

## Founding an Environmental Ethic on Kant's Work on Judgments of Beauty

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PEOPLE often defend the importance of protecting the environment by appealing to the benefits it provides us. For example, we often hear that we ought to protect the rain forest because it produces oxygen we need or because many of the species in it will prove medically useful. But should we preserve the environment because, in some sense, it is valuable in itself, not just valuable for our benefit? In the case of the rain forest, the best way to protect it may be to explain our dependence on it, since one of the easiest things to convince people to do is to save their own skin. However, not all habitats and species obviously benefit us. Though some argue that protecting the environment is always in our best interest in the long run, many others argue that we should protect the environment regardless of whether it is in our best interest to do so. They say we have obligations to the environment in itself.

The belief that we have obligations to certain things because they have inherent value is Kantian. However, according to Kant, the categorical imperative, which is the basis of all moral judgments, denies that we have obligations to the environment in itself. Still, I will argue that we have obligations to the environment in itself and that though Kant's ethics denies this, his work on judgments of beauty provides a foundation for such obligations. To do this, I will (a) show the importance of the categorical imperative, (b) explain why nature cannot have value in itself, (c) consider the problem of environmental questions if

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nature has no inherent value, and (d) ground our obligations to the environment in Kant's philosophy of judgments of beauty. My point is not that Kant's work on judgments of beauty shows that he believed we have obligations to the environment. Instead I argue that Kant's work on judgments of beauty offers a foundation for an environmental ethic—an ethic which entails obligations to the environment in itself.

### A. The Importance of the Categorical Imperative

The categorical imperative says that "I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law" (*Groundwork* 70). Kant believes that this principle is the sole foundation for all moral judgments. Whether or not we agree that the categorical imperative alone serves as the sole foundation for all moral judgments, we would be foolish not to take this principle seriously, since there is no question that people justify their judgments of what is moral or immoral by appealing to principles similar to Kant's categorical imperative.

One could counter that since one of the most common ways to justify calling an act immoral is to point out the bad result the act has (or could have), it is not clear that the categorical imperative is generally used by people. However, even when people give the negative result of an act as justification for calling it immoral, they must mean something more than just what they have said; if the only justification for calling a thing immoral were the result of the act, what is called immoral would merely be imprudent (*Groundwork* 70).

Clearly, people use a principle like the categorical imperative to distinguish between the moral and immoral when they appeal to the "golden rule." The golden rule states: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This rule is similar to the categorical imperative. This can be seen by considering the reasoning used to determine that an action is wrong. For example, according to the categorical imperative, since logically I cannot want everyone to steal other people's things, I should not steal another person's things. According to the golden rule, since I do not want anyone to steal my things, I should not steal anyone else's things. Thus, the categorical imperative is an abstract and universal form of the justifications we commonly give for regarding an act as moral or immoral (*Groundwork* 71).

## B. Nature Cannot Have Value in and of Itself

The categorical imperative requires that we treat others as the equals of ourselves. It says nothing at all about nonrational beings. And since for Kant the categorical imperative is the foundation of all moral law, according to him we have moral obligations only toward other people. Kant argues that the only foundation for the moral law is this: "rational nature exists as an end in itself" (*Groundwork* 96). Thus, the categorical imperative becomes: "act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (*Groundwork* 96). The only obligation we can have to animals and plants is an obligation we have toward other people who are benefited by animals and plants, since only people are ends in themselves.

Aldo Leopold would disagree. He concludes his essay "The Land Ethic" by saying, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Rolston 18). Leopold suggests that we have obligations to the environment in itself. But even if Kant is wrong, even if we have obligations to the nonrational world, surely these obligations are not the same as our obligations to other people. It is hard to take the idea seriously that killing a tree is like killing a person. We recognize a great difference between killing a person and killing a tree because, as I will argue, though people have value in themselves, trees do not. This claim is similar to Kant's ethical claim that we have obligations only to people. However, against Kant, I will argue that, though only people have value in themselves, we nevertheless have obligations to the nonrational world. But first, consider why nature cannot have value in itself.

A thought experiment illustrates the difference between what we can value in itself and what we cannot. Imagine sacrificing a whole group of people for something we call valuable. We know people are valuable in themselves. Thus, if the natural world is not inherently valuable, it would be impossible to justify sacrificing people to save it. Of course, even if the natural world is not inherently valuable, we might imagine a justified case of sacrificing some people to save it because other people depend on it. But in such a case, people are not being sacrificed for the natural world; people are being sacrificed for the people who depend on the natural world. To see whether we can value nature

in and of itself, we must consider whether we could justify sacrificing the whole human race to save some huge portion of the nonrational world, such as the Brazilian rain forest. The genetic diversity of the rain forest is much greater than that of the human population. The number of plants and animals is far greater than the number of people, yet we could not justify sacrificing the human race to save the rain forest. The reason we could not seems obvious: the world without any possibility of a rational being<sup>1</sup> to evaluate it would be meaningless and hence valueless.

In ethical questions it is easy to believe that what is in one's best interest also happens to be what is correct. For this reason, it is not always wise to trust an intuition that is in our best interest just because it seems obviously correct. Consider, therefore, a fuller argument for why we cannot value the nonrational world in and of itself, without any rational being to contemplate it. We cannot value such a world because we cannot even imagine it. Those who believe that they could imagine a world without any rational being to contemplate it forget that the world they would imagine would be a world contemplated at least by themselves. A world that rationality can have no part in is, by definition, to us as rational creatures only a void. It is impossible for us to talk about the value of such a world, for we can have nothing to do with it. Therefore, it is beyond our ability to recognize inherent value in the nonrational world.

Of course, one could object that a world of only nonrational beings can have value because there is a possibility of that world evolving a rational being, or the possibility of rational beings from another world visiting it. Both of these responses resolve the problem by claiming that such a world in some sense would not be without a rational being. In other words, these responses seem to concede that a world without rational beings in any sense (with no hope of them whatsoever) has no value. But, if we could recognize nonrational beings as inherently valuable, then surely we would recognize a world of only these beings as valuable in itself. But, as we can see, we cannot recognize a world with

<sup>1</sup>Some might say that there are creatures other than humans which are rational. They might mention God or might claim that certain animals have a form of rationality. The relevant question, though, is whether we can assign value to nonrational beings. Unless all beings are rational, the question of whether nonrational beings can have value in and of themselves is relevant.

no rational beings (nor any hope of them) as valuable. It follows that the environment, which is composed of only nonrational beings, is not inherently valuable.

### C. Environmental Ethics Given that the Environment Lacks Inherent Value

Kant says that we must never treat humanity "simply as a means" (*Groundwork* 96). Utilitarianism, on the other hand, evaluates every ethical decision on the basis of the total good *in the end*. Everything is only a means to the ultimate good; no action is good in itself. This separation between actions and the standard for judging their moral worth becomes problematic. There is no final stage for which we could attempt to calculate the "ultimate good" for *all* people. That is, the utilitarian standard for deciding ethical questions is indefinite. However many consequences of possible actions we consider, we have never looked far enough. For example, even if we attempt to calculate the consequences of an action for all people within the next century, we exclude from consideration other consequences beyond the next century. The categorical imperative escapes this problem. According to it, we cannot simply address the utility of all possible actions to find the most ethical choice. We cannot because we have to address people as valuable in themselves. This avoids the problem of grounding obligations in the final good by appealing to immediate obligations which are independent of consequences.

However, according to the categorical imperative we only have unconditional obligations to other rational beings. This means that every environmental question reduces to a question to be decided on the grounds of utility for rational beings. Therefore, in questions dealing with the environment, the categorical imperative shares the problem of utilitarian ethics. Since no actions towards the environment are good in themselves, Kantian ethics here encounters the problem of separating the actions and the standard for judging those actions. Because there can be no immediate environmental obligations, and because changes to the environment affect an indeterminate number of rational beings, the standard for judging the morality of such changes is indefinite. Thus, like utilitarian ethics, Kantian ethics is in principle unable to decide if an act toward the environment is moral.

This problem becomes obvious in practical situations. For example, the Supreme Court and then the Endangered Species Committee stopped the construction of the \$116-million Tellico Dam in order to save a small fish, *Percina tanasi*. Later Congress voted to finish the dam and to transplant the fish despite the risk that the transplant would not be successful (Rolston 74). Those in Congress who made the decision knew close to nothing about ecology. They had no idea what the result of not saving the *Percina tanasi* would be. Since they had no idea what the consequences of their actions would be, their decision was completely arbitrary by utilitarian and Kantian standards alike. However, even if only the best ecologists today had been consulted, their decision would have been no less arbitrary by these standards. The best ecologists today cannot “determine with confidence the number of species that a habitat can support” or “provide the precise predictions often needed for environmental policy making” (Schrader-Frechette 3). Not even the best ecologists have any idea what long-term effects choosing to eliminate the *Percina tanasi* would have. Nor can we avoid the problem of not knowing the future by weighing the chances that eliminating the *Percina tanasi* will have a good or bad effect in the long run. We do not even have enough information to have a good idea of these chances. Few good ecologists doubt the importance of the rain forest, but most environmental questions are not as simple as whether or not we should preserve the rain forest. Many cases are like the case of the Tellico Dam and *Percina tanasi*. In these cases, a decision based on consequences is impossible because we do not know how what we do will affect the environment.

If we decide environmental questions without assuming obligations to the environment in itself, we are faced with mostly arbitrary decisions. The categorical imperative in these cases suggests that we should make a decision based on utility for rational beings. Clearly this is problematic. In principle there is no way to know all the consequences of any action, and we are generally ignorant of even the more immediate consequences. For nonarbitrary decisions to be possible, actions toward the environment must not be right or wrong merely because of their consequences.

#### D. Grounding Environmental Obligations in Judgments of Beauty

The fact that nature has no value in itself seems to suggest that we cannot have obligation toward the environment in itself. Obligation

to something in itself obligates all rational beings regardless of their individual circumstances. Many people hold, as I do, that we have such moral obligations to the environment. And even if these beliefs are misguided, the claim to such obligations must be reckoned with. How do such claims about the environment arise?

For an environmental ethic to exist, we must have a scientific understanding of the environment sufficient to recognize that our actions change the environment, sometimes in drastic ways. If we do not recognize that we can influence the environment, then no environmental ethic is possible. We must know that our actions have consequences. Clearly, simply recognizing that one's actions have consequences does not establish obligation. Still, it is important that we recognize that to have an environmental ethic one must have this level of understanding of the environment. This in part explains the relative newness of environmental ethical claims. It is not surprising that such obligations were not recognized sooner, since we only recently recognized that our actions can significantly influence the environment.

In order to understand what other factors may account for the claim that we have environmental obligations, consider the people who make these claims and the justification they give. Those who claim that we have environmental obligations are often those people who work or recreate in nature. They are often the people who derive pleasure from nature. For this reason, they may try to justify environmental obligation by saying that nature is valuable in itself because it gives them pleasure. Clearly though, this pleasure cannot obligate us to nature in itself. Though some make this appeal, this justification fails, since rather than showing that nature is valuable in itself, it shows only that it is valuable insofar as it gives them pleasure.

Another justification that they commonly give is more helpful. Those who claim that nature is inherently valuable are often people who find nature beautiful. Rather than arguing that we should protect nature because it gives us pleasure, these people justify protecting nature by appealing to its beauty. If judgments of beauty provide no foundation for obligation, then claims that we have environmental obligations are perhaps the result of misunderstanding the nature of judgments of beauty. However, I will show that judgments of beauty do provide this foundation. Because of their peculiar nature, judgments of beauty force us to accept obligations to nature in itself.

When faced with an environmental question, one can consider nature to be valuable either in itself or only as it affects humanity. According to the categorical imperative, we ought only to consider the effects that different environmental solutions to a given problem will have on humanity. I will call this type of assessment a consequence-based assessment. As I will show, such an evaluation will always be incomplete for anyone who finds nature beautiful. Anyone who finds nature beautiful cannot assess the value of a beautiful object in nature without considering the benefit that beauty provides for humanity, because surely beautiful objects are beneficial. But attempting to assess the value of beauty in terms of its consequences is problematic. No such assessment completely captures that value because every such assessment considers only the subjective responses of individuals. Since we are assessing the value of beauty for rational beings, their responses are the standard for assessing value. But if our evaluation of beauty merely evaluates the responses evoked by the beautiful, then beauty is reduced to something which can make no objective claim.

When an object is judged beautiful, this judgment demands universal agreement (*Judgment* 54). (Even though what is beautiful is not universally agreed on, any aesthetic claim makes a universal demand for such an assent.) When a person asserts that an object is beautiful, he or she asserts that all rational beings should find it beautiful. This is the essential difference between the beautiful and the agreeable. To say that something is agreeable is merely to say that it is agreeable to me; no universal assent is expected (*Judgment* 55). So, if we hold that beautiful objects are valuable in a way that merely agreeable objects are not, then any assessment of the value of their beauty must take into account the universal nature of aesthetic claims. But since a consequence-based assessment of the value of the beautiful has access only to the subjective responses of individuals, such an assessment can never capture the importance of the objective demand of a beauty claim. The consequence-based assessment assesses the beautiful as if it were merely the agreeable.

Ethical deliberations about nature require us to assess the value of the beautiful. The only way to avoid reducing this value to the value of the agreeable is to recognize the universal demands made by aesthetic judgments. To the extent that we say that the beautiful is more valuable than the merely agreeable, we must acknowledge the beautiful to be

valuable in itself. For if the beautiful were valuable only because of its beneficial effects, there would be no distinction between its value and that of the agreeable. There is such a distinction: we cannot claim that something is beautiful without necessarily claiming that it is beautiful—and hence valuable—to all rational beings. But what is valuable to all rational beings is necessarily valued by any rational being in any situation whatsoever. Whatever is necessarily valued by all rational beings is valuable in itself. And whatever is valuable in itself morally obligates us, since we must desire it categorically and not merely hypothetically. Thus, to claim that nature is beautiful is to claim that we have obligations to nature in itself. This may seem to contradict my earlier claim that nature in itself lacks value. However, the claim here is that *beauty* has value in itself. Nature can only be beautiful when presented to rational beings. Therefore, the peculiar nature of judgments of beauty requires that we accept obligations to nature in itself, even though nature in itself lacks value.<sup>2</sup>

### E. Conclusion

In this discussion of the categorical imperative, it is clear that Kant believes that we have obligations only toward other people. Kant does not say that the beauty of the environment requires obligations to nature in itself. Still, the link between the aesthetic and the moral is very important for Kant. According to him, “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good” (*Judgment* 228). It is a symbol of the morally good because the same rule that allows us to recognize judgments of beauty as universal allows us to recognize morality as universal (*Judgment* 227–28). It is this similarity between judgments of beauty and moral judgments that makes possible obligation to the environment in itself.

Without such obligation, environmental decisions must be based on consequences and must therefore be arbitrary. In principle we cannot know all the consequences of any action. Further, we are usually unable to predict even relatively immediate consequences. This suggests that there must be a better way to make environmental decisions than

<sup>2</sup>Thanks to Michael Durham for his critical comments on and helpful revisions of this section.

judging the consequences of possible actions. This other way is founded on the peculiar nature of judgments of beauty, which requires us to accept obligations to the environment in itself even though the environment in itself has no value.

Knowing that we have obligations to the environment in itself does not make deciding environmental questions simple. One of the difficulties is that there can be no principle in environmental ethics that accounts for environmental obligations as the categorical imperative accounts for obligations toward other people. No such principle can exist because environmental obligations depend on recognizing nature as beautiful, and no principle alone can account for how we decide what is beautiful. Still, we can have an agreed upon standard. This standard is possible because in judgments of beauty there is a standard: good taste. Of course, since not everyone has good taste, not everyone will agree on what our environmental obligations are. However, just as we can reach a general consensus among those with good taste as to what constitutes good art, we can hope for a general consensus in environmental ethics among those who acquire a taste for the beauty of nature.

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