

Environmental Ethics 2015/16

Dr. David J. Gunkel

Week 8

Objective

One of the enduring concerns of moral philosophy is deciding who or what is deserving of ethical consideration. Although initially limited to “other men,” the practice of ethics has developed in such a way that it continually challenges its own restrictions and comes to encompass what had been previously excluded individuals and groups—foreigners, women, animals, and even the environment. This is what animal rights philosopher, Peter Singer, has called the “expanding circle” of moral philosophy. Last week, we read Luciano Floridi’s proposal for what he believe is an all-encompassing moral theory that can expand moral consideration to anything and everything, thereby bringing this moral expansion to completion. This week we will challenge this effort not by asking the usual question: “What does IE exclude or leave out?” but by questioning IE’s defining center—its ontocentrism. The text we are reading this week, Anthony Weston’s “Multicentrism: A Manifesto,” argues that the principal problem with moral theory is not which centrism one endorses (anthropocentrism, animo-centrism, bio-centrism, ontocentrism). The problem is with *centrism* itself. In other words, the problem is with the common gesture, shared by all previous forms of moral theorizing, to define the center of moral concern. In response to this, Weston proposes a new moral geometry that he calls “multicentrism.” In opposition to previous forms of moral thinking, “multicentrism envisions a world of irreducibly diverse and multiple centers of being and value—not one single circle, of whatever size or growth rate, but many circles, partly overlapping, each with its own center.”

Readings

Anthony Weston, Multicentrism: A Manifesto

Questions

1) Weston titles his text “Multicentrism: A Manifesto.” Why does he call this essay a “manifesto?” What is a manifesto? Why do people write manifesti? What is the purpose of this kind of writing? And what are the philosophical advantages and limitations of this kind of writing? In other words, what should you (the reader) expect from a text that is called “a manifesto?” What limitations does this particular literary form have, if any? And what does this mean for this particular essay and its position within the debate concerning environmental ethics?

2) What is the problem with previous forms of moral centrism (i.e. anthropocentrism, bio-centrism, and IE’s ontocentrism)? In other words, what are the philosophical problems to which multicentrism is designed to respond? And does multicentrism, in your opinion, provide a suitable solution? What, in particular, are its advantages for formulating a theory and directing the practices of environmental ethics? And what limitations or unintended consequences remain unaddressed? To put it another way, do you think Weston’s proposal for a new moral geometry is both necessary and successful? Does it adequately identify and respond the problems of previous forms of moral philosophy and provide us with a new and more appropriate way to address the environment as a moral subject?