The Ethics of Environmental Concern

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A Review of Recent Literature

Ecological problems and social attitudes (chapters 1 and 5)

The reality of worldwide ecological problems is by now beyond dispute, with daily news reports of the greenhouse effect, holes in the ozone layer, radioactive emissions, acid rain, and polluted rivers, seas and oceans.

Some of the most striking disclosures since the first edition of this work was published have concerned the widespread pollution in Eastern Europe, and particularly in Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. These disclosures cast further doubt on the theories that ascribe ecological problems to population growth, to affluence, or indeed to capitalism. Nor is it plausible that high technology is usually to blame (much of the emissions being from antiquated technology). Rapid industrialisation is, perhaps, more to the point, together with the attitudes of the erstwhile authorities. In the terms of this book, these attitudes had little to do with Christianity or Judaism, and rather more to do with belief in the inevitability of material progress. Yet, as is argued at pages 83f above, this is no reason to abandon all belief in progress or in the possibility of finding rational solutions to our problems. (Some of the diagnoses of the first edition will soon be available in USSR when Progress Publishers issue a translation of chapters 2, 5 and 10 above.)

About the possibility of collective, democratically controlled national and international action which would make selective use of science and technology to resolve or alleviate the problems, much can be learned from H. J. McCloskey, *Ecological Ethics and Politics*, although, to say the least, very severe constraints on market economies would be required. On the nature of the problems themselves, however, McCloskey contributes most through his advocacy of clarity in
the use of concepts such as ‘resources’ and ‘overpopulation’; as Robert Elliot’s critical notice in Australasian Journal of Philosophy points out,² his tendency to side with technological optimists, and thus to underestimate the extent of the problems, needs to be balanced, in matters of risk assessment, with the caution advocated by Robert E. Goodin in ‘Ethical Principles for Environmental Protection’.³ Some of the themes of an earlier version of Goodin’s essay are discussed above in chapter 6. (Goodin’s views are further developed in a work on ethical theory which is substantially in harmony with the present one, Protecting the Vulnerable.⁴) McCloskey’s call for clarity about the concepts of ‘resources’ and ‘overpopulation’ is echoed by David Pepper in The Roots of Modern Environmentalism;⁵ Pepper adds a sophisticated Marxist critique of environmentalism and of ecotopias, too relativist, perhaps, about values, but valuable itself for its critiques not only of ecocommunism and ecofascism but also of liberalism.

Different ethical perspectives, certainly, give rise to different perceptions of the nature of the problems, as is argued in chapter 1. Thus his more recent writings make it clear (despite the passage about him at page 3 above) that Arne Naess, the founder of the Deep Ecology movement, does regard the current global level of the human population as a threat to other species, and thus one of the causes of the problems. (See e.g. Principle 4 of the Basic Principles of the Deep Ecology Platform, set out at page 14 of ‘The Deep Ecology Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects’.⁶) Some grounds for a different view are presented in chapter 7 above. If, as argued there, overpopulation is impending rather than actual, measures should certainly be considered to introduce population control, but not specifically to reduce the number of people to below current levels. Naess’s ideas can be found more fully in his Ecology, Community and Lifestyle.⁷

Some reviewers regarded the discussion of the causal theories in chapter 1 as ‘inconclusive’, as no single theory was accepted without qualification (though some, such as Elliot, regarded this as a merit). Economic growth, for example, was regarded as no more than part of the explanation (p. 17); such explanations have to be supplemented, I maintain, by reference to attitudes. But the attitudes of Judaism and Christianity do not turn out to account for the problems (see chapters 2 to 4); the troublesome attitudes (as the more alert reviewers noticed) are rather found in belief in perennial material progress (p. 83), its rightness and its inevitability. To this I should wish to add the crucial role of the world system of economic relations and power relations, as depicted (for example) by Pepper and also in the Brundtland Report,
Our Common Future. Such reports underline what several reviewers (and McCloskey too) have urged, the indispensable need for democratic national and international political solutions.

The Judaeo-Christian heritage and the stewardship tradition (chapters 2–4)

These issues have recently been tackled by the leading Protestant theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, in God and Creation. According to Moltmann, what accounts for the rise of modern scientific and technological civilisation is not so much the biblical world view nor the economic, social and political circumstances of the early modern period, as the Renaissance belief in God’s almighty power and the attempts of humanity (through the persons of Bacon and Descartes) to match it. Critics of the Judaeo-Christian tradition misunderstand the biblical passages about dominion, which concern rather ‘the protective work of a gardener’ than predatory exploitation, and which are not anthropocentric but theocentric. Humanity, even as the image of God, with a special position within creation, still remains ‘a member of the community of creation’ (p. 31), and, significantly, the God in whose image people are made is the creator and preserver of the world (p. 29). As Henry Vaughan, living in the seventeenth century, recognised (in a poem about Romans 8), the rest of creation awaits the manifestation of the sons of God no less than does humanity (p. 40). Clearly I have no quarrel with these interpretations, exaggerated as the role ascribed to Bacon and Descartes may be held to be.

Some parallel sentiments from an Orthodox standpoint are expressed by Paulos Gregorios in The Human Presence. Gregorios points out that, for Maximus the Confessor, the ‘decisively towering figure’ of the Byzantine tradition (p. 73), man (sic) is a mediator between God and the cosmos. Gregorios stresses that, in place of a posture of domination, humanity needs a ‘reverent-receptive’ attitude to nature, responsive to its mystery; he finds examples of this attitude in thinkers of all ‘climes and cultures’ (p. 86), and not least in the Catholic poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Without this attitude, ‘replacing the concept of domination with the concept of stewardship will not get us very far’ (p. 84); nevertheless the kind of mysticism which advocates a ‘return to nature’ is to be rejected, in favour of a posture which combines the attitudes of mastery and mystery (p. 87). While there may be doubts about the consistency of all this, it is not difficult to sympathise with much of Gregorios’ overall position.

More recently the erstwhile muteness of the voice of the Catholic
church on the deepening ecological crisis has been challenged by Sean McDonagh in *To Care for the Earth*.\(^{11}\) McDonagh urges the need to move away from a theology concerned exclusively with human salvation to a theology of creation which would return to and develop ‘the holistic creation theology of Paul, Benedict, Francis, Hildegarde of Bingen, Meister Eckhart and Thomas Aquinas’ (p. 108), pressing into service the evolutionary insights of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Besides surveying the ‘Bright and Dark Sides of the Christian Response’ (commendably introducing into the literature therewith the celebration of the natural world of Hildegard of Bingen), McDonagh elicits celebrations of nature in Christian sacraments and also in non-Christian religions, and commends, as emanating from the proposed new theology, solutions including nuclear disarmament, the United Nations World Charter for Nature\(^{12}\) and, in nonexploitative forms, birth control. Here, then, the religious seeds of an ecological ethic have been nourished (albeit in a rhetorical and semipopular form) along lines which many Catholics are increasingly prepared to take seriously.

Attitudes to nature in the Judaeo-Christian tradition are also surveyed by Arthur Peacocke and Peter Hodgson in chapter 7 of *Values, Conflict and the Environment*.\(^{13}\) Peacocke and Hodgson claim that Christianity satisfies several of the criteria for a religious model that facilitates ecological decision making which are propounded by Don Marietta at page 154 of ‘Religious Models and Ecological Decision-Making’.\(^{14}\) In the following chapters the attitudes of Secular Humanism and of Environmentalism are depicted by me, and those of Marxism by Andrew Belsey. A secular version of the ethic of stewardship is presented by Robert Goodin at pp. 183ff of *Protecting the Vulnerable*.\(^{15}\) Meanwhile an account of Christian history somewhat less sympathetic than mine is presented by Andrew Linzey in *Christianity and the Rights of Animals*,\(^{16}\) Linzey also urges a recognition of animal rights on biblical grounds. Since then, the unfavourable attitude to wilderness and wild creatures often ascribed to early monasticism has been ably contested by Susan Power Bratton in ‘The Original Desert Solitaire: Early Christian Monasticism and Wilderness’, in *Environmental Ethics*.\(^{17}\)

Since *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* appeared, the claims about Christian humanitarianism and the stewardship tradition (of chapter 3) have been substantially vindicated in the work of the historian Keith Thomas. Thomas’ *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility*,\(^{18}\) as well as stressing the characteristic anthropocentrism of sixteenth-century English practice, takes to task John Passmore and Peter Singer for denying that Christians in the centuries prior to Montaigne ever regarded cruelty to animals as wrong in
itself, and for suggesting that humanitarian attitudes were pioneered mainly by sceptics, being adopted by Christians only as an afterthought. Thomas' impressive array of evidence shows (among other things) that such judgements are to be found throughout the Christian centuries, and that there was a constant rationale underlying the preaching and (later) the pamphleteering against cruelty to animals from *Dives and Lazarus* (ca. 1400) right through to recent times. Similar points are in place in reply to Michael Zimmerman's article 'The Paradox of Naturalism' in *The Deep Ecologist*; by contrast, Zimmerman's more recent work ('Quantum Theory, Intrinsic Value and Panentheism', in *Environmental Ethics*) reflects a sympathetic appreciation of Christian panentheism. The debate about Christian attitudes to nature and the fitness of Christian theology to cope with environmental issues is continued in Eugene Hargrove's collection *Religion and Environmental Crisis*.

Belief in humanity as the image of God (stressed, for example, by Moltmann) is, however, expressly rejected by James Rachels, who would doubtless also reject belief in the distinctive mediating role of humanity (stressed by Gregorios). In *Created from Animals* (subtitled 'The Moral Implications of Darwinism') Rachels argues that Darwinism undermines both the design argument and the theistic belief in human distinctiveness; the speciesism of traditional morality lacks tenable foundations, and should be replaced by a more egalitarian ethic (as, in fact, McDonagh would agree: see p. 203). Rachels' ethical stance is to be applauded. But it is less clear that the design argument is overthrown by Darwinism; for an argument to the contrary see my earlier work *God and the Secular*, chapter 6. Nor is it clear that the 'image of God' doctrine must be abandoned, in view of human moral capacities and responsibilities. (Extraterrestrials with like capacities and responsibilities, it should be granted, would fall under the same doctrine.)

Meanwhile supporters of the Deep Ecology movement, such as Warwick Fox (in *Approaching Deep Ecology: A Response to Richard Sylvan's Critique of Deep Ecology*), have been contending that what is needed is identification with nature and the biosphere. Where identification simply involves concern for nature (etc.), this is an uncontroversial claim, though one which leaves issues of priorities unresolved. But if one of the more usual senses of 'identification' is intended, then, as Peter Reed has argued, a sense of awe at nature's otherness could equally well foster appropriate actions and policies. Naess's reply shows that awe and identification can be combined, but not that awe invariably involves identification, and could not have a role of its own.
Some shrewd criticisms of the kind of arguments deployed by Fox from the new physics in favour of an ethical paradigm shift are made by Eric Matthews in ‘The Metaphysics of Environmentalism’, and deserve attention despite Matthews’ anthropocentrism. My unpublished paper ‘Sylvan, Fox and Deep Ecology: A View from the Continental Shelf’ includes a more explicit reply to Fox’s metaphysics and his derogation of value-theory; at some points, I suggest, and despite certain misunderstandings, Richard Sylvan’s ‘Critique of Deep Ecology’ should be endorsed. (The ‘Continental Shelf’ paper may serve to amplify my response to Deep Ecology, with which some reviewers thought I took too short a way in chapters 8 and 9 above.)

**Future generations (chapter 6)**

Unlike Stephen Clark, who represents my normative theory as an Ideal Utilitarianism which turns on the maximisation of happiness, Wayne Sumner’s review argues that the ability to exercise essential capacities, central in the above account of intrinsic value, was in practice included under ‘happiness’ by classical utilitarians such as Mill, and could have been included by me. If, however, it is agreed that the development of essential capacities is of intrinsic value, it seems better to make this explicit in a value-theory, rather than to rely on its tacit inclusion in happiness, an inclusion which is, to say the least, controversial. Sumner is, of course, a fellow supporter of the Total-View version of consequentialism; the relation of this position to moral rights is well discussed in his *The Moral Foundation of Rights.*

Robert Elliot’s critical notice includes a defence of Rawlsian contractarianism involving a revised version of Rawls’ original position. My difficulties with the revised original position, and with the principles which might emerge from it, have already been set out at page 10 of *A Theory of Value and Obligation,* to which interested readers may be referred. Meanwhile J. R. Cameron’s revision of the Rawlsian original position in ‘Do Future Generations Matter?’ is subject to the difficulties raised at pages 105f above. While no version of the Rawlsian scenario seems likely definitively to generate the key principles either of justice or of obligations towards future generations, the Rawlsian model continues to inspire valuable contributions to environmental philosophy, such as Robert L. Simon’s essay ‘Troubled Waters: Global Justice and Ocean Resources’, in Tom Regan (ed.), *Earthbound.* In the same collection the issues concerning future-oriented obligations are well surveyed by Annette Baier in ‘For the Sake of Future Generations’. I agree with Robert Goodin, however, (see *Protecting the*
Vulnerable, pp. 173–8) in preferring a consequentialist basis for these obligations to Baier's transgenerational contractarianism.  

Further light is shed on the nature and extent of people's responsibility with regard to further generations by Hans Jonas in his book The Imperative of Responsibility. As his subtitle ('In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age') suggests, Jonas holds that modern technology presents people now alive with unprecedented moral problems. While he is aware of the possibilities opened up by technology, his stress is on the dire threats which it poses, and on the apocalyptic choices thus generated, granted that the scope for the exercise of responsibility on the part of future people is never to be foreclosed (p. 107). By thus translating his own works Das Prinzip Verantwortung and Macht oder Ohnmacht der Subjektivität, Jonas has enriched Anglo-Saxon philosophy from an independent tradition; where necessary, readers can supply the refinements which a more analytic approach might call for. It is, however, a pity that such large parts of his grounds for better practice turn on human interests and on duties to humanity; the openness urged by Jonas to a nonanthropocentric axiology (p. 8) does not ultimately rescue him from anthropocentric tendencies. (I am grateful to Carl Talbot for access to a paper of his which alerted me to Jonas's work.)

The methodology of decision making as regards environmental and other issues with a bearing on future generations is discussed in Values, Conflict and the Environment, where the method of Comprehensive Weighing is proposed and defended. The method incorporates a qualified use of discounting future costs and benefits, but only where some relevant factor such as opportunity costs or uncertainty is present; thus there is no radical disagreement here between that report and the current work. The application of Comprehensive Weighing would require considerable changes involving (in most countries) the restructuring of departments of government, and considerable reforms of the law and of education.

In some ways the practical counterpart of theories about responsibilities towards future generations is to be found in Our Common Future, with its advocacy of sustainable development and of a socially and environmentally sustainable world-system – which, to be sustainable, would have to be a just one. While principles of sustainability are discussed above in chapter 6, and the stabilising of the human population in chapter 7, the specifics of sustainability lie beyond the scope of this book. With very few reservations, however, I am glad to commend the analyses and the proposals of the World Commission on Environment and Development, and to
encourage readers to play what part they can to facilitate their imple-
mentation.

*Multiplication and the value of life (chapter 7)*

The philosophical reviewers of this chapter have not found much to add. Dieter Birnbacher (in *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie*) is completely convinced by the case here presented for the Total-View version of consequentialism, and the advocacy of a sustainable popu-
lation level which it yields;\(^{41}\) Wayne Sumner, while endorsing both theory and conclusion, speaks of ‘missteps’, which, however, he does not identify, but finds the results ‘quite impressive’.\(^{42}\) Robert Elliot finds the discussion sensitive, but considers me too ready to ‘find refuge in the claim that the allegedly unacceptable consequences of total utilitarianism would not arise in the actual world’, pointing out that normative theories should apply to possible worlds also (p. 506).\(^{43}\) But the text of pages 128f above discusses also the deliverances of the theory for ampler possible worlds, the only worlds for which a larger human population is indicated, and argues that this is an unobjection-
able implication. In the actual world, now of 5,000 million people, the relief of absolute poverty takes obvious priority.

Meanwhile John Lemons, in *The Environmental Professional*,\(^{44}\) complains at inadequate treatment of the relationship of population growth to environmental damage; but factors such as this do in fact modify the level of sustainable population commended at page 128. He also regrets the lack of coverage of population control programs, a topic explicitly disowned as beyond the scope of the book at page 136. Both these matters receive discussion in *A Theory of Value and Obligation* (172f) and in my essay ‘Population Policies and the Value of People’.\(^{45}\)

McCloskey\(^{46}\) also defends the conclusions that there is no over-
population problem at present, and that justice requires a redistribution which would enable all humans to be fed; while the benefits as well as the problems of the current human population, and the case for attaining a sustainable level, are well set out in *Our Common Fu-
ture* (the Brundtland Report),\(^{47}\) together with much wisdom about the value of population policies. Arne Naess’s advocacy of a diminished population has been remarked in the first section of this chapter. A similar case is presented in greater detail, together with criticism of the implications of utilitarianism for population levels, in Richard Routley (now Sylvan), ‘People vs the Land: The Ethics of the Popula-
tion Case’.\(^{48}\)
In 1984 the long-awaited, magisterial contribution of Derek Parfit to normative theory and related population issues appeared at last in *Reasons and Persons*.\(^4\) As anticipated on the basis of his earlier work, Parfit supplied a defence (in Part Four) of the very Repugnant conclusion (Parfit's expression) which seems to invalidate Total-View consequentialism; Parfit's *tour de force* allowed me to return to the defence of the Total View in chapter 9 of *A Theory of Value and Obligation*, where population is presented as a test case of that theory, which (with the aid of one or two refinements concerning the concept of a worthwhile life) well survives the test.

*The moral standing of nonhumans (chapter 8)*

The conclusions of chapter 8 that nonsentient living creatures have moral standing, and that their flourishing is of intrinsic value, have come in for criticism from diverse directions; special attention is here paid to two in particular.

Gary E. Varner, in ‘Biological Functions and Biological Interests’,\(^5\) endorses my rejection of Joel Feinberg's sentience-only account of interests, supplying an evolutionary account of the needs which belong distinctively to living creatures as opposed to human artifacts. This account may well help to dispel scepticism about the moral standing of nonsentient creatures, for which Varner goes on to argue. Varner, however, finds fault with my thought experiment concerning people's reactions to the last surviving sentient being who cuts down a tree. His first criticism applies only to an earlier version of this thought experiment, presented in ‘The Good of Trees’,\(^5\) in which the tree is the last of its kind; he seems not to notice that in the version at pages 155f above it is claimed that the last human's deed would be regarded as wrong even if the tree is *not* the last of its kind. Varner's second criticism concerns the possibility that what gives the tree moral significance is its beauty rather than its interests. But the belief that beauty (as opposed to its appreciation) is of intrinsic value is countered above at pages 152f; and, of course, if that argument succeeds, then the tree's value, if related to its beauty, depends on its being the object of future appreciation, something which the thought experiment precisely precludes. So if, as I should claim, most people would still hold the act of the last sentient being to be wrong, this cannot be due to the tree's beauty. Thus if the arguments of chapter 8 which contest alternative explanations succeed, this pervasive judgement concerning the act's wrongness would have to be explained by the intrinsic value of the good of the tree itself.

Varner's main objection, however, concerns method. While 'widely
shared intuitions . . . can serve as fixed points against which to check our moral theories’, this applies to ‘intuitions about “normal” cases’, whereas in marginal cases (including the above thought experiment) ‘a theorist should feel called upon to follow theory, rather than intu-
ition’. 52 There are some misconceptions here. Varner glosses ‘normal cases’ as ‘cases concerning human beings’; but if only these may be relied on, then far too many cases of pervasive judgements could be discounted or ignored in face of an adverse theory. (The relations of stable reflective judgements to theory are discussed further in my paper ‘Methods of Ecological Ethics’. 53) There again, at the stage in ‘The Good of Trees’ and in chapter 8 above where this thought experiment appears, theoretical grounds had already been adduced supporting the intrinsic value of the good of plants and also their moral standing; while these grounds (being ultimately analogical) were not claimed to be conclusive, they had already served to cast significant doubt upon the sentience-only position. Nor had I claimed that the thought experi-
ment constitutes a conclusive argument in itself; my claim was rather that ‘in this case intuitions confirm a theory which already has some independent support’ (p. 155). (For Elliot’s discussion of this same thought experiment, see pp. 506f of his review.)

Largely, however, belief in the moral standing of nonhumans must rest on arguments concerning needs which are recognised to be morally significant but which in no way depend on actual (or even hypoth-
etical) preferences, or on sentience. Since such arguments move from the health or the harms of cases of recognised moral standing to other more controversial cases, they are inevitably analogical. Varner himself presents arguments of this kind, acknowledging that they are inconclusive; to my mind he accords too large a place within interests to interests related to preferences. Parallel arguments (which he does not remark) appear in ‘The Good of Trees’ 54 and above at page 153. Another writer who has deployed such arguments is Alan Holland, whose distinctive approach (which addresses the questions of harm and freedom alongside that of suffering) may be found in The Bio-
revolution. 55

In another version the analogical argument appears together with the thought experiment argument at page 26 of Values, Conflict and the Environment. 56 Unfortunately the chapter which includes this passage never really replies to it, although various arguments for the sentience-
only conclusion there adopted are supplied. My criticisms of this as-
pect of the report (and of its analysis of ‘interests’ in terms of informed preferences) are given, together with a defence of many of its other aspects, in an essay yet to be published. 57

A different criticism of belief in the moral standing of nonsentient
creatures has recently been made by Janna Thompson, who at the same time maintains that ‘environmental ethics’ in general, by which she means systems teaching that ‘some entities in nature or in natural states of affairs are intrinsically valuable’, fail the requirements of consistency, nonvacuity and of decidability (i.e. providing for clear-cut decisions).\textsuperscript{58} In response to criteria of intrinsic value proposed by environmental ethicists and to applications of these criteria, Thompson poses a series of sceptical questions such as ‘Why stop here?’, seeking to show that no position which accords moral standing to creatures lacking subjectivity is tenable. While some of Thompson’s criticisms correspond to my own criticisms of according value to nonsentient entities, and again of ethical holism, her targets include positions such as that defended in chapter 8 above, with its claim that things with a good of their own or interests of their own (i.e. nonderivative interests) have moral standing.

After citing Paul Taylor’s defence of such a position (taken from p. 66 of his \textit{Respect for Nature, A Theory of Environmental Ethics},\textsuperscript{59} Thompson proceeds to claim that the class of things with a good of their own includes organs and machines.\textsuperscript{60} But the good of an organ is dependent on that of the organism to which it belongs, and of a machine on the interests of those who either invent, make, use or repair it, in a way which has no analogue where the good in question is the good of individual living creatures.

Indeed Thompson finds the need to eke out her sceptical case by asking why a thing’s having a good of its own is relevant to the question of moral standing. Granted the similarities (in point of self-maintenance and integrity) between on the one hand crystals and rocks, which (strictly speaking) lack a good of their own, and on the other hand recognised bearers of moral standing such as sentient animals, it is inconsistent, she maintains, to ascribe moral standing to the latter and not to the former. But, quite apart from the question of the degree and quality of self-maintenance exhibited by crystals and by rocks, Kenneth Goodpaster’s argument still stands: if a thing lacks a good of its own, there is no possibility of moral agents showing beneficence in its regard.\textsuperscript{61} Indeed much the same could be said of the other attitudes appropriate to the bearers of moral standing.

While many of Thompson’s particular criticisms of environmental ethics deserve sympathy, the impression comes across that the rigorous (and almost scathing) scrutiny of belief in the intrinsic value of natural entities or their states and conditions is not paralleled when positions ascribing intrinsic value to states of beings possessed of either sentience or subjectivity are under consideration. There again,
Thompson’s own position is that the value of nonsentient creatures will be found to lie in their value for our lives, granted a suitably enhanced conception ‘of what we are as individuals and of what a good life is’;\(^62\) while such a conception of the good life would involve recognition of nature’s value, it is less plausible that in the absence of such a conception there would be no grounds other than instrumental ones for moral agents to respect or conserve nonsentient creatures. Yet in recognising the pivotal importance of the concept of intrinsic value, Thompson’s critique represents an advance over approaches which would, if consistently pursued, undermine all reasons for all moral agents. (I have responded to one such critique in ‘Deep Ecology and Intrinsic Value: A Reply to Andrew Dobson’.)\(^63\)

By way of response to the sturdy defence of anthropocentrism supplied by Bryan G. Norton in ‘Conservation and Preservation: A Conceptual Rehabilitation’,\(^64\) it must suffice here to refer to the arguments of chapter 8 above. This is not said, however, to disparage arguments from human interests, which Norton ably deploys in his essay ‘On the Inherent Danger of Undervaluing Species’.\(^65\)

Inter-species morality: principles and priorities (chapter 9)

Ronald Preston’s review in *Theology*\(^66\) urges the according of priority to persons, as having a higher grade of being than other creatures, rather than heeding equal interests equally, as commended above. In practice, as I have maintained at pages 177f, such a policy may be justified in human society even in cases of severe subnormality, by reference to the interests of human third parties. To discriminate solely on the basis of personhood, however, would be close to speciesism in cases where greater interests are at stake for nonpersons. This is more clearly still a problem for the position of Holmes Rolston,\(^67\) which recognises superiority in human beings as such. (See my review in *Environmental Ethics*.\(^68\))

Not unrelatedly, some writers from one kind of stable (thus McCloskey)\(^69\) continue to ascribe rights only to those animals possessed of moral autonomy (rights which can, however, be overridden by the welfare interests of other animals); alternatively rights are located in subjects-of-a-life, as by Tom Regan, whose earlier and ampler account of moral standing, depicted at page 146 above, seems to have been revised to cover just the bearers of points of view, and thus of subjectivity.\(^70\) For Regan such rights can seldom be overridden, a grave source of problems this, as I have pointed out at page 168. Elliot\(^71\) makes the related point against McCloskey that as long as animal
rights can be overridden by other values, there need not be an irreconcilable opposition between animal welfarists and environmentalists (and thus there need not be fundamental problems for those sympathetic to both movements in parting company with McCloskey and recognising animal rights). Yet, while R. G. Frey (Rights, Killing and Suffering) remains insufficiently sensitive to animal interests, his argument is to be applauded that little or nothing can be accomplished using the language of rights which cannot be accomplished in its absence.

Other philosophers suggest that, beyond locating the bearers of moral standing, philosophy cannot move further and produce well-grounded priorities among such bearers. This position appears in Lawrence E. Johnson's A Morally Deep World. A reply could consist in my 'degrees-of-intrinsic-value' reply to John Benson (pp. 175f); indeed in the absence of a reply, environmental ethics would indeed fail one of Thompson's crucial tests, the requirement that decidability be provided for over a broad range of cases.

Priorities are also a problem for Paul Taylor. In Respect for Nature, Taylor advances five principles for the fair resolution of conflicts. But, granted his biocentric egalitarianism, it is unclear how the principles are severally to be defended, or how conflicts between them are to be resolved by rational means. Some of the problems have been aired in my essay 'Biocentrism, Moral Standing and Moral Significance'. Similar problems arise for the Deep Ecology Platform of Arne Naess, to the extent, that is, that the 'biospherical egalitarianism' of The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement is to be taken seriously. (The Deep Ecology alternative, however, of abandoning value-theory, adopted by Warwick Fox and ascribed by him to Naess and to George Sessions, seems to forego the possibility of supplying reasons for action altogether, and the possibility of conflict resolution therewith.) Without a principle requiring equal interests to be given equal consideration (and thus unequal interests unequal consideration) it is hard to see how reasonable resolutions of conflicts are to be possible.

To interpret this principle (taken from the works of Peter Singer), a qualified version of Donald VanDeVeer's Two-factor Egalitarianism is introduced above. Unlike some reviewers, Elliot recognises the qualifications, sees their force, and seems to endorse the principle which emerges, subject to his reservations about fundamental value-theory. If, however, the interests of systems were somehow to be accorded intrinsic value, the possibility of any longer applying an 'equal interests' principle would be vanishingly small (and the prospects of com-
plying with Thompson’s decidability requirement vanishingly remote). But the case for recognising intrinsic value in systems is yet to be made out, at least to my satisfaction.

Similar principles for conflict resolution are presented in *Values, Conflict and the Environment*,79 except that no morally relevant interests are recognised in nonsentient creatures, and that interests are expounded in terms of informed preferences. My response to these differences is to be found in a hitherto unpublished paper, ‘Reasoning About the Environment’.80 For most practical purposes, however, I am able to support the method of Comprehensive Weighing advanced in that report (see above), not just as being superior to cost-benefit analysis (including the variety upheld in David Pearce et al., *Blueprint for a Green Economy*)81 or to the decision procedure proposed in Rolston’s *Environmental Ethics*,82 but as being well-grounded as to its theoretical content, immune from criticisms of cost-benefit analysis such as those of Mark Sagoff’s monograph *The Economy of the Earth*,83 and amenable to practical application.

*Old principles, new politics (chapter 10)*

The second edition (1980) of Passmore’s *Man’s Responsibility for Nature* includes his essay ‘Attitudes to Nature’,84 which concludes by recognising the need for both ‘a more realistic philosophy of nature’ and for ‘new attitudes to nature’.85 In the light of this apparent shift from at least the tone of Passmore’s first edition (1974) one of the aims of my final chapter was to gauge how far, in the light of the theories defended in the rest of this work, new moral attitudes or principles were required in the areas of pollution, resources, population and preservation. While I am yet to be persuaded that significantly new moral principles are required, this is because in my view the implementation of longstanding principles already requires some radical restructuring of society.

The point can be illustrated from more recent work. Thus on nuclear energy generation Daniel Shaw contributes to Nigel Dower’s collection a hard-hitting article ‘After Chernobyl: the Ethics of Risk-Taking’,86 which is very largely in keeping with the above principles and conclusions. And on most of the other practical issues discussed above, the World Commission on Environment and Development report *Our Common Future*87 has valuable things to say, which would, however, involve the restructuring of international relations and of the international economic order.

McCloskey88 is to be applauded for his arguments against totalitarian proposals for coping with the problems, and in favour of democratic
solutions; there is no reason to trust despots, however ecologically benign their intentions. But whether the more regulated free-market system which he favours is equal to the problems is itself problematic. Murray Bookchin is rightly scathing about ecophilosophers who ignore social problems and power relations; yet his own principles (and therewith his solutions) need revision in the light of the principles argued above.

Maybe a properly green solution requires (as Alan Carter has argued) the bringing of production into decentralised, democratic control worldwide. As, however, such a solution may have to be long awaited, and much of value could be forfeited in the mean time, reflection and action at a more grass-roots level is both indispensable and, often, all that is possible. Actions which make lives more worthwhile cannot be valueless, even when their repercussions are less than cosmic; it may also be suggested (with Carter and with Keekok Lee) that any such effort just might contribute to change which is both global and sustainable.

NOTES


REVIEW OF RECENT LITERATURE

33 Elliot, Critical notice of *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*.


40 For the details of *Our Common Future*, see note 8 above.


42 Sumner, Review of *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*, p. 81.

43 Elliot, Critical notice of *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*, p. 506.


46 McCloskey, *Ecological Ethics and Politics*.

47 *Our Common Future*, chapter 4.


52 Varner, ‘Biological Functions and Biological Interests’, p. 263.


54 ‘The Good of Trees’, p. 50.


56 For *Values, Conflict and the Environment*, see note 13 above.

69 McCloskey, *Ecological Ethics and Politics*, p. 66.
71 Elliot, Critical notice of *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*, p. 503.
77 Fox, *Approaching Deep Ecology*.
78 Elliot, Critical notice of *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*, p. 508.
79 For *Values, Conflict and the Environment*, see note 13 above.
80 Robin Attfield, ‘Reasoning About the Environment’ (unpublished paper).
84 John Passmore, ‘Attitudes to Nature’, is included in the second edition of *MRN*, London: Duckworth, 1980 (207–18), and is also available in Royal


87 For *Our Common Future*, see note 8 above. (About nuclear energy generation, this report sits uncharacteristically on the fence.)

88 McCloskey, *Ecological Ethics and Politics*.

