

Ethical Extensionism¹

Ethical extensionism is an approach to environmental and animal ethics in which the scope of ethical theories is extended to cover beings traditionally thought to fall outside the purview of those theories. As traditionally understood, the dominant moral theories in Western philosophy restrict the class of morally considerable beings to currently existing human beings.

Extensionists contend that this restriction is arbitrary and antithetical to those theories. They insist that a proper understanding of these ethical theories requires expanding the sphere of morally considerable beings to include beings other than currently existing humans.

Anthropocentric extensionists expand the sphere of moral concern to include future humans. Nonanthropocentric extensionists maintain that the domain of morally considerable beings must be expanded further to include various nonhuman beings. For example, animal liberationists expand the domain to include conscious sentient animals. Biocentrists extend the sphere of moral concern to include all living organisms.

Proponents of ethical extensions insist that expanding the domain of morally considerable beings in these ways is not an ad hoc amendment aimed at addressing a particular moral issue but is rooted in a principled and rigorously consistent application of classical moral theories. Utilitarian and deontological extensions illustrate this point.

Utilitarian Extensionism

Hedonistic utilitarians maintain that pleasure is the only thing intrinsically good and pain is the only thing intrinsically bad and seek to maximize intrinsic goodness and minimize intrinsic badness. Accordingly, they hold that an action A is right for an agent if and only if, out of all the

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actions available to that agent, action A maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain for all affected. Despite the fact that the founder of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, explicitly argued that animal suffering should be included in the utilitarian calculus, in practice utilitarians traditionally have factored only human pleasures and pains into their calculations.

Peter Singer (1975) contended that restricting the domain of morally considerable beings to human beings is arbitrary and antithetical to the spirit of utilitarianism. He argued that any being capable of suffering has an interest in avoiding suffering and that any being with interests deserves to have those interests taken into account equally with all other similar interests. Because many of the animals people eat and perform biomedical experiments on are capable of feeling pain, there is no legitimate reason not to take those animals' interest in avoiding pain into consideration when carrying out utilitarian calculations. Because pain is pain no matter what being experiences it, Singer argued, there can be no moral justification for not taking animal pain into account. Singer's conclusion is that utilitarianism, consistently applied, requires people to take into account the interests of all sentient beings and to give equal interests equal weight in utilitarian calculations.

Deontological Extensionism

Tom Regan's (1983) case for animal rights can be viewed as an extension of Immanuel Kant's deontological ethic. The "respect-for-persons" formulation of Kant's categorical imperative commands people to treat persons "always as an end and never as a means only" (Kant [1875] 1959, p. 47). In Kant's view persons are subjects deserving of respect, not mere objects to be used and discarded. When an agent treats a person as a mere means, that agent acts wrongly, for he or she treats an intrinsically valuable subject as a mere object. Kant equated *persons* with rational beings but incongruously held that all and only human beings are persons. The problem with Kant's account of personhood—if rationality is understood as an empirically testable

capacity to solve practical problems in a rudimentary logical way—is threefold: (1) Not all human beings are rational; (2) not all nonhuman animals lack rationality; and (3) there is no good reason to restrict personhood to rational beings.

Regan (1985) argued that Kant's account of personhood is too strong, at least if personhood is required for full moral considerability. As Regan (1983, 1985) sees it, the issue is less about personhood and more about which beings are owed full direct moral consideration. Nevertheless, he can be viewed as offering an alternative, more expansive account of personhood.

Regan recognizes that on a consistent reading of Kant's criterion (provided that Kant means by rationality some empirically verifiable mental capacity), some human beings (e.g., the severely retarded) would not be persons and thus would not deserve respect under the categorical imperative. Regan contended that rational or not, those human beings are persons deserving of respect. What makes them persons, according to Regan, is the fact that they are experiencing subjects of a life (ESLs), that is, conscious creatures that have an individual welfare that is important to them regardless of their usefulness to others. Such beings are inherently valuable subjects (not mere objects) and deserve to be treated in ways that respect their value. A consistent application of the ESL criterion of personhood indicates that many of the animals people eat and experiment on are persons with inherent value and thus have a right to be treated in ways that respect their value. The upshot of Regan's argument is that the respect-for-persons imperative, properly understood, requires that people respect all ESLs, whether they are human or nonhuman, as inherently valuable ends and never treat them as mere means.

Albert Schweitzer took the Kantian respect-for-persons ethic and expanded it into a reverence-for-life ethic. Harkening back to the post-Kantian metaphysics of Arthur Schopenhauer (1819), Schweitzer (1923) reported that he had a profoundly moving experience watching four

hippopotamuses and their young plod along that led him to see that all life possesses the same will-to-live that every person possesses. Once one notices that all life has the same will-to-live that one finds in oneself, one will see that morality requires that all life be respected, not just human life.

Anthropocentric and Nonanthropocentric Extensionism

Joel Feinberg (1974) argued that any being with a good of its own has interests and that any being with interests has rights. He used the second thesis, which he called the “interest principle,” to defend both nonanthropocentric and anthropocentric extensions. In regard to the first extension, Feinberg noted that many higher animals “have appetites, conative urges, and rudimentary purposes, the integrated satisfaction of which constitutes their welfare or good” (1974, p. 50). Because these animals have a good of their own, they have interests and a correlative right against people to respect their interests. Feinberg’s anthropocentric extension requires extending rights to future human beings. Feinberg observed that whoever these future human beings turn out to be, they will have certain interests, including an interest in a habitable environment, that people can affect for better or worse right now. Because future human beings have an interest in a habitable environment, Feinberg concluded, they have a right against contemporary people to be left such an environment.

Kenneth Goodpaster (1978) pointed out an inconsistency in the way Feinberg applied his account of interests to defend a biocentric ethic. Feinberg restricted the class of interest possessors to human beings and higher animals, but this restriction is inconsistent with his stated account of interests, which holds that any being with a good of its own has interests. Feinberg argued that “mere things” have no unconscious drives, no latent tendencies, no directions of growth, and no natural fulfillments and that, therefore, mere things lack a good of their own. However, as Goodpaster observed, plants and all other living organisms have unconscious

drives, latent tendencies, directions of growth, and natural fulfillments. Thus, they are not mere things. In addition, all living organisms are such that some conditions are good for them and other conditions are bad for them. Hence, they appear to have a good of their own. Consequently, a consistent application of Feinberg's account of interests entails that all living organisms have interests. Goodpaster concluded that because all living organisms have interests, all living organisms deserve moral consideration. He was, however, careful to point out that the fact that all living organisms are morally considerable does not imply that all living organisms have comparable moral significance.

Synthesizing Singer's egalitarianism with Schweitzer's reverence for life and the Feinberg/Goodpaster account of moral considerability, Paul Taylor (1986) developed and defended an egalitarian biocentric ethic. Taylor contended that by adopting the ultimate moral attitude of respect for nature, people naturally will be inclined to behave properly and responsibly toward the natural world. He maintained that all living things are "teleological centers of life" and as such have a good of their own and went on to argue that every being with a good of its own possesses equal inherent worth and deserves equal moral consideration. Thus, Taylor concluded, every living organism deserves equal moral consideration. It might be objected that in extending equal moral consideration to every living organism, Taylor has taken biocentric extensionism to an absurd extreme, but he tries to mitigate this objection by formulating a complex system of rules for adjudicating and resolving the conflicts that inevitably will arise between these equally considerable organisms.

Criticisms

Critics of ethical extensionism contend that piecemeal extensions of the dominant individualistic approaches to ethics cannot give rise to an adequate environmental ethic because individualistic

ethics, which privilege individuals over ecological wholes, fail to address people's actual environmental concerns. Many environmentalists are not concerned about the welfare or well-being of individual shrubs, bugs, and grubs; rather, they are concerned about species preservation, ecological integrity, and air and water pollution. These critics of ethical extensionism contend that an emphasis on individual welfare and individual rights is one source of many current ecological and environmental crises. Thus, they recommend the wholesale rejection of all the dominant individualistic ethics, even in their more inclusive extensionist versions, in favor of more radical holistic ethics such as Aldo Leopold's land ethic and Arne Naess's deep ecological approach.

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