

“Therefore, a broad respect for living or beautiful or well-functioning things need not translate into *equal* respect. It need not translate into universal respect, either. Part of our responsibility as moral agents is to be somewhat choosy about what we respect and how we respect it. I can see why people shy away from openly accepting that responsibility, but they still have it. We might suppose speciesism is as arbitrary as racism unless we can show that the differences are morally relevant. This is a popular sentiment among animal liberationists such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan. However, are we really like racists when we think it is worse to kill a dolphin than to kill a tuna? The person who asserts that there is a relevant similarity between speciesism and racism has the burden of proof: identify the similarity.” (David Schmidtz, “Are All Species Equal?”, 119)

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the advantages of deontological accounts of environmental value?
2. What problems and dilemmas might arise from the application of anthropocentric environmental rights?
3. Is it desirable to extend environmental rights to non-humans, as eco-centric approaches demand?
4. Is it possible to identify non-anthropocentric value without relying on arbitrary, individual judgements? (Is it even fair to call individual judgements arbitrary? If not, why aren't those judgements universal?)

Is environmental protection a duty?

If the scientific requirements of environmental protection are not self-evident, it is tempting to turn to moral philosophy, or the search for universally acceptable ethical principles. Unsurprisingly, then, this is exactly what many environmentalists did in the 1970s and '80s, in order to identify an ethic that would promote environmental action. The purpose of this new ethic was to specify precisely what humans' relationship with nature should be—or, more precisely, which aspects of the environment should be granted moral considerability. An example of moral considerability is individual autonomy: we have a duty to respect (refrain from interfering with) other people just in so far as those people are capable of, and entitled to, their own intentions and plans of life.

However, Kant—the most important figure in deontology—provides a clear warning for new environmental ethicists. In the Kantian system, moral considerability is strictly limited, for the simple reason that our ability to *know* is strictly limited. I know that you have an intrinsic interest in being the author of your own life, but beyond that, I have little more than conjecture. How, then, can deontology support an environmental ethic? The obvious answer, is to extend (roughly) the same logic to non-humans: animals, plants, and maybe even eco-systems, have an intrinsic interest in realising their capacities in life (more simply: flourishing), which ought to be recognised in the principles that shape human life, just as our human right to flourish is (or, at least, should be, if you agree with Kant). The trouble is that it's difficult to make this extension without falling foul of Kant's central principle of non-contradiction. Animal rights will necessarily conflict with one another, and possibly even with human rights (e.g., our right to pursue protection against autonomy-rending pandemics through vaccine research).

The question is whether it's possible to find a principled solution to these conflicts, or whether we must rely on arbitrary (meaning *non*-principled, as opposed to unprincipled) fudges. If we *can* find a principle, then we might be able to make a compelling moral case for the moral considerability of animals. But it's difficult to avoid the conclusion that any principle that demands sacrifice from its holders (e.g., animals, or trees) is one that we can't oblige them to accept. After all, we wouldn't accept that *humans* should sacrifice themselves for animals (and they wouldn't do so anyway), so why should we expect animals to do that for us? If this is correct, then deontology cannot help environmentalists, despite its great promise. If, that is, we cannot avoid making arbitrary judgements, then there is no way of avoiding what Schmidtz calls here our “responsibility as moral agents”: we must decide what's important for us *qua* humans, and we must argue the case. In other words, we must confront the uncertainty of our situation, and the need to decide which approaches to it, if any, are reasonable.