THE NARRATIVES

N. SCOTT MOMADAY

"Native American Attitudes toward the Environment"

About the Author: N. Scott Momaday is the author of numerous works, including *House Made of Dawn* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain.*

About the Article: In an informal context, Mr. Momaday discusses the ways in which Native Americans understand their relationship to the natural environment. He focuses on several key ideas: the ways in which the relationship between human beings and the environment is one of mutual appropriation, the ways in which Native Americans understand what an "appropriate" relationship is between a person and the environment, and the important role played by imagination in understanding these issues.

As You Read, Consider This:

1. How does Mr. Momaday use stories to develop his ideas? Would you draw the same conclusions from his stories that Mr. Momaday does?
2. What does Mr. Momaday mean by "appropriateness"?

The first thing to say about the Native American perspective on environmental ethics is that there is a great deal to be said. I don't think that anyone has clearly understood yet how the Indian conceives of himself in relation to the landscape. We have formulated certain generalities about that relationship, and the generalities have served a purpose, but they have been rather too general. For example, take the idea that the Indian reveres the earth, thinks of it as the place of his origin and thinks of the sky also in a personal way. These statements are true. But they can also be misleading because they don't indicate anything about the nature of the relationship which is, I think, an intricate thing in itself.

I have done much thinking about the "Indian worldview," as it is sometimes called. And I have had some personal experience of Indian religion and Indian societies within the framework of a worldview. Sometime ago I wrote an essay entitled "An American Land Ethic" in which I tried to talk in certain ways about this idea of a Native American attitude toward the landscape. And in that essay I made certain observations. I tried to express the notion first that the Native American ethic with respect to the physical world is a matter of reciprocal appropriation: appropriations in which man invests himself in the landscape, and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience. That suggests a dichotomy, or a paradox, and I think it is a paradox. It is difficult to understand a relationship which is defined in these terms, and yet I don't know how better to define it.

Secondly, this appropriation is primarily a matter of the imagination. The appropriation is realized through an act of the imagination which is moral and kind. I mean to say that we are all, I suppose, at the most fundamental level what we imagine ourselves to be. And this is certainly true of the American Indian. If you want a definition, you would not go, I hope, to the stereotype which has burdened the American Indian for many years. He is not that befeathered spectacle who is always chasing John Wayne across the silver screen. Rather, he is someone who thinks of himself in a particular way and his idea comprehends his relationship to the physical world, among other things. He imagines himself in terms of that relationship and others. And it is that act of the imagination, that moral act of the imagination, which I think constitutes his understanding of the physical world.

Thirdly, this imagining, this understanding of the relationship between man and the landscape, or man and the physical world, man and nature, proceeds from a racial or cultural experience. I think his attitude

N. Scott Momaday, "Native American Attitudes toward the Environment," *Seeing with a Native Eye: Essays on Native American Religion*, edited by Walter Holden Capps (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 79–85.

toward the landscape has been formulated over a long period of time, and the length of time itself suggests an evolutionary process perhaps instead of a purely rational and decisive experience. Now I am not sure that you can understand me on this point; perhaps I should elaborate. I mean that the Indian has determined himself in his imagination over a period of untold generations. His racial memory is an essential part of his understanding. He understands himself more clearly than perhaps other people, given his situation in time and space. His heritage has always been rather closely focused, centered upon the landscape as a particular reality. Beyond this, the Native American has a particular investment in vision and in the idea of vision. You are familiar with the term "vision quest" for example. This is another essential idea to the Indian worldview, particularly that view as it is expressed among the cultures of the Plains Indians. This is significant. I think we should not lose the force of the idea of seeing something or envisioning something in a particular way. I happen to think that there are two visions in particular with reference to man and his relationship to the natural world. One is physical and the other is imaginative. And we all deal in one way or another with these visions simultaneously. If I can try to find an analogy, it's rather like looking through the viewfinder of a camera, the viewfinder which is based upon the principle of the split image. And it is a matter of trying to align the two planes of that particular view. This can be used as an example of how we look at the world around us. We see it with the physical eye. We see it as it appears to us, in one dimension of reality. But we also see it with the eye of the mind. It seems to me that the Indian has achieved a particularly effective alignment of those two planes of vision. He perceives the landscape in both ways. He realizes a whole image from the possibilities within his reach. The moral implications of this are very far-reaching. Here is where we get into the consideration of religion and religious ideas and ideals.

There is another way in which I think one can very profitably and accurately think of the Indian in relation to the landscape and in terms of his idea of that relationship. This is to center on such a word as *appropriate*. The idea of "appropriateness" is central to the Indian experience of the natural world. It is a fundamental idea within his philosophy. I recall the story told to me some years ago by a friend, who is not himself a Navajo, but was married for a time to a Navajo girl and lived with her family in Southern Utah. And he said that he had been told this story and was passing it on to me. There was a man living in a remote place on the Navajo reservation who had lost his job and was having a difficult time making ends meet. He had a wife and several children. As a matter of fact, his wife was expecting another child. One day a friend came to visit him and perceived that his situation was bad. The friend said to him "Look, I see that you're in tight straits, I see you have many mouths to feed, that you have no wood and that there is very little food in your larder. But one thing puzzles me. I know you're a hunter, and I know, too, there are deer in the mountains very close at hand. Tell me, why don't you kill a deer so that you and your family might have fresh meat to eat?" And after a time the man replied, "No, it is inappropriate that I should take life just now when I am expecting the gift of life."

The implications of that idea, and the way in which the concept of appropriateness lies at the center of that little parable is a central consideration within the Indian world. You cannot understand how the Indian thinks of himself in relation to the world around him unless you understand his conception of what is appropriate; particularly what is morally appropriate within the context of that relationship.

Question: Could you probe a little deeper into what lies behind the idea of appropriate or inappropriate behavior regarding the natural world. Is it a religious element? Is it biological or a matter of survival? How would you characterize what makes an action appropriate or inappropriate?

Momaday: It is certainly a fair question but I'm not sure that I have the answer to it. I suspect that whatever it is that makes for the idea of appropriateness is a very complex thing in itself. Many things constitute the idea of appropriateness. Basically, I think it is a moral idea as opposed to a religious one. It is a basic understanding of right within the framework of relationships, and, within the framework of that relationship I was talking about a moment ago, between man and the physical world. That which is appropriate within this context is that which is *natural*. This is another key word. My father used to tell me of an old man who has lived a whole life. I have often thought of this image. The old man used to come to my grandfather's house periodically to pay visits, and my father has very vivid recollections of this man whom I never knew. But his name was Chaney. Father says that Chaney would come to the house and he would make himself perfectly at home. He would be passing by going from one place to another, exercising

his ethnic prerogative for nomadism. But he would make my grandfather's house a kind of resting place. He stayed there on many occasions. My father says that every morning when Chaney was there as a guest he would get up in the first light, paint his face, go outside, face the east, and bring the sun out of the horizon. Then he would pray. He would pray aloud to the rising sun. He did that because it was appropriate that he should do that. He understood. Or perhaps I should say that in terms of his own understanding, the sun was the origin of his strength. He understood the sun, within a more formal religious context, similar to the way someone else understands the presence of a deity. And in the face of that recognition, he acted naturally or appropriately. Through the medium of prayer, he returned some of his strength to the sun. He did this everyday. It was a part of his daily life. It was as natural and appropriate to him as anything could be. There is in the Indian worldview this kind of understanding of what is and what is not appropriate. It isn't a matter of intellection. It is respect for the understanding of one's heritage. It is a kind of racial memory and it has its origin beyond any sort of historical experience. It reaches back to the dawn of time.

Question: When talking about vision, you said that the Indians saw things physically and also with the eye of the mind, I think this is the way you put it. You also said that this was a whole image, and that it had certain moral implications. Would you elaborate further?

Momaday: I think there are different ways of seeing things. I myself am particularly interested in literature, and in the traditions of various peoples, the Indians in particular. I understand something of how this works within the context of literature. For example, in the nineteenth century in America, there were poets who were trying very hard to see nature and to write about it. This is one kind of vision. They succeeded in different ways, some succeeding more than others. They succeeded in seeing what was really there on the vision plain of the natural world and they translated that vision, or that perception of the natural world, into poetry. Many of them had a kind of scientific training. Their observations were trained through the study of botany, astronomy, or zoology, etc. This refers, of course, to one kind of vision.But, obviously, this is not the sort of view of the landscape which characterizes the Indian world. His view rather is of a different and more imaginative kind. It is a more comprehensive view. When the Native American looks at nature, it isn't with the idea of training a glass upon it, or pushing it away so that he can focus upon it from a distance. In his mind, nature is not something apart from him. He conceives of it, rather, as an element in which he exists. He has existence within that element, much in the same way we think of having existence within the element of air. It would be unimaginable for him to think of it in the way the nineteenth century "nature poets" thought of looking at nature and writing about it. They employed a kind of "esthetic distance," as it is sometimes called. This idea would be alien to the Indian. This is what I meant by trying to make the distinction between two sides of a split image.

Question: So then, presumably in moral terms, the Indian would say that a person should not harm nature because it's something in which one participates oneself.

Momaday: This is one aspect of it. There is this moral aspect, and it refers to perfect alignment. The appropriation of both images into the one reality is what the Indian is concerned to do: to see what is really there, but also to see what is *really* there. This reminds me of another story. It is very brief. It was told to me by the same fellow who told me about the man who did not kill the deer. (To take a certain liberty with the title of a novel that I know well.) He told me that while he himself was living in southern Utah with his wife's family, he became very ill. He contracted pneumonia. There was no doctor, no physician nearby. But there was a medicine man close at hand. The family called in a diagnostician (the traditional thing to do), who came and said that my friend was suffering from a particular malady whose cure would be the red-ant ceremony. So a man who is very well versed in that ceremony, a seer, a kind of specialist in the red-ant ceremony, came in and administered it to my friend. Soon after that my friend recovered completely. Not long after this he was talking to his father-in-law, and he was very curious about what had taken place. He said, "I wonder about the red-ant ceremony. Why is it that the diagnostician prescribed that particular ceremony for me?" His father-in-law looked at him and said, "Well, it was obvious to him that there were red ants in your system, and so we had to call in a seer to take the red ants out of your system." At this point, my friend became very incredulous, and said, "Yes, but surely you don't mean that there were red ants inside of me." His father-in-law looked at him for a moment, then said, "Not ants, but ants." Unless you understand this distinction, you might have difficulty understanding something about the Indian view of the natural world.

READING

Endnote

This paper was adapted from transcriptions of oral remarks Professor Momaday made on this subject, informally, during a discussion with faculty and students.

Journal/Discussion Questions

✍ *Mr. Momaday suggests that "appropriateness" is a central concept in terms of which Native Americans understand their relationship to the natural world. In your own life, what role—if any—does this notion play in your understanding of your own relationship to the natural world. Does this concept shed light on any parts of your experience that you hadn't reflected on before?*

1. Explain what Mr. Momaday means by appropriateness. How could this idea be used to develop environmental policies?
2. Think about the way in which Mr. Momaday responds to questions. He usually tells a story. What does this suggest about the way in which Native Americans maintain and transmit moral wisdom? How does this relate to the role of imagination?

EDWARD O. WILSON

"Apocalypse Now: A Scientist's Plea for Christian Environmentalism"

About the Author: *Edward O. Wilson is a Harvard biologist, the founder of a discipline called sociobiology which studies behavior—including human behavior—within an evolutionary biological framework. His book Sociobiology: A New Synthesis (originally published in 1975, updated in 2000) defined the field, and his book On Human Nature (1979) presented it to a wider, nonscientific audience. Among many other honors, he has twice won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction and has also been awarded the National Medal of Science. Among many other issues, he has been concerned with the sociobiological foundations of altruism. He was born in Birmingham, Alabama.*

About the Article: *Wilson is known as a secular humanist, and has often been criticized by some on the religious right for his views. In this letter to an imagined Southern Baptist pastor and to the larger evangelical community, Wilson attempts to find common ground with some of his traditional critics.*

As You Read, Consider These Questions:

1. *In the opening paragraphs, Wilson states what separates him from the Southern Baptist pastor, but also discusses that which they may share. If you were to add your voice to this discussion, which things would you share with Wilson? With the pastor?*
2. *What does Wilson mean when he asks whether he and the pastor "can meet on the near side of metaphysics"?*
3. *What does Wilson present as a "universal value." What is it that makes this value universal?*

Dear Pastor,

We have not met, yet I feel I know you well enough to call you a friend. First of all, we grew up in the same faith. As a boy, I, too, answered the altar call; I went under the water. Although I no longer belong to that faith, I am confident that, if we met and spoke privately of our deepest beliefs, it would be in a spirit of mutual respect and goodwill. I know we share many precepts of moral behavior. Perhaps it also matters that we are both Americans and, insofar as it might still affect civility and good manners, we are both Southerners.

I write to you now for your counsel and help. Of course, in doing so, I see no way to avoid the fundamental differences in our worldviews. You are a strict interpreter of Christian Holy Scripture; I am a secular humanist. You believe that each person's soul is immortal, making this planet a waystation to a second, eternal life; I think heaven and hell are what we create for ourselves, on this planet. For you, the belief in God made flesh to save mankind; for me, the belief in Promethean fire seized to set men free. You have found your final truth; I am still searching. You may be wrong; I may be wrong. We both may be partly right.

Do these differences in worldview separate us in all things? They do not. You and I and every other human being strive for the same imperatives of security, freedom of choice, personal dignity, and a cause to believe in that is larger than ourselves. Let us see, then, if we can meet on the near side of metaphysics in order to deal with the real world we share. You have the power to help solve a great problem about which I care deeply. I hope you have the same concern. I suggest that we set aside our differences in order to save the Creation. The defense of living nature is a universal value. It doesn't rise from, nor does it promote, any religious or ideological dogma. Rather, it serves without discrimination the interests of all humanity. Pastor, we need your help. The Creation—living nature—is in deep trouble.

Scientists estimate that, if habitat-conversion and other destructive human activities continue at their present rates, half the species of plants and animals on earth could be either gone or at least fated for early extinction by the end of the century. The ongoing extinction rate is calculated in the most conservative estimates to be about 100 times above that prevailing before humans appeared on earth, and it is expected to rise to at least 1,000 times greater (or more) in the next few decades. If this rise continues unabated, the cost to humanity—in wealth, environmental security, and quality of life–will be catastrophic.

Surely we can agree that each species, however inconspicuous and humble it may seem to us at this moment, is a masterpiece of biology and well worth saving. Each species possesses a unique combination of genetic traits that fits it more or less precisely to a particular part of the environment. Prudence alone dictates that we act quickly to prevent the extinction of species and, with it, the pauperization of earth's ecosystems. With all the troubles that humanity faces, why should we care about the condition of living nature? Homo sapiens is a species confined to an extremely small niche. True, our minds soar out to the edges of the universe and contract inward to subatomic particles—the two extremes encompassing 30 powers of ten in space. In this respect, our intellects are godlike. But, let's face it, our bodies stay trapped inside a proportionately microscopic envelope of physical constraints. Earth provides a self-regulating bubble that sustains us indefinitely without any thought or contrivance of our own.

This protective shield is the biosphere, the totality of life, creator of all air, cleanser of all water, manager of all soil—but is itself a fragile membrane that barely clings to the face of the planet. We depend upon its razor-thin health for every moment of our lives. We belong in the biosphere, we were born here as species, we are closely suited to its exacting conditions—and not all conditions, either, but just those in a few of the climatic regimes that exist upon some of the land. Environmental damage can be defined as any change that alters our surroundings in a direction contrary to humanity's inborn physical and emotional needs. We must be careful with the environment upon which our lives ultimately depend.

In destroying the biosphere, we are destroying unimaginably vast sources of scientific information and biological wealth. Opportunity costs, which will be better understood by our descendants than by ourselves, will be staggering. Gone forever will be undiscovered medicines, crops, timber, fibers, soil-restoring vegetation, petroleum substitutes, and other products and amenities. Critics of environmentalism forget, if they ever knew, how the rosy periwinkle of Madagascar provided the alkaloids that cure most cases of Hodgkin's disease and acute childhood leukemia; how a substance from an obscure Norwegian fungus made possible the organ transplant industry; how a chemical from the saliva of leeches yielded a solvent that prevents blood clots during and after surgery; and so on through the pharmacopoeia that has

stretched from the herbal medicines of Stone Age shamans to the magic-bullet cures of present-day biomedical science.

These are just a few examples of what could be lost if Homo sapiens pursue our current course of environmental destruction. Earth is a laboratory wherein nature—God, if you prefer, pastor—has laid before us the results of countless experiments. We damage her at our own peril. You may well ask at this point, *Why me?* Simply because religion and science are the two most powerful forces in the world today, and especially in the United States. If religion and science could be united on the common ground of biological conservation, the problem might soon be solved.

It may seem far-fetched for a secular scientist to propose an alliance between science and religion. But the fact is that environmental activists cannot succeed without you and your followers as allies. The political process in American democracy, with rare exceptions, does not start at the top and work its way down to the voting masses. It proceeds in the opposite direction. Political leaders are compelled to calculate as precisely as they can what it will take to win the next election. The United States is an intensely religious nation. It is overwhelmingly Judeo-Christian, with a powerful undercurrent of evangelism. We secularists must face reality. The National Association of Evangelicals has 30 million members; the three leading American humanist organizations combined have, at best, a few thousand. Those who, for religious reasons, believe in saving the Creation, have the strength to do so through the political process; acting alone, secular environmentalists do not. An alliance between science and religion, forged in an atmosphere of mutual respect, may be the only way to protect life on earth, including, in the end, our own.

Yes, the gulf separating our worldviews is wide. The Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—believe that the universe was constructed to be relevant to humanity. The discoveries of science, in unintended opposition, have reduced earth to an infinitesimal speck within an immensity of space unrelated to human destiny. The Abrahamic religions envisage a supreme ruler who, while existing outside the material universe, nevertheless oversees an agenda for each and every one of our immortal souls. Science can find no evidence of an agenda other than that fashioned by the complex interaction of genes and environment within parallel evolving cultures. Religious creation stories have a divinely engineered beginning and a divinely ordained ending. According to science, in contrast, humans descended from apish ancestors; our origin was basically no different from that of other animals, played out over geological time through a tortuous route of mutation and environmentally driven natural selection. In addition, all mainstream religious belief, whether fundamentalist or liberal, is predicated upon the assumption that humanity is not alone, and we are here for a life and purpose beyond our earthly existence. Science says that, as far as verifiable evidence tells, we are alone, and what significance we have is therefore of our own making. This is the heart of the agonizing conflict between science and religion that has persisted for the past 500 years.

I do not see how the difference in worldview between these two great productions of human striving can be closed. But, for the purposes of saving the Creation, I am not sure that it needs to be. To make the point in good gospel manner, let me tell the story of a young man, newly trained for the ministry and so fixed in his Christian faith that he referred all questions of morality to readings from the Bible. When he visited the Atlantic rainforest of Brazil, he saw the manifest hand of God, and in his notebook he wrote, "It is not possible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, admiration, and devotion which fill and elevate the mind." That was Charles Darwin in 1832, early into the voyage of the HMS *Beagle*, before he had given any thought to evolution. And here is Darwin, concluding *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, having first abandoned Christian dogma and then, with his newfound intellectual freedom, formulated the theory of evolution by natural selection: "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved." Darwin's reverence for life remained the same as he crossed the seismic divide that separated his religious phase and his scientific

one. And so it can be for the divide that, today, separates mainstream religion and scientific humanism. And that separates you and me.

Indeed, despite all that divides science from religion, there is good reason to hope that an alliance on environmental issues is possible. The spiritual reach of evangelical Christianity is nowadays increasingly extended to the environment. While the Old Testament God commands humanity to take dominion over the earth, the decree is not (as one evangelical leader recently affirmed) an excuse to trash the planet. The dominant theme in scripture as interpreted by many evangelicals is instead stewardship. Organizations like the Green Cross and the Evangelical Environmental Network (the latter a coalition of evangelical Christian agencies and institutions) are expanding their magisterium to include conservation—in religious terms, protection of the living Creation.

This evangelical interest in the environment is part of a worldwide trend among religions. In the United States, the umbrella National Religious Partnership for the Environment works with evangelical groups and other prominent organizations, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches of Christ, and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. In 2001, the Archbishop of Canterbury urged that "it may not be time to build an Ark like Noah, but it is high time to take better care of God's creation." Three years earlier, Bartholomew I, Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, had gone further: "For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation . . . these are sins." He and Pope John Paul II later issued a "Common Declaration" that "God has not abandoned the world. It is His will that His Design and our hope for it will be realized through our co-operation in restoring its original harmony. In our own time we are witnessing a growth of an ecological awareness which needs to be encouraged, so that it will lead to practical programs and initiatives." Unfortunately, a corresponding magnitude of engagement has not yet occurred in Islam or the Eastern religions.

Every great religion offers mercy and charity to the poor. The poor of the world, of whom nearly a billion exist in the "poverty trap" of absolute destitution, are concentrated in the developing countries—the home of 80 percent of the world's population and most of Earth's biodiversity. The solution to the problems of both depends on the recognition that each depends on the other. The desperately poor have little chance to improve their lives in a devastated environment. Conversely, natural environments, where most of the Creation hangs on, cannot survive the press of land-hungry people who have nowhere else to go.

To be sure, some leaders of the religious right are reluctant to support biological conservation, an opposition sufficient to create a wedge within the evangelical movement. They may be partly afraid of paganism, by which worship of nature supplants worship of God. More realistically and importantly, opposition rises from the perceived association of environmental activism with the political left. For decades, conservatives have defined environmentalism as a movement bent on strangling the United States with regulations and bureaucratic power. This canard has dogged the U.S. environmental movement and helped keep it off the agenda of the past two presidential campaigns.

Finally, however, opinion may be changing. The mostly evangelical religious right, which, along with big business, has been the decisive source of power in the Republican Party, has begun to move care of the Creation back into the mainstream of conservative discourse. The opportunity exists to make the environment a universal concern and to render it politically nonpartisan. Still, for all the positive signs, I remain puzzled that so many religious leaders have hesitated to make protection of the Creation an important part of their magisterium. Pastor, help me understand: Do they believe that human-centered ethics and preparation for the afterlife are the only things that matter? Do they believe that the Second Coming is imminent and that, therefore, the condition of the planet is of little consequence? These and other similar doctrines are not gospels of hope and compassion. They are gospels of cruelty and despair.

You and I are both humanists in the broadest sense: Human welfare is at the center of our thought. So forget our disagreements, I say, and let us meet on common ground. That might not be as difficult as it first seems. When you think about it, our metaphysical differences have remarkably little effect on the conduct of our separate lives. My guess is that you and I are about equally ethical, patriotic, and altruistic. We are products of civilization that rose from both religion and the science-based Enlightenment. We would gladly serve on

An Introduction to the Moral Issues

An Introduction to the Moral Issues

Perhaps more than any of the other issues that we have considered in this book, questions about our relationships with animals and the environment take us to the heart of a fundamental clash of worldviews. It is, moreover, not like the familiar clashes between liberal and conservative, theist and atheist, or the like; it is, rather, a clash between a *scientific and technological worldview*—that encompasses liberal and conservative, theist and atheist, and other divisions familiar to us—and a diverse set of *natural worldviews*—many of them echoing the cultures of indigenous peoples—that emphasize the continuity and interdependence of human beings and the natural world.

One of the by-products of this clash of worldviews is that much of environmental ethics calls into question the foundations of traditional (i.e., Western European) ethics. This has been both an asset and a liability for the development of environmental ethics. On the plus side, it has resulted in a number of interesting discussions that illuminate aspects of the foundations of Western ethics that might not otherwise be brought as sharply into focus. In particular, it has called attention to the ways in which Western ethics conceptualizes the natural world and understands the place of human beings in it. On the negative side, however, the concern with such foundational questions has detracted, at least in the eyes of some, from environmental ethic's principal task as *applied* ethics. Rather than concentrating on specific moral issues facing those concerned with the environment (as well as those who are not concerned with it!), environmental ethics has concentrated on issues that exist on such a high level of abstraction that they are not immediately fruitful for making decisions about the specific environmental issues.

The Central Questions

As we turn toward a consideration of environmental ethics, three questions present themselves:

1. Who, or what, *has moral weight* (i.e., is deserving of direct moral consideration)?
2. How *much* moral weight does each (type of) entity have?
3. How do we make *decisions* when there are *conflicts* among different types of beings, each of which have moral weight?

An adequate environmental ethic must eventually provide answers to all three of these questions. In recent work by environmentalists, considerable attention has been paid to the first of these questions.[2] Here the debate has centered on the question of whether individual animals, species, plants, rivers, and the like have moral weight (i.e., whether we should give moral consideration to the question of their well-being or continued flourishing). Sometimes this question is posed in relation to individuals (e.g., this specific plant) and sometimes it is posed in relation to species (e.g., the spotted owl). In the next section of this introduction, we examine a number of specific answers to these questions.

The second question—how much moral standing something has—is both crucial and usually neglected. It is crucial because ethics must eventually provide guidance for our actions, and if we have no way of ranking how much moral consideration a given entity merits, we are left without assistance in resolving conflicts among morally considerable beings. The answer to the third question obviously presupposes an answer to the first two questions. We shall consider each of these three questions here, but first sketch out an overview of the main schools of thought in environmental ethics.

An Overview

Because this is relatively uncharted territory for many of us, it may be helpful to see an overview of the conceptual terrain and the various positions that have been marked out on it by the current participants in the discussion of environmental ethics. We may initially divide these approaches into two categories. *Human-centered approaches* to the environment take human beings as their moral point of reference and consider questions of the environment solely from that perspective. They ask, in other words, environmental questions from the standpoint of the effects of the answers to such questions on human beings in one way or another. In contrast to these approaches, we find in recent years that a number of *expanded-circle approaches* (to borrow a term from the title of Peter Singer's *The Expanding Circle*) have come into the circle of morally considerable beings—that is, entities deserving of moral respect in some way—with an increasingly wide radius. Let's examine each of these in somewhat more detail.[3]

Human-Centered Approaches

Human-centered approaches to the environment do not necessarily neglect the environment, but typically they recognize as valid moral reasons only those acceptable to traditional moral theories. These theories are of the various types we discussed in the Introduction to this book.

Ethical egoists recognize only reasons of self-interest as an adequate moral justification for treating the environment in a particular way. For example, ethical egoists could well imagine people wanting a particular landscape preserved because it provided them personally with an aesthetically pleasing view, but it would also see those who wanted to strip-mine that particular landscape as morally justified if it maximized their own self-interest.

Group egoists are also concerned with self-interest, but the net of self-interest is more broadly cast to include not only one's personal interests but also the interests of the group with which one most strongly affiliates. The boundaries of the group may be comparatively narrow (one's family), intermediate (one's neighborhood, one's corporation, one's church group), or quite broad (one's nation, all those who share one's religious beliefs). What is characteristic of these approaches is that only the interests of one's group are to be given moral weight in making decisions.

Similarly, there are approaches in *virtue ethics* that concentrate on developing those character traits that contribute to the welfare of the group: loyalty, a spirit of self-sacrifice, obedience to authority, and so on. Aristotle, for example, sought to determine those character traits that would make a person a good member of the *polis*, the Greek city-state. Much more recently, William Bennett and others have sought to determine the virtues we should foster to have a better civic and communal life in the United States. One of the principal differences between group egoist and virtue ethics is that egoism focuses on the question of what actions we should perform, whereas virtue ethics looks at the kind of person we should be.

Utilitarians, like egoists, are consequentialists; that is, they determine whether particular actions are right or wrong by looking at their consequences. However, whereas the ethical egoist looks at consequences only insofar as they affect the egoist personally, the utilitarian looks at consequences insofar as they affect all human beings

Often courses of action that would be justified from the standpoint of ethical egoism are not morally justified from a utilitarian standpoint, because they may benefit the egoist but not provide sufficient benefit to humanity as a whole (when judged in relation to competing courses of action).

Preserving the natural environment may be an important value to utilitarians if doing so provides the maximal benefit to humanity. There are a variety of ways in which this could be so. For example, preservation—or at least careful management—of the natural environment may provide long-term resources for all of humanity. Thus, we may want to preserve the rain forests because, even though destroying them might bring short-term profit to a small group of people, preserving them provides irreplaceable benefits to humanity in terms of air quality, natural resources, and the like. Notice that there is no claim here that the rain forest is valuable in itself; its value derives from the ways in which it contributes to human well-being. If in the long-run human well-being would best be served by destroying the rain forests, then utilitarianism would not only permit this, it would require it.

EXPANDED-CIRCLE APPROACHES

Expanded Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism has often been concerned with the effects of various actions on the well-being of human beings. The underlying rationale has been that the whole point of ethics is to increase pleasure or happiness and to decrease pain, suffering, or unhappiness. As we saw in the previous chapter, a number of philosophers, most notably Peter Singer, have taken the next step and asked why only *human* suffering counts in the utilitarian calculus. If we are concerned with reducing suffering, should we be concerned with reducing the suffering of *all* sentient beings. Thus this version of utilitarianism has expanded the circle of morally considerable beings to include nonhuman animals. Although this is far from a full-fledged environmental ethic, it is an important step beyond a purely anthropocentric ethic.

Biocentrism

Biocentrism represents the first step toward a genuinely environmental ethic, for it maintains that all living beings—this includes plants, fauna, and so on, as well as human and nonhuman animals—are deserving of moral consideration in their own right. Biocentric approaches focus on individual entities and the premise here seems to be primarily a teleological one. All living beings have some *telos* or final goal, and this is usually understood in terms of flourishing or growing in some sense. They are thus entitled to moral consideration from us; that is, we should not act in ways that thwart their movement toward their natural goal.

Ecocentrism

Ecocentrism, which is often called deep ecology by its supporters, expands the circle to its maximal terrestrial limits by taking the entirety of what exists on the earth as morally considerable, inanimate as well as animate. It comes in two versions, the latter of which is much more plausible than the former. *Individualistic ecocentrism* gives moral weight to each and every entity within the ecosystem. The difficulty with this approach flows from the fact that individualistic ecocentrism has been unable to provide a criterion for assigning different weights to different individuals—and if everything has an equal moral weight, then it is virtually impossible to arrive at a decision procedure in particular cases in which precedence must be given to one individual over another.

The more plausible variant of ecocentrism is to be found in *holistic ecocentrism*, which gives moral weight to each species, type, and so forth in the ecosystem. Thus holistic ecocentrism is concerned with the preservation of species, and concern about individuals is only a means to the end of species-preservation. Similarly, ecocentric environmentalists may be concerned about the preservation of particular types of environments—wetlands, sand dunes, rain forest—both in their own right and insofar as they are parts of larger ecosystems. The ultimate ecosystem is the earth as a whole.

As we saw in Chapter 10, many philosophers have argued that the moral circle ought to be expanded to include nonhuman animals. As we see in this chapter, some philosophers want to expand this circle even further to include the entire natural environment.