

Interview with Dale Jamieson - Is Animal Liberation An Environmental Ethic?

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TPM: As ethical concerns for animals and for the environment seem to have increased hand in hand in society in general, many will be surprised to hear that in intellectual circles, the two concerns have more usually been seen as inconsistent. You suggest this is because of the difference between "environmental" or "land" ethics and ethics based on the idea of "sentience". Could you briefly clarify and explain the importance of this distinction?

Jamieson: 'Sentientists' typically think of suffering as the only or most important 'evil'. Concern for animal suffering goes back to at least Bentham in the modern philosophical tradition. Those who champion the land ethic are more communitarian. They see nature as involving a community that is both biotic and abiotic, that can be in balance or not. From their perspective, a little suffering here and there is just a fact about how the system works. Although philosophy of nature is an ancient subject, the idea of the land ethic originated in the work of the twentieth century American wildlife manager, Aldo Leopold. At least on the face of it, this is an important difference in the intellectual heritage of animal liberationists and some environmentalists.

TPM: You note that sometimes environmentalists and animal liberationists agree in practice. For example, not eating meat is wrong for liberationists because animal lives are of great value, and it is wrong for environmentalists because animal farming causes more damage to the environment than agrarian farming. As part of your attempt to reunite environmental and animal ethics, however, you want to show how both views can share not only certain practical principles, but also a common conceptual ground. Crucial to this project is your claim that "nonsentient features of the environment are of derivative value, but they can be of extreme value and can be valued intrinsically." What do you mean by "derivative value" and "valuing intrinsically" and how do these concepts help provide a common grounding for animal and environmental ethics?

Jamieson: These terms invite misunderstanding, but I am at a loss for a better vocabulary. What is

important to understand first is that to say that something is of derivative value is not to say anything about how valuable it is. Rather it is to say something about the natural history of its value--how it has come to have the value that it does.

On my view only creatures that have a point of view on the world are of primary value. It is these creatures who are valuers who are of primary value, but they are not the only things that have value. Mountain ranges, artworks, temples, and rivers also have value. In some cases their value may outweigh the value of sentient creatures. Surely it is worse to destroy the Mona Lisa than to scratch a human being. Thus someone who accepts this version of an animal liberationist standpoint can intensely value all sorts of things that are not sentient.

The idea of intrinsic value is one of the most confusing in contemporary philosophy. Part of the problem is that intrinsic values sound like things that we might encounter in the world (or wild). I want to refocus the notion on the process of valuing, away from the kind of thing that is valued. When I appreciate a sunset with no concern about what the experience may do for me, I am intrinsically valuing the sunset. But are sunsets intrinsically valuable? That sounds to me like a bad question, or at least not one that I want to mess with.

But what all this comes to is that animal liberationists can value many of the same natural entities as environmental ethicists (mountains, rivers, etc.). What will be different is the value-theoretic story, not the valuing or even its intensity.

TPM: Perhaps the trickiest point in your paper is where you try to persuade us that, not only CAN the environment be intrinsically valued, but that it SHOULD be intrinsically valued. At the same time, you hold that "value is mind-dependent". It seems to me that many will simply never be persuaded that they should value the environment for its own sake, and that what is more, it is hard to criticise these people if the source of values is the feelings of sentient creatures. At this stage,

therefore, doesn't your argument end and personal judgement take over?

Jamieson: I think there is a lot of room between 'argument', as philosophers understand it, and 'personal judgement'. I don't think that there are many issues on which reason or the heart dictates unique responses. People can believe a lot of different things without being irrational. They can feel a lot of different ways without being completely insensitive. But this doesn't mean that dialogue or shared experience doesn't matter. There are better and worse things to think, and more and less sensitive ways to feel. Part of what life in community is about is forging shared values. Over the last generation there has been enormous solidification around various environmental ideas. Almost everyone these days believes that species should be protected, natural areas preserved, and animals safe from torture. What this looks like to me is a pretty successful cultural process of persuasion and solidification--not the discovery of new, mind-independent features of the world. Of course there are those who find the very idea that values are in anyway constructed deeply abhorrent. To them I say, welcome to the world. It's not that I'm against mind-independent values, it's just that I don't think there are any.

TPM: You talk of you hopes for a "Hollywood romance" between environmental and animal ethics. Even the greatest romances have their sticking points. Where do you think the two views face the greatest difficulties in coming to an accommodation?

Jamieson: there are a huge number of sticking points. I'll just mention one that I'm currently involved in. Carleton College has a large arboretum from which hunting is banned. Now ecologists say that there are too many deer, and regrettably there should be a sport hunt to prune the numbers. I am opposed, and part of our conflict is that I value individual animal welfare more than my ecologist friends do. They on the other hand place a higher priority on some ecological values. However, it would be wrong to say that neither of us finds anything in the values of the other--it's a question of weighing. And I also think in this particular case some arguments can be given. Yes, there are ecological values at stake but they are not that unique or important. If deer have to be killed, do it humanely and efficiently, not via a sport-hunt. This may not

sound exactly how a happy couple resolves their differences, but on the other hand, I've seen some couples who claim to be very much in love who have much nastier tongues!

The other thing about Hollywood romance is that we're more likely to have it if we believe in it. Instead of focusing on the conceptual differences between animal liberationists and environmentalists, let's look for common ground. Just as shell has been very effective in bringing together environmentalists and human rights campaigners, so the beef industry should bring together both environmentalists and animal activists in opposition.