

Phil 362/662  
Environmental Ethics  
9<sup>th</sup> Class  
ENVIRONMENTALISM, SUSTAINABILITY, AND POVERTY  
Handout



*1. Today's question*

In the previous classes we have found that anthropocentrism is false; that at least some of the objects of the human environment have non-derivative moral standing and so that there are things we ought and ought not to do to these objects independently of how it affects human interests. But this insight creates a new set of moral dilemmas: though anthropocentrism is false, it also seems clear that we have special reasons to care for ourselves and for other human beings and that these “human-centered” reasons may sometimes conflict with the “environment-centered” reasons that are presented by the duties to the objects of our environment. So, we have to negotiate situations where human interests conflict with the moral demands that the objects of the human environment present to us. How to do so is the topic of today's class.

*2. A sharper definition of the question*

We can begin by introducing three distinctions: first, as indicated in the previous, we can distinguish between human-centered and environment-centered reasons; these are the two kinds of reasons that can come into the conflicts that this class is about. The next two distinctions are within the domain of human-centered reasons.

The second distinction is between the reasons supplied by basic and non-basic human needs. Basic human needs, let's say, are needs for the elements of human survival (food, air, water, room, temperature, etc.). Non-basic human needs, let's say, are the things we like to have, but without which we can still go on living. So, non-basic needs include social needs (friendship, family, etc.) and what we might call 'luxury needs' (for tasty food, for nice temperatures, a comfortable bed to sleep in, etc.).

The third distinction is between prudential and moral interests. Prudential interests are the reasons for action that persons have based in their own welfare. Moral interests are the duties we have to self and others.

Using only these distinctions (many more might be relevant), the map of the sorts human-centered reasons that might be in conflict with the moral demands of the objects of our environment (i.e. environment-centered reasons) is as follows:

Table 1: human-centered reasons

		Type of reason	
		<i>Prudential</i>	<i>Moral</i>
Type of need	<i>Basic</i>	Self-defense	Duties of rescue (sufficientarian)
	<i>Non-basic</i>	Pleasure	Utilitarian (welfarist)

(Note: I leave out duties to respect the negative rights of others – to not torture or kill, for example.)

The division of human-centered reasons should help us navigate when we should give priority to duties to the environment. Sometimes the moral demands of objects of the human environment conflict with non-basic and prudential needs, say, if I really like cheese-burgers, but I can have one only by supporting morally suspect factory farming. Sometimes environment-centered reasons conflict with self-interested basic needs, say, if my only access to food is a factory farmed burger. Sometimes they conflict with moral duties of rescue relating to basic needs, say when we have a choice between feeding the poor and preserving wilderness. Sometimes they conflict with non-basic moral duties; say, if we have a choice between protecting an ecosystem and allowing industry that will bring jobs and prosperity to a troubled city. These four cases reveal the complexity of the human-centered reasons that environment-centered reasons might come into conflict with.

It is, I think, important to draw these distinctions simply to make the case that sometimes (if not always) duties we have to objects of the human environment are overridden by our rights of self-preservation. Rarely (if not never) they are overridden by our self-interested reasons based on satisfying non-basic needs. But what about conflicts of moral duties: conflicts where interpersonal duties (whether of rescue or utilitarian, or perfect and imperfect, if we prefer the rights-discourse) conflict with duties to the environment? The question for today's class is: how do we negotiate such conflicts?

This question becomes even more complex if we distinguish between different types of environment-centered reasons. Here we can distinguish between the objects that are the sources of the reasons (individual animals or plants, species, ecosystems) and the sorts of reasons they present; the duties we have to them (rights-based, good-based, or what have you). It might, for example, be that some animals have rights and that this provide especially strong environment-centered reasons, whereas plants only have a claim to not be wantonly destroyed, which would be a much weaker reason. If so, then it might be the case that a set of human-centered reasons overrides some, but not all, environment-centered reasons. Here is an example of how an environmental ethic might view the different types of environment-centered reasons:

Table 2: environment-centered reasons

(This is an example, different environmental ethics will disagree about these duties)

		Objects	
		<i>Individuals</i>	<i>Wholes</i>
Type of duty	<i>Rights based</i>	Sentient animals	Preserve species
	<i>Good based</i>	Respect for life	Integrity etc. of community

*Hard case: when duties to the environment conflict with duties of rescue*

We will focus on where the conflict is sharpest: where a duty of rescue is in conflict with duties to the environment (of the kinds indicated in table 2). The case at hand, alas not a thought-experiment, is the apparent choice we face between overcoming human hunger and duties to the environment. The conflicts of duties in this class include the following:

1. Conflict between alleviating human hunger and duties to protect the biotic community from destabilizing impacts of human production.
2. Conflict between alleviating human hunger and duties to not be the cause of species extinction.
3. Conflict between alleviating human hunger and duties to individual animals (say, if a cost-efficient way to alleviate human hunger is factory farming).
4. Conflict between alleviating human hunger and respect for life in general.

These are all hard questions and I fear that there are no easy answers: general answers of the type “human basic interests always/never override duties to objects in the environment” won’t work. So, one thing that makes the questions hard is that the answer will depend on the exact nature of the conflicting duties. And there will be issues of degree: if, say, we are talking about saving many human beings at the expense of one cow, then the issue seems straightforward. Conversely, if the issue is saving one human beings at the expense of huge animal suffering and the extinction of many species, then, maybe, the balance of reasons change in favor of the duties to the objects of the human environment. At least, Rolston III has an argument that, if certain conditions are satisfied, then duties to the objects of the human environment can override interpersonal duties of rescue.

### *3. Rolston III, “Feeding People versus Saving Nature”*

Rolston argues that if a set of conditions are satisfied, then it is conceivable that we should give priority to duties to the objects of our environment over our duty to provide food for starving human beings. Though he initially resists the conclusion, Rolston finally says: “Ought we to save nature if this results in people going hungry? In people dying? Regrettably, sometimes, the answer is yes.” (413)

So, the conclusion is that sometimes human rights must take a backseat to duties to nature – human rights are overruled by the claims of the human environment. The conclusion is especially dramatic since Rolston allows that there is a human right to subsistence.

Rolston only draws this conclusion after a very careful consideration of the conditions that must be satisfied – and, notably, these conditions include failures of human actions that brought about the unfortunate conflict of duties.

The conditions are: developed countries post boundaries across which the poor cannot pass freely; and there is an unequal and unjust distribution of wealth; and calls to alleviate poverty by redistribution are resisted; and the consumption of the world's resources is as unequal as it presently is; and low productivity of domesticated land continues; and significant natural values are at stake (e.g. the extinction of species).

These conditions are all satisfied presently: thus, “one ought not always to feed people first, but rather one ought sometimes save nature.” (415)

Note: Rolston's point is that we should change the way we act and seek a more just distribution of resources than we presently have. If we do so, he suggests, then we could overcome poverty without having to domesticate more of nature. Alternatively, we could increase the yield of current cultivated land by better production methods. Or we could lower our consumption per capita. So, Rolston's main suggestion is that, instead of accepting a conflict of duties between duties of rescue and duties to the environment, we should *either* create a situation where the duties of rescue didn't arise since there is no hunger; *or* meet the duties of rescue in a way that does not entail violating duties to nature; *or* both.

So, Rolston's article really amounts to a rejection of the claim that there is a conflict of interpersonal duties of rescue and duties to the environment. Instead, as he sees it, there is a conflict between

(a) the interest in pleasure and luxury of the affluent countries (prudential interests in satisfying non-basic needs).

(b) duties to the environment (of various kinds).

(c) duties of rescue (moral interest in basic needs).

If the choice was *only* between (b) and (c), then we'd have the hard choice. But, Rolston appears to argue, we don't actually face this choice, but a choice where one of the options is to maintain a status quo of unjust distribution of resources and wide-scale satisfaction of luxury needs of the rich. And, once we understand that this is the nature of the current conflict, then it is ridiculous to claim that we should give priority to our interests in luxury and injustice against our duties to the environment. We both can and should take care of our duties of rescue and duties to the environment, before we pursue our interests in luxury. And we should do something about the injustices of unequal distribution no matter what. (Recall also Rolston's diagnosis of the three problems: overpopulation, overconsumption, underdistribution.) So, Rolston's conclusion really is that there are alternatives to giving priority to duties of rescue and duties to the environment, and so the supposed dilemma dissolves.

Yet, what about the dilemma. Does it really go away? Sure, we should distribute differently. And sure, we should produce more effectively. But:

- i. Should we really sacrifice all interests in luxury when they conflict with duties to the environment? And, what if the only way we can undo the effects of the interests in

luxury is by limiting human freedom in ways that would violate human rights of free initiative, liberties of tastes and pursuits?

- ii. Doesn't the problem persist: the population of the world today reached 7 billion. It is projected to reach 12 billion by 2150. It seems hard to imagine that we can feed this many mouths without doing something drastic – more than just improve on agricultural production methods. So, it might still be the case that we face a choice between hunger and expanding agriculture at the expense of the environment – quite possibly with the effect that some species will go extinct. So, the question remains: should we feed the hungry if we can only do so by violating our duties to the objects of the human environment?

#### 4. Schmidtz "Natural Enemies, An Anatomy of Environmental Conflict"

Schmidtz identify three kinds of conflicts between human interests and duties to the environment. These three are based on a distinction between conflicting values and conflicting priorities.

1. First kind of conflict: where there is a conflict in the use of some resource. Examples include the use of a commons or traffic. Different conflicts and problems call for different institutional solutions. Thus, there might be rules for the orderly use and removal of the resource or rules that regulate the distribution of externalities. A system of property rights solves such problems.
2. The second kind of conflict: conflict in values. Conflict in values obtain where there are two different views on how we should value objects in the environment. Thus, an anthropocentric view on the environment would might view the environment as a pool of resources to be regulated by property rights, whereas a non-anthropocentric ethics might view the same things as having a value so that they cannot be viewed as a resource. Here, a scheme of property rights won't satisfy the non-anthropocentric ethic.
3. The third kind of conflict: conflicting priorities. Even if we agree on how things should be valued, so that there is no conflict of values present, disagreement or conflict can be based on different priorities. So, even if we agree that we should protect the environment, the poor people might not care too much about the environment if they face a choice between duties to the environment and starvation, "Thus, there is a kind of conflict that originates not so much from a difference of values as from a difference in which values people can afford to pursue under their differing circumstances." (418) Schmidtz further explains by an example of threatened species: the way to protect them is to remove the conflict between self-interest and their survival; to have their survival become protected, *because* it is in the narrower self-interest of people that they survive. Another example: burning the rainforest to get land that can sustain hungry families. The farmers might agree that the rainforest has intrinsic value, but think that it is more important to feed their families. So, if we ask the farmers to not burn the rainforest, we need to see that we have to remove the conflict of priorities that make them burn it – we should give them self-interested reasons to not burn it. Final example: foxes on the farm (it's quite convincing).

Point: “even people who embrace environmentalist values will act contrary to those values when they cannot afford to act in accordance with them.” (419)

So, Schmidtz is making a realist sort of argument: if we want to save the environment, we should focus on how we make it in persons’s self-interest to not damage the environment rather than appeal directly to moral duties to protect the environment: “on purely biocentric grounds, we have reason to think anthropocentrically. We need to be human-centered to be properly nature-centered, for if we do not tend to what is good for people, we will not be tending to what is good for nature either. [...] In cases of conflicting priorities, we need to think about people first, if we care about people, or even if we do not. [...] wildlife will survive to the extent that people who have to live with it are better off taking care of it. It is roughly that simple.” (422-3)

Is it?

### *5. Attfield’s critique of Rolston III*

Attfield presents a criticism of Rolston’s article. Attfield’s main arguments are: first, in cases of sustainable development there will be no conflict between human development and nature; second, it is a mistake to think that the human population can be represented as a cancerous threat to nature. The main thesis is that if development is socially and biologically sustainable, then it will seldom conflict with saving or preserving nature; if development is not sustainable, then there will be conflict, but then it is not the sort of development we should pursue in the first place. Attfield’s article thus draws attention to the concept of sustainability.

Two major questions are, first, whether it is possible to maintain a sustainable use of natural resources given the population growth and expected future population size; and, second, whether it is possible to sustain the expected future population size without inflicting much damage to various ecosystems. In short, whether we can feed everybody also in the future and whether we can feed everybody without cultivating all of nature at the expense of diversity. These are, by and large, factual questions.

But it appears clear that we cannot feed everybody also in the future without drastically expanding agricultural output. And that to expand agricultural output it may be that we have to compromise wilderness – to cultivate the earth at the expense of its current diversity. This gives rise to the normative question of whether and to what extent we should give priority to preserving a diverse environment over feeding everybody.

Attfield’s position: “The only kind of prohibited actions would be ones which meet human interests through the kind of so-called ‘development’ which destroys the reserve [wildernesses], because of the value of the thriving of wild nature, because of the importance of this for future humans, and because of the importance of the intactness of habitats necessary if the thriving of wild nature is to be facilitated.” (294)

## 6. Feeding people versus saving nature?

### *Time to debate:*

Rolston says that we may have duties to the environment that override duties of rescue so that “Ought we to save nature if this results in people going hungry? In people dying? Regrettably, sometimes the answer is yes.” (413) He uses the example of Zimbabwe’s policy regarding the black rhinoceros population to illustrate: first, poachers are shot. Second, some people go hungry to protect the habitat of the black rhino. Rolston concurs: “Given the fact that rhinos have been so precipitously reduced, given that the Zimbabwean population is escalating [...] one ought to put the black rhino as a species first, even if this costs human lives.” (413)

### *What do you think?*

#### I. Black rhino case

Assume that: 1. there is a dramatic population growth in the area, 2. it is clear that we cannot feed everybody without expanding farmland, 3. that expanding farmland will mean the end of the species of black rhinoceros.

Question: should we expand farmland?

#### II. Madagascar

Assume that: forests are dwindling, population rising, species at the brink of extinction.

Question: What do we do?

