

MORAL STANDING IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

by

CHARLES SULLIVAN

B.A., Portland State University, 1994

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Department of Philosophy

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

.....

.....

.....

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

September 1996

© Charles Sullivan, 1996

Abstract

This thesis in environmental ethics examines the question of what kinds of beings or entities can have moral standing in their own right. A being or entity with moral standing is one for which it is possible to give direct moral consideration, and toward which we can have moral obligations.

Are direct moral considerations and obligations applicable only to humans, or human persons, i.e., moral agents? Can the scope of consideration and obligation be meaningfully extended to include all sentient animals, or all living things, or even further to species and such natural objects as mountains and rivers? These are the questions with which this thesis is concerned.

I first consider humanism, which holds that the boundaries of moral standing cannot extend beyond humans or human persons. I argue that humanism fails because it is not consistent with our deeply held moral conviction that the reason why it is not morally permissible to torture humans typically has nothing to do with being a member of the human species, or with being a moral agent. Rather, the reasons for not torturing humans are that the infliction of unnecessary pain is bad for humans, and we would rather be free from such suffering. Since these

reasons are applicable to all sentient animals, humanism is rejected as an inconsistent and mistaken theory of moral standing.

The next view I consider is sentientism, which holds that the boundaries of moral standing can be extended to include those with the ability to have conscious experiences, i.e., pain, pleasure, satisfaction, frustration. I argue that sentientism is by far the most consistent with our generally accepted ethical foundations.

I then move on to vitalism, which holds that the boundaries of moral standing can be extended to include all living things. Vitalists argue that because conditions can be better or worse for plants they therefore have a good of their own, which is considered sufficient for moral standing. I reject vitalism by arguing that the good of plants is an empirical matter and not a normative one. I further maintain that because plants are incapable of having experiences that matter to them it is unclear how they can be morally wronged.

Finally I consider attempts to extend the moral boundary to include such things as species, ecological systems, and natural objects such as mountains and rivers. These positions I reject also, except insofar as the moral

standing of such things can be reduced to the interests of individual sentient beings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	5
Acknowledgments	6
Dedication	7
Introduction	8
Humanism	17
Theological Ethics	17
Simple Humanism	19
Sophisticated Humanism	20
Sentientism	25
The Professor and the Chimpanzee	28
The Severely Retarded Human	31
Two Kinds of Sentientism	33
Vitalism	39
Health as a Good	41
Health and the Good of Animals	43
The Needs of Plants and Animals	47
The Interests of Plants	53
The Comatose Human	59
Taylor's Vitalism	63
Further Expansion of the Moral Franchise	69
Species	69
Ecological Systems and Natural Objects	74
Sentientism vs. Environmentalism	79
Last Words	88
Conclusion	92
Bibliography	103

Acknowledgments

[Acknowledgments removed for web version]

Dedication

[Dedication removed for web version]

1. Introduction

In this thesis I examine the question of what kinds of beings or entities can have moral standing. A being or entity that has moral standing is one that can be on the receiving end of a moral action by a moral agent, and one whose status as a being with moral standing is considered independently of its usefulness or value to others.

I begin, in Chapter 2, by giving a brief account of Christian theological ethics. I dismiss the theological approach because it relies upon faith in the authority of scripture and not upon rational thinking. I then consider a simple form of humanism which holds that only humans can have moral standing simply because they are members of the human species. This theory is rejected because the membership principle is arbitrary and irrelevant to moral standing in a way analogous to how membership in a particular race or ethnic group is arbitrary and irrelevant to moral standing. I then turn to a more sophisticated form of humanism which holds that only persons can have moral standing, i.e., those who are self-conscious, rational, moral agents.

The remainder of the chapter examines a sophisticated form of humanism, or personalism. I argue that this theory

cannot account for the reasons we tend to give for not causing unnecessary suffering, and further, that a subject is a self-conscious, rational, moral agent is not directly relevant to why we ought not cause the subject unnecessary suffering.

Chapter 3 examines sentientism which holds that what matters for moral standing is the ability to have conscious experiences such as pain, pleasure, satisfaction, frustration, and so forth. I argue that whether a moral agent is justified in treating persons and animals differently will depend upon the kind of treatment in question, and upon any relevant differences between animals and persons that could justify different treatment. Some kinds of treatment, like promise keeping, can apply only to persons because such actions require some degree of self-consciousness, rationality and moral agency. However, when it comes to causing unnecessary suffering, the relevant reasons for not mistreating persons are the same reasons as for not doing so to animals. These reasons are that needless suffering is bad for persons and animals, and that it *matters* to persons and animals that they not experience suffering. I then compare a chimpanzee with a severely retarded human in order to further defend the sentientist position. I point out that we do not think it right to

cause unnecessary suffering to severely retarded humans, even though they are not self-conscious, rational, moral agents. The most relevant consideration for not harming severely retarded humans is that they are capable of suffering. Consistency then requires that similar weight be given to equivalent suffering for whomever is threatened, be it a normal human, a severely retarded human, a chimpanzee, or whatever.

At the end of Chapter 3 I compare utilitarian and rights-based sentientism. I explain that utilitarian sentientism casts a broader moral net in that it takes into account various sentient experiences that, although not sufficient for rights, are still deserving of moral consideration. On the other hand, rights-based sentientism appears to provide more protection for an individual in that it would not as readily allow for individual rights to be trumped on behalf of aggregate utility. Although I do not endorse either form of sentientism over the other, I suggest that talk of interests, rather than rights, may be more appropriate in relation to animals. I do, however, consider sentientism in general to be the most compelling theory for moral standing in environmental ethics, and elsewhere.

Chapter 4 examines the theory of vitalism which holds that all living beings possess moral standing by virtue of being alive. Vitalists argue that because conditions can be better or worse for nonsentient living beings, i.e., plants, that these beings have a good of their own--apart from their instrumental value to others--and that this good is sufficient for moral standing. I argue against vitalism by showing that what we mean when we say that certain conditions are good or bad for plants is that these conditions are either conducive or detrimental to the health of plants. I then argue that the reason why we consider health to be good for *animals* is because it allows for experiences in their lives which are satisfying to them. Since plants are incapable of having experiences at all, whether healthy or not, I conclude that health as such is not a good for plants in any literal sense. We thus have no direct moral obligation to promote the health (or good), or to refrain from promoting the ill-health (or bad), of plants.

I then consider a number of arguments which attempt to show that plants have interests sufficient for moral standing because they can be benefited and harmed, or because they have latent tendencies, direction of growth, and natural fulfillments, or because they heal and maintain

themselves. I argue against these views by maintaining that because plants are incapable of having experiences that can matter to them--that they do not, so to speak, have a sake of their own--it is unclear how exactly they can be morally wronged or righted, have morally significant interests, or moral standing.

Next I consider an alternative approach to environmental ethics developed by Paul W. Taylor. Taylor develops a type of vitalism that involves three elements: a belief-system, a moral attitude, and a set of rules or standards by which to govern our behaviour. Taylor calls his belief system *the biocentric outlook*. Greatly influenced by ecology, this outlook views all life as part of an interconnected, unified system whose integrity and stability are necessary for promoting the good of the various biotic communities of which it consists.

Taylor believes that when moral agents adopt this non-normative biocentric outlook they will find what he calls *the attitude of respect* to be a reasonable normative attitude to adopt in relation to all life. And thus moral agents will ascribe inherent worth to all living entities, and will see the promotion of their good as intrinsically valuable. Taylor maintains that if we accept the ecologically-informed biocentric outlook then the adoption

of the moral attitude of respect will be as reasonable as the adoption of any other theory in environmental ethics.

A central claim in Taylor's thesis is that all living things are teleological centres of life with their own good. I argue that Taylor's account does not provide compelling reasons for making the transition from the view that plants can have a good, i.e., health, to adopting the normative attitude of respect. I also argue against Taylor's claim that the biocentric outlook makes the attribution of equal intrinsic value to all living things most reasonable. Although I accept that it is not irrational to adopt the normative attitude of respect for all of Nature, given the non-normative biocentric outlook, it appears that adopting this attitude is in no way forced upon us by this outlook either.

In Chapter 5 I examine attempts to further expand the moral franchise in order to establish the moral standing of species, ecological systems, and natural objects such as rivers and mountains.

I consider the view put forward by Holmes Rolston III that species have moral standing, and that this standing is not simply the aggregation of the interests of the individual members of the species. I argue that Rolston does not adequately explain how conditions can be

beneficial to a species apart from being beneficial to the collection of existing and future members of the species. I maintain that a species is an abstract category and cannot, as such, be the kind of thing that can have moral standing.

I then consider the view that ecological systems and certain natural objects can have moral standing. I argue that ecological systems and natural objects can only have *instrumental* moral standing insofar as they contribute to the morally significant interests of sentient beings.

Next I consider the attempt by Mary Anne Warren to overcome the conflict between two incompatible positions: rights-based sentientism and environmentalism. The former view would, in principle, allow for the sacrifice of certain biosystems in order to protect the rights of individual animals; whereas the latter view would allow for the sacrifice of individual animals in order to maintain certain biosystems. Warren first argues that, although animals may have certain rights, these rights have less moral force than corresponding human rights, and that they can be overridden--in a way that human rights cannot--in order to protect certain *vital goals* of a utilitarian and environmental nature.

Warren provides good reasons for attributing less stringent moral rights to animals than to humans. However, she fails to adequately explain what would count as a *vital goal* that would allow us to override the rights of animals. It is not clear whether these vital goals must bear some relation to human rights to life, and freedom from suffering, or whether they need only be grounded in the human interest in aesthetic and emotional experiences. Without further explanation of what a vital goal is, it is difficult to determine in what cases the killing of animals could be justified.

Warren then presents a thought experiment designed to show that our intuitions lend support to the view that nonsentient living parts of the ecosystem have intrinsic value independently of their value to human or other sentient beings. Her scenario involves two viruses: one that would kill all sentient life (including humans), and one that would kill all nonsentient life. If both viruses were released, the one that kills nonsentient life would not begin to take effect until after all sentient life had been destroyed. Warren suggests that it would be morally preferable not to release the second virus despite the fact that no sentient interests would be transgressed, and that

no one would ever know that the second virus had been released.

My intuitions differ from Warren's in relation to her thought experiment. Without a more substantial argument for the intrinsic value of nonsentient life, I am left to conclude that rights-based sentientism and environmentalism may not be entirely compatible, although Warren has reduced the conflict between them by arguing for the diminished rights of animals.

Finally, I argue that if we give proper and honest moral consideration to sentient interests, including the interests of future humans (physical, emotional, and spiritual) that we can go a long way toward achieving many of the much needed moral reforms in our relationship to nature and the environment without the recourse to radical reconceptions of moral standing such as vitalism proposes.

2. Humanism

Much of traditional Western ethics has held either that only biological humans or human persons can be properly said to have moral standing. Typically, such views are defended by appealing to exclusively human characteristics that are deemed relevant to moral standing. Both theological and non-theological arguments have been used to defend these positions.

Theological Ethics

The theological view of moral standing, as put forward by Thomas Aquinas,¹ attempts to reconcile selected themes from the Bible² with the views of Aristotle.³ Aquinas argues for a hierarchy of beings in which God is at the apex, "man" is lower than God, animals are lower than "man", and plants are lower than animals. In this hierarchy, the purpose of the lower beings is to be of service to the higher beings. Although this position has been used to justify the human use of animals, it also includes a number of injunctions concerning how animals are to be treated.

¹Aquinas [1918], II, II, Q64, art. 1.

²Particularly *Gen. i*, 29-30, and *Gen. ix*, 3.

³Particularly *Politics I*, 3.

These injunctions do not involve concern for animals as such, but rest on the notion that the human mistreatment of animals may lead to the human mistreatment of other humans. Thus Aquinas states the following:

Now it is evident that if a man practice a pitiable affection for animals, he is all the more disposed to take pity on his fellow-men, wherefore it is written (*Proverbs* xii, 10) "The just regardeth the life of his beast."⁴

Fortunately, the theological defence of the exclusive moral standing of humans is not as fashionable as it once was. As theological speculation and the citation of scripture came to be viewed as weak defences for moral claims, other justifications were needed to maintain the exclusion of non-human animals from moral standing. Thus it is that Immanuel Kant--himself a Christian--argued for the exclusion of nonhuman animals from moral standing on non-theological grounds, as when he stated the following:

But so far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious, and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man. . . . Our duties towards animals are merely indirect duties towards humanity.⁵

Kant avoids reference to religious or superstitious beliefs as the basis for the moral distinction between humans and nonhuman animals, but relies instead on the

⁴Aquinas [1918], II, I, Q102, art. 6.

⁵Kant [1963], p.239.

characteristic of self-consciousness. In addition to self-consciousness, such characteristics as rationality, language, and moral agency have all been used to justify the difference in treatment and status between humans and nonhuman animals. The justification of this difference in moral standing between humans and nonhuman animals by identification of certain exclusive characteristics of humans or persons is the basis of humanism.

Simple Humanism

Humanism is the secular view that holds that only humans have moral standing. At this point it is helpful to distinguish between two forms of humanism: Simple, and Sophisticated humanism. Simple humanism holds that the criterion for moral standing is membership in the human species. If a being is genetically human it qualifies for moral standing, otherwise it does not. Sophisticated humanism (or personalism) holds that there are certain characteristics typical of humans, such as rationality, self-consciousness, and moral agency (or autonomy), that are necessary and sufficient for moral standing.

Simple humanism relies on a membership principle which seems to be an extension of the moral attitudes and consideration people naturally have toward family and friends. But what is it about Homo Sapiens as a species

that *limits* moral consideration to them? Consideration only for members of our own species bears a striking similarity to consideration based upon race. What if we were to encounter intelligent, sensitive, well-disposed extraterrestrial beings? Would we consider them to lack all moral considerability?⁶ It would be unreasonable to entirely disregard them simply because they are not Homo Sapiens. We can see that both racial and species membership are *arbitrary* in the sense that they do not identify characteristics that are relevant to moral standing. Thus simple humanism fails as an adequate theory of moral standing.

Sophisticated Humanism

Sophisticated humanism offers--as the name suggests-- a more sophisticated defence for the exclusion of animals from the moral sphere. This view holds that humans exist in moral communities within which they establish relationships of mutual responsibilities and obligations. In order to establish and develop these moral relationships one must necessarily be a self-conscious, rational, moral agent. Since animals are not self-conscious, rational, moral agents they cannot be members of the moral community. The characteristics that underlie membership in the moral

⁶I thank my thesis advisor, Earl Winkler, for this suggestion.

community are thus the conditions for moral standing itself. Lacking these characteristics, animals cannot have moral standing.

Sophisticated humanists may be able to incorporate many of the practices of environmentalists into their theory. It could be argued that environmental destruction is a bad thing for humans, whether economically, aesthetically, emotionally, or physically. And because of this negative impact upon humans, the humanist can maintain that we ought not continue with these destructive practices. What the humanist will not accept is that we ought to discontinue these practices *for the sake of* the environment, whether that includes individual animals, species, trees or ecosystems.

It is obvious that the characteristics of personhood cited by humanists are necessary in order to make and keep promises, and to enter into other agreements that involve moral responsibilities and obligations. What is not so obvious is the claim that in order to have moral standing one must necessarily be able to enter into mutual moral agreements and relations.

Young children, idiots, and some of the mentally ill are not self-conscious, rational, moral agents, and are thus unable to enter into moral agreements, yet we do not

consider these individuals to be lacking in moral status, nor do we exclude them from our moral community. It would seem that in order to remain consistent the sophisticated humanist must exclude all individuals that are not self-conscious, rational, moral agents from the moral sphere. Thus young children, idiots, and the mentally ill will fall into the same camp as animals.

This troublesome result of denying moral status to these particular groups of humans does not prove that sophisticated humanism is false, yet it should make us pause and reconsider whether being a self-conscious, rational, moral agent is a necessary condition for having moral status.

It is possible for the sophisticated humanist to accept the uncomfortable consequence of his theory while attempting to repair the damage by maintaining that it is in the interests of certain *persons* that we treat undeveloped humans with respect. It could be argued that because there exist full-fledged members of our moral community who have relationships of care, concern, and love for these undeveloped humans, it is therefore in the interest of these *persons* in our moral community that we respect these undeveloped humans. Thus the humanist could

grant moral standing by proxy to young children, idiots, and the mentally ill.

But this position leads one to wonder upon what basis the treatment of abandoned or orphaned children should be governed, or how one should treat those individuals who are senile, idiots, or mentally ill yet have no one who personally loves or cares for them. We are left to conclude that third parties are obligated to govern their treatment of these marginal humans based solely on the number of *persons* whose interests would be at stake in relation to the treatment.

In our everyday moral lives when we are asked to give reasons why any full-fledged person should not be mistreated we do not tend to cite such reasons as the person is a self-conscious, rational, moral agent. The appeal to self-consciousness, rationality, and moral agency seems mistaken when considering why we should not cause unnecessary suffering to persons. Typically our reasoning reflects our belief that mistreatment is harmful to persons, and that it is something that persons wish to avoid. Simply put: mistreatment hurts, and it is a bad thing for beings like us who are capable of suffering. But we can give the same reasons why we should not mistreat young children, idiots, or the mentally ill. Unnecessary

suffering is a bad thing for these individuals in much the same way that it is for persons. There are countless ways in our everyday moral lives that demonstrate that we do not regard the moral status of the young, the infirm, and the incapacitated as simply derivative from the interests of full-fledged persons. Thus if we allow that the experience of unnecessary suffering should not be visited upon young children and these marginal humans because it is bad for them, and because they do not like these experiences, then it would seem that there is nothing to prevent our extending these same reasons to animals that are also capable of suffering. Thus we are inescapably led to consider the merits of sentientism.

3. Sentientism

The sentientist argues that moral status depends not at all on whether a being is a self-consciousness, rational, moral agent. According to sentientism, what matters for moral standing is the ability to experience pain and pleasure. What counts as pain and pleasure is not necessarily limited to gross physical sensations, but can include such experiences as discomfort, dissatisfaction, discontent, satiation, frustration, and other physical, psychological and emotional states.

Undoubtedly, the possession of self-consciousness, rationality, and the capacity for moral agency are relevant factors in many of the moral relations among humans. Such things as promise-keeping, the freedom to voice one's opinions, and the right to political affiliation can apply solely to those humans possessing self-consciousness, rationality, and moral agency, i.e., persons. But as things stand, all moral relations between humans are not such as to require uniquely human attributes on the part of everyone involved. They do require that there be at least one moral agent or actor, but the recipient in moral relations need not possess uniquely human characteristics.

That the individual doing the particular act must necessarily be a moral agent in order for the act to qualify as a moral act is fairly obvious. We may "punish" a dog that takes the food from the kitchen table, but this is a form of behavioural conditioning, and it cannot truly represent moral censure nor a positing of moral blame. Rather, we believe that the dog could not help it, and for that reason we do not assign moral responsibility to the dog.

A moral act, then, requires that the individual performing the act be a moral agent. But what of the recipient of the moral agent's act, i.e., the moral *patient*? "What is . . . the condition of moral *relevance*? What is the condition of having a claim to be *considered* by rational agents?"⁷ As we have seen, the sophisticated humanist argues that only persons can qualify as moral patients, whereas animals cannot. On the other hand, the sentientist argues that it is the capacity for sentient experiences that matter, thus animals do qualify as moral patients. In order to assess whether a moral agent is justified in according different treatment to a person than to an animal it is important to keep the following two considerations in mind.

⁷Warnock [1971] p.148.

1. The kind of treatment in question.⁸
2. The relevant differences between the individuals that are supposed to justify the difference in treatment.⁹

From the sentientist perspective these considerations are important in determining justifiable differences in treatment between persons and animals. The first criterion is important because certain kinds of treatment may be relevant to only certain kinds of beings. Such things as admission to university, opportunity for employment, and the freedom to vote are examples of kinds of treatment that by their nature exclude animals from consideration. Similarly, torment and torture are kinds of treatments that necessarily exclude rocks and other mere things from consideration.

The second criterion is important in determining whether, given the particular treatment in question, there are relevant differences between individuals, e.g., between persons and animals, such as to justify the difference in treatment. I will explore these two criteria in the following hypothetical cases.

⁸Rachels [1990] p.178.

⁹Rachels [1990] p.176.

The Professor and the Chimpanzee

First consider the case of the decision of who to hire as a mathematics professor at a university. In this case the *kind of treatment* in question is the act of hiring a mathematics professor. The *relevant differences* that could justify hiring applicant *A* over applicant *B* would involve an assessment of which candidate possesses more of the qualities necessary for being a good mathematics professor, e.g., knowledge of mathematics, teaching skills, etc.

In a similar manner, if one candidate for the professorship were a qualified human and the other a bright chimpanzee, there would be no doubt that the human should be hired over the chimp. This is because chimps are quite incapable of acquiring the necessary qualifications for the job of mathematics professor. This marks a relevant difference between the human and the chimp with respect to the treatment in question. In this case the university would be justified in rejecting all chimps from consideration, and it certainly would not be arbitrary discrimination to do so.

Now consider a different kind of treatment between a human and a chimp, say torture, i.e., the infliction of needless suffering. Consider what kind of relevant

difference might exist between a human and a chimp that could justify torturing the chimp but not the human. [This case is not meant to be one in which we *have* to torture either the human or the chimp, and now must decide which one *must* be tortured]. Since torture is the kind of treatment in question it would seem that the relevant characteristic to be considered is the ability to suffer. The considerations that we would cite in favor of not torturing a person would be such things as torture causes the person to suffer, needless suffering is bad for the person, and it matters to the person that they not experience suffering. These are also the same considerations that we would cite in favor of not torturing the chimp. Such characteristics as self-consciousness, rationality, and moral agency appear to be irrelevant, except insofar as they play a role in a being's capacity to experience various forms of suffering. It would seem that in relation to torture there is no relevant difference between the person and the chimp that could justify torturing the chimp but not the person.

It might be that in the case where we *had* to choose between either torturing a human or torturing a chimp we would choose in favor of the human. This is not based on the belief that the human would suffer more physical harm

from the torture, although if this belief were true it could make a difference. Rather, it is that the human might have a greater ability to know ahead of time what will happen, and thus suffer more. Or the human may suffer the emotional and psychological consequences for a longer period of time afterwards than would the chimp. Or it may be that the human's family and friends will also suffer, and that the human might have a greater potential for happiness in the future than that of the chimp.¹⁰ Although this suggests that there may be more reasons for not causing the same needless suffering to humans than to animals, it does not mean that the ability to suffer is only relevant in relation to our treatment of other humans. Continued life, the capacity for various experiences, and freedom from mistreatment by humans are good things for most animals. "These things create interests for them, in continued life and in not being mistreated."¹¹

Fortunately for decision-making, it is rare that the suffering caused to animals involves a choice between human suffering and nonhuman animal suffering. Indeed, much animal suffering is caused in the name of comparatively

¹⁰Singer [1979] p.196.

¹¹Winkler [1991] p.185.

trivial gustatory, cosmetic, and fashion preferences of humans.

In case one still suspects that there is some relevant characteristic of either personhood or humanity that limits moral considerability or status to humans, it will help to look at the familiar case of the severely retarded human.

The Severely Retarded Human

Consider a human whose retardation is severe enough that he does not possess self-consciousness, rationality, or moral agency, but he can experience pleasure and pain. Consider further that this severely retarded human is orphaned, having no friends, family, nor anyone who personally cares for him. The question is what considerations we would cite in favor of not torturing him. These considerations must be independent of the considerations for persons who might be negatively affected by the act of torturing the severely retarded human, or simply by the awareness that the torture is taking place. By stripping the severely retarded human of all of the supposed morally relevant characteristics unique to persons, he is now in much the same position as the chimp with respect to those characteristics that could be cited to justify his not being tortured. Indeed, it may be that

a normal chimp would suffer even more than a severely retarded human due to the chimp's greater capacities of awareness, memory, and so forth. It should be clearer now that in certain moral situations regarding humans the most relevant consideration is the ability to suffer.

Consistency would then require that similar weight be given to equivalent suffering for whomever is threatened, be it a normal human, a severely retarded human, a chimpanzee, and so forth.

Being a self-conscious, rational, moral agent is not directly relevant to the justification of torture, just as being a good poet would not be directly relevant in justifying the employment of a mathematics professor. As Jeremy Bentham remarked nearly 200 years ago, "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?"¹²

If we accept, with respect to being caused unnecessary pain, that the ability to suffer is the most relevant moral consideration in determining the moral standing of severely retarded humans, then in order to be consistent we must also grant the same consideration to chimps and other animals capable of suffering. Thus, humanism can be rejected as a mistaken theory with respect

¹²Bentham [1789] ch. 17, section 1.

to the relevant differences between humans (or persons) and other sentient animals that could justify causing unnecessary suffering to the latter but not the former.

Two Kinds of Sentientism

Sentientism has been developed in two varieties: a utilitarian form, and a rights-based form. The prominent proponents of these two forms of sentientism are, respectively, Peter Singer, and Tom Regan.

Within a utilitarian sentientist framework the principle of utility declares that we should act in such a way as to bring about the greatest possible balance of good over evil (including pain over pleasure, satisfaction over dissatisfaction, and so on) of any being capable of these experiences. The utilitarian sentientist also holds that the suffering and pleasure (including other experiences of a sentient nature) of any being capable of these experiences is to be counted equally with the like experiences of any other being so capable.

The interests of many animals in not being made to suffer are comparable to the interests of humans in not being made to suffer. Singer believes, therefore, that if we employ the utilitarian sentientist approach to our ethical decision-making we will be forced to alter significantly the way that we treat animals.

If we give equal weight to the like interests of animals and humans, argues Singer, we should morally oppose raising animals for food and using them, as we presently do, in research. To do otherwise would make us guilty of what he calls 'Speciesism'. Analogous to racism, speciesism involves a preference for the interests of the members of our own species simply because they are members of our own species.

Rights-based sentientism maintains that many individual animals have interests sufficient for having rights. As with humans, the rights of animals imply that they have a claim to a certain kind of treatment that is owed to them, or is their due, and that the withholding of this treatment is considered a wrong and an injustice, and not simply a cause of damage.¹³ And just as children and certain incapacitated humans need not be able to claim their rights in order to have them--rather, they can be claimed on their behalf--so likewise animals need not be able to vocalize or comprehend their rights in order to have them. Rights are considered to provide a stronger moral claim than interests in the sense that they are not normally to be traded-off with another being's interests or overridden for the sake of the general welfare. That

¹³Feinberg [1974] p.50.

humans are the subjects of a life, or centres of consciousness with a good of their own is, according to Regan, the basis for ascribing inherent value to humans. It is further argued that on the basis of this inherent value it is a violation of the rights of humans to treat them solely in terms of whether they forward the aggregate pleasures of the group. "In particular, to harm human beings for the sake of the profit or pleasure of any group is to violate their right not to be harmed."¹⁴

Typically, rights-based sentientists do not try to demonstrate that humans have rights--a claim that is denied by some philosophers. Rather, they query whether if humans can be said to have rights, can animals then be said to have them also? Regan responds in the affirmative. His claim is that animals are also the subjects of a life that can be better or worse for them, and that animals exhibit behaviour which suggests that they have certain choice-preferences, pleasures and pains, and satisfactions and dissatisfactions which constitute their having interests in attaining a better life and avoiding a worse life. And further, according to Regan,

The satisfaction or realization [of these interests]...would appear to be just as

¹⁴Regan [1980] p.44.

intrinsically worthwhile, judged in themselves, as the satisfaction or realization of any comparable interest a human being might have.¹⁵

Much of the disagreement between Singer and Regan mirrors the disagreement within human ethics between utilitarians and deontological theorists. Deontological theorists often voice concern that utilitarianism can, theoretically, result in undeserved harm to individuals if the causing of this harm promotes overall utility. Utilitarian theories have been greatly refined in response to these concerns, and many rule-utilitarians argue that their theories can account for the concerns of rights-based theorists without invoking the language of rights. Within human ethics it is not clear that either side can yet claim victory in this debate, and this may likewise be the case in a sentientist-based ethics.

Utilitarian sentientism, it seems, casts a broader moral net than does rights-based sentientism in the sense that there may be sentient experiences that, although not sufficient for rights, are given consideration in the felicific calculus. On the other hand, rights-based sentientism would appear to provide stronger protection for the individual, in that it would not as readily allow for

¹⁵Regan [1975] p.201.

the individual's rights to be trumped on behalf of the aggregate utility.

I am not convinced that animals do have moral rights; but I am also concerned with the possibility of utilitarianism justifying harm to individuals for the benefit of the group, whether that group consists of humans, animals, or a combination of both. It may be that talk of interests, as opposed to rights, is more appropriate in relation to animals. But just how we ought to weigh competing interests, whether between individuals, or between an individual and a group still remains a difficult problem. There may be clear cut cases in which, for example, the interests of a bear in continued life and freedom from suffering would outweigh the interests of a hunter in experiencing the sense of accomplishment, or camaraderie with his fellow hunters, in tracking and killing a bear. On the other hand there are more difficult cases in which, for example, it must be decided whether it is justifiable to destroy the habitat of certain animals--the result being starvation, or some other form of death--in order to provide employment for people to maintain themselves and their families. It may be that we cannot always be certain what is the best course of action in these difficult situations, or what counts as sufficient

justification for overriding the interests of other beings. But it is a significant step forward to realize that moral justification is a requirement for overriding the interests of other sentient beings.

4. Vitalism

Vitalism is the theory of moral standing in environmental ethics which holds that all living things possess moral standing by virtue of being alive. According to vitalism, being alive is sufficient for moral standing. Vitalists argue that all living entities are teleological centres of life, which is to say that they are goal-oriented, and pursue their own good in their own unique manner.¹⁶ Any condition that promotes or permits a living entity to attain the goals toward which it teleologically aims is considered good for that entity, and any condition that hinders or prevents a living entity from attaining the goals toward which it aims is considered bad for that entity.

It is supposed that a living entity need not be interested in attaining its good in order for this attainment to be good for that entity. A fortiori, neither must a living entity have a conscious wish nor a desire to attain its good in order for the thing attained to be good for it. Vitalists argue that because something can be 'good for' a living entity this implies that that living

¹⁶Taylor [1986] p.45.

entity can have a 'good of its own'. Paul Taylor argues this point when he states that,

One way to know whether something belongs to the class of entities that have a good is to see whether it makes sense to speak of what is good or bad for the thing in question. If we can say, truly or falsely, that something is good for an entity or bad for it, without reference to any other entity, then the entity has a good of its own.¹⁷

It makes sense to say that mere things, i.e., rocks, sand, etc., differ from plants in that certain conditions can be better or worse for plants, but not for mere things.¹⁸ If someone were to destroy a rock garden or a neatly combed sand garden we would not say that the destruction is bad for the rocks and sand themselves, although the gardener might very well suffer. Similarly, a gardener might suffer if one were to trample on her flower garden. But in this case we would say that the trampling of the flowers, unlike the rocks and sand, is bad for the flowers themselves. When certain conditions are good for plants, it is indeed their own good to which we are referring. In this way it makes perfect sense to speak of

¹⁷Taylor. [1986] p.61.

¹⁸It may make sense to say that lubrication is good for a car engine, but what counts as good for a car engine depends on the intentions, interests, or desires of the humans who make or use cars. The good of plants, however, would seem to be independent of human intentions, interests, or desires, although this does not discount the possibility of humans having a contingent interest in the good of plants.

plants having a good of their own. But what is the moral significance, if any, of plants having a good of their own?

Health as a Good

One way to mark the distinction between biological entities and mere things is in terms of goal-directed systems:

. . . goal-directed systems are, roughly, those systems that have a tendency to maintain a state (the "goal" state) in the face of external and internal perturbations.¹⁹

The goal state that biological entities have a tendency to maintain is nothing other than what we would call the health of those entities. The more able an animal or plant is at maintaining this goal state the more healthy it is, whereas the less able an animal or plant is at maintaining this goal state the less healthy it is.

Environmental conditions, whether natural or human-made, determine to a great degree how difficult or easy it is for a living entity to maintain its metabolic equilibrium, or health. Certain environmental conditions can be better or worse for living entities, which certainly suggests that some conditions can be *good for* living entities, and others *bad for* it. But as the rock and sand garden examples illustrate, one cannot speak literally of something's being

¹⁹Bedau [1992] p.34.

good *for* a mere thing, in the sense that the thing itself will derive any benefit.

Mere things do not have metabolic goal-states, i.e., health. Since one cannot speak *literally* of the health or ill-health of things, it makes no sense to speak of something's being good or bad for them. Things have no optimal state of existence toward which they continually strive to maintain. Without this optimal state, i.e., health, toward which a thing strives, there is nothing against which to measure whether certain conditions are good or bad for them, literally speaking. Thus it is that mere things, whether natural or human artifacts, cannot have a good in any but a metaphorical sense. Of course, mere things can have an instrumental good (or bad) when what is done to (or with) them is good or bad for beings that can be benefited and harmed.

As pointed out, when speaking of plants it makes literal sense to speak of something's being good or bad *for* them. When something is good for a plant, what we mean (all that we *can* mean) is that the thing in question is conducive to the plant's health. Similarly, all that we can mean when we say that something is bad for a plant is that the thing in question is detrimental to the health of the plant. We can say, for example, that Dutch Elm Disease

is bad for Dutch Elm trees, or that stripping off the protective layer of bark from trees is generally bad for trees. Similarly we can say that light and water (in varying amounts) are good for Dutch Elm trees (as well as other plants). We do not speak metaphorically, analogously, or anthropomorphically, but literally, when we say that plants have varying degrees of health, and that certain conditions can be good for plants (conducive to their health), or bad for plants (detrimental to their health).

If we assume that health, as such, constitutes the good of plants,²⁰ does this then mean that the health of plants is morally significant? In order to get a clearer understanding of how (if at all) the health of plants is morally significant, it may be profitable to ask first why it is that the health of (most)²¹ animals is morally significant.

Health and the Good of Animals

As with plants, we can speak literally of animals being in good health, ill-health, or somewhere in between; in short, animals can have varying degrees of health.

²⁰Although G.E. Moore [1903] pp.42-44 considers it an open question as to whether health (defined as what is normal) is also good.

²¹I say "most" animals because there may be some very simple animals that are more like plants, so that my analysis of animals will not apply to them.

Consider dogs. We can say, for example, that exercise is good for dogs, in the sense that exercise is conducive to the health of dogs. Why, then, is health good for dogs? I would suggest the following answer: Health is good for dogs because it allows for the existence of experiences in the lives of dogs that are satisfying for dogs. Health enhances the experiential lives of dogs. This is not to say that the reason why health is good for dogs is because dogs value health. Rather, dogs experience satisfaction from the events in their lives that are engendered by being healthy. When dogs are healthy they are better able to do those things that give them pleasure, satisfaction and contentment. These might include such things as eating, playing, exploring, socializing, sleeping, and whatever else it is that constitutes a good life for dogs. Being unhealthy is bad for dogs because they are then less able (or unable) to do those things that give them pleasure, satisfaction and contentment. This lessened ability (or inability) invariably leads to dogs being dissatisfied, discontent, frustrated, or in pain.

In addition to certain states of affairs being beneficial for dogs, i.e., conducive to their health, we can also say that health itself is good for dogs precisely because it enables them to have more satisfactory

experiences than they would if they were unhealthy. In relation to plants we can say that,

A connexion with its survival [or health] can make something beneficial to a plant. But this is not, of course, to say that we count life [or health] as a good to a plant. We may save its life [or health] by giving it what is beneficial; we do not benefit it by saving its life [or health].²²

The distinction between being able to have experiences that are engendered by health (or ill-health), and not being able to do so, marks a difference between animals and plants. This distinction reveals the difference between merely having a good of one's own, and having a sake of one's own. On this account, plants cannot have a sake *for which* we can act by advancing their good (health), because no forms of experience accompany their being healthy. Without experiences nothing can matter to plants. Because of this I am led to believe that health (and continued life) is not a *good for* plants in any literal sense. Dogs, on the other hand, can have both a good of their own, e.g., health, and a sake of their own for which we can act. If we believe that it is necessary that something matter experientially to an entity in order for it to have interests in a sense that can create moral

²²Foot [1977] p.39. Brackets mine.

standing, then it would seem that plants cannot have moral standing.

Except for various forms of instrumental value, this distinction between something's being of the sort that has experiences that matter to it, and not being that sort of thing, marks the boundary between the moral and the non-moral world. This distinction marks the difference between those entities that can have interests of a kind that create moral standing and those that cannot.²³

It may help at this point to clarify what I mean by *matter*ing. I am not referring to anything necessarily as complex as having a set of values or norms. When I talk of something mattering to animals I do not mean that they have cognitive capacities such as attitudes or beliefs. When something matters to a being this means that it makes an experiential difference to that being. The paradigmatic example of something mattering to an animal is when an animal desires to avoid (or be free from) the unpleasant subjective state that we call pain.

In case one thinks that the distinction I have drawn between beings capable of having experiences that matter to them, and those that cannot is irrelevant and lacking in

²³I thank my thesis advisor, Earl Winkler, for pointing out this distinction.

moral significance, I will explain why I think this distinction is relevant and morally significant. As mentioned, the specific distinction drawn is between those beings for which the experiences engendered by health (or ill-health) matter, and those beings for which mattering is not possible. It should be pointed out that the experiences, or states of affairs, that matter to humans (and possibly certain other animals) need not be limited to those conditions that are engendered by health or ill-health. This is another way of saying that the experiences engendered by health need not be the only experiences that matter to humans (and possibly certain other animals). But when we talk of something being good for plants we can *only* mean that it is conducive to the health of plants, and nothing more. Since health is the only kind of good, and the only *apparent* normative predicate that can apply to *both* plants and animals, I restrict my argument to that of health.

Why, then, is it relevant and morally significant that the experiences, or states of affairs, engendered by health can matter to most animals, but not to plants?

The Needs of Plants and Animals

By way of explication, consider Joel Feinberg's talk of the purported relationship between having needs and

having interests.²⁴ He argues that mere things cannot have needs, and that when we say such things as 'the house needs cleaning,' or, 'the banjo needs tuning,' we are not talking literally about the house's needs or the banjo's needs. Rather, we are talking about a human's need for a clean house or a tuned banjo.

We can also talk of the needs of plants, e.g., plants need water, and the needs of animals, e.g., animals need water. In attempting to clarify what Feinberg sees as an ambiguity in the use of the word 'need' he explains that we can understand this word in either of two ways. When we say that "A needs X", argues Feinberg, we can mean either one of two things:

1. X is necessary to the achievement of one of A's goals, or to the performance of one of its functions, or
2. X is good for A; its lack would harm A or be injurious or detrimental to him (or it).²⁵

Feinberg then states that,

The first sort of . . . statement is value neutral, implying no comment on the value of the goal or function in question; whereas the second kind of statement . . . commits its maker to a value judgment about what is good or bad for A in the

²⁴Feinberg [1974] pp.53-4.

²⁵Feinberg [1974] p.53.

long run, that is, about what is in A's interests.²⁶

Feinberg thinks that the first statement can apply to plants, but the second statement cannot. I agree with Feinberg that the first statement is value neutral, and that it can apply to plants. His assessment agrees with my analysis of "health as a good," in relation to plants. Even though something can be *good for* plants, I argued, this can only mean that it is conducive to health, or as Feinberg puts it,

. . . necessary to the achievement of one of . . . [a plant's] goals, or to the performance of one of its functions.

It sounds odd to say that something is *good for* a plant, while insisting that this "good" is value neutral. If it is understood that "good for a plant" can only mean "conducive to the health of a plant," then what is being asserted is that what is conducive to the health of a plant is not *good for* a plant in the sense of its having a sake of its own, or in the sense of being in its experiential interest. Before I defend this claim it will help to clear up some of the confusion in Feinberg's second statement.

Feinberg's comment concerning the second statement suggests that the expression "good for" must imply

²⁶Feinberg [1974] p.53.

interests. He suggests that a being must have interests in order for the second statement to be meaningfully applied to that being.²⁷ I believe Feinberg is mistaken here, primarily because he does not distinguish between two different senses of the word 'good.' The first being 'good' in the sense of "conducive to health," and the second being 'good' in the sense of "it mattering to the being that those conditions engendered by health obtain." Thus it is that the expression "X is good for A," where A is a plant, *is* meaningful with regard to a plant's health, and should not be used to exclude plants as Feinberg has done. Further, in the second statement, Feinberg speaks of harm, detriment, and injury as being value judgments that would also exclude plants. It is important to be careful in using terms such as harm, detriment, and injury since on some accounts it is possible to use these expressions meaningfully in relation to plants.

Consider Kenneth Goodpaster's argument that sentience in not necessary for a being to have moral standing in its own right. Goodpaster argues that those views which claim that sentience is necessary for moral standing,

. . . are not plausibly supported, when they are supported at all, because of a reluctance to acknowledge in nonsentient

²⁷Feinberg [1974] p.54.

living beings the presence of independent needs, capacities for benefit and harm, etc.²⁸

These capacities for nonsentient needs, benefits and harms of plants do appear to be independent of their usefulness to humans in a way that distinguishes them from mere things or human artifacts whose benefits and harms are strictly instrumental to humans.

Certainly we can meaningfully use the term "detriment" in relation to plants. If we allow that some things, e.g., sun and water, are beneficial to plants, i.e., conducive to their health, then it certainly follows that the lack of those things, or certain things contrary to those things, e.g., poison, frost, etc., would be detrimental to plants, i.e., conducive to their ill-health. Likewise, those things that are detrimental to plants can be said to harm or injure them; not, of course, in the sense that plants *suffer* or *experience* harm or injury, rather, in the sense that they are conducive to the plant's ill-health. To *suffer* or *experience* harm, injury or detriment implies much more than that certain states of affairs are conducive to ill-health; it also suggests a felt effect that can matter to the being. Thus it would

²⁸Goodpaster [1978] p.60.

appear that everything contained within Feinberg's second statement can also apply to plants.

If Feinberg intended for harm, injury, and detriment to mean *suffering* or *experiencing* harm, injury, and detriment then I believe he was on the right track. What we should say is that if and only if the health (or ill-health) of plants, or the conditions engendered by the health (or ill-health) of plants, *matters* to plants themselves can they have interests in a strict sense. Since nothing can matter to plants then it follows that they cannot have interests of any moral significance, and that talk of the harm, injury, and detriment of plants can only be value-neutral so far as they are concerned. The same holds for the so-called "needs" of plants. The "needs" of a plant would simply be those things, e.g., sun and water, that would be conducive to a normal state of health for that plant. This, likewise, is a value-neutral term since it does not matter to the plant whether or not its "needs" are fulfilled. Thus it is that no claim of what is owed to plants in their own right can be made on the basis of their health alone. And since health is the only good that plants can have, no claims to certain kinds of treatment can meaningfully be made on behalf of plants,

and neither can they have interests in any strict sense, nor moral standing.

The Interests of Plants

Goodpaster, however, maintains to the contrary that plants do have interests when he states the following:

In the face of their obvious tendencies to maintain and heal themselves, it is very difficult to reject the idea of interests on the part of trees (and plants generally) in remaining alive.²⁹

If we accept Goodpaster's claim that plants can have interests (in remaining alive), then at the very least we now have two different kinds of interests: those of sentient beings, and those of nonsentient beings.

Goodpaster allows that the recognition of the interests of all living things does not mean that there are no differences in the degrees of moral significance between sentient and nonsentient interests.

But what are we to make of the so-called interests on the part of plants in remaining alive? Feinberg argues that if a being can have rights then it must be the kind of being that has (or can have) interests. In this case it may be better to replace talk of rights with that of moral standing. Although weaker than rights, moral standing implies direct moral considerability for the entity in

²⁹Goodpaster [1978] p.59.

question, and may provide a common conceptual ground between sentientists and vitalists. Feinberg identifies what he calls the interest principle which outlines two reasons why an entity must have interests in order to have rights. In the following I will substitute the term, "an entity with moral standing" for Feinberg's term, "rights holder". Thus it is argued that an entity with moral standing must be the kind of entity that can have interests for the following reasons:

(1) because an entity with moral standing must be capable of being represented and it is impossible to represent a being that has no interests, and (2) because an entity with moral standing must be capable of being a beneficiary in his own person, and a being without interests is a being that is incapable of being harmed or benefitted, having no good or "sake" of its own. Thus, a being without interests has no "behalf" to act in, and no "sake" to act for.³⁰

Despite some misgivings about Feinberg's use of the expressions, "having a good", and "being harmed and benefitted"--which on some accounts can apply to plants--it seems that he is essentially arguing for the view that in order for an entity to have interests there must be the capacity to experience. This seems to support the notion of having a "behalf" to act in, or a "sake" to act for. These kind of interests could be called sentient interests

³⁰Feinberg [1974] p.51.

because they are grounded in the *experiences* of benefit and harm.

Goodpaster maintains that their independent needs, and capacities for benefit and harm do indeed support the view that plants have interests, yet he acknowledges that plants may not experience anything in relation to their needs, benefits and harms. In support of this claim, Goodpaster takes Feinberg to task for holding that the discharging of the biological functioning of plants is assigned by human interests.³¹ In this, Goodpaster seems correct. Although the growth of certain plants can be in the interest of humans (and other sentient beings), it seems true that humans do not assign to plants their biological functioning. Indeed the discharging of these biological functions can take place independently of any human interests. I do not see, however, how we can conclude, as Goodpaster does, that it is then a matter of the plant's interests in discharging its biological functions. It may be that when there are no human or sentient interests at stake then there are simply no interests involved at all in a plant's growth and life. Or if it does make sense to talk of a plant's interests it is

³¹Goodpaster [1978] p.59.

hard to see how these interests can entail any moral considerations.

Feinberg argues further that interests must be compounded out of conations, and he then provides some criteria for conative life. These consist of such things as,

conscious wishes, desires, and hopes; or urges and impulses; or unconscious drives, aims, and goals; or latent tendencies, direction of growth, and natural fulfillments.³²

Robin Attfield finds some of Feinberg's criteria for conative life to be supportive of his claim that plants have interests. For plants do indeed have tendencies at certain times in their life cycle, and they have direction of growth as well as the ability to flourish after their own kind.³³ Attfield here takes Feinberg to be stating that latent tendencies, direction of growth, and natural fulfillments are *sufficient* conditions for having interests.³⁴ It is odd that Feinberg would offer these criteria as sufficient conditions for having interests when in the same essay he argues that plants cannot have interests.³⁵ Although it is always dangerous to guess an author's intention, I will hazard a guess that--based on

³²Feinberg [1974] pp.49-50.

³³Attfield [1981] pp.39-40.

³⁴Attfield [1981] pp.39.

³⁵Feinberg [1974] pp.51-5.

the tenor of the essay as a whole--Feinberg did not intend for these three criteria to be sufficient conditions for having interests. It seems more plausible that he considers these three criteria to be *necessary* conditions. In light of this concern it becomes less clear whether he intended for all of his criteria for having interests to be necessary conditions, or whether some are necessary, some sufficient, or some both necessary and sufficient. Regardless of Feinberg's intentions, it seems doubtful that latent tendencies, direction of growth, and natural fulfillments can be sufficient conditions for having interests that are of any direct moral significance.

Mark Johnson attempts to ground interests in wellbeing as when he states the following:

Those things that facilitate or contribute to our wellbeing are instrumentally good for us and are therefore in our interests. The concept of wellbeing does not presuppose a conception of the good, but is an empirical matter, determined in principle in terms of the nature of the entity concerned.³⁶

On Johnson's account, the empirical matter of a living entity's wellbeing has to do with the telos of that entity, i.e., the inherent nature of an entity that defines its identity and its effective functioning.³⁷ Wellbeing, as

³⁶Johnson [1991] p.145.

³⁷Johnson [1991] p.146.

applied to sentient beings suggests some measure of contentedness or at least a lack of discontent, something which is not identical to health or effective functioning. Rather, wellbeing in a sentient context is an experiential by-product of health or effective functioning. A plant's wellbeing, however, would seem to consist solely in its being healthy, or living in accord with its genetic programming. It is not clear how being healthy, as such, can be considered a ground for interests of a morally significant kind when there can be no experiential by-products of health that can matter to plants. It is even difficult to understand how health, as such, can be a ground for the morally significant interests of humans if there are no experiential by-products (or mattering experiences) had by humans that are engendered by health.

It may help to consider the case of the comatose human in order to better understand how it is that a being must have experiences that can matter to it in order to have interests deserving of any moral consideration. This analogy may help explain why I believe that simply being alive is not sufficient for having interests; or that if nonsentient beings can be said to have interests these are of no direct moral significance.

The Comatose Human

Consider a comatose human in a vegetative state with severe, irreversible brain damage. Assume that there is no possibility that this patient can ever come out of this vegetative state. The patient knows no comfort, discomfort, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, contentment, discontentment, satiation, frustration, pleasure, or pain. In short, nothing can matter to the patient as he is now. He has no experiences. It would seem that the patient, like the plant, has no interests, or at least none of a morally relevant kind.

Repulsive as this might seem initially, it does not mean that we may then do as we please with the living bodies of comatose patients, or that we have no obligations *concerning* these patients. We do not, however, have obligations directly *to* these patients, because they do not have interests of the relevant kind, since nothing matters to them:³⁸

We may be obliged to keep them alive [and treat their bodies with respect] to protect the sensibilities of others, or to foster humanitarian tendencies in ourselves, but we cannot keep them alive [or treat their bodies with respect] for their own good, for they are no longer

³⁸Although we most likely do have obligations to persons who give explicit instructions about what should be done in the event that they become human vegetables.

capable of having a 'good' of their own
[for their own sake].³⁹

The fact that certain therapies can improve the health of the body of the permanently comatose patient does not mean that the therapies are done for the sake of the patient, or that they are, strictly speaking, in the patient's interests, since neither health, nor the conditions engendered by health can matter at all to the patient. Plants are no different from the comatose patient in the sense that if nothing can matter to them then they cannot have morally relevant interests; they can have no "sake", and no moral standing.

If the permanently comatose patient had a broken leg, and a physician were to set and cast the leg, would we say that this procedure is in the interest of the patient (or the leg)? The patient or the leg has no experiences that can matter to him or it. Certainly the bone will mend itself according to the genetic instructions that relate to bone growth. But because this mending procedure can make no difference to the patient or the leg it is unclear exactly wherein lie the interests, or to whom or what they belong. Or if there are interests, it is unclear why they should be of any direct moral significance.

³⁹Feinberg [1974] p.61. Brackets mine.

This is also the most that one can say about plants. Simply because plants mend, have direction of growth, and are alive is no reason to think that they have an interest in mending, growing, or being alive any more than does the comatose patient or his leg have these interests. Again, if we want to refer to biological growth as somehow comprising interests it is unclear how they could create any obligations on the part of moral agents to give them consideration.

If a plant cannot have experiences that can matter to it then it becomes difficult to understand how it can be morally wronged or righted. Just as the capacity to be a moral agent is necessary in order for one to have moral obligations, so likewise the capacity to have experiences that matter seem necessary in order to have morally considerable interests, a good of one's own for one's own sake, and moral standing.

All of this may sound rather dogmatic, and one might feel that what is really needed is some grand overhaul in our conception of morality, a kind of "paradigm-shift" to a way of seeing all living things as endowed with interests of direct moral significance, and with moral standing. I, for one, have difficulty conceiving how this would be possible. Admittedly, my arguments do not establish

conclusively that there cannot be alternative understandings of what counts as sufficient conditions for an entity to have moral standing in its own right. Likewise, I have not proven that there could not be other outlooks that could count as moral outlooks with very different boundaries concerning what has moral standing. My approach to the question of moral standing takes as its starting point the traditional, conservative Western philosophical view that only humans or persons can have moral standing. It then attempts to work outward to sentientism by showing that humanism is inconsistent with our generally accepted moral conviction that it is wrong to cause needless suffering to *any* being capable of experiencing suffering. Moreover, it seems to me that any act that causes pain to another being requires good reasons or justification. In order to work outward to vitalism in this same manner the most plausible approach would involve providing good reasons for believing not simply that plants can be said to have interests in some sense, but that the satisfaction or not of a plant's interests matters somehow to the plant. I have not encountered any convincing arguments which show that health qua health of a plant matters or is morally significant in any way other than its being instrumentally conducive to experiential interests.

As mentioned above, I have not proven that there cannot be alternative conceptions of morality with very different boundaries concerning what has moral standing. Paul W. Taylor develops just such an alternative approach to environmental ethics. Taylor does not attempt to work outward from humanism to sentientism to vitalism; rather he argues that given a background of certain empirical facts from ecology it is reasonable to adopt a certain normative attitude of respect by which we can ascribe inherent worth to all living things.

Taylor's Vitalism

Taylor develops a type of vitalism that involves three elements: a belief-system, a moral attitude, and a set of rules or standards by which to govern our behaviour. Taylor's belief system is what he calls "the biocentric outlook". He considers the biocentric outlook to be a philosophical world-view that is greatly influenced by the science of ecology. This outlook sees all living things as part of a vast interconnected, unified order whose integrity and stability are necessary for promoting the good of the various biotic communities of which it

consists. The biocentric outlook involves four basic elements:⁴⁰

1. Humans are members of the community of life on the same terms as all of the nonhuman members.
2. The Earth's ecosystems are seen as a vast interconnected web in which the sound biological functioning of each being depends on the sound biological functioning of the others.
3. Individual organisms are conceived as teleological centres of life, pursuing their own good in their own way.
4. The claim that humans are, by their nature, superior, cannot be supported from the disinterested biocentric viewpoint.

Taylor believes that when moral agents adopt this non-normative biocentric outlook they will find the attitude of respect to be the most suitable attitude to adopt in relation to all of the living members of the earth's biosphere. Thus they will ascribe inherent worth to these living entities, and will see the promotion and protection of their good as intrinsically valuable. This attitude of the respect for nature is then manifested in

⁴⁰Taylor [1981] p.70.

rules and standards that govern our behaviour toward all living members of the biotic community.

Taylor acknowledges that he does not present an argument that shows his theory to be correct, and others incorrect. Rather, he asserts that,

the biocentric outlook recommends itself as an acceptable system of concepts and beliefs to anyone who is clear-minded, unbiased, and factually enlightened, and who has a developed capacity of reality awareness with regard to the lives of individual organisms. This, I submit, is as good a reason for making the moral commitment involved in adopting the attitude of respect for nature as any theory of environmental ethics could possibly have.⁴¹

Although I have no difficulty in accepting the empirically-informed biocentric outlook, I do find it difficult to understand why it is that we should then adopt the attitude of respect, and its accompanying moral commitments. Taylor hopes that when we recognize (among other things) that all living organisms are teleological centres of life that pursue their own good in their own way, we will then be persuaded to accept the normative attitude of respect toward these organisms. He believes that when we become familiar with the good of individual organisms we can develop an understanding of their point of view. By conceiving of organisms as centres of life,

⁴¹Taylor [1981] p.81.

Taylor believes one is then able to view the world from their perspective.⁴² And this perspective will in turn make it reasonable to adopt the normative attitude of respect.

I can conceive of how one can consider the perspective of animals. We can empathize with many of their experiences that contribute to or detract from their good. This ability to adopt the animal's perspective is particularly obvious when we see an animal, say, in pain, or quenching its thirst. But what could it mean to for us to look at the world from a plant's perspective? If an organism such as a plant has no subjective experiences then it seems that there is nothing it is like *to be* that organism, or nothing it is like *for* that organism.⁴³ How then can one take up the perspective of a plant when it does not have a perspective, or point of view of the world to begin with?

Taylor maintains that,

When considered from an ethical point of view, a teleological center of life is an entity whose "world" can be viewed from the perspective of *its* life. In looking at the world from that perspective we recognize objects and events occurring in its life as being beneficent, maleficent, or indifferent.⁴⁴

⁴²Taylor [1981] p.74.

⁴³Nagel [1979] p.166.

⁴⁴Taylor [1981] p.74.

Fortunately for Taylor nothing much hinges on the acceptance of the notion of an entity whose "world" can be viewed from the perspective of *its* life. We need not be able to "identify" with the life of, say, a plant. All that is required is that we can understand that all living things are centres of life with their own good.

More importantly, Taylor maintains that the biocentric outlook makes the attribution of equal intrinsic value for all living things most reasonable. But the whole biocentric outlook is so abstract and "removed" that it makes it at least equally reasonable to deny that any living thing has intrinsic value as to say that all living things have equal intrinsic value. Indeed, one can ask what the real difference is between all living things having equal intrinsic value and nothing having intrinsic value.⁴⁵ Taylor fails to adequately recognize that valuing requires some framework of needs and interests in relation to which values can be said to exist.

The moral outlook that seems most reasonable to me in terms of being consistent with our generally accepted moral convictions is one where sentience is required for moral standing. Although I am not prepared to argue that

⁴⁵I thank my thesis advisor, Earl Winkler, for pointing out the difficulties inherent in Taylor's attribution of equal intrinsic value to all living things.

vitalism or the moral attitude of respect for all living things are impossible moral outlooks, I nevertheless have some difficulty understanding these outlooks as *moral*. In spite of these concerns it is not clear that Taylor gives adequate reasons to make the jump from adopting the non-normative biocentric outlook to then adopting the attitude of respect which ascribes moral standing to *all* living organisms. Although it may not be irrational to adopt the moral attitude of respect in response to the biocentric outlook, it is not clear that the attribution of equal intrinsic value to all living things is as reasonable a move as Taylor suggests. It is certainly not irrational or unreasonable to accept the biocentric outlook while rejecting the attitude of respect. Indeed, if we reject the attitude of respect we cannot be charged with inconsistency in relation to either our generally accepted moral convictions, or the ecologically-informed biocentric outlook.

5. Further Expansion of the Moral Franchise

Just as vitalists attempt to expand moral standing beyond sentient interests to include all living things, others have attempted to expand moral standing beyond vitalism to include species, ecological systems, and some natural objects such as mountains and rivers. On my view, the plausibility of further moral expansion will depend upon whether we consider these objects to have morally significant interests.

Species

Most of us are familiar with laws enacted by governments designed to protect threatened and endangered species of plants and animals from extinction. Those of us who find the rapid rate of extinction of many species to be appalling, especially when profit is the main motive behind this destruction, will applaud conservation legislation. Whether or not species themselves can have moral standing is not a question with which legislators need necessarily concern themselves. It is often enough to consider that existing and future humans will be harmed by this rapid extinction, or that many humans may simply value maintaining biodiversity as a part of our human or cultural heritage. However, a question that has arisen in

environmental ethics is whether a species--as opposed to the individual members of the species--can have moral standing.

Holmes Rolston III argues that species do have moral standing. What exactly a species is, on Rolston's account, is not always clear but he does suggest that the obligations that moral agents have to a species are not to a class or a category, nor to an aggregation of sentient interests.⁴⁶ He refers to a species as a 'lifeline', and as a 'specific form'. He considers species to be "objectively real genetic forms"⁴⁷ that exist in time (but not in space), and further, as a kind of collection that is itself a separate and distinct whole whose qualities cannot be reduced to the aggregation of the qualities of the individual members of the species.⁴⁸

It is not difficult to understand the motivation for those arguments that aim to establish species as true objects of moral concern. If the equivalent interests of different individuals are to be given equal consideration then it would seem that the interests of individuals of an endangered species would have no greater claim to protection than those of a flourishing species when their

⁴⁶Rolston [1988] p.147.

⁴⁷Winkler [1991] p.187.

⁴⁸Rolston [1988] esp. pp.133-6.

interests are equivalent. For example, the interests in continued life, and freedom from unnecessary suffering would most likely be the same for a Bald Eagle, and a common urban pigeon. That a species is rare seems to have no bearing when considering the sentient or vital interests of the members of the species.

In support of the distinction between the interests of a species as a whole, and those of the aggregate of individual members of the species, Rolston argues the following:

Events can be good for the well-being of the species, considered collectively, although they are harmful if considered as distributed to individuals.⁴⁹

One often finds deer hunters using claims similar to this one in order to justify preserving the integrity of the herd or the species, by hunting the old and the sick. Whether deer hunters really do kill primarily the old and sick, and whether this justification for hunting can be maintained is not the point at issue. What is at issue is whether talk of the well-being of a species considered as distinct from the aggregate well-being of the members of the species is the most intelligible way to maintain this distinction. Rather than positing the existence of a

⁴⁹Fraser [1962] quoted by Rolston [1989] p.214.

species as an entity distinct from the aggregation of its members, I would argue that talk of the well-being of a species can be best understood as a statistical compilation of health indicators quantified over all of the individual members of the species. Moreover, when we talk of improving the species at the expense of individuals, this improvement is better understood as including in our statistical compilation the predicted health indicators of future individual members of the species.

In an attempt to impart some substance to his notion of species, Rolston argues that the *telos* is encoded in the genetic set, and that this is as much a 'property' of the species as it is of the individual members of the species. And further, he maintains that events can be beneficial at the species level, which is an additional consideration to whether they are beneficial to individual members of the species.⁵⁰ What Rolston fails to recognize is that it is not a species, as such, that is benefited at the expense of certain individuals, rather it is existing and future individuals that are the beneficiaries at the expense of certain existing individuals.

Rolston argues in some detail for his claim that a species is a kind of animate, dynamic form that does not

⁵⁰Rolston [1989] p.215.

exist in space, and whose existence is not reducible to that of its members. I believe that despite his imaginative efforts Rolston fails to make his case because he does not adequately explain what it could mean for conditions to be beneficial to a species (an abstract form on his account) apart from being beneficial to the collection of existing and future individual members of the species. The difficulty in arguing for the moral standing of a species lies in the fact that a species is nothing more than an abstract category--despite Rolston's assertion to the contrary--and abstract categories are not the kinds of things that can have interests or moral standing.

If we consider the well-being of a species to consist in the aggregate well-being of existing and future members--which I believe to be the most reasonable conception--we must then consider the status of the two categories of species: sentient, and nonsentient. If we reject the vitalist's claim that nonsentient living organisms can have a good which establishes direct moral standing, then no amount of aggregation of these goods can lead us to assert that a nonsentient species can have moral standing. If, on the other hand, we hold that sentient experience is required for an individual to have morally significant interests (the interests in not being harmed, and in

continued life), then there seems to be no reason why we cannot consider a sentient species to have moral standing, but only, however, in terms of the aggregate sentient interests of the individual members, present and future. In this sense, promoting the interests of a species can be seen as analogous with working toward bettering a human community in which the interests of the community are reduced to the collective interests of the individual members who comprise the community.

Ecological Systems and Natural Objects

The theory that ecological systems have moral standing can be interpreted in two ways: distributively, or collectively.⁵¹ The first view holds that the earth's ecological workings are comprised of many distinct and separate things, and it is these things themselves that have moral standing. The second view holds that these distinct and separate things comprise a whole, or a unified system, and it is this whole itself that has moral standing.

Since many of the distinct and separate things that make up the earth's ecological workings are nonliving natural objects, e.g., mountains, bodies of water, volcanoes, then, according to the distributive approach,

⁵¹Frankena [1979] p.11.

these natural objects would all have moral standing. This further expansion of ethics in its distributive form is explained by Rolston when he states the following:

If we now universalize "person," consider how slowly the circle has been enlarged fully to include aliens, strangers, infants, children, Negroes, Jews, slaves, women, Indians, prisoners, the elderly, the insane, the deformed, and even now we ponder the status of fetuses. Ecological ethics queries whether we ought again to universalize, recognizing the intrinsic value of every ecobiotic component.⁵²

We can certainly recognize the *instrumental* value of ecobiotic components in relation to how they contribute to the good of sentient subjects, but this is not what is being recommended. Even those vitalists who would ground interests and moral standing in the teleological good of nonsentient organisms would have difficulty recognizing what kind of moral value ecobiotic components could have other than their instrumental value to living entities.

Rolston realizes that nonliving natural objects do not have a *telos*, or end, toward which they strive. Yet he believes that we can recognize that these objects do have moral status when we consider what he calls "projective nature". It may be best to quote Rolston at length on this point:

We confront a *projective nature*, one restlessly

⁵²Rolston [1975] p.101.

full of projects--stars, comets, planets, moons, and also rocks, crystals, rivers, canyons, seas. The life in which these astronomical and geological processes culminate is still more impressive, but it is of a piece with the whole projective system. Everything is made out of dirt and water, stellar stuff, and funded with stellar energy. One cannot be impressed with life in isolation from its originating matrix. Nature is a fountain of life, and the whole fountain--not just the life that issues from it--is of value.⁵³

Although nature's astronomical and geological projects have culminated in life, they can just as easily culminate in death and destruction, to which one theory for the extinction of the dinosaurs attests. We may respect these processes in terms of wonder, or fear. Or we may value these processes as the instrumental precursors to the existence of sentient life, or even all life. But apart from instrumental value, or a respect grounded in awe, it is difficult to see how any kind of moral obligations can arise with respect to nonliving, nonsentient natural projects.

Rolston recognizes that we may value these natural projects or processes, but he also maintains that they have value in themselves.⁵⁴ It is difficult to know what to make of this claim. We may consider such things as pleasure, knowledge, and beauty to have intrinsic value, but that

⁵³Rolston [1988] p.197.

⁵⁴Rolston [1988] p.199.

does not mean that these things have value apart from the ability of beings who can value or experience them. It makes more sense to say that we value these things intrinsically (for what they are), rather than claiming that these things have some kind of value apart from any valuing or experiencing subject. When I intrinsically value some pleasant experience, a beautiful object, or having knowledge, this means that I value these things apart from any additional instrumental benefits that these things may impart--although I may value the instrumental benefits, this is an additional consideration to valuing something intrinsically. If, however, I do not value pleasant experiences, beautiful objects, or the possession of knowledge I cannot meaningfully be said to have morally wronged or transgressed the interests of pleasant experiences, beautiful objects, or items of knowledge. Likewise, if I do not value some nonsentient natural project I cannot be said to have morally wronged or transgressed the interests of that project. Whereas if it does not matter to me whether I cause unnecessary suffering to sentient beings, I can still be said to have transgressed their interests, and thus to have morally wronged them. With this distinction in mind it is difficult to see how a natural project can have any value

in itself apart from its being valued by this or that valuer.

If we consider the idea that it is the wholes or unified systems that have value in themselves, I believe that we will encounter much the same difficulty. I do not know how one might go about grounding moral concern for wholes, except insofar as they can be reduced to the interest of persons and sentient beings. One might argue using the analogy of a community of persons. It might be maintained that what counts as the moral good of the overall community is more than the sum of the moral good of its individual members, although this seems doubtful.⁵⁵ Even if we accept this analogy with possible emergent properties of community, it is hard to know how any unified system can have moral value in itself without the existence of *some* subjects within this natural community whose interests can be transgressed. Frankly, I do not see how one could maintain that unified systems or wholes have any direct moral status apart from the interests of sentient beings, whose lives are inexorably linked with the functioning of the unified system.

⁵⁵Frankena [1979] p.17.

Sentientism vs. Environmentalism

There is a conflict at the forefront of environmental philosophy between rights-based sentientists and environmentalists. The environmentalist sees the stability, complexity, and integrity of ecological systems as the indicator of the value of species and individual organisms, and as the measure of the rightness and wrongness of human actions. The environmentalist would be willing to sacrifice various individual sentient beings for the benefit of the ecosystem as a whole. On the other hand, the sentientist outlook, "is individualist in its moral focus, in that it treats the needs and interests of individual sentient beings as the ultimate basis for conclusions about right and wrong."⁵⁶ The sentientist would in principle be willing to sacrifice the integrity of the ecosystem for the sake of individual sentient beings. There is some concern as to whether these two positions are fundamentally incompatible.

Mary Anne Warren argues that these two positions are reconcilable provided each side is willing to make some compromises.⁵⁷ Warren is willing to accept that animals have a right to life, and a right to freedom from

⁵⁶Warren [1983] p.110.

⁵⁷Warren [1983].

unnecessary suffering, but that these rights are less stringent than the corresponding rights of humans. Warren suggests that the continued life of a human has greater intrinsic value than the continued life of an animal because human lives are worth more to their possessors.

She supports this view by suggesting that,

animals appear to lack the sorts of long-range hopes, plans, ambitions and the like, which give human beings such a powerful interest in continued life.⁵⁸

She does not deny that animals have a right to life, but rather that this right has less moral force, and can be overridden more easily than the corresponding human right to life.

Concerning the right to freedom from unnecessary suffering Warren recognizes that it is not clear that humans necessarily suffer more than animals. Although humans may be thought to suffer more because of the ability to anticipate and remember more clearly the anguish and torment of suffering, animals could similarly be thought to suffer more because they may be unable to recognize that the pain will eventually subside, and they may be unable to focus on other things in order to distract themselves somewhat from the experience of suffering. Since we cannot

⁵⁸Warren [1983] p.116.

be certain that human suffering is, on the whole, more intense than animal suffering we cannot accord humans a greater right to freedom from unnecessary suffering on this basis alone. Warren suggests, however, that there may be other reasons for regarding the human right to freedom from unnecessary suffering as more stringent than the corresponding animal right.

Warren argues that moral autonomy provides a reason for according humans a stronger right to freedom from suffering than animals.⁵⁹ Borrowing from a contractualist theory of morality, Warren points out the mutual advantage to moral agents when they agree to respect the interests of other moral agents on the stipulation that this respect will be reciprocated:

Thus, it is the possibility of *reciprocity* which motivates moral agents to extend *full and equal* moral rights . . . only to other moral agents. I respect your right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in part because you are a sentient being, whose interests have intrinsic moral significance. But I respect them as *fully equal to my own* because I hope and expect that you will do the same for me.⁶⁰

Warren examines a number of objections to her position, the most significant being the difficulty in accounting for the full and equal rights of those nonparadigm humans who, like

⁵⁹Warren [1983] p.119.

⁶⁰Warren [1983] p.119.

animals, lack moral agency. In terms of infants and children, Warren gives three reasons for assigning them stronger moral rights than animals.⁶¹ First, infants and children possess not just potential autonomy, but partial autonomy, in that they are already learning the things that will enable them to become fully autonomous moral agents. Second, we simply place great value on the lives and well-being of infants and children. And third, if we did not grant strong moral rights to infants and children they would most likely not grow up to become responsible moral agents.

Concerning those nonparadigm humans who are incurably senile or severely retarded Warren suggests some reasons why they should be extended stronger moral rights than animals. Although they lack the potential for moral autonomy, there may be friends and relatives who care for their well-being. They may have greater mental capacities than are apparent, and may, if cared for, gain or regain some measure of moral autonomy. And further, since someday we may become mentally incapacitated to some degree, we might be worried about our futures if we denied strong moral rights based upon mental incapacitation.⁶²

⁶¹Warren [1983] p.121.

⁶²Warren [1983] p.121-2.

A number of these reasons, provided by Warren, for ascribing stronger moral rights to nonparadigm humans than to animals have to do not with the interests of these humans themselves, but with our interests as fully autonomous humans. Warren refers to the rights that arise out of these instrumental concerns as *conferred* rights, in contrast to *natural* rights, which are based on the properties of the being itself. In relation to this distinction she argues the following:

The sentience of nonparadigm humans, like that of sentient nonhuman animals, gives them a place in the sphere of rights holders. So long as the moral rights of all sentient beings are given due recognition, there should be no objection to providing some of them with *additional* protections, on the basis of our interests as well as their own.⁶³

Warren's view that animals do not have rights of the same moral force as humans allows for cases in which these rights can be overridden for certain utilitarian or environmental considerations which would not be permissible in the case of human rights. If there is no alternative available--short of killing animals belonging to a flourishing species--in order to achieve what Warren calls a *vital goal*, such as the preservation of a threatened species, then the killing of these flourishing animals

⁶³Warren [1983] p.122.

would be justified.⁶⁴ Warren does not make it clear what exactly would count as a *vital goal*. Specifically, one is left wondering whether this should include, say, a threatened plant species that plays no obvious beneficial role in the stability of the ecosystem, the preservation of which is simply a matter of botanical curiosity. In such cases it is not clear that even the diminished rights of animals could justifiably be overridden.

Let us assume, however, that the conflict is between members of a threatened sentient species, and those of a flourishing sentient species. In this case Warren would appear to believe that the preservation of a threatened sentient species constitutes a *vital goal* such that its preservation would justify our killing members of the flourishing sentient species. But since the rights of the members of the threatened sentient species do not necessarily outweigh the rights of those of the flourishing sentient species, it must then be the rights of humans that would tip the scales in favor of those of the threatened species. Warren does not explain which human rights could justify such actions, and how these rights are related to *vital goals*. If human life and freedom from suffering are what is at stake in the preservation of the threatened

⁶⁴Warren [1983] p.126.

species then this could provide reasons that would justify killing members of the flourishing species. But would the human interest (I hesitate to call this a right) in the aesthetic or emotionally pleasant experience of observing, say, Bald Eagles be enough to tip the scales in favor of killing numerous Sea Gulls--a prolific and invasive species--in order to preserve these rare birds? This is not clear on Warren's account. Without clarifying which human interests (or rights) constitute vital goals, and which are trivial ones, it is hard to know to what degree Warren succeeds in attempting to bridge the gap between sentientism and environmentalism.

In addition to arguing for the diminished rights of animals in an attempt to bridge the gap between sentientists and environmentalists, Warren argues for the intrinsic value of the nonsentient elements of the ecosystem in order to bolster the environmentalist's position. Warren describes a hypothetical scenario designed to test our intuitions concerning whether nonsentient elements of the ecosystem have value apart from their instrumental value for sentient beings.

In Warren's thought experiment⁶⁵ a dangerous virus that will kill all animal life on earth (including humans)

⁶⁵Warren [1983] p.128-9.

in a matter of weeks has accidentally escaped from a laboratory. Furthermore there is another virus which would destroy all plant life if it were released, but this second virus would not begin to take effect until after the last animal is dead. This second virus could be released secretly so that no one would suffer, even from the knowledge that all plant life will be destroyed after the extermination of all sentient life. Further, we are to assume that there is no possibility that sentient life could ever re-evolve from plants, if the plants were not destroyed, and moreover, we may be certain that no sentient aliens would ever visit the earth. With these variables of her thought experiment in place, Warren considers the following:

The question is would it be morally preferable, in such a case, *not* to release the second virus, even secretly? If we tend to think that it would be, that it would certainly be better to allow the plants to survive us than to render the earth utterly lifeless (except perhaps for the viruses), then we do not really believe that it is only sentient--let alone only human--beings which have intrinsic value.⁶⁶

What are we to make of Warren's thought experiment?

My intuitions on this matter do not coincide with hers.

Indeed I think that there is no morally preferable or unpreferable way to proceed when it comes to releasing the

⁶⁶Warren [1983] p.129.

second virus. One of the variables in the thought experiment is that no one will suffer even from the knowledge that all nonsentient life will be destroyed. When I engage in the thought experiment, however, I am well aware that all nonsentient life will be destroyed, yet I am supposed to imagine that I would have no such knowledge of this destruction. I would guess that the difficulty in performing such mental contortions would account for my Warren-like intuitions, were I to have them. I do value the beauty, complexity, and integrity of nonsentient living things for the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual comforts they afford me and others. The fact that I value the existence of these experiences, and that they are accompanied by such strong feelings, could make it difficult to honestly imagine what it would be like to have no knowledge of the destruction of all nonsentient life while performing the thought experiment. But to the degree that I am psychologically able to hold all of the hypothetical variables of the experiment in place, and not allow any residual feelings to escape these fixed variables and creep back into my final intuitions, then I am led to believe that the release of the plant-killing virus is neither morally preferable nor unpreferable. And if I were to give as much weight to my intuitions as Warren gives to

hers, my beliefs would be that nonsentient living things do not have intrinsic moral value, but have only instrumental moral value insofar as they effect the conscious experiences of sentient beings.

Last Words

The rising interest in the field of environmental ethics would appear to reflect more than simply the curiosity of philosophers concerning the boundaries of moral standing and the limits of our obligations. There are pressing concerns and fears about the manner and degree of the exploitation of animals and the environment in order to feed the growth of industry, agriculture, and the human population. These concerns have given rise to a growing consciousness of our exploitive behaviours and their harmful effects. We find this growing consciousness manifested in a spectrum of practices from recycling and conservation to public policy lobbying and civil disobedience. The role played by environmental philosophers in addressing these concerns, although important, should not be overestimated. It is one thing to attempt to clarify concepts and principles, or to give reasons why certain behaviours are morally preferable to others, but it is quite another thing to expect that the reasoning of philosophers will be consistently reflected in

the actions of individuals, communities, corporations, and governments.

Although I defend the sentientist view of moral standing, I am given to admire the motivation behind the search for the justification of vitalism, and further moral expansion. In my attempt to work outward from humanism by remaining consistent with our firmly held moral convictions I find that I am unable to find room for the belief that the concept of moral standing is applicable to those entities lacking conscious experiences. Although I hold that we do not have moral obligations directly toward nonsentient entities, we certainly can have obligations *concerning* nonsentient entities. Those who seek to establish moral standing beyond sentient interests may not be satisfied with indirect obligations concerning nonsentient entities, yet I think approaching the problem in this manner will yield strong moral reasons by which to govern our actions. If the interests of sentient animals are given due moral consideration then certainly strong justification for the destruction of wilderness areas, especially habitat areas, would be required.

Human interests, it seems, may provide even stronger moral reasons for how we govern our actions. The ill-effects to existing and future humans of such things as

global warming, ozone depletion, and toxic waste are all matters of great moral concern, and if human interests are honestly taken into account we would find many of our present practices to be morally unjustifiable.

Furthermore, the emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual benefits that we derive from our experiences in wilderness areas--or even from simply knowing that there are pristine wilderness areas, though we may never experience them--provide further moral reasons for how we should govern our actions. The destruction of a particular wilderness area, or the extinction of a species, may do us no physical harm, but the fact that we value a wilderness or a species for the important, though often more subtle, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual benefits they provide us are good moral reasons for not destroying them.

It may be thought that talk of our common natural heritage, or of our feelings of connectedness to nature, or the preservation of animal habitats has been heard for some time but has not fared very well in stemming the tide of our exploitive practices. I would not deny this. However, I believe that the problem is not a matter of these being inadequate moral reasons for governing our actions, rather it is that the weight of these reasons has not been given their proper due in the deliberations of policy makers.

The problem, it would seem, is more one of politics, moral psychology, and sociology, rather than philosophy. If the history of abolitionists, civic rights workers, and Vietnam War protesters has taught us anything, it is that policy makers do not always weigh the interests of those affected by their decisions as they should. If the interests of sentient animals are honestly taken into account, as well as those of existing and future humans, and if further, our emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual interests are given just consideration then I think we may go a long way to achieving the goals of the vitalists, and the environmental expansionists.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined the question of what kinds of beings or entities can have moral standing in their own right. In Chapter 2 I briefly examined Christian theological ethics which holds that only humans have moral standing. I rejected this theory because it relies primarily on non-rational faith in the authority of religious scripture. I then considered a simple form of humanism which holds that it is membership in the human species that is necessary for moral standing. I rejected this theory because it does not adequately describe why membership in any group--whether it be a species, a race, or a gender--is relevant to moral standing. In relying upon membership as such, and not upon any unique characteristics or qualities of humans, simple humanism appears to be a theory that is too weak to adequately defend its conclusion. I then turned to a more sophisticated form of humanism which holds that only self-consciousness, rational, moral agents, i.e., persons, have moral standing. I argued that, although being a self-conscious, rational, moral agent is relevant to many of the moral relations between persons, it does not appear to be directly relevant to why we ought not cause unnecessary

suffering. That fact that suffering is bad for persons, and that it matters to persons that they not suffer are the main reasons we tend to give for not causing unnecessary suffering. These reasons apply to all sentient beings, and not only persons. For this reason self-consciousness, rationality, and moral agency appear to be irrelevant to moral standing, and thus sophisticated humanism is rejected.

In Chapter 3 I examined sentientism which holds that what matters for moral standing is the ability to have certain conscious experiences such as pain, pleasure, frustration, satisfaction, and so on. I argued that whether a moral agent is justified in according different treatment to a person than to an animal will depend upon the kind of treatment involved, and upon the relevant differences between animals and persons that could justify different treatment. Certain kinds of treatment such as the opportunity for employment, and the freedom to vote are relevant only to persons, and to exclude animals is not arbitrary discrimination. However, when it comes to such treatment as torture, i.e., causing unnecessary suffering, the relevant reasons that we give for not treating persons in this way are the same reasons we give for not doing so to animals. These reasons are, namely, that needless

suffering is bad for persons and animals, and that it matters to persons and animals that they not experience suffering. In order to further defend the view that being a self-conscious, rational, moral agent is not directly relevant to being caused unnecessary suffering I compared a chimpanzee with a severely retarded human. I argued that we do not tend to think it right to cause unnecessary suffering to severely retarded humans even though they are not self-conscious, rational, moral agents. The most relevant consideration for not harming severely retarded humans concerns their ability to suffer. I then argued that consistency requires that similar weight be given to equivalent suffering for whomever is threatened, be it a normal human, a severely retarded human, a chimpanzee, and so forth.

At the end of Chapter 3 I compared utilitarian and rights-based sentientism, specifically the views put forward by Peter Singer and Tom Regan, respectively. I explained that utilitarian sentientism casts a broader moral net in that it takes into account various sentient experiences that, although not sufficient for rights, are still deserving of moral consideration. On the other hand, rights-based sentientism would appear to provide more protection for the individual in that it would not as

readily allow for the individual's rights to be trumped on behalf of the aggregate utility. Although I did not commit myself to endorsing either form of sentientism over the other, I suggested that talk of interests, rather than rights, may be more appropriate in relation to animals. I did, however, contend that sentientism in general is the most compelling theory for moral standing in environmental ethics.

Chapter 4 examined the theory of vitalism which holds that all living beings possess moral standing by virtue of being alive. Vitalists argue that because conditions can be better or worse for nonsentient living beings, i.e., plants, that these beings have a good of their own--apart from their instrumental value to others--and that this good is considered sufficient for moral standing. I argued against vitalism by showing that what we mean when we say that certain conditions are good or bad for plants is that these conditions are either conducive or detrimental to the health of plants. I then argued that the reason why we consider health to be good for *animals* is because it allows for experiences in their lives which are satisfying to them. Since plants are incapable of having experiences that are engendered by being healthy, I concluded that health as such is not a good for plants, and we thus have

no moral obligation to promote the health (or good), or refrain from promoting the ill-health (or bad), of plants.

I then considered a number of arguments which attempt to show that plants have interests sufficient for moral standing because they can be benefited and harmed, or have latent tendencies, direction of growth, and natural fulfillments, or that they heal and maintain themselves, or that they have a wellbeing. I argued against these views by maintaining that because plants are incapable of having experiences that can matter to them, i.e., a sake of their own, it is unclear how exactly they can be morally wronged or righted, have morally significant interests, or moral standing. I was willing to grant the possibility that various aspects of biological growth can somehow comprise interests on the part of plants, but that these interests are not of a morally significant kind, and do not create any obligations on the part of moral agents to give them consideration.

I conceded that I do not prove conclusively that plants cannot have moral standing, and that there cannot be alternative conceptions of morality with very different boundaries concerning what has moral standing. With that in mind I turned to the alternative approach to environmental ethics developed by Paul W. Taylor.

Taylor develops a type of vitalism that involves three elements: a belief-system, a moral attitude, and a set of rules or standards by which to govern our behaviour. Taylor calls his belief system *the biocentric outlook*. He considers the biocentric outlook to be a philosophical world-view that is greatly influenced by the science of ecology. This outlook sees all living things as part of a vast interconnected, unified order whose integrity and stability are necessary for promoting the good of the various biotic communities of which it consists.

Taylor believes that when moral agents adopt this non-normative biocentric outlook they will find what he calls *the attitude of respect* to be the most suitable attitude to adopt in relation to all of the living members of the earth's biosphere. And thus they will ascribe inherent worth to these living entities, and will see the promotion and protection of their good as intrinsically valuable. Taylor does not present his theory as the correct one, while others are incorrect, rather he maintains that if we accept the ecologically-informed biocentric outlook then the adoption of the moral attitude of respect will be as reasonable as the adoption of any other theory in environmental ethics.

An important aspect of Taylor's theory emphasizes the understanding that all living things are teleological centres of life with their own good. That a living thing is a teleological centre of life is, on Taylor's account, a non-normative factual claim. Whereas the claim that a living thing has a good of its own appears to carry some normative weight for Taylor, or at least he considers it a reasonable non-normative basis for a normative attitude. I argued that Taylor's account does not provide compelling reasons for making the transition from accepting the view that plants can have a good, i.e., health, to then adopting the normative attitude of respect. I also argued against Taylor's claim that the biocentric outlook makes the attribution of equal intrinsic value to all living things most reasonable. Although I accepted that it is not irrational to adopt the normative attitude of respect for nature given the non-normative biocentric outlook, it appears that adopting this attitude is not clearly and obviously as reasonable as Taylor would have us believe.

In Chapter 5 I examined attempts to further expand the moral franchise in order to establish the moral standing of species, ecological systems, and natural objects such as rivers and mountains.

I considered the view put forward by Holmes Rolston III that species have moral standing, and that this standing is not simply the aggregation of the interests of the individual members of the species. I argued that Rolston fails to adequately explain what it could mean for conditions to be beneficial to a species apart from being beneficial to the collection of existing and future individual members of the species. I maintained that a species is an abstract category and cannot, as such, be the kind of thing that can have moral standing.

I then considered the view that ecological systems and certain natural objects can have moral standing. I argued that ecological systems and natural objects can only have *instrumental* moral standing insofar as they contribute to the morally significant interests of sentient beings.

Next I considered the attempt by Mary Anne Warren to reconcile two apparently incompatible positions: rights-based sentientism and environmentalism. The former view could, in principle, allow for the sacrifice of the integrity and stability of certain biosystems in order to protect the rights of animals. Whereas the latter view could allow for the sacrifice of animals in order to maintain certain biosystems. Warren first argues that, although animals have certain rights, these rights have

less moral force than the corresponding human rights, and that they can be overridden--in a way that human rights cannot--in order to protect certain *vital goals* of a utilitarian and environmental nature.

Warren provides good reasons for attributing less stringent moral rights to animals than to humans. However, she fails to adequately explain what would count as a *vital goal* that would allow us to override the rights of animals. Whether these vital goals must bear some relation to the human rights to life, and freedom from suffering, or whether they need only be grounded in the human interest in pleasant aesthetic and emotional experiences is not clarified. Without further explanation of what a vital goal is, it is difficult to assess in what circumstances the killing of animals would be justified.

Secondly, Warren presents a thought experiment designed to show that our intuitions are such that we do indeed consider nonsentient living parts of the ecosystem to have intrinsic value independently of their value to human or other sentient life. Her scenario involves two viruses: one that would kill all sentient life (including humans), and one that would kill all nonsentient life. If both viruses were released, the one that kills nonsentient life would not begin to take effect until after all

sentient life had been destroyed. She concludes that it would be morally preferable not to release the second virus even though no sentient interests would be at stake, and even though no one would ever know that the second virus had been released.

Concerning this thought experiment, Warren and I simply have conflicting intuitions on the matter. Without a more substantial argument for the intrinsic value of nonsentient life, I conclude that rights-based sentientism and environmentalism are not completely compatible, even though Warren may have narrowed the gap somewhat by arguing for the diminished rights of animals.

Finally, I expressed my sympathy with the motivation behind vitalism and further moral expansion although I do not think the arguments succeed in establishing moral standing beyond sentient interests. I maintained that we can achieve many of the goals of vitalism and further moral expansion without adopting these theories. I argued that we have compelling moral reasons to protect wilderness areas if the interests of sentient beings, as well as the interests in life and freedom from suffering of existing and future humans, are honestly given proper moral consideration. Furthermore, I maintained that the human interest in the benefits of valuable emotional, aesthetic,

and spiritual experiences afforded by our relationships with natural environments provides additional moral reasons for the protection and promotion of these environments.

Bibliography

- Aquinas, Saint Thomas [1918] *Summa Theologica*, trans. English Dominican Fathers. Benziger Brothers.
- Attfield, Robin [1981] "The Good of Trees", *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 15, 1981, 35-54.
- Bedau, Mark [1992] "Goal-Directed Systems and the Good", *The Monist*, Vol. 75.
- Bentham, Jeremy [1789] *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*.
- Callicott, J. Baird and Michael E. Zimmerman . . . [et al.] (eds). [1993] *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Feinberg, Joel [1974] "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations", in *Philosophy and Environmental Crisis*, Blackstone, William T. (ed). Athens: University of Georgia Press, 43-68.
- Feinberg, Joel (ed). [1984] *The Problem of Abortion*, second edition, Belmont, California: Wadsworth.
- Foot, Philippa [1977] "Euthanasia", in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, 33-61. Originally published in

Philosophy and Public Affairs, Vol. 6, No. 2, Winter 1977. Page references are to the former.

Frankena, W.K. [1979] "Ethics and the Environment", in *Ethics and Problems of the 21st Century*, Goodpaster, K.E. and K.M. Sayre (eds). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 3-20.

Fraser, G.R. [1962] "Our Genetic 'Load.' A Review of Some Aspects of Genetic Variation", *Annals of Human Genetics*, 25 (1962), 387-415, quoted by Holmes Rolston III [1989] *Philosophy Gone Wild*, Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

Goodpaster, Kenneth E. [1978] "On Being Morally Considerable", in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, Zimmerman, Michael E. and J. Baird Callicot . . . [et al.] (eds). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993, 49-65. Originally published in *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXV, 6 (June 1978), 308-25.

Goodpaster, Kenneth E. and K.M. Sayre (eds). [1979] *Ethics and Problems of the 21st Century*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Johnson, Lawrence, E. [1991] *A Morally Deep World: An Essay on Moral Significance and Environmental Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kant, Immanuel [1963] "Duties to Animals and Spirits", in *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield. New York: Harper and Row.

Moore, G.E. [1903] *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nagel, Thomas [1979] "What is it Like to be a Bat?" in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 165-80.

Rachels, James [1990] *Created from Animals; the Moral Implications of Darwinism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Regan, Tom [1975] "Do Animals Have a Right to Life?", in *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Regan, Tom and Peter Singer (eds). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976, 197-204. Originally from "The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism", *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, October, 1975. Page references are to the former.

Regan, Tom [1980] "Animal Rights, Human Wrongs", in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, Zimmerman, Michael E. and J. Baird Callicot . . . [et al.] (eds). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993, 33-48. Originally published in *Environmental ethics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 1980), 99-120.

Regan, Tom [1982] *All That Dwell Therein*, Berkeley:
University of California Press.

Regan, Tom [1983] *The Case for Animal Rights*, Berkeley:
University of California Press.

Rolston, Holmes III [1975] "Is There an Ecological
Ethic?", *Ethics*, 85 (Spring 1975).

Rolston, Holmes III [1988] *Environmental Ethics: Duties
to and Values in the Natural World*, Philadelphia:
Temple University Press.

Rolston, Holmes III [1989] *Philosophy Gone Wild*, Buffalo:
Prometheus Books.

Russow, Lilly-Marlene [1981] "Why do Species Matter?", in
People, Penguins and Plastic Trees, Van De Veer,
Donald and Christine Pierce (eds). Belmont,
California: Wadsworth, 1986, 119-126. Originally
published in *Environmental Ethics*, Vol.3 (Summer 1981)
101-112.

Singer, Peter [1975] *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for
Our Treatment of Animals*, New York: Avon Books.

Singer, Peter and Tom Regan (eds). [1976] *Animal Rights
and Human Obligations*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice
Hall.

Singer, Peter [1979] "Not for Humans Only: The Place

- of Nonhumans in Environmental Issues", in *Ethics and Problems of the 21st Century*, Goodpaster, K.E. and K.M. Sayre (eds). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 191-206.
- Singer, Peter (ed). [1985] *In Defense of Animals*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Stone, Christopher D. [1974] *Should Trees Have Standing?* Los Altos, California: William Kaufmann.
- Taylor, Paul W. [1981] "The Ethics of Respect for Nature", in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, Zimmerman, Michael E. and J. Baird Callicot . . . [et al.] (eds). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993, 66-83. Originally published in *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 1981), 197-218.
- Taylor, Paul W. [1986] *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Van De Veer, Donald and Christine Pierce (eds). [1986] *People, Penguins and Plastic Trees*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth.
- Warnock, G.J. [1971] *The Object of Morality*, London: Methuen & Co.
- Warren, Mary Anne [1983] "The Rights of the Nonhuman

World", in *Environmental Philosophy*, Elliot, Robert and Arran Gare (eds). Pennsylvania State University Press, 109-134.

Winkler, Earl [1991] review of *Philosophy Gone Wild*, by Holmes Rolston III, *Dialogue* (Book Reviews) Vol. XXX, No. 1-2, 184-189.