he calls ‘the Hume-Darwin-Leopold line of social, humane and environmental ethics’, understands our moral sentiments as the products of evolution.  

Granted that human beings have evolved, this much is hardly controversial. Although it may not settle the content of ethics to the extent that Callicott may suppose (when he selects the views of Hume, Adam Smith, Darwin and Leopold, and prefers them to those of Kant, Bentham, Mill and Regan), it certainly shows that there are limits to the range to viable ethical systems. Callicott seems to have abandoned the emotivism with which he once toyed but does seem to maintain that intrinsic value is projected by human subjects onto objects by which they are suitably excited or otherwise affected. Callicott’s meta-ethical views, however, have themselves incurred criticism, not least from the leading environmental ethicist, Holmes Rolston, and also from the nondualist philosopher Michael Zimmerman.  

Rolston calls this position ‘the theory of anthropogenic intrinsic value’. While he accepts that this theory is not egoistic or anthropocentric, he defends the contrasting view that natural objects (or some of them) are of value in themselves whether or not any human subject ever values them, will value them or even would value them. Only such a theory, he holds, is authentically a theory of intrinsic value, as opposed to theories such as Callicott’s, in which the value does not exist unless a human being will or would confer it. While Rolston’s sense of ‘having value’ is not entirely clear, what he may well mean is ‘supplying interpersonal reasons (whether instrumental or intrinsic) for being fostered, promoted or preserved’; if so, his claim that in-
trinsic value does not wait upon human conferment is surely a cogent one. Rolston goes on to claim that the anthropogenic account of intrinsic value ‘is a strained saving of what is really an inadequate paradigm, that of the subjectivity of value conferral’. It is simpler to hold that ‘some values are objectively there – discovered, not generated’, and that a theory such as his own, of autonomous intrinsic value, can itself value the human appreciation of such independent value, without committing ‘a fallacy of the misplaced location of values’. Similar comments, I suggest, are in place about Robert Elliot’s theory of value, which makes value relative to one or other human valuational framework.

Zimmerman’s criticism of Callicott is also important. For, while the above critique of subjectivist theories of value should stand, Callicott at one stage appeared to move beyond them, claiming that quantum physics requires the distinction between subjects and objects to be discarded, and that a relational account of value, involving reference both to persons and to valued objects, should replace subjectivist theories. To this Zimmerman replies that many interpretations of quantum physics do not require the distinction between subjects and objects to be discarded at all, and that in any case quantum physics alone proves insufficient to commit its practitioners to a rejection of philosophical dualism. Despite Zimmerman’s own advocacy of nondualism and his related sympathy for the aims of Callicott’s revised account of value, his criticisms suffice to show that talk of subjects and objects remains coherent, quantum physics notwithstanding, and that the above debate about subjectivist and objectivist accounts of value retains its point and its significance accordingly. Nor, I should add, can it be sidestepped by advocacy of an enlarged concept of the self, expanded to include nature in its entirety. Even if this enlarged concept were coherent (but what sense can be made of ‘I’ where nothing could count as ‘you’, ‘she’ or ‘he’?), a coherent account would still be needed of the nature of good reasons for action on the part of (old-style) agents or selves.

A number of questions remain unanswered about meta-ethical objectivism (the kind of position upheld by Rolston and, rather differently, by myself). How may the making of truth claims in matters of values be vindicated? How can any such claims amount to knowledge? Do such claims fall foul of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’, and how, in any case, is it possible to move from facts to values? These are highly important questions, which deserve a much fuller discussion than is appropriate to an introduction. They are also issues which I have tackled, directly or indirectly, in the final three chapters of A Theory of Value.
and Obligation, and my responses to these questions (and to others) are there to be found; objectivity and ethical knowledge are discussed in chapter 10, relativism in chapter 11, and ‘the naturalistic fallacy’ and naturalism in chapter 12 (by a route rather different from that of Rolston’s essays in Philosophy Gone Wild and of his discussion of this ‘fallacy’ in chapter 6 of Environmental Ethics). Similarly, chapter 1 there discusses the scope of moral standing (and thus my views about the bearing of meta-ethics on the limits of such standing, asked about by Elliot; also the concept of intrinsic value is defended in chapter 2, and a theory of its application is elaborated in chapters 3–5. My own position is (to put matters technically) cognitivist and naturalist; certain values are necessarily related to certain kinds of fact and can thus be known, while there is also a necessary connection between value and obligations, of which knowledge is also sometimes possible. Intrinsic value (in the sense supplied above) turns out to be the pivotal concept; if nothing has such value, then there are no reasons for action at all, and no obligations either. Knowledge of intrinsic value is what makes it possible to discover which courses of action are desirable and which are obligatory.

Some questions about normative ethics also arise. Here Callicott’s most recent work attempts to bring together again animal welfare ethics and the kind of holistic environmental ethics whose warfare he depicted in ‘Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair’. Having been persuaded by Mary Midgley’s excellent book Animals and Why They Matter that domestic animals have always formed part of (otherwise) human communities, Callicott attempts to reconcile obligations in their regard with obligations to human groups (such as one’s family) and with environmental obligations, on the basis of the Leopoldian position that obligations arise within communities, and that communities can now be understood as including the biotic community. Callicott suggests that Leopoldians need not hold that environmental obligations override social obligations arising from communities in the more traditional sense. Indeed, obligations to family (Callicott holds) ‘come before obligations to more remotely related human beings’. Peter Singer’s view that it might be obligatory to impoverish one’s children to prevent starvation in another continent is flatly denied. But preventing human starvation takes precedence over environmental obligations, as also does protecting domestic animals from wild ones.

Compared with Callicott’s earlier views, the social ethic here is a strikingly conventional one. But it suffers from failure to explain why conventional beliefs about obligation should be accepted as definitive. (What is so morally special about family ties as to justify letting
strangers starve?) In this connection Peter Singer, who has argued cogently for a much more open and egalitarian ethic, is berated for advocating nothing but an egoism amended by abstract principle, and for ignoring sympathy as a fundamental motivation, as if he had never written *The Expanding Circle.* Further problems for such a social ethic are mentioned below at pages 93f and 97, while at pages 157f the limitations of regarding the biosphere as a community are remarked, and in chapter 9 Singer's equal interests principle is interpreted and defended. What is commendable in Callicott's new approach is the attempt to reach a unified theory of obligations relating to humanity, nonhuman animals and the environment. Unfortunately he supplies no rational basis either for identifying the nature and limits of our various obligations or for determining priorities among them.

Some of the alternative proposals for a satisfactory normative ethic are discussed below, not least in the Review of Recent Literature. Unlike Callicott, some of those who advocate an enlarged concept of the self believe that its application will replace the need for an ethic altogether; my grounds for rejecting this position, given above, are supplemented there. So too are the difficulties for the biospherical egalitarianism which used to be favoured by Deep Ecologists (also discussed in chapters 9 and 10 below), and also for the (rather different) biocentric egalitarianism of Paul Taylor.

Others make sturdier attempts at integrating the obligations just mentioned. Some (such as Tom Regan in *The Case for Animal Rights*) rely for the basis of their ethic on rights, a concept argued below not to be capable of settling priorities between rights (167f), and plausibly incapable of coping with obligations with regard either to future generations or to nonhuman species. By locating value and rights in "subjects-of-a-life" only, Regan seems now to have rejected the moral standing of nonconscious living creatures, argued for in chapter 8 below, and in the first chapter of *A Theory of Value and Obligation.* For the reasons given there, I continue to hold that a wider account of the scope of moral standing should be accepted. And parallel remarks are in place, despite the much greater rational resources of Peter Singer's consequentialism, about his restriction of moral standing to sentient creatures. (Such sentientism is further discussed in the Review of Recent Literature.)

By contrast Rolston (in his book *Environmental Ethics*) appeals to a much wider range of values – too wide, perhaps, granted his purported discovery of 'systemic value' as a third kind alongside value of the intrinsic and instrumental sorts. But Rolston appears to adopt more than one overall position. At one stage (chapter 2) he seems to adopt
one ethic for social dealings and another for dealings with wild nature; yet the culture/nature distinction cannot be assumed always to warrant differential treatment of otherwise similar creatures. Later in chapter 7 a more integrated axiological model (and a related decision procedure) are presented. The derivative principles elaborated here are mostly admirable, as is the incorporation within the axiological model of the importance of values which cannot be quantified as well as of values which can. The problem, however, lies in the effective absence of justifications for the priorities between the values adopted in the model, for the inclusion of some of these values in the first place, and for deriving these principles from these values. (These matters are further discussed in two hitherto unpublished papers of mine.34)

More recently, Eugene C. Hargrove’s Foundations of Environmental Ethics presents an anthropocentric case for the preservation of nature on aesthetic grounds. This work is full of fascinating (if occasionally erratic) insights, about, for example, the impact of the history of philosophy on preservationist attitudes. While I do not accept the intrinsic value of beauty or, again, the beauty of everything natural, I find much of value in Hargrove’s aesthetic case (a case which has till now received insufficient attention).35 Yet the value-theory is too narrow, and insufficiently integrated with any defensible social ethic at that, to meet the requirements of normative ethics. (Hargrove’s historical overviews and their current bearing are appraised in two forthcoming essays.36)

What is needed is a theory which defensibly locates intrinsic value (including relative intrinsic value), and is thus able to underpin the prioritising of principles. This is what is attempted in chapters 3 to 5 of A Theory of Value and Obligation. On such a basis, principles of rightness and of obligation then need to be elaborated and defended (something I attempt there in chapters 6 and 7), and to be tested in the areas which traditionally pose the greatest problems for theories of the kind adopted (the consequentialist kind: this I have attempted in chapter 8, which concerns justice, and chapter 9, which concerns population ethics). Intrinsic value is located in the development (up to the level of the ability to exercise them) of the essential capacities (as there defined) of the affected creatures, while relative intrinsic value is expounded in terms of the role of different states, actions and experiences in the life of affected creatures, and of the complexity of the capacities which may be at stake. It is further argued that actions are right which maximise intrinsic value, or which comply with a rule or practice which does this (or would do this); and that such actions are obligatory where a serious difference stands to be made to the value of outcomes. This,
however, is as much a caricature as a summary of the case presented; it is included here to show how (and where) the positions of chapters 6 to 9 below have been developed. Beyond this, the interested reader should be referred to that work, not as the definitive solution of all the problems, but as the best attempted solution, as far as its author is able to judge.

Important as ethical theory is, contemporary problems call for more than theory if they are to be solved, and for more than personal re-orientation or commitment too. Solutions will need to be coordinated solutions; and thus political and often international action and policies are involved. A little is said about this in the Review of Recent Literature, supplementing what had already been said in chapter 10. Lest, however, anyone should needlessly overlook it, the very great wisdom and positive practicality of *Our Common Future* (the ‘Brundtland Report’) should at once be drawn to attention.\(^{37}\) Despite the views of its critics,\(^{38}\) the recommendations of this report should be commended to all governments and bodies wielding international power with a view to early implementation, as being, in practice, the best hope for a just and sustainable global society. The fact that these proposals are also more or less in harmony with the axiological and ethical theories of this book is, by comparison, but a minor commendation.

NOTES

2 See Robin Attfield and Katharine Dell (eds), *Values, Conflict and the Environment*, Oxford: Ian Ramsey Centre, Oxford and Centre for Applied Ethics, Cardiff, 1989. (Copies of this report of the environmental ethics working party of the Ian Ramsey Centre are available from the Principal’s Secretary, Westminster College, North Hinksey, Oxford, OX2 9AT.)


11 Ibid., pp. 120–24.

12 Ibid., p. 124.


19 Elliot’s theory emerges at pp. 502f of his Critical notice (see note 3 above), and also in ‘Meta-Ethics and Environmental Ethics’, *Metaphilosophy*. 16, 1985, 103–17. For a further discussion of subjectivism and relativism, see *A Theory of Value and Obligation*, chapter 11.


21 For details of this book, see note 17 above.


23 Elliot, Critical notice of *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*, p. 507.


