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Penultimate draft

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Here are some quick answers to this question: it's new, it's challenging, it's vitally important to our collective future, and it's not possible to develop a comprehensive approach to ethics without it.

Ethics is commonly understood as the study or practice of how we – human beings – should behave towards one another. Unlike some academic subjects and certainly some other areas of philosophy ethical questions impress themselves on us from an early age. For example, a favourite toy is taken from a small child by an older sibling and the small child says 'It's not fair!' This is said not just as a way of parroting the parents but with the full emotional force and clarity of vision that an injustice has taken place and that it should not have done. Something is wrong and needs to be put right. We are caught up in ethical questions all our lives and almost everyone thinks about ethical questions as they regularly encounter ethical dilemmas regarding their own behavior and that of friends, relatives, and those in events relayed to them by the media.

For centuries the focus of ethics has been on inter-human relationships. What mattered was human beings, not just because they seemed to be the only beings capable of ethical thought, but because they were deemed to be the only beings who mattered; the only beings for whom it made sense to ask questions about how they should be treated. The relatively recent expansion of ethical concern to animals and to the wider environment has been well documented and widely discussed. However, this expansion of ethical concerns has brought with it some seemingly irresolvable dilemmas. How do we weigh up consideration of an ecosystem or the protection of biodiversity against the suffering involved in the eradication of a sentient invasive species? How do we live a culturally rich human life with a small ecological footprint? Environmental ethics is a new area and exciting in part due to its newness and the opportunity this allows for some original thought. It is also extremely challenging and inherently intriguing. You could see it as concerned with all the problems of inter-human ethics plus a whole lot more besides. Some of this new territory has been mapped and can provide you with a range of concepts and approaches to get you started, but this remains an area with very real challenges for the keen student or researcher.

Beyond the puzzles and opportunities that this new area provides to flex one's intellectual muscles, the study of environmental ethics has a knockout argument going for it: the problems it addresses are among the most important challenges we face – indeed, environmental problems arguably constitute the most important problems we face as a *species*. Although much of the most obvious work in addressing environmental

problems occurs at the level of politics and policies, the thinking that informs decisions at this level needs to be underpinned by sound reasoning in ethics otherwise it can easily be undermined; the reasoned justifications that underpin the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' of ethics are the lifeblood of rational policy making.

What kind of thinking is required for environmental ethics? I would like to suggest two provisos. First, it needs to be scientifically literate. Ethicists do not need to be scientists but it makes sense to be informed - skeptically if you like, but informed nonetheless - by the latest research and thinking. For example, in order to address the problem I referred to above of sentient invasive species we need to be informed by the latest research on the cognitive abilities of non-human animals and the nature of biodiversity and natural processes. Second, but linked to the first point, any workable theory needs to issue in ethical mores that are possible for beings like us; that is, these mores need to be psychologically realistic and take into account our situation as evolved, envired beings.

In addition to these provisos, which I think should apply to any ethical theory regardless of its focus, we can also enrich our general ethical understanding by looking to at least four sources of inspiration for environmental ethics. One is the contemplation of nature; environmental ethics has been shaped and informed by a long tradition of human responsiveness to the wonder of nature and the natural world. Being responsive to nature, listening to something other than human discourse, is a learning experience and one that hones and develops human characteristics that are useful in the domain of human interactions and, some claim, essential for full psychological health. A second, related source is the fact that contemplation of and responsiveness to the world develops our aesthetic sensibilities. This need not be just to nature but also to the built environment. The movement away from purely inter-human ethics helps us to appreciate nature aesthetically but also allows us to see that what we physically make in the world matters and that the way we respond to our built environments shapes the kind of people we become. A third source is an understanding of ourselves as part of the world, as intimately connected through our evolution and our being-in-the-world. A fourth source of inspiration for environmental ethics is respect for otherness, not just other human beings (or as historically understood, other human beings like me) but respect for the very difference that separates us from other beings and things in the world.

With these two provisos and four sources of inspiration properly utilized environmental ethics can lead the way to a workable, comprehensive ethic that can actually guide our actions in the world and help to lead us out of the mistakes of the past.

How people find their way to this area and are inspired enough to work within it is a personal story for each of us but no doubt there are common themes. My introduction to the strikingly new range of questions this area throws up came in a lecture I attended as a student in 1988 given by Alan Holland on the distinction between deep and shallow

ecology. However, a deeper commitment came about through a tangential journey into Goethe's scientific writings and working with his method of observation of nature. The study of natural phenomena using this method created in me a heartfelt engagement with the material world as a place of power, wonder, and fragility, accompanied by a sense of duty to protect and live up to that wonder.