A Diversity of Imaginaries

Little could be more obvious than that pressing environmental questions cannot be raised or answered with reference only to facts contrasted strongly with values and held to be free from contamination by them. It is hardly plausible to deny that debates about environmental issues are about values, or at least pro and con attitudes (c.f. James 2016), as much as they are about facts. It is much less obvious what to say next though. How should we think about the relevant facts and values and their relation?

One way is to focus on the social production of knowledge as interwoven with the normative preoccupations of its time. Thus in the first paper of this issue Mick Lennon proposes a framework that combines Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science with Charles Taylor's moral philosophy, and analyses the controversy between eco-restorationists and advocates of novel ecosystems. These conservation approaches then appear as competing paradigms armed with their own Kuhnian exemplars of scientific theory, practice and criteria for problem identification and knowledge claims. Each has its own charismatic advocates. The choice between them cannot be a matter of simply adopting a neutral procedure of knowledge acquisition because what counts as the facts, or at least the *significant* facts, is itself contested. Each side operates within a particular moral framework, in Taylor's terms a 'social imaginary': restorationists are focused on 'repairing the anthropogenic harm done to nature' and guided by 'historical fidelity' to ecosystems as they were before, Lennon says. Advocates of novel ecosystems are future oriented and value the autogenic development of new assemblages of flora and fauna brought about by human activity (see Katz (2014), Steinwall (2015), Verduijn et al. (2015) and Keulartz (2016) for more on this contrast and its contestation). Lennon unpicks this impasse in some detail and argues that each side tends to elide the facts and values that constitute their perspectives. One might hope that making the value commitments explicit should allow such debates to proceed more rationally, with greater self and mutual understanding.

Presumably an obstacle here is the sheer and shifting diversity of perspectives on such issues. That these might not all be packaged neatly into distinct paradigms is implied by Jonathan Prior and Emily Brady's paper, which addresses the aesthetic implications of rewilding. Rewilding counts as a form of restoration, but of *wildness* rather than wilderness: they rightly emphasise the importance of this contrast and that we need to avoid fixating on wilderness if we are to make sense of rewilding. They also highlight the forward looking orientation of rewilding, as wrapped up with imagined futures, for the landscape or ecosystem in question – *not all restoration is focused on the past then* – and discuss the aesthetic issues in that light. Important here is wild 'self-regulation' within and between nonhuman species and the upshot of this in terms of unpredictable, if imaginable, outcomes, which may be aesthetically challenging,

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'unscenic' and include instances of the 'terrible beauty' of wild predation. The outcome will likely be *novel* then, at least from the perspective of many human inhabitants of the resulting landscapes. Prior and Brady warn that public proponents of rewilding need to be prepared to explain how any replacement of previous aesthetically valued features, with more challenging features, flows from wild agency and not human mismanagement or absence of management.

For some social imaginaries an interest in wild nature is motivated by concern for animal rights. Steve Cooke develops an argument that basic rights to functioning habitats arise when those habitats are necessary conditions of animal life and well-being. This requires us to respect a kind of ownership that animals can have over their habitats; not full-scale individual property rights, which would entail the right to sell for example, but shared usufructuary rights amounting to territorial rights the animals have over habitats they need. The idea of nonhuman territorial rights is not new, but Cooke argues that previous accounts have tended to make claims about nonhuman autonomy and self-determination that are implausibly strong, except for a very limited number of species – perhaps orang-utans, but not possums. The rights Cooke posits rely on third parties (advocates, trustees), and he sketches how this might work in terms of partial sovereignty modelled upon the governance of protectorate and trusteeship territories (see also Hedberg's (2016) discussion of presumptive duties to assist wild animals). Interestingly and importantly, they entail a remedial right of secession in cases of serious and systematic unjust habitat destruction. This gives his picture a historical focus on past and ongoing unjust habitat destruction, rather than an ideal theoretic focus on a future utopian state of justice. It also apparently reinforces a presumption in favour of preservation and some forms of restoration, not for reasons of 'historical fidelity' as such, but to respect the rights of existing animals to the habitats necessary to their survival and well-being.

Often contrasted with those based upon basic rights are approaches based upon aggregate welfare. For the latter it might well be that the interests of the many outweigh the interests of the few. However, surely the welfare of any number of micro-organisms cannot rival that of highly evolved, self-aware beings like ourselves – can it? John Nolt argues that there are no infinite differences in objective welfare between living organisms, whether sentient or not. He draws upon considerations of evolutionary history (it is implausible to suppose that the evolution of sentient animals brought an *infinite* increase in objective overall welfare over that of their non-sentient forebears) and ingenious arguments concerning the relation between infinity and incommensurability, to arrive at the conclusion that 'there is some very large number of bacteria whose aggregate welfare is *not less* than—though it may be incomparable with—your overall welfare and mine' (p.88, his emphasis). As Nolt points out, it is a further issue what follows morally from such considerations. It seems hard to deny though that the objective welfare of very large biotic

aggregates has some such significance. Adding this to the mix of normative considerations informing environmental imaginaries does little to simplify the situation. On the other hand, drawing the moral line at sentience merely for the sake of simplicity seems hardly more acceptable than drawing it at membership of our own particular species simply because it is ours (compare Bertrand Russell's cautionary aphorism about the philosopher and the protozoon quoted at the start of Nolt's paper).

Such morally uncertain diversity in the array of environmental considerations is one reason why philosophers have sometimes started from the other direction: not so much from what 'they' (micro-organisms, animals, ecosystems, landscapes, places...) are like, and what calls if any they make upon us morally, but on what 'we' are or ought to be like. Maybe we have a clearer grasp – and are more likely to agree – upon what it is to be a good person confronted with environmental issues than on what we (should) make of 'them'. Dominic Lenzi suggests that although it should not be made too hastily there is something important in this move. He considers the question of how we can know which of the various novel virtues suggested by environmental philosophers (see for example, Di Paola (2015) and Hannis (2015)) are genuine virtues.

Again though, one apparent obstacle to a convincing answer here is the diverse ways 'nature' is understood and valued. This raises the problem of relativism about which human dispositions regarding nature are really virtues and how they should be understood in substantive terms. For example, as Lenzi points out, the virtue of 'non-maleficence' cannot be thought to be simply a matter of recognising the vulnerability of things and avoiding harming them; if the virtue is to have purchase one must be able to recognise that *this* particular harm is to be avoided. However, then people with different paradigms and imaginaries regarding 'nature' – advocates of wilderness, novel ecosystems, rewilding, biocentric welfare, animal habitat rights – will have different positions on what is harmful and how to avoid it. Lenzi suggests that the way around this is to make the (traditional, Aristotelian) move of concentrating on particular people whose lives we consider exemplary in environmental terms. For example, he claims, the very widely admired Rachel Carson exemplified the virtue of 'care for nature' (abiotic and biotic). Lenzi argues that looking at how such a virtue manifests in such an admirable life is an important guide to genuine environmental virtues, and one not undermined by the plurality just mentioned. This is partly because no 'reasonably reflective perspective' will claim that such environmental considerations do not partly constitute what it is to be a good person faced with an impending anthropogenic crisis impacting all species and ecosystems. Moreover, every reasonably reflective perspective on nature is committed to discernible conceptions of 'environmental excellence'.

I am not sure that Lenzi's move is fully satisfactory in the face of the range of imaginaries on display, even in just this issue of *Environmental Values*, but it

does at least offer something to counter the intellectually empty pluralist's response to that diversity that goes '*oh, it depends...it's all just relative anyway*'. Such relativism must be rejected and part of the reason is that, despite our other differences, we share to some significant degree a sense of what constitutes a good person, in our time.

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