

# **Towards an account of ethical holism able to challenge individualism in environmental ethics.**

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# Introduction

The struggle for acceptance faced by ethical holism indicates the wide gulf between, on the one side, environmental ethicists and activists and, on the other, philosophers more generally. Holism is often of central importance to those who are interested specifically in working on environmental issues; Michael P. Nelson tells the story of how, in his classes on environmental ethics, students reject traditional philosophical approaches simply because they are not sufficiently holist – recognition of the primacy of holism is often a basic assumption in thinking about environmental ethics.<sup>1</sup> In philosophy more generally, however, frameworks which favour the individual have long been standard, and moral status is usually not conferred on groups or wholes. Attempts to recognise the moral status of these wholes are met with fear that such a status necessarily impacts on the status of the individuals. There is thus an ever-present tension between holism and individualism in environmental philosophy, because this is an arena where neither side quite dominates the other; advocates for both sides are keen to describe the various merits and demerits of both positions, explaining why one is better than the other.<sup>2</sup> In my opinion both sides talk past each other, and too often focus on discussions which are weighted in their respective favours. So we find much focus, from those of an individualist persuasion, on the idea of subordination of individual rights which is supposedly entailed by holism; an ethical framework which would allow subordination of, say, human rights can hardly be widely accepted. Holism has pivotal questions to answer, but it appears as though the answers given so far have not been satisfactory – certainly, there is still obvious opposition to ethical holism in modern moral philosophy. Yet ethical individualism is problematic when applied to problems of environmental ethics; if ethical holism is to replace it in this field, then it must find satisfactory answers to these pivotal questions. What the ethical holist needs is an account of holism sophisticated enough to rebut individualist criticism and provide solutions where individualism fails. The question then becomes: in which ways does ethical holism require development in order to challenge individualism in environmental ethics.

The hypothesis around which I structure this thesis is as follows: ethical holism is required in order to meet the global challenges of environmental ethics. I believe that this is so. I aim to show first that ethical holism is neither dangerous nor unwarranted, and I think the way to do this is by engaging

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<sup>1</sup> Michael P. Nelson, "Teaching Holism in Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 32 (2010): 34.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of standard arguments between the two camps, see Marion Hourdequin, *Environmental Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 57-84.

with the deeper philosophical topic of parts and wholes. I believe much of the controversy over the implications of ethical holism is due to confusion over this topic, and so a successful account of ethical holism – one which can address the individualist’s criticisms – will need an explanation of why this confusion arises and how it can be dispelled. Such a version of ethical holism will also be able to resist accusations that it is not necessary for environmental ethics, and it will do this by demonstrating the conceptual and practical advantages it holds over ethical individualism in matters regarding living beings and their environments. To develop this version of ethical holism, it should prove useful to build on what I take to be the strongest existing version. In 2013 J. Baird Callicott published *Thinking Like a Planet*.<sup>3</sup> This book, which covers Callicott’s thoughts on a huge number of topics ranging from the history of science through moral philosophy and environmental ethics, cements the author’s position as perhaps the foremost ethical holist in contemporary western philosophy. My arguments in the following chapters have, generally speaking, the same goal as Callicott’s book, namely: to promote the idea that we need to be able to speak about moral duties to environmental collectives or systems, or what I tend to refer to as wholes. Callicott and I are opposed to the idea that we cannot do so, that moral duties can only be towards individual organisms. In taking Callicott’s account of ethical holism as a starting point, I hope to show what ethical holism still requires in order to be taken seriously as a better alternative to individualism in environmental ethics.

To complete this introduction, I now offer a short description of each chapter. In chapter one, I discuss the relationship of parts and wholes in general. Of crucial importance is the status of the whole: is it merely a collective, an aggregate of its component parts? Or does it have some type of status which is not reducible? This inquiry is essential groundwork for a meta-ethical evaluation of ethical holism: we must be clear on the status of the whole and how the parts are related to it in order to understand the ways in which a whole can be an agent, or the extent to which its responsibilities or harms can differ from those of its components. I try to show how it is relevant that wholes can have a distinct type of existence from their parts.

In chapter two, I discuss the relationship of parts and wholes in a more specific sense. A crucial sticking point in the debate between environmental individualists and environmental holists is the idea, held by the individualists, that the whole can subordinate the part. I contend that this idea of subordination is misguided. Taking inspiration from Hegel’s political philosophy, I argue that the conception of a conflict of interests between part and whole is incoherent. Furthermore, if this is

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<sup>3</sup> J. Baird Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

accurate, then it seems to follow that the problem of subordination is more acute for individualist approaches rather than for holistic ones.

In chapter three, I talk about moral status and the historical extension of the scope of things with direct moral status. This puts our choice between individualism and holism at the forefront of the discussion because it can be argued that both approaches are essentially concerned with the exact same things, only in different ways. We must consider the matter of whether something requires direct moral consideration. An important question is raised in this chapter: is ethical environmental holism required? Some philosophers argue that, since individualism can achieve the same results, ethical holism is not required. This bold claim requires careful investigation.

In chapter four, I move on to an analysis of the concept of the individual in order to make a conceptual criticism of ethical individualism. Often in environmental philosophy, particular living beings are seen as individuals and parts, in contrast to greater systems and wholes – the former recognised as having moral status, the latter much less so. However, the concept of the individual is not so simple as that. Systems can be seen as individuals, and individuals can be seen as systems; this makes any alleged tension between part and whole highly context-dependent. I argue that it is not so easy as equating parts with individuals and wholes with systems. The result of this discussion is recognition that environmental individualism may be far less intuitive than first thought.

In chapter five, I bring up a specific challenge for individualism in environmental ethics. It is sometimes bemoaned that the fault in humans' unethical treatment of their environment lies in the humans themselves, not in the dominant, individualist ethical framework. If only, so the claim goes, we all acted in a morally appropriate manner then there would be no need to seek out a new, holistic, ethical framework. I criticise this claim by reference to the debate between internalism and externalism in the meta-ethical problem of moral motivation. I argue that there is actually a fault in the dominant individualist ethical framework which is not traceable to the moral fault of humans, and does actually lead to poor results in environmental policy. I hope also to show that a holistic approach can resolve this fault and that, therefore, ethical holism has a practical advantage over individualism in environmental ethics.

Finally, in chapter six, I discuss the issue of time and the idea of moral obligations to things which do not yet exist. This is a hotly-debated issue in moral philosophy and is outlined well in the non-identity problem, which I explain. I hope to show why the problem of talking about ethical treatment of future generations is specifically a problem for individualist approaches to ethics. Ethical holism, however, has the tools with which to avoid the non-identity problem and, I argue, allows us to easily

talk about ethical treatment of future generations. This is then a second practical advantage which ethical holism holds over individualism.

# Chapter 1

## The possibility of ethical holism: parts and wholes

A general inquiry into the relationship between part and whole should address the nature of the whole, specifically the hypothesis that it is nothing more than the aggregate of its parts. Such a hypothesis is reductive and its proponent will doubt whether wholes can have a nature distinct from the natures of its component parts. I, however, wish to claim that wholes, or collectives, can be of distinct ethical significance; in order to do this I will need to find plausible ways of demonstrating that they can have a type of being, or attributes, not reducible to the level of their component parts. Furthermore, this demonstration must also show how these irreducible characteristics specifically can be ethically relevant. This is the groundwork for any account of ethical holism.

Jeremy Bentham is sometimes invoked in the environmental ethics literature as being an arch-individualist.<sup>4</sup> Renowned for extending the scope of moral status to include nonhuman animals who can feel pain, Bentham's work serves as a useful starting point with which to investigate the well-known tension in non-anthropocentric ethics between animal rights advocates and environmental holists. Bentham's concern for individual welfare, however, is not as one-sided as it is sometimes suggested. Indeed, he seriously engaged with the deep philosophical tension between part and whole, and consideration of his position could prove illuminating in the field of environmental ethics. His chief concern, though, was not with individual living beings and their environment, but rather with individual humans and their societies. Bentham's thoughts on political philosophy touch on issues in environmental philosophy, and this suggests that our specific environmental problems are not separate from more general philosophical difficulties.<sup>5</sup>

J. Baird Callicott, in stressing Bentham's influence to the modern emphasis on individuality, quotes Bentham in the following way:

"The interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals... When it has a meaning, it is this. The community is a fictitious *body*, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its *members*. The interest of the community then is what? – the sum of the

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<sup>4</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> For a concise summary of the major themes in Bentham's political philosophy, see Bhikhu Parekh, ed. *Bentham's Political Thought* (London: Croom Helm, 1973).

interests of the several members who compose it. It is vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual.”<sup>6</sup>

Bentham here seems to render the community as an abstract idea, a collective nothing more than the sum of its parts. However, J. A. W. Gunn argued that this reading of Bentham is overly simplistic.<sup>7</sup> Gunn gives some examples of cases where Bentham appears to affirm that the state has some sort of being independent of its members. To start with, in discussing the value of individual humans and the unjust manner in which nations sacrifice the welfare of those individuals in the fulfilment of national honour, Bentham concedes that a nation’s honour can be attacked with no adverse effects upon its members. Gunn claims that such a point demonstrates that Bentham only denied the independent character of a community up to the point where individual interests were not negatively affected.<sup>8</sup> More clearly, Gunn points out that Bentham admitted the possibility of offences against the state in general: an example could be some crime which harms a community’s internal order.<sup>9</sup> Individuals would probably suffer from these offences, but the identification of particular affected interests would be difficult and perhaps impossible. If Gunn is correct, then we may be sceptical of some of the claims made about Bentham’s position. Callicott, for example, after listing the quotation noted previously, claims that, for Bentham-style utilitarianism, it is nonsensical to talk of a community being benefited or harmed.<sup>10</sup> Gunn, though, argues that there is scope to talk about a community’s welfare as somewhat distinct from the welfare of its individual members – even for the arch-individualist Bentham himself. In stressing the individualism of Bentham, environmental ethicists must remember that philosopher’s purposes. Arguably, Callicott has taken Bentham’s words out of context, and used Bentham’s specific comment on the purported interest of a community to count for the being of a community in general. However, Bentham was not a reductionist just for the sake of it, and he was certainly no opponent of society. He was concerned with any attempt to conjure up a separate national interest not derived from component individual interests. In working out the details, though, Bentham showed that the whole of the state or community was not entirely reducible to its parts.

If supposedly extreme individualism does not deny the possibility of real and important differences between individual humans and the wholes they make up, then it should be no surprise to see that other philosophers have taken on the challenge of specifying what those differences could be. D. E.

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<sup>6</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 60.

<sup>7</sup> J. A. W. Gunn, “Jeremy Bentham and the Public Interest,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1 (1968): 398-413.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 402-3.

<sup>10</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 60.



Cooper demonstrated why he believed wholes to be potentially much more than the sum of their parts in a discussion on collective responsibility.<sup>11</sup> Debates on collective responsibility are complex and there are certainly contemporary philosophers who argue that full responsibility must ultimately lie with individuals.<sup>12</sup> However, for the purposes of this thesis, I wish only to give an idea of how it can be argued that collective responsibility is something viable. In much the same way as an individualist may want to claim that the interests of a community are reducible to the interests of its members, someone may want to claim that collective responsibility is reducible to the individual responsibility of the members in that collective. Cooper disputes this reduction. He says that we do sometimes have a good reason to think that the description of a whole is derived from a description of its parts, as when we describe a stamp collection as old – the collection is old because all the components are themselves old. However, sometimes we have no good reason for supposing such a reduction to be accurate. His example of a delicious stew made from ingredients which are not by themselves delicious is enough to show that wholes can display properties which their parts cannot. Such emergent properties of wholes can be ethically relevant. Cooper argues that groups of people can be responsible for the decline in quality of a party or a club in ways which the members, as individuals, are not held responsible; this is not a strange claim once we accept the importance of interaction to group success. Certain collectives of people can simply fail to achieve harmony, and that without any obvious individual failings.

“A collective’s falling below an expected standard might be quite different from an individual’s falling below a standard expected of him. Certain things may be expected of a collective, and if it fails to live up to expectations then it will incur blame. This may occur without any individual failing to live up to what is expected of him.”<sup>13</sup>

If Cooper is correct in saying that collective responsibility is not reducible to individual responsibility, then we have further support for thinking of wholes as not merely the sum of their parts. We started by noting that, even for Bentham, the notion of a community’s welfare is not totally reducible to individual welfare. Now we can see that there is space to conceive of a group as having responsibility not reducible to individual responsibility.

Individualist ethicists may well accept both these positions: that groups can have a being distinct from the aggregate being of its members, as well as the fact that this entity can have responsibilities not reducible to the responsibilities of its members. However, the questions as to whether these groups can be moral beings, or whether they can have moral responsibilities, are separate, and

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<sup>11</sup> D. E. Cooper, “Collective Responsibility,” *Philosophy* 43 (1968): 258-68.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Narveson, “Collective Responsibility,” *Journal of Ethics* 6 (2002): 179.

<sup>13</sup> Cooper, “Collective Responsibility,” 263.

individualists can argue that the claim of the moral agency of groups does not follow from the prior arguments. The role of intentions in moral action is typically important for this argument because it is often held that it is intentions which separate instances of behaviour from actions – actions being things which can be judged morally. Holists can respond to this in two ways: first, they can argue that intentions are not required – the presence of intentions does not demarcate different realms of moral action and non-moral behaviour. Certainly, few people will doubt that intentions can be relevant in the matter of moral judgment: most people would judge more harshly someone who intentionally threw a cricket ball at another person's head than a person who, while casually throwing the ball around, accidentally hit a passer-by. However, it seems just as obvious that some morally blameworthy acts are devoid of intention to harm – or, in any case, devoid of intentions regarding other people. In this way, behaviour which threatens other people is typically seen as morally wrong, even if the guilty party has no intention to impact other people. Also, in cases of lack of action, we can often justifiably censure people who refuse to help others in need, such as the adult who refrains from saving a child drowning in shallow water when able to do so. In such a case, there is absolutely no other-regarding intention from the adult whatsoever, yet we would still typically see this as a case of moral blame. Therefore, so the argument might go, it does not matter that groups do not have intentions – they can still be seen as moral entities, potentially worthy of praise or blame.

The second option for responding to such an individualist argument is to claim that groups can, in a way, have intentions, therefore making them eligible to be considered moral agents. This is a tricky step to take, because intentions are normally understood to be mental states: if we commit to the thesis that a group can have intentions then surely we are then positing a group mind, which is somehow related to the distinct minds of the individual members. Intuitively, we may decide to say that the collective mind is something that supervenes on individual minds, but it would not then be clear how the group intention is anything different from the cumulative intentions of individuals. A better tactic may be similar to the one developed by Larry May.<sup>14</sup> May stresses that intentions are developed in different ways; so, for example, a person can develop an intention independently from other people, but can also develop an intention in association with others. These intentions are different in a relevant sense because they do not simply inhere within individuals, but are instead 'outside' the individuals, at least partly. Take any team effort: we can locate a collective intention entirely within the individual members by saying that member A has the intention to P, as does member B and member C and so on. Such an assessment, however, ignores the point that the very existence of such intentions is explainable only in a wider context, a context in which the

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<sup>14</sup> Larry May, *The Morality of Groups* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

relationships between individuals are as telling as the individuals taken alone. By focusing on relationships the holist can avoid positing a collective mind as such; instead, she can argue that intentions, while mental states, are not limited to a single mind. In this way can a group have an intention: not because it has a mind, but because intentions can be developed and shared between different minds.

I have shown some ways in which philosophers have argued that wholes are not merely the sum of their parts. This is intended only as an introduction to these topics, as debates on such things as collective responsibility and group intentions can quickly become very complex. For now, I deem it sufficient to have shown how it is possible for a whole to be seen as distinct from its parts in both a conceptual and a normative sense. This is a necessary first step in explaining the validity of ethical holism's claim to be an adequate solution to the challenges of environmental ethics. Now that the possibility of ethical holism has been established, we can move forward and assess the most common ways in which the desirability of ethical holism as a conceptual framework has been challenged.

# Chapter 2

## Separation of part and whole: the problem of subordination

A great deal of the philosophy written on problems arising from the relationship between parts and wholes concerns problems of political philosophy, especially the relationship between the individual human being and his or her society. Tensions exist in this relationship because the two sides are commonly conceived of as having their own goods: the good of the individual human may conflict with the good of the society. This conception results in a dichotomy whereby the respective goods are separated, and the part and the whole are set up as opposites. This conception of the two components as alien to one another lends itself easily to a conception of any conflict between them in terms of a power struggle. Especially in political philosophy we often encounter the language of domination when an assessment of tension between individual and society is required. Any argument which focuses on the good of a state, for example, is open to accusations of subordinating the individual to that state – an accusation which can be rather harmful to a philosopher's reputation. The problem of subordination is supposed to be particularly acute for ethical holism, and so it must be answered before ethical holism can be accepted as a viable framework for environmental ethics.

In this chapter I will suggest that placing a part in opposition to a whole is of limited use, and becomes downright misleading when that part is an individual living being. I will first assess the idea that the good of a society can subordinate the good of an individual, and show how Hegel challenged the coherence of this notion. Then, moving beyond the field of strictly human relationships, we can investigate whether those same ideas are equally applicable in the broader arena of relationships between individuals and their environments. This will involve a look at the traditional separation of humans from 'nature' but also the common modern dichotomy between individual living beings and the non-living features of their environments. As a result of these inquiries, I aim to demonstrate i) that ethical holism does not necessarily subordinate the part to the whole, and ii) that there is often no outright way to distinguish between part and whole. Ethical holism can then be recognised as a moral framework which should not quickly be dismissed.

## 1. HEGEL AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND STATE

Hegel is often accused of subordinating the individual to the state. Historically, this is partly the result of poor translations of his texts; but his image as an apologist for totalitarianism carries over and is still hinted at in philosophical work.<sup>15</sup> I find reason to doubt this image, and also to doubt that there is any real subordination going on in Hegel. I will now try to pinpoint exactly where this criticism of Hegel comes from and also why it could be mistaken. This investigation is useful because the traditional rejection of this part of Hegel's philosophy is effectively the same rejection commonly suffered by ethical holism – they are both accused of subordinating the part to the whole. In talking about political organization, Hegel certainly argued that, in the rational state, the interests of the individual and the state would be in harmony. The first thing to notice is that, by state, Hegel means all social life (or, as he sometimes calls it, 'the substance'): the supposed opposition is not between individual and government but between individual and community. But, more importantly, Hegel is not talking about blind conformity to one's society. The interests of individual and state do not harmonize when the former is erased and replaced by the latter. This is because a human, for Hegel, has both an individual and a universal aspect, and neglect of either aspect results in a sort of alienation. Blind conformity – just going along with what everyone else is doing – is a neglect of one's individuality and a disavowal of one's own interests. Therefore, harmony between interests does not include permission of conformity and subordination.

But the relationship between individual and state in Hegel is interesting in another way, because there is no clear split between the two. If each one necessarily instantiates the other, then we may wonder whether it is coherent to set them up as opposites. States are the result of human creation and so, to a certain extent, my state is an objectification of myself. Conversely, we are all products of our environment, and so our activity can hardly be separated from our state.

What appears here as the power and authority of the individual exercised over the substance, which is thereby superseded, is the same thing as the actualization of the substance. [PS¶490]<sup>16</sup>

For Hegel, as mentioned already, all people have a universal aspect in addition to their individuality; and this universal aspect is exemplified in our reason and our social environment, things which

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<sup>15</sup> David Sherman, "Existentialism and Politics," in *The Continuum Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Joseph et al (London: Continuum, 2011), 63.

<sup>16</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Cited by paragraph number.

connect us to something beyond ourselves and which last. It is not so easy to place individuals in opposition to their state simply because it is not so easy to isolate individuals from their state. A human shorn of a social environment might not be a coherent idea because it is essential to our identities. Even a person who leaves society to go and live in the wilderness, for example, still retains, among other things, the language of his/her previous society. It seems very problematic to isolate a fundamental aspect of our being and suppose that, by opposing it, we could remain the same beings. Now, I would not wish to claim that there can be no subordination on Hegel's terms; however, I think that there is here scope for questioning the coherence of the idea that individual people can be subordinated to the state. Subordination, properly conceived, seems rather to be a case of a part of a whole being dominated by a different part of that whole, and thus a problem for individualism rather than holism. Parallel to this, I think there is room to question any clear separation of individual and state and, more generally, a clear separation of part and whole when the parts in question are living things. The interconnectedness of part and whole in such cases is of the utmost relevance. Given these Hegelian insights, I take it as reasonable to conclude both that ethical holism does not necessarily imply subordination of parts to wholes, nor can subordination really be a problem for ethical holism.

## **2. VOGEL AND THE SEPARATION OF HUMANS FROM NATURE**

Let us now consider a different dichotomy with a long philosophical history, with which we can shift our attention more explicitly to matters of environmental philosophy: humans and nature. I believe that the insights drawn from Hegel can provide further support for critics of this dichotomy. Some environmental policies are criticised for advancing the good of nature at the cost of subordinating particular human interests; in this way, the whole (nature) is imagined to subordinate the part (humans). I claim that, just as subordination of part to whole is not really a problem for Hegel, the idea of subordination of humans to nature is misguided. In its strongest formulation, the opposition of humans and nature can involve an actual separation: humans – or at least the rational aspect of humans – are on this account something completely different from nature, and ought not be grouped together with nature. The capacity for rationality is usually the justification for such a claim, and thus are other rational beings – whether they be divine or extra-terrestrial – also imagined to exist outside the bounds of nature. The contrast between humans and nature can also be formulated in a weaker sense: humans do not need to be seen as outside the bounds of nature but rather as a unique part of it. In this way there is no separation between the two, as such; but isolation of the human, for whatever purpose, would still be considered unproblematic.

Steven Vogel has argued that the concept of 'nature' has no place in environmental philosophy.<sup>17</sup> After making his case, he concludes that we should be wary in any attempt to isolate humans from what was traditionally seen as nature, because much environmental thinking on this topic is flawed. I will now attempt to sum up those arguments of Vogel which I find most relevant to my discussion. He begins by following John Stuart Mill's point that there are at least two very distinct meanings of the term nature. The first, which Vogel capitalizes as 'Nature,' refers to the physical world; everything which exists according to physical laws – the laws of nature, as they are often known – is on this account part of nature. This would certainly include humans. The contrasting term for 'Natural' would then be supernatural, or things that are not bound by physical laws (and Vogel notes that this might well be an empty set). In addition to the concept of 'Nature' we have the lower-case 'nature,' which is contrasted with artificial. Vogel claims that this second definition of nature is invoked often in environmental philosophy but argues that it is a highly dubious notion, unhelpful and probably unjustifiable. Indeed, he argues that neither conception of nature is of any use in talking about humans' normative relationship to the rest of the world. If by nature we mean 'Nature' then it is unclear how we could possibly determine any environmental obligations, for every human action would then need to be considered part of nature and harmonious with it. On the other hand, if we mean the narrower conception of 'nature' as something non-artificial, then it does not seem possible for us to do anything natural at all – all human action could be considered artificial, to some extent. It is not obvious why anyone should accept the natural/artificial dichotomy as relevant for our environmental ethics; however, if we do, then it would seem impossible for us to talk of ethical treatment of something which we, by definition, cannot encounter: any part of nature altered by humans would immediately turn artificial. It may possibly be contended that we could retain duties regarding nature, insofar as we recognise duties not to interfere beyond the boundaries of our artificial environments; this would perhaps qualify as a type of ethical treatment of nature in the sense that we would be blocking the potential for unethical treatment. We would then, though, need to specify where these boundaries lie; it is, for example, an ongoing debate as to whether any part of the surface of our planet can now properly be considered as natural.<sup>18</sup>

There are difficulties with any attempt to posit humans as either a special part of nature or as distinct from nature. While it may be true that we possess a unique capacity for rationality, other species likewise have unique capacities and we do not seem to admit that they have special relationships

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<sup>17</sup> Steven Vogel, "Why "Nature" Has No Place in Environmental Philosophy," in *The Ideal of Nature* ed. Gregory E. Kaebnick (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 84-97.

<sup>18</sup> See for example: Robin Attfield, "Is the Concept of Nature Dispensable?" *The Proceedings of the Twenty-First World Congress of Philosophy* 5 (2007): 59-63; and Bill McKibben, "The Challenge to Environmentalism," *Daedalus* 137 (2008): 5-7.

with nature. Vogel notes that it is the products of humans which are often seen as unnatural. However, this is not easy to justify. Some of our products, such as our bodies' waste products, seem as natural as those of other living things, while the engineering of our environment bears no obvious dissimilarity with the activity of animals such as beavers. For Vogel, the human/nature dichotomy and its difficulties stem from a metaphysical presupposition that we have already made and that we are now trying to justify.

When environmental thinkers distinguish nature from the human...this is not because it is possible to discover in the world some ontologically significant difference between those things humans have transformed and those that they have not. Rather, this view begins by *assuming* the existence of such a difference – begins, that is, by assuming that humans are distinct from nature, typically because of their mental capacities – and then uses that assumption to *justify* the claim that that which humans have made or done (the *artificial*) can be ontologically distinguished from the *natural*.<sup>19</sup>

Vogel's position that the concept of nature has no real use in environmental philosophy is understandable. Is the human/nature dichotomy, though, anything like the individual/state dichotomy discussed previously, and can a Hegel-style critique of it prove useful? I believe we can draw some similarities between the two. To start with, 'Nature' as the physical world is, to a certain extent, constructed by individual humans. Now, it is not immediately clear to me if the scale of this construction is comparable to that of states (Are there parts of our physical world untouched by us? Are there parts of our states not constructed by us?) but it seems likely that 'Nature' stands in a similarly alterable relationship to humans as do states. The concept of 'nature' as non-artificial does not seem to play a similar role in the analogy. Likewise, 'nature' cannot play a part as an essential aspect of our being in the same way that our states are part of who we are. 'Nature' however plays a very similar role: our own lives would make absolutely no sense without, as Hegel might call it, the universal aspect of physical laws. It is, outside of a limited context, arbitrary to isolate humans from 'Nature'; and it may also be incoherent to set up an individual person in opposition to 'Nature' if we are ultimately explainable by reference to it.

Vogel's critique of the concept of nature and its place in environmental philosophy partly illuminates why the human/nature dichotomy is so unsatisfactory. Nature as non-artificial seems based on a metaphysical assumption about the special role of humans in the world. Nature as the physical world seems unworkable as a basis from which to derive obligations to the environment. However, this idea of 'Nature' as the physical world is interestingly similar to Hegel's idea of the state as social

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<sup>19</sup> Vogel, "Why "Nature" Has No Place in Environmental Philosophy," 95.



world. In the same way that we may question the coherence of the idea of an individual human at odds with his/her state, we may wonder whether the idea of an individual human at odds with nature makes any sense. Again, as with Hegel, I could not deny that subordination occurs. However, these musings on the interconnectedness of humans and 'Nature' suggest to me that there is a certain inaccuracy in claiming that the part can be subordinated to the whole; that the individual human can be ignored in pursuit of the greater good of the ecosphere. The complex relationship between part and whole does not seem to lend itself so easily to such a conception of subordination of interests. I believe that this link between Hegel and Vogel is useful in recognising ethical holism's ability to evade the problem of subordination, as we move from specifically human relationships to the relationship between humans and their environments.

### **3. LEMA AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ORGANISMS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTS**

Hegel's insight can be brought out more if we abandon the dubious human/nature dichotomy and replace it with a modern scientific assessment of the relationship between humans and the rest of the physical world. Without referring to Hegel particularly, Sean C. Lema engages in such a task while discussing the interdependency of organisms and their environments.<sup>20</sup> Lema claims that the traditional move of separating organisms into a realm of moral consideration while leaving their environments outside this consideration is untenable, because there can be no coherent way in which we can affect one and not the other. If Lema is correct then we may be justified in doubting the adequacy of individualist ethics to properly care for, not just the non-living features of our environments, but living things as well.

Lema begins by noting the (comparatively) recent trend in Western philosophy to adopt a perspective of human-in-nature to replace the previous human-and-nature one. This, he says, is a result of the influence of ecology, which has demonstrated so well the intimate relationship between living things and their environment. In the early days of ecology, ideals such as equilibrium and stability were the focus: the complex relationships between things living and non-living were the subject of attempts at preservation. This ideal is captured somewhat in the famous maxim of Aldo Leopold: "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."<sup>21</sup> Followers of Leopold have had to adapt this sentiment somewhat, given modern scientific emphasis on change as an essential aspect of biotic

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<sup>20</sup> Sean C. Lema, "The Ethical Implications of Organism-Environment Interdependency," *Environmental Ethics* 36 (2014): 151-69.

<sup>21</sup> A. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 224-5.

communities. The ideal of maintaining a perfect system is no longer relevant when discussing the good of an ecosystem, because an ecosystem itself is necessarily in a state of flux. Additionally, modern biology increasingly emphasises the ways in which the biotic and abiotic parts of communities develop through their interactions with each other. Lema thinks that this modern perspective has great implications for our concepts of organism and environment.

It is now clear that an organism's phenotype – its morphological, behavioural, physiological, and life history characteristics – is shaped by the interactions and experiences that the organism has earlier in life. Environmental conditions – which include both internal factors (e.g., hormone signals, cellular oxygen tension) and factors external to the organism (e.g., environmental temperature, social interactions) – influence the complex dynamics of the intracellular state including gene expression, which subsequently shifts an organism's behaviour, morphology, physiology, and life history.<sup>22</sup>

For Lema, the traditional way of conceptualizing the environment as something external to the organism is no longer viable. It does not act merely as an 'other' – some place for organisms to navigate, or some challenge to which they must adapt – but is instead indispensable to their very cores. It changes the physical make-up of organisms themselves. Here we must recall the importance of change, because both organisms and environments are constantly developing. Nor does the developing influence originate from only one side of the relationship: organisms, to whatever extent, change their environments, thus impacting the types of interactions that will occur between the two in the future.

The conceptual constructs of "organism" and "environment" are reformulated so that the "organism" becomes the outcomes of development, while the "environment" is viewed as the processes that produce, maintain, and alter those outcomes. Organisms no longer exhibit particular phenotype characteristics solely because those characteristics are adaptations to a particular niche. Instead, organisms are shaped developmentally by their interactions during development with the other components – both biotic and abiotic – of the community, and the niche itself is constructed by the activities of the organism (e.g., habitat selection, ecosystem engineering, etc.). The organism becomes indivisible from its environment and experiences.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lema, "Organism-Environment Interdependency," 154-5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

Lema's position bears a striking resemblance to Hegel's, though the subject matter may differ. The individual/state dichotomy was misleading because the two components could not really be separated. The state is constructed by its individuals and cannot be properly understood as opposition to those individuals; on the other hand, the idea of the individual as separated from the state is not really coherent – the state is an essential part of any individual, and will remain so no matter what. For Lema, the organism/environment dichotomy is similarly misleading. An environment is – if not constructed – at least developed by the living things within it, and should not be seen as some independent or foreign thing. An organism separated from an environment is also incoherent, because an organism's environment is not something external to it but rather the key explanation of what a developing individual actually is. If we take Lema's ideas further, we may well wish to question whether an individualist approach to ethics is adequate or suitable for environmental philosophy. If organisms are inseparable from their environments, might we not be in danger of overlooking some ethically relevant factors when we dismiss one part of the combination as not of direct moral consideration? And, practical questions aside, might we require a different justification for excluding entities such as ecosystems from the realm of moral status?

It may be objected that such ruminations over the interdependency of part and whole are problematic, not just for individualism, but for holism too. When we doubt that the part can be subordinated by the whole, do we not thereby admit that subordination comes down to parts, i.e. the minor part is subordinated by the major part? Is this not simply individualism? Where, then, does the whole come into it? I would say at this point that holism can be exemplified in two distinct ways and that it is important not to conflate them. The phenomenon of subordination is a context where holism can be exemplified in just one way. We can meaningfully talk about an individual human as being in opposition to a limited whole, as when a person's interest of dumping waste products clearly conflicts with the good of the lake intended as the dumping ground. This may be because the person has no direct relationship with the lake. One of these components – the person or the lake – is going to be subordinated in any ethical reflection about what ought to happen. In this way, holism still has a part to play in any matter of prioritisation of interests. Holism in the greater sense, however, does not play a part in these questions, and this is due to the complex interdependency between part and whole that I have covered in this chapter. Unlike the case of the person and the lake, it is doubtful whether it makes sense to set up the individual person in opposition to the entire ecosphere, and so the concern about subordinating the interests of individuals to a greater good, of which the individual is part, is misleading.

In summary, I have argued that Hegel's insight regarding the relationship between individual and state is relevant for any defence of ethical holism. This is because a major criticism levelled at ethical

holism – that it permits subordination of parts to the whole – is one dealt with by Hegel, satisfactorily in my view. I propose that any conceptual act of isolating individual beings, be it from their society, from nature, or from their environment, can be useful only up to a certain extent. A total demarcation, in order to explain the phenomenon of subordination, goes beyond this and should be recognised as dubious. The good of a whole cannot subordinate the good of its parts because there cannot exactly be a conflict between such goods. Because of this, I argue that the problem of subordination is really no problem at all for ethical holism. Assigning moral status to wholes allows for no more subordination of individual interests in practice than does individualist ethics. I take this as given, and now consider that one of the major criticisms of ethical holism can be answered.

# Chapter 3

## Towards ethical holism: the individualist's challenge

In the previous chapter, I concluded that ethical holism can be unfairly rejected due to groundless misgivings regarding the subordination of parts to wholes. In this chapter, I want to explore what I take to be the other main reason why ethical holism is so often rejected – the thought that it is unnecessary. Here, the claim is that practical holism is a framework sufficient to garner all the benefits of ethical holism without requiring additional moral commitments; it would be possible to fruitfully discuss and engage with wholes – such as ecosystems – without according those wholes moral status. This position is defended by Gary Varner, whose reluctance to accept ethical holism I will criticise. Before that, however, I will discuss moral status, and look at why we consider certain things to be of direct moral consideration while leaving other things out of that club. I think this step will be useful, because the debates between different ethical individualists can mirror the debates between ethical individualists and ethical holists. Indeed, we can find the same argument levelled against ethical holism – that it is unnecessary – in any discussion about the extension of the moral sphere, even discussion limited to moral consideration of individual things. My position will be that certain wholes must be of direct moral consideration if we are to adequately address the serious environmental concerns of the modern world, and so I am opposed to Varner on this point. Once we understand his position we will then be able to move forward and explain why practical holism proves inadequate, and hence why ethical holism is required.

### 1. MORAL STATUS – WHICH THINGS REQUIRE DIRECT MORAL CONSIDERATION?

It may be argued that there is no need to include a holistic aspect to our ethic for the following reason: for whatever benefits holism is supposed to bring, a completely individualistic ethic can deliver those same benefits. In the case of water pollution, for example, there would be no need to extend the scope of moral consideration to include wholes such as an ecosystem; as water pollution harms the individuals in that ecosystem, all that is required to benefit that ecosystem is proper adherence to an individualistic ethic for those beings within the ecosystem. Such a solution confirms individuals as objects of direct moral consideration, and wholes as objects of indirect moral consideration.

Such arguments have historically been made in order to resist recognition of the direct moral consideration of certain individuals.<sup>24</sup> At various times and places throughout history, slaves and women were also widely seen as lacking direct moral importance. Ethical treatment of such individuals was justified by reference not to them, but to those individuals of direct moral consideration with whom they were bound up – the slave’s owner, or the dominant male figure in the woman’s life. This subordination was not the result only of disregard for slaves or women; dominant individuals could be concerned with the well-being of slaves and women while still believing that an ethic which denies them direct moral consideration could adequately meet their needs. Such resistance of the direct moral consideration of individual humans has been discredited due to widespread recognition that there is no ethically relevant way to discriminate between humans in this matter. Additionally, the belief that the needs of individual humans can adequately be met under an ethic which denies them direct moral consideration seems fairly ridiculous nowadays.

Advocates of animal welfare and animal rights have a similar revulsion for the idea that animals can be of mere indirect moral concern.<sup>25</sup> Their contention is that, in much the same way as individual humans should themselves be treated ethically – as ends in themselves – so should moral duties concerning animals be toward those animals directly. Humans and animals would all be of moral consideration. In this way it would not matter if an anthropocentric ethic claimed to deliver the exact same treatment we could expect for animals under a non-anthropocentric one: as good as the projected outcomes would be, the anthropocentric ethic would still lack something seemingly vital – a direct moral consideration of animals.

Direct moral consideration of animals already causes hesitation among people (certainly more people than doubt the direct moral consideration of other humans). However, the next extension of the moral circle takes things much further. We could argue that each individual living thing should be an object of direct moral consideration. The difficulty in making this step could be for multiple reasons. For one, sentience as a crucial moral attribute has a highly influential history in philosophy, and is still defended in modern times by some philosophers as the sole criterion of direct moral consideration.<sup>26</sup> The continued popularity of this idea accounts for some of the reluctance to extend the sphere of direct moral consideration to include non-sentient life-forms such as trees. Another reason, though, could be the suspicion that – unlike individual humans and animals – non-sentient life could genuinely be just as well off with an ethic which takes it as of indirect moral concern as it could be with an ethic which considers it of direct moral concern. It might seem obvious to a modern

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<sup>24</sup> Hugh LaFollette (ed), *Ethics in practice: an anthology* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2014), 389-91.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-71.

<sup>26</sup> For probably the most famous example, see Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

philosopher that an ethic which treats women of indirect moral concern cannot yield results anywhere near as good for individual women (and men) as does an ethic where women are of direct moral concern. It may be somewhat more plausible to suppose that an anthropocentric ethic could yield the same benefits for animals as a non-anthropocentric one, though this would still be a controversial claim. However, it does not seem quite as obvious that non-sentient life needs to be the object of direct moral concern. Once we move past the sentience threshold, it becomes more difficult for humans to identify with anything like the interests or the good of non-sentient life-forms – this accounts partly for resistance of direct moral consideration of this large group of individuals.

Such resistance is seen as arbitrary by some philosophers. Kenneth Goodpaster argued that such bias comes from our narrow conception of interests: we tend to associate an interest with a corresponding psychological capacity for desire.<sup>27</sup> On this conception we may deny that trees, for example, have interests, because they don't formulate desires psychologically. Once we recognise that interests can be conceptualised in a wider sense, however, we can accept that all living beings have an interest in living. For Goodpaster, sentience seems to be "an adaptive characteristic of living organisms that provides them with a better capacity to anticipate, and so to avoid, threats to life."<sup>28</sup> According to Goodpaster, then, this characteristic of sentience is not itself the relevant criterion but rather something which developed from the relevant criterion, which is life itself. All living things can then be seen as objects of direct moral consideration, once life is accepted as the relevant criterion for moral consideration.

Environmental problems, though, are also influential in promoting direct concern for all life-forms among numerous philosophers. Certainly, it is often argued that an anthropocentric ethic can adequately address the environmental problems facing the modern world; such an outlook justifies imperatives to act on these problems by relating them to their effects on humans. This anthropocentric approach is challenged by a non-anthropocentric one which takes life as the relevant criterion for moral consideration – such an approach may be called biocentric.<sup>29</sup> Given the prior discussion of groups excluded from moral consideration, it is no surprise that the scepticism of biocentric approaches concerning anthropocentric solutions to environmental problems attracts plenty of sympathy. The claim here is that an ethic which denies direct moral consideration of non-sentient life can no better meet the interests of such life than can an ethic denying the direct moral consideration of women meet the interests of women. Only a biocentric approach, one which affirms the direct moral consideration of all life-forms, can adequately meet the interests of all life-forms.

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<sup>27</sup> Kenneth E. Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable," *The Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 320.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>29</sup> Hourdequin, *Environmental Ethics*, 67.

The next challenge comes from an approach we may call ecocentric.<sup>30</sup> Ecocentrism extends the scope of moral status to include, not just life-forms, but also their environments. It effectively groups anthropocentrism and biocentrism together as different versions of an individualist approach to ethics. The ecocentric concern is, however, very similar to the concern biocentrism has regarding anthropocentrism – that being, the inability of an anthropocentric ethic to adequately meet the interests of all life-forms. Ecocentrism accuses biocentrism of being likewise inadequate in addressing the interests of all life-forms, and the essential conflict between the two approaches is undoubtedly that of individualism versus holism. Ecocentrism contends that a narrow focus on individuals and individuals only as objects of moral consideration is the critical characteristic causing biocentrism to fail in adequately meeting the needs of living things; ecocentrism also holds that a holism, which can treat wholes such as ecosystems as being morally considerable, is required to address global environmental problems.

Individualism versus holism, as I described the essential conflict between biocentrism and ecocentrism, is already a somewhat misleading phrase, so let us first get clear on that. There is a certain asymmetry in this struggle, for while individualism tends to reject holism, it is usually not the case that holism rejects individualism. Holists are keen to include wholes in the set of morally considerable entities, a set which already includes individuals; it would be a radical holist indeed who argued that moral status should be shifted from individuals to wholes instead. This point is important in understanding traditional opposition to holism in ethics, and particularly environmental ethics. Tom Regan famously used the phrase ‘environmental fascism’ to decry ethically holistic views of nature, and the supposed subordination of the individual human is – to a lesser or greater extent – a problem for all advocates of environmental ethical holism.<sup>31</sup> Regan’s accusation, though, is only obviously applicable to the most radical forms of holism. Most holists do not intentionally eliminate or subordinate individuals, but instead try to find a balance between the interests of individuals and the interest of the whole. Callicott, for example, argues that his holistic environmental ethic is in harmony with, and not opposed to, a human rights ethic.<sup>32</sup> For Callicott, different ethics are like different layers. When we extend the scope of moral consideration – from a smaller community to a larger one – we do not thereby replace the previous ethic, but instead add to it. We are members of different moral communities – Callicott identifies the following: clan, tribe, nation, nation-state, global village and biotic community.<sup>33</sup> Many of our moral problems concern conflicting obligations to different communities, as when we must choose between our clan and our nation. It is not so simple

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<sup>30</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 225.

<sup>31</sup> Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 361-2.

<sup>32</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



as saying that the interests of one community always trump the interests of another. In this way, Callicott denies that his environmental ethic is a threat to a human rights ethic; it is similar to how the human rights ethic should not be seen as a threat to our familial obligations. Holism need not reject individualism.

Even though we may accept that the charge of 'environmental fascism' is unfair to holistic approaches in general, we may still question why we need holism in environmental ethics. It appears to me that there are two main reasons for promoting holism in discussions on moral status – the first conceptual and the second pragmatic. First, conceptually speaking, it may be that individualist approaches go so far as to no longer offer an accurate portrayal of reality. The reduction of wholes to constituent parts threatens to undermine that which is lost in the reduction – this is the idea that wholes can be greater than the sum of their parts, and that what is lost in the reduction may be of moral concern. Because of these concerns, it should prove fruitful for the development of an account of ethical holism to examine the very notion of the individual. In Chapter Two I challenged the coherence of the idea of an individual as isolated from and contrasted with a whole of which it is a part; furthermore, it will be a requirement to assess the extent to which any entity can actually be seen as an individual – this will be the main focus of Chapter Four. The results of these inquiries may persuade us that it is improper to exclude holist approaches from our work, be it scientific or ethical. Second, pragmatically speaking, there may be compelling reasons for seeing individualist ethics as inadequate for dealing with environmental problems. These pragmatic concerns are the focus of Chapters Five and Six. Ethical holism may turn out to be better able to secure the well-being of life in general than can a strictly individualist ethic. Perhaps, in the same way that anthropocentric individualism is accused of being insufficient for adequate treatment of non-human life, individualism itself is insufficient for adequate treatment of wholes such as ecosystems.

## **2. VARNER'S CHALLENGE TO ETHICAL HOLISTS**

Those advocating a holistic approach to ethics are usually seen as carrying a heavy burden of proof. Ethics has been dominated by individualist approaches for a long time and so any change in approach will not be easily accepted. Extending the scope of moral concern to include wholes is a greater philosophical challenge than is extending that scope from humans to small animals or plants. This opposition to ethical holism need not involve hostility to holism in general, though. It is perfectly consistent for an individualist ethicist to recognise the value of holistic approaches in certain contexts. However, just because a holistic approach to a particular problem may be useful, it would not then follow that the whole under assessment is itself morally considerable. Individualist

approaches to environmental ethics need not be so reductionist that they fail to recognise the status of ecosystems, but there is an important difference between recognising an ecosystem and according it moral status.

Gary Varner gives one of the foremost statements of this challenge.<sup>34</sup> He identifies two different types of environmental holism, namely practical and ethical.<sup>35</sup> For Varner, it is probable that all environmental philosophers will be practical holists: it is difficult, to say the least, to imagine that a person interested in environmental policy would deny the conceptual value of ecosystems in regards to explanation and action. Varner also notes that many environmental philosophers are, in fact, ethical holists as well, though the connection is contingent rather than necessary. He contends that this jump from practical holism to ethical holism has yet to be justified in a satisfactory manner, because it is yet to be shown how a system can have direct moral standing. Varner says that the paradigm example of a thing with direct moral standing is an individual human being, and that any ethical approach which could not ascribe direct moral standing to the satisfaction of at least some vital human interests would be very strange and unacceptable.<sup>36</sup> Given this, it seems to follow that advocates of ethical holism must argue one of the following claims: either that an entity which is very different from a human being can have interests; or that there is a criterion other than interests which can serve as a foundation of direct moral standing, and that ecosystems meet this criterion.

Varner first dismisses the idea that an entity such as an ecosystem can have interests. It is sometimes said that it is the interests of humans that are in conflict with the interests of ecosystems but, for Varner, this is metaphorical language. Interests are often connected with the psychological capacity of a being. On this view, interests are, probably by definition, too narrow a phenomenon to be applicable to something like an ecosystem. However, the connection between interests and psychological capacity can be challenged – indeed, Varner himself does this. He argues that, in the case of humans, those interests of which we are aware form a subset of our total interests, because fulfilment of some of our biological functions also qualifies as interests – this despite the fact that we are not conscious of them or, even, not able to be conscious of them.<sup>37</sup> Varner uses this claim as the basis from which to derive the moral status of individual non-conscious living beings, because such beings can also have interests as so defined. What, then, is the relevant difference between organisms and ecosystems? In adopting his position that there is a relevant difference, Varner emphasises the dissimilarity between individuals and ecosystems as entities by discussing the hypothesis that an ecosystem is a type of super- or quasi-organism. Varner's claim is that individual

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<sup>34</sup> Gary Varner, *In Nature's Interests?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

living things are the paradigm cases of things with interests, and that proponents for the interests of ecosystems – since ecosystems do not closely resemble these things – will require additional justification than this weak analogy between organisms and ecosystems. Varner refers to the old debate between Frederick Clements and Arthur G. Tansley, where Tansley criticised Clements' conception of ecosystems as themselves organisms.

“...Tansley stresses that, unlike the organs of a body, individual organisms from a given ecosystem are capable of existing independently of each other. From this “general independence” of an ecosystem’s constituent organisms follow two other disanalogies between an ecosystem and an organism: (1) ecosystems lack “the physical unity and definiteness of outline” characteristic of an organism and (2) an ecosystem’s organisms can “transfer themselves to another community and become true members of it,” an ability with no significant analog in an organism’s organs.”<sup>38</sup>

Varner does not really go beyond these points of Tansley, but it seems to me that the matter is hardly settled by them. It is not obvious that particular organs are more dependent on each other than are particular organisms; it is not obvious that an ecosystem’s outline must be considered less clear than the outline of an individual organism; and, as Varner must agree, it is not obvious why an organism’s ability to transfer itself is relevant, given the previous discussion on the interests of non-conscious life. Further investigation into the analogy between organisms and ecosystems will be required before we can make any declaration regarding the interests of ecosystems.

For now, let us just note that Varner has doubts over the coherence of the idea of ecosystem interests. If we leave the concept of interests to one side, could there be a different criterion which can serve as a foundation of direct moral standing? Varner assesses the merits of two candidates.<sup>39</sup> First, he looks at the claim that an ecosystem is morally considerable because it is a self-renewing thing. This claim can be used in an attempt to construct a different analogy between organisms and ecosystems than the one discussed previously. The idea here is that an ecosystem organizes itself and develops in ways which resemble the actions of individual organisms. For Varner, while there may be an interesting resemblance here, self-renewal itself is not sufficient for moral status. What really matters is the thing which is renewing itself. He uses the example of a sand heap to illustrate his point: the sand heap is, over time, supplemented by more sand and changed by external factors such as the wind. It renews itself but we probably would not wish to ascribe moral status to such a thing. There may be a counter-argument which stresses the passivity of the sand heap in comparison

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 17-24.

to the active organization of the components in the ecosystem, but Varner thinks this leads to further problems. This is because, when stressing active organization, we are not then really talking about the ecosystem but rather the biotic community within that ecosystem. Varner apparently doubts that biotic communities can develop in a really meaningful way because any major change in a biotic community thereby renders it a different biotic community. We are therefore not talking about self-renewal in such a case; we are talking about upheaval.

There are numerous points to raise from Varner's dismissal of self-renewal as itself ethically relevant. For a start, it is not exactly clear why the arrival of successive generations within a biotic community could not be considered the paradigm case of ethically relevant self-renewal. A biotic community could then claim to be self-renewing in a way similar to an individual organism. Also, depending on how we view the intimacy between a biotic community and the abiotic features of its ecosystem, we may ask whether Varner is being fair in rejecting the potentially relevant difference between the sand heap and the ecosystem: if the activity of the biotic community cannot be separated from the renewal of the ecosystem then the analogy between the sand heap and the ecosystem may be weak. Furthermore, though we do not immediately ascribe moral status to the sand heap, this example may be less helpful than first supposed. There is a suspicion of question-begging here. Varner uses the example of what he takes to be a self-renewing thing without moral status in order to demonstrate that other self-renewing things might also be without moral status. However, if self-renewing things do have moral status – which is precisely the claim under dispute – then his premise about the sand heap will not be accurate. Indeed, considering that the holist is now debating any philosopher who accepts the moral consideration of all life-forms, it does not seem absurd to speculate over the moral consideration of a sand heap, given that a sand heap supports life. It is the same debate in miniature.

The second candidate in the search for a different criterion of direct moral standing that is discussed by Varner involves the idea of production. This idea is most famously attributed to Holmes Rolston III.<sup>40</sup> Rolston thought that, while it may be true that ecosystems have no interests, they nevertheless must be considered to be of more than just instrumental value due to the fact that they produce things (organisms) which are of intrinsic value. Rolston made a similar point in relation to species extinction: for him, the harm caused by the elimination of a species is worse than the aggregated harms of those eliminated individuals, because the loss includes the potential of that species to produce new generations. A species may not be said to have interests but the potential to produce more beings of intrinsic value means that it is more than just instrumentally useful. This idea of

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<sup>40</sup> Holmes Rolston (III), *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in The Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

Rolston's is not too far away from the previously discussed idea of self-renewal; indeed, in a sense, production of new generations is a type of self-renewal. However, Varner thinks the argument is invalid. For Varner, just because X came from Y, and X has a certain value, it does not follow that Y also has that value. In this way, he claims that Rolston has committed a genetic fallacy. He uses an example whereby "an otherwise devastating hurricane happens to clear up the waters of a lagoon so that it is very beautiful..."<sup>41</sup> We may think that the lagoon has a certain kind of value but we wouldn't ascribe the same value to the hurricane which helped construct it. I am not so certain the analogy is useful. The hurricane certainly caused the state in which we now value the lagoon, but I do not think we can accurately say that it produced that state. There is surely a relevant difference between production and causation in this debate. Where we can say that adults of a given species can produce offspring, I am less certain that we would want to say that they can cause offspring. Rolston is not obviously committing a fallacy here.

Throughout this chapter I have been focusing on one reason why people may reject ethical holism, that being the suspicion that it is unnecessary. As the discussion on moral status shows, it is possible to doubt that direct moral consideration of a thing is required in order to satisfy the well-being of that thing; this is more or less controversial when we are talking about individual living beings, but far more common when talking about wholes such as ecosystems. And though I have questioned Varner's claims at several points, I do believe that he clearly states the challenge for the ethical holist. Ethical holism is certainly not the same thing as practical holism, and we may well be tempted by the idea that practical holism is all we will need in order to adequately address the serious environmental concerns of modern times. Such an outlook will not ignore the value of the holistic approach, and will stress that we need to investigate and understand the wholes (ecosystems) in order to properly understand the problems faced by the parts (organisms); it will, however, deny that those wholes are themselves of direct moral standing, and concur with the common view that the abiotic features of ecosystems are worth moral consideration only insofar as they affect the lives and welfare of the individual organisms of those ecosystems. The challenge for the ethical holist is to show that individualist ethics, in combination with practical holism, is insufficient in addressing modern environmental concerns; and therefore to rebut the reason for rejecting ethical holism discussed in this chapter. In the following chapters, I will take up this challenge by introducing some conceptual and pragmatic criticisms of individualist ethics – criticisms serious enough, I argue, to suggest that ethical holism is required in environmental ethics, due to individualism's inadequacy.

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<sup>41</sup> Varner, *In Nature's Interests?*, 23.

# Chapter 4

## The concept of the individual: first advantage of holism

To begin my attempt to outline the inadequacy of individualist ethics for environmental philosophy, I will turn to conceptual criticism. The aim of this chapter is to show that our ordinary notion of the individual organism is dubious and that opposition to ethical holism is arbitrary. In terms of the project as a whole, I aim to show that ethical individualism is conceptually deficient before moving on to show how it is also insufficient in practical matters. So let us now consider the following question: to what extent can the individual be said to differ from the whole? This question is closely related to the subject of chapter two, because we are again dealing with the separation of the individual from the whole. It is different, however, because we will be less concerned with conflict between the two and more interested in finding the essential differences between the two. In chapter two, I considered the extent to which an individual can be seen as opposing the whole of which it is a member. I concluded that it is misleading to see the interests or the welfare of the individual as in conflict with the interests or welfare of the whole. The welfare, for example, of the whole is constituted in part by the welfare of the individual, and vice versa. Because of this, any dichotomy with individual and whole, separated from each other and set up in opposition, makes little sense. Opposition of part and whole is incoherent because they operate on different levels. If this is correct then instances of subordination of parts are explainable, not by reference to the whole, but rather by reference to other parts. This is brought out by Hegel, for whom the individual person's subordination is caused by other people and not by the state, of which that individual is a component. So much for the question of opposition. Now we need to get a better grip on what we mean when we use terms such as 'individual' and 'system.' I will first compare humans with ecosystems in an attempt to clarify what we could possibly mean by those terms, and also how they relate to parts and wholes. After this I will argue, using the conclusions of Katie McShane, that the meaning of these terms depends heavily on the context in which they are used, and that it is not so easy as grouping certain things like humans into the category of parts, while other things such as ecosystems are grouped into the category of wholes. After these reflections we will be able to criticise the very idea of a contest between individualism and holism in ethics, as we will have concluded that individuals and wholes are not really different things at all.

## 1. WHAT IS AN INDIVIDUAL?

Alan Code drew attention to “the hypothesis...that something is a countable, unified whole, an individual, to the extent to which it exemplifies a substantial form.”<sup>42</sup> This description of an individual as itself a whole is very useful to think on, as it highlights the importance of context in ontological judgments. A national state may be a simple example: in an international context that state is considered a part of the greater international whole; but in a more local context it can itself be considered a whole made up of constituent parts. An individual human is also a unified whole while at the same time being a part of a society or an ecological whole. Is the human a whole which can be divided into parts depending on context? Arguably so, given that we can study various physical or psychological aspects of humans quite independently of the greater whole. With this in mind, we must remember to think about how the context affects our ability to talk about individuals, parts and wholes. The second part of the previous quotation, though, touches on the heart of the matter: disagreement over what counts as a thing which exemplifies a substantial form is a general problem in a wide range of philosophical topics, and very obviously in environmental ethics.

The problem of the ontological status of things like ecosystems recalls to mind the problem discussed in chapter one – that is, is the status of a collective reducible to the status of its constituent parts? There we saw that, even for the proposed arch-individualist Bentham, a collective can have a being not reducible to the aggregate being of its members. However, it is commonly claimed by opponents of ethical environmental holism that the status of an ecosystem is reducible to the status of its members; or, alternatively, that the ontological status of ecosystems is somehow lesser than the ontological status of its members. Let us consider how appropriate this approach is. To start with, we can note that a total denial of any sort of independent being of an ecosystem seems to be more obtuse than anything else. Callicott suggests that, if certain properties exist, then it follows that the entities which have those properties also must exist.<sup>43</sup> In this way, if we want to say that a particular transportation network exists then we must also admit that the municipality of which that transportation network is a part also exists. Likewise, if we want to recognise properties of ecosystems, like food-chains, then we must also recognise the ontological status of the ecosystems themselves. Callicott admits that the argument isn’t completely compelling, because he can imagine someone who might want to talk about the properties of a wall while denying that the wall itself has a firm ontological status (it being an aggregate of bricks and mortar); he does, however, suggest that

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<sup>42</sup> Alan Code, “What Is It To Be An Individual?” *The Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 647-8.

<sup>43</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 91.

such reductionism is absurd. Recognition of the property without recognition of the entity may well be absurd, but we may still ask: why not simply deny, or at least play down, the ontological status of such properties and entities together? Why should we accept that things like food-chains are real properties on the same level as properties of paradigm entities?

The paradigm entity is usually an individual human being (with all due respect to certain philosophers, who might prefer something else in that place). As Callicott says, we generally take humans to be paradigm entities because we are, ourselves, humans, and it is rather reassuring to imagine ourselves as obvious entities, with ontological status so robust as to render all questioning of it pointless outside of philosophy class.<sup>44</sup> We then use ourselves as the standard against which to judge whether or not other things have a similarly robust ontological status. Often when we look outwards to the greater wholes of which humans are parts, we give a negative judgment; in this way are things like families, clubs, states, and ecosystems seen as less real than the individual parts which constitute them. Interestingly, when we look inward at the parts which constitute the human being, we are less likely to give a negative judgment: fewer people doubt the reality of things like organs and cells. Now, is it at all suspicious that we tend to stop at the level of the organism when seeking individuals of robust ontological status and refer to all things beyond this level as systems?

To differentiate between these levels in order to show why one is more real than the other, we need a certain criterion possessed at one level and not at the other. As we have seen, Gary Varner suggested that the capability of having interests is the relevant criterion in ascription of moral status, though here we may consider the problem without the moral dimension – it is not even a morally relevant criterion we are now looking for, but any criterion whatsoever that could help us differentiate between organisms and ecosystems. Recall that Varner emphasised the dissimilarity between organisms and ecosystems by stressing that ecosystems could not be conceived of as organisms or super-organisms; Varner only goes so far as to informally accept a classification of ecosystems as quasi-organisms.<sup>45</sup> This, Varner claimed, is because ecosystems cannot be said to have interests. Argument can – and does – rage on this point, but we must also notice that there is a corresponding argument to be made on the other side of the analogy. Rather than focus on how different ecosystems are to organisms, we can instead focus on how similar organisms are to ecosystems. A combination of both tactics can help to show that the approach of Varner is perhaps too one-sided; also, consideration of the similarities between organisms and ecosystems may shed more light on the tricky issue of exactly what kind of things can be said to have interests. For now, let us just note that, whatever an individual thing is, it would appear difficult to label it as either a part

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>45</sup> Varner, *In Nature's Interests?*, 17.



or a whole. At this point we may doubt the very dichotomy of individualism/holism so prominent in environmental ethics, because holism deals in individuals and individualism deals likewise in wholes.

## 2. MCSHANE ON INDIVIDUALS AS WHOLES

Katie McShane has tackled both issues and argued that modern biology demonstrates the archaic nature of our concept of the individual.<sup>46</sup> I will look at her thoughts on why organisms are, practically speaking, ecosystems in miniature; but first I will explain her particular opposition to Varner's approach. Recall that Varner related interests to biological functions. McShane notes first that the fulfilment of biological functions cannot be equated with any Aristotelian-style teleology, whereby a thing fulfils a specific biological function because it is in its nature to do so. Modern biologists, according to the argument, deny that things like goals or purposes are actually built into organisms. This being so, we need another explanation of what fulfilment of biological functions actually means. Instead of Aristotle's old way, we can instead focus on natural selection. With this focus, it is argued that biological functions are fulfilled by some trait of a thing; the trait is selected for by the thing because it performs this function. So, in McShane's example, the reason humans have hearts (a trait) is because they have been selected for, historically, due to their special function – to pump blood through the body. But while the trait now exists because of historical functions, the function now exists because the trait now exists. It follows that anything with interests – anything which can fulfil its biological functions – must have traits which have been selected for. But, says McShane, the question as to what kind of thing has traits which are subject to natural selection is difficult to answer. We are now faced with what she calls the unit of selection problem. A unit of selection was, McShane says, typically seen as a thing which can have the trait that gets selected for by natural selection. A unit of selection is therefore a thing that can have interests. It is unclear, though, exactly what we might mean by the term unit of selection; and it is especially unclear as to whether anyone can decisively use this concept to demarcate the parts from the whole.

McShane tells us that when people previously used the concept of unit of selection – meaning a thing which has traits selected for by natural selection – there was much confusion, as different concepts were all being referred to as units of selection. Now, philosophers of biology distinguish three different types: replicators, evolvers, and interactors. McShane asks which of these groups we might want to consider as bearers of interests. Only genes are replicators, so that fails to get off the ground. Only genes or species are suggested as being potential evolvers. As for interactors, they are

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<sup>46</sup> Katie McShane, "Individualist Biocentrism vs. Holism Revisited," *The Ethics Forum* 9 (2014): 130-48.

equated with phenotypes. McShane says that, strictly speaking, this leads back again to genes only; but it could be argued for an extension of the phenotype which would include the thing that carries the phenotype. However, this does not stop at the thing carrying the genes, and the same phenotype can also be seen as a trait of genetically different organisms, or indeed groups and ecosystems. The upshot is this: McShane concludes that such a focus on natural selection will not allow us to make any easy distinction between individual organisms and ecosystems. The strategy of linking the capacity for interests with the fulfilment of biological functions leads to interesting and perhaps unexpected results when colliding with modern biology, and that is why McShane is unpersuaded by Varner's criticism of ethical holism.

McShane has further criticisms of the approach emphasising fulfilment of biological functions: arguing that such a backward-looking approach results in false judgments regarding the good of members of displaced species as well as the good of synthetic beings. These are separate issues, though. For now, let us consider her claim that individual organisms resemble ecosystems in compelling ways.

“The more we learn about organisms, the more we see that many turn out to be, as a matter of both evolution and biological functioning, a lot more like wholes than like individuals.”<sup>47</sup>

As noted at the start of this chapter, we must remember that most entities cannot be conceived of as being a part and thus not a whole, or as a whole and thus not a part. McShane is not saying here that organisms are wholes rather than individuals, but emphasising that they are individuals only in certain contexts. This goes against a long philosophical tradition of stressing the individual aspect of organisms as such, without regard to context. Such a position is untenable given modern science's understanding of the workings of organisms. A scientific understanding of the human body can no longer be credible without reference to the thousands of species of bacteria which live on and in us; these beings, themselves organisms, are essential to our very being – as McShane points out, “[t]heir behaviour regulates our metabolism, our immune system, our moods, and much, much more.”<sup>48</sup> Looked at this way, the human being – the paradigm individual with interests – appears to be a complex system very much like an ecosystem. So, in what way can this individual – the human – be said to be different from the whole – the ecosystem?

The most obvious response is to say that we determine individuals genetically. Bacteria might live on and in us but they do not have the same genes as we do; therefore, anything without the organism's

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

genes is not itself part of the organism, but rather part of its environment. For McShane, the problem with this response is that it ignores the relationship between genes and their environment – specifically the point that environments actually change genes. DNA is not some core thing that cannot be affected. Related to this, McShane points out that much of an organism’s DNA can be traced back to the introduction, within its ancestors, of foreign DNA – whether by parasites or whatever. The example of humans is, as usual, especially interesting.

“What people used to call “junk DNA,” i.e., the 98% of human DNA which does not code for proteins and which does not appear to have any epigenetic function, is now understood to contain, and might even turn out to be entirely made up of, genetic material inserted into our DNA by other creatures. If that is right, then the majority of our DNA might not be, strictly speaking, *our own*.”<sup>49</sup>

Now, dramatic flourishes aside, we need not accept that individuation is impossible on the grounds of a varied heritage: ontological status does not obviously depend on history, and there seems to be no good reason to doubt that the DNA an organism is, in any case, born with is not its own. However, the point that our genes are changeable is strong enough to cast doubt on their ability to effectively demarcate the part from the whole. It still remains to be seen why some wholes such as complex organisms are treated as individuals in general, when other wholes, such as ecosystems, are not individuated unless in much more specific contexts.

Callicott mentions the notion of an ontological gradient.<sup>50</sup> With such a conceptual framework, we can ascertain that certain entities have, if not exactly a greater degree of existence, at least a sense of being easier to isolate or distinguish. Callicott’s example is the Sun. For most inquiries, the Sun as an entity is demarcated in the same way, and it serves thus as a paradigm example – no-one disputes what the Sun is. Ecosystems, however, are sometimes disputed as real entities, because there is often disagreement about their boundaries. This is because the boundaries of ecosystems are usually determined by the specific inquiries into them, and different studies on different inhabitants of an ecosystem will draw those boundaries differently. In this way are ecosystems of less robust ontological status. However, they obviously have some sort of ontological status. They are not non-existent things like (Callicott again) ghosts or gremlins.<sup>51</sup> This is brought out by close comparisons between our favourite paradigm examples of real entities, human beings, and ecosystems. The task for any opponent of McShane would be to demonstrate a relevant way in which organisms differ

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>50</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 93.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 94.

from ecosystems, so that the former could retain their status as individuals at the expense of the latter.

To summarize, I have argued that the concept of the individual is far from clear in environmental ethics. It is often used to describe organisms to distinguish them from things such as species and ecosystems, but this usage is difficult to justify. Things such as organisms are systems as well as individuals, and can therefore accurately be described as a part or as a whole – depending on the context. Given this, the way in which ethical holism is usually conceptualised as being contrasted with ethical individualism looks suspicious. Ethical holism deals with wholes such as ecosystems, but also wholes such as organisms – paradigm individuals; and, likewise, individualism does not only deal with parts of greater wholes, because those individual parts are themselves wholes. Given this, opposition to ethical holism seems more and more arbitrary. McShane's comments on the individual organism add further support to my earlier inclination that it is often unhelpful and problematic to isolate part from whole, certainly when the topic is organisms and their environments. These criticisms demonstrate the conceptual deficiency of ethical individualism for environmental philosophy; in the following chapters I turn to practical matters, and argue that individualism is also deficient in the more pragmatic issues of environmental ethics.

# Chapter 5

## The problem of motivation: second advantage of holism

Until now I have been considering conceptions of parts and wholes without too much regard for practical matters. With the results of these inquiries in mind, it is now possible to take a fresh look at the debate between individualism and holism as it relates to specific practical problems in environmental ethics. After the criticism of ethical individualism on a conceptual level in the previous chapter, I move now to criticism of its practicality; I aim to demonstrate that we have pragmatic reasons for deeming ethical individualism inadequate in solving environmental problems. Individualism can then be seen as insufficient on both conceptual and pragmatic levels. From acceptance of this conclusion, we will then be compelled to investigate the potential of ethical holism to provide more adequate solutions.

In the final two chapters I talk more explicitly about people as moral agents, and their effect on the global environment. I outline the extent to which ethical individualism is inadequate in dealing with global problems: first, in chapter five, by assessing its inability to deal with great numbers of living things, and then, in chapter six, by discussing the difficulty it has in talking about future problems. I will begin chapter five by opposing the dual-claim that i) there is nothing wrong with individualist morality, and ii) that it is instead the fault of humans who fail to live up to the standards of such morality. My position will be that the very structure of individualist morality aids and abets insufficient responses to global problems. I link this problem to the conflict between internalism and externalism in meta-ethics and argue that, just as the internalist does in focusing narrowly on the concept of weak will, the individualist who places all blame on moral agents does a disservice by ignoring the bigger problem. I end the chapter by assessing two problems levelled at individualism by holists and conclude that one – its inability to adequately deal with the fact that causes and harms on a global scale are diffuse – is compelling, while the other – the supposed problem of remoteness in space – does not succeed.

## 1. WEAKNESS OF WILL

One of the main tactics of the individualist is to hand over the burden of proof right at the start.<sup>52</sup> Ethics starts with individualism, they say, so why should we go beyond this? First of all, we can dispute that ethics starts with individualism. Callicott certainly doubts this claim, arguing that, historically and scientifically, it can be shown that morality originated as a way in which to maintain group harmony, e.g., the right thing to do is that which produces the greatest collective good.<sup>53</sup> I will not assess this particular debate; not because I might doubt that Callicott's vision of early ethics is actually a type of holism, but rather because – whether it started that way or not – it is beyond doubt that individualism has dominated ethics for a long time. What reason could we now have to embrace ethical holism? We may be tempted to suppose that there is a connection between the reductive and atomistic conception of the world emphasised by the scientific revolution and the immense despoilment of the rest of the planet by humans so obvious in the last two centuries; however, this would not be very philosophical. It is not by necessity, say individualist ethicists, that such awful results were achieved by the dominant world-view that only individual things can be of moral consideration. If only humans lived their lives within a consistent and appropriate moral framework then they could enjoy a world without this scale of environmental destruction (or, more pessimistically, if only they had lived so then they could have enjoyed such a world). This is the claim that it is not a problem with individualistic ethics in itself, but rather a problem with humans and their moral behaviour. Michael P. Nelson, in discussion of this point, quotes William K. Frankena as a representative of this claim. For Frankena

“...there is another possibility that should be explored first, namely, that our old ethics, or at least its best parts, is entirely satisfactory as a basis for our lives in the world, the trouble being only that not enough of us live by it enough of the time – that is, that what we need is not a new ethics but a new moral rearmament, a revival of moral dedication.”<sup>54</sup>

Nelson summarises this position by stating that “...for Frankena our problems are not the result of a lack of moral inclusivity, but rather they are the product of our collective weak will.”<sup>55</sup> I find the term ‘weak will’ very interesting in this discussion. It brings to mind the debate between internalists and externalists in the meta-ethical problem of moral motivation, where the idea of weakness of will

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<sup>52</sup> Varner, *In Nature's Interests?*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 51-4.

<sup>54</sup> William K. Frankena, “Ethics and the Environment,” in *Ethics and Problems of the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Kenneth Goodpaster & Kenneth Sayre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

<sup>55</sup> Nelson, “Teaching Holism,” 37.

plays a major role.<sup>56</sup> I believe that, just as it is in meta-ethics, the resort to accusations of weak will in the defence of individualist environmental ethics is too idealistic and too large a price to pay.

Let us first consider the question of internalism versus externalism in the matter of moral motivation. According to internalism, moral judgments are intrinsically motivating: if I was to judge that I ought to give money to charity then it follows that I would be motivated to do so. According to externalism, however, moral judgments are not by themselves intrinsically motivating: I could judge that I ought to give money to charity without being motivated thereby to act in that way, and it would take some additional thing in order to motivate. The ultimate goal in this debate is to explain the link between moral judgment and motivation to act: internalists think the link is conceptual and internal to the judgment; externalists think the link is contingent and external to the judgment. Michael Smith is a prominent internalist who sums up the main attraction of internalism in this way:

“By all accounts, it is a striking fact about moral motivation that a *change in motivation* follows reliably in the wake of a *change in moral judgment*, at least in the good and strong-willed person. A plausible theory of moral judgment must therefore explain this striking fact.”<sup>57</sup>

Now, the internalist’s chief problem is to explain the phenomenon of people not acting on their moral judgments, which is surely a very common occurrence. Internalism cannot avoid this problem but must instead deal with it head on. One way out is to say that those people who seem to make judgments and are not then motivated by them are, in fact, not really making judgments at all. This is one way to deal with the so-called amoralist challenge, where we could argue that someone uninterested in morals could make moral judgments without being swayed by them; in such a situation the internalist may wish to claim that such an amoralist is not really making judgments – a judgment involves something more than merely technical use of language. Such an internalist solution does seem to be verging dangerously close to no-true-Scotsman territory, though, as it appears to simply throw out instances where internalism has no explanatory use just because they give the wrong answer. A different solution can be gleaned from the previous quotation from Smith; instead of doubting whether the unmotivated person has made a judgment, we can instead point to their strength or weakness of will. Weakness of will is equated with a psychological failure and can be conceptualised as a form of practical irrationality.<sup>58</sup> With this solution we need not doubt whether all the morally culpable people are actually making moral judgments; we need only to look at the

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<sup>56</sup> Russ Shafer-Landau & Terence Cuneo (eds), *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 223-251.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 70.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

problem of moral motivation in terms of willpower. Here, I believe, the internalist gets into further difficulties by relying so heavily on the concept of the will; it looks to me as though the will is a placeholder for that additional component requested by the externalists to explain the link between moral judgment and motivation. However, that is a separate issue. What is most interesting here is that we can blame the lack of willpower among humans as causing moral problems.

Consider again Frankena's thoughts from before: that the state of the planet is not to do with defective ethics but rather defective moral agents. Quite a sobering thought, really. Is it accurate, though? Far be it from me to dispute the prevalence of ethically dubious behaviour among humans, but I am not sure whether we can so easily blame it on collective weak-will (to use Nelson's term) – especially given the very real problem of moral motivation within a framework of individualist ethics. As the scale of moral concern increases, our duties to individuals become nigh impossible to imagine; division of benefits and harms into tiny parts leads to situations where we can convincingly argue that moral failure has nothing to do with weakness of will, but everything to do with structural faults in our moral framework. This is how Callicott attacks individualist ethics, arguing that such approaches cannot motivate effective environmental action and must therefore be superseded by a holistic approach.

## **2. CAUSES AND HARMS ON A GLOBAL SCALE ARE DIFFUSE**

Callicott uses Dale Jamieson's example to express his opinion on the supposed failure of individualist ethics, what he now refers to as 'Smith-and-Jones' ethical thinking.<sup>59</sup> This is a type of ethics which is useful only for certain moral problems. Jamieson's example is the case of one individual, Jones, who steals a television from the house of another individual, Smith. The harm inflicted in this situation is completely clear; likewise, the bearer of responsibility for that harm is also completely clear. Individualist ethics in such situations are entirely appropriate, and neither Jamieson nor Callicott would deny that such individualist approaches are adequate for the vast number of potential situations like the Smith and Jones example in the course of human life. However, environmental ethical issues pose different problems. Jamieson states these differences.

“There are three important dimensions along which global environmental problems such as those involved with climate change vary from the paradigm: [1] apparently

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<sup>59</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 270.



innocent acts can have devastating consequences, [2] causes and harms may be diffuse, and [3] causes and harms may be remote in space and time.”<sup>60</sup>

The issue of intentional action is certainly of interest in environmental ethics, though I would not want to say that it distinguishes the field in any major way – in humans’ treatment of other humans too we see examples where devastating consequences can arise through unintentional action. The other two points, though, arguably do distinguish environmental ethics as a field wherein previous ethical frameworks are pushed to the limit. Consider the second point: that causes and harms may be diffuse. The issue of moral motivation is present here. Take the case of pollution, where the cumulative acts of a huge number of people harm a huge number of (often) different people. We can reduce to the level of individuals, take any one polluter and any one victim, and see how motivated it is possible to be. The polluter is responsible for a tiny part of the victim’s harm, so tiny that, effectively, it cannot be identified. This relationship of action and harm gives the polluter a reason to not act on a moral judgment, and the reason has nothing to do with weakness of will; the polluter may well judge that an act of pollution is wrong but also that, since the act has no real effect, it is not really something that should be avoided. In this way, the structure of individualist ethical frameworks allows the polluter to justify his actions by reference to the lack of effect they have – there is ample room here to deny the accusation that his action is down to weakness of will.

Is holism not vulnerable to this same problem, though? Certainly the polluter in the previous case was responsible only for a tiny proportion of the harm suffered by the victim, but that would also be the case if the victim in question was a whole rather than an individual; the polluter would be responsible for only a tiny part of the harm caused to the ecosystem. Is this not the exact same problem for moral motivation? There is, perhaps, a relevant difference. Even if we were to see the bearers of responsibility – the polluters – as individuals, viewing the victim as a whole could greatly help motivation; this is because a smaller number of duties is more manageable than a larger number of duties. A situation whereby everyone is working as individuals in the pursuit of a near infinite number of tasks is too convoluted, and leads to widespread belief that our environmental activism is meaningless. The alternative situation, however, where all individuals are working in pursuit of the same goal – something like a modern re-working of Leopold’s maxim to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community – is more likely to motivate, because if we only have one real goal then it is easier to stay focused. Even then, we do not have to conceptualise only the victim as a whole; we can do the same thing for the bearers of responsibility. A focus on individual responsibility in environmental ethics not only ignores the essential and complex

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<sup>60</sup> Dale Jamieson, “Ethics, Public Policy, and Global Warming,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 12 (1992): 140.

relationship between individuals and their wider communities, but also forgoes the motivational power of recognising that an individual human, as part of that whole, is involved in significant harms; the level of the individual human is simply inappropriate when dealing with such great harms, and only the level of the greater whole above humans makes sense when apportioning responsibility. So individualist ethical frameworks promote pessimism and negativity about the utility of our actions, and what has been called weakness of will can simply be seen as rational and pragmatic. Alternatively, a holistic framework can motivate ethical behaviour because it simplifies our duties and allows us to understand how we, as individuals, can effect such serious harms.

### 3. CAUSES AND HARMS ON A GLOBAL SCALE ARE REMOTE

Perhaps, then, we may legitimately doubt Frankena's suggestion that it is only moral agents at fault and not the traditional ethical frameworks. If individualist approaches actively abet the justified failure of motivation to act on moral judgments then that would certainly be a good reason to seek out a different approach, one in which wholes are themselves of direct moral consideration – as actors and patients. Let us now consider the third way in which, according to Jamieson, the Smith-and-Jones ethical paradigm does not serve environmental ethics – that is that causes and harms are remote in space and time. I will hold off discussion on time until the next chapter, as I believe it warrants a more comprehensive investigation; so let us first consider remoteness in space. For Callicott, the importance of relationships is paramount in morality. As mentioned in Chapter Three he argues that humans are members of several different communities, and that moral problems often arise due to conflicting duties – as when we must choose between our family or our state in a given situation. Some communities are more intimate and our duties to these communities should usually trump those of the less intimate communities, if they are of similar urgency; however, depending on the strength of the corresponding duties, the good of a less intimate community can prevail in moral judgment. An urgent duty to one's neighbourhood, for example, should trump a less pressing duty to one's family. Now, from this it is clear that Callicott utterly rejects any sort of principle of equality which ignores the importance of relationships in morality. He takes particular issue with Peter Singer's famous principle of equal consideration of interests.<sup>61</sup> Singer, with the intention of showing that our duties to complete strangers are no lesser than our duties to people we know, ended up committing to the conclusion that favouritism to a family member instead of a stranger is unfair

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<sup>61</sup> Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 21.

discrimination. For Callicott, such a conclusion is an absurd result of extreme ethical individualism, and could easily be avoided should we recognise the moral status of wholes such as families.<sup>62</sup>

This looks as though Callicott is committing to what may be seen as a large conceptual price. The claim, remember, is this: individualism is inadequate in environmental ethics in part because causes and harms are remote in a spatial sense. Presumably, ethical holism is an adequate alternative because if we invoke wholes then we drastically reduce the remoteness of causes and harms; perhaps the connection becomes even intimate if the wholes in question interact with each other. However, if we reject such individualism, to what extent do we approach the conclusion that we, as moral agents, have no real duties to people whom we do not know? It is easy to criticise Singer for musing over the fairness of choosing to pursue the well-being of one's own child over a stranger's child; however, these thoughts arose through concern for establishing direct duties to our fellow living beings (or feeling beings, in the case of Singer). If we reject the idea of direct duties to, say, fellow humans then we might wonder whether Callicott is making it easier to justify ignoring the suffering of unrelated people far away. This is surely at odds with notions of human rights. Callicott, of course, plays down such worries, arguing that extending the scope of moral consideration to wholes such as societies and ecosystems does not replace our prior ethics but rather supplements it. If this is the case, though, where is the particular problem with remoteness in space of causes and harms? For if we are adding new layers to our ethics, and the individualist layers have not previously had any issue with remoteness in space of causes and harms, then where in the order of items of moral concern does the problem really start? And if it does start within the group of humans on this planet, then there may be a genuine conflict between Callicott's ethical holism and certain tenets of human rights. I mention this not because I believe that all thinking on human rights has been completed and that no philosophical account should refrain from challenging aspects of prevailing opinion, but simply because it appears to me to be the case that, should one wish to promote remoteness in space of causes and harms as a serious issue for individualist environmental ethics, one would need to engage with this tension and assess the conceptual price that must be paid. Remoteness in space does not itself seem to be a real problem for individualist ethics; by making it a problem, the holist invites negative implications for our relationships with far-away humans. Invoking the layer of individualist human rights is no real solution, because then the debate moves on to the differences between a remote human and, say, a remote animal or plant – and such a discussion of moral status is far off topic. For these reasons, I find it best for the holist to avoid the tactic of criticising individualism for its supposed problem with motivating behaviour towards remote entities.

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<sup>62</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 124-6.

In summary, I have argued that ethical individualism is vulnerable to the charge that it cannot adequately motivate moral behaviour on a global scale. I believe the discussion on moral motivation is necessary, because it is sometimes claimed that the insufficient response to global problems is the fault of moral agents and not a problem with the existing ethical framework. I take issue with this position. It seems to me that an individualist framework inhibits motivation to act when a problem involves such a great number of perpetrators and victims. It becomes absurd to divide such causes and harms among individuals and expect such a tiny proportion of responsibility to motivate action. Ethical holism offers a way out of such absurdity. Holists should not, however, focus on attacking individualism for its supposed failure to motivate for duties regarding remote people; this is because once we accept remoteness in space as a relevant mitigating factor in our moral duties we appear to invite tension with human rights. An adequate account of ethical holism need not get involved in such controversy. The problem of motivation regarding vast numbers of moral subjects is enough to indicate that ethical individualism is unsuitable for environmental ethics. Ethical individualism is a useful framework for moral problems regarding smaller numbers of individuals where causes and harms are simpler to identify; environmental ethics, however, is a discipline dealing with vast numbers of individuals, where causes and harms are extremely intricate and difficult to specify in any way that can motivate action. Given our desire to motivate moral action in answer to environmental challenges, this is a significant disadvantage of individualism, and a pragmatic reason to seek a different approach.

# Chapter 6

## The problem of the future: third advantage of holism

In the last chapter we saw that it is sometimes argued that the spatial remoteness of causes and harms is a problem for individualist approaches to environmental ethics. I am unconvinced by this claim. However, more compelling to me is the argument that temporal remoteness of causes and harms is a problem for those individualist approaches. The issue of time, and especially the question of how we can or should treat future generations, is highly problematic in environmental discussions; Callicott contends that we could do away with these problems by embracing ethical holism. I will first describe the non-identity problem made famous by Derek Parfit and show why it is a serious issue for any future-orientated field, as environmental ethics surely is. I will then note some possible solutions to the problem before showing why Callicott thinks it to be the final nail in the coffin of individualism in environmental ethics. For Callicott, there is a simpler solution to the problem than any of those bandied about by individualists, and it involves embracing ethical holism. By recognising duties to currently existing wholes we effectively negate the need to recognise duties to those parts which will exist at a later time. With this step, currently existing wholes can be seen as encompassing future parts; the future is then intimately connected with the present, instead of being conceptualised as some other disconnected thing. By allowing us to talk easily about duties toward the future, ethical holism can claim another advantage over individualism, and this gives us another pragmatic reason to replace individualism with holism when seeking solutions to global environmental problems. Callicott's framing of the issue brings to light essential questions as to why we are interested in environmental ethics, and for this reason I find it to be a useful way to close the discussion.

### 1. THE NON-IDENTITY PROBLEM

As mentioned in the previous chapter, spatial distance and personal relationships are sometimes seen as irrelevant in moral behaviour. Partiality to family members or people in one's near community is worrisome for certain moral philosophers as such partiality may have no purely rational grounding. There does, however, seem to be a clear gap when we introduce the notion of temporal distance; we have ample space in which to argue that our duties to future people are not the same as our duties to contemporary people. Future people do not exist, and there seems to be a

difficulty in thinking that we can treat non-existing things either well or poorly. This, though, is obviously a serious challenge in moral philosophy, as most people do have the intuition that we can do right or wrong by people who will exist after us – or indeed that people of the past have, somehow, wronged people of the present. Environmental ethicists, as much as anyone, wish to show that our actions can be good or bad for future people, and thus require a solution to the non-identity problem.

The non-identity problem concerns flawed lives that people bring about and the difficulty in pinpointing exactly where the moral fault is in their actions. There can be cases of bringing children into the world where we feel certain, intuitively, that a moral crime has been committed; and yet specifying the exact nature of that crime, from bearer of responsibility to victim of harm, is highly problematic. Consider G. Kavka's example of the slave child.<sup>63</sup> A man and woman agree to conceive and bear a child who, upon its birth, will be sold into slavery. Now, the capture of a contemporary person and the subsequent sale of that person into slavery is usually seen as wrong because of the harm it causes that person. However, it is different in the case of the child. It is not as simple as saying that the harm of sale into slavery has been perpetrated to the new-born baby, because that baby would not exist had the deal not been made. The harmful scenario is the condition of that child's existence. We might want to say that mere existence in this scenario is itself worse than not existing. Whether this is true or not is itself a tricky philosophical problem, but we can avoid getting tangled in it if we tweak the example a small bit. Imagine now that the slave child's life is, while deficient in obvious ways, not completely awful: the child may be treated reasonably kindly and could even enjoy a standard of living enviable to many free folk. The point of this tweak is to show that the non-existence of this slave child is not obviously better – certainly for the child itself – than such an existence. And we still have the strong intuition that the biological parents of the slave child have acted in a morally reprehensible manner. But why?

Derek Parfit's example to demonstrate the non-identity problem is precisely the situation of most importance to environmental ethics – so much so that Callicott gives it a new name, the 'Parfit Paradox.'<sup>64</sup> The problem is essentially the same as the slave child example but brings to light the massive extent of this moral difficulty, as it concerns, not just a single child, but basically the entire future of the human species (or all species, even).<sup>65</sup> We can imagine a woman who is advised that, should she conceive now, she will bear a child with a handicap; if she waits a couple of months then the chance of conceiving a handicapped child greatly diminishes. Should she choose to conceive,

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<sup>63</sup> G. Kavka, "The Paradox of Future Individuals," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 11 (1981): 93-112.

<sup>64</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 285

<sup>65</sup> D. Parfit, "On Doing the Best for Our Children," *Ethics and Population* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1976): 100-15.

bear and raise the handicapped child, there is no recourse for the child to claim that the mother has harmed him by not waiting that extra time before conceiving – for if the mother had waited then she would have conceived a different child. Parfit argues that this scenario is analogous to the problem of our treatment of future generations. Our current environmental policies (or lack thereof) are links in the causal chain which determine who will exist in the future. Much like the child who suffers through his handicap, future people who suffer through poor environmental conditions will exist because of the way the world was prior to their conceptions. Different environmental policies will affect the movement and behaviour of contemporary people, thus affecting who meets who, at which times, and which children are brought into the world. Therefore, unless their existence is so miserable that non-existence would be better, future people who suffer through poor environmental conditions caused, in part at least, by us, must nevertheless be seen as beneficiaries of how we have treated the planet.

It seems clear that something is wrong here. There are all sorts of proposed solutions to the non-identity problem. Utilitarianism is still a popular approach: if the right thing to do is that which will bring about the greatest happiness, then we could argue that bringing the slave-child or the handicapped child into the world is wrong because there were other options available which would have resulted in a greater amount of happiness. This approach does seem to generate further problems, though, such as the apparent moral necessity of having children; indeed, it may entail a focus on increasing the number of individuals in the world instead of improving living conditions, for then we also increase the net happiness of the world by choosing quantity over quality. We could, alternatively, choose a rights-based approach; in this way, we need not focus on any harm that is caused to the individual to explain the moral fault. A person may be spared some dire fate inadvertently due to their initial plans being thwarted by unfair discrimination; such treatment is morally wrong and an assault on the person's rights, no matter if the consequences turned out favourable to the victim. Similarly, we can sensibly state that future people can be treated wrongly even though they also benefit by this same treatment. This solution does not seem to work in the case of the handicapped child, for it seems odd and problematic (and probably offensive as well) to argue that children have the right to be born without a handicap. Likewise, in the case of future generations, specification of their rights might not be an adequate basis for environmental ethics: beyond ensuring sufficient levels of food and water, there still seems to be great scope for environmental destruction perfectly in accord with fulfilment of individual rights.

## 2. CALLICOTT'S HOLIST SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

Callicott argues that such wrestling with the non-identity problem, at least with respect to environmental ethics, is a senseless endeavour of individualist ethicists. If we embrace ethical holism, he says, then the problem disappears quickly. The non-identity problem concerns the future of things that do not yet exist; however, we can easily talk about the future of things that do exist. Individual life-forms are poor candidates for pivotal units of moral concern in developing environmental policy, because they are short-lived. Certainly, it would seem inadequate to place humans in this role, because the humans who exist now will all be gone in about 120 years and it is not as if environmental activists are not bothered by what happens after this time runs out. Currently existing trees will be around for a lot longer but this would seem a strange basis for environmental ethics; even then, today's trees will also disappear long before the temporal scope of concern for environmental activists is exhausted. So what potential candidates are there? Callicott suggests two: the Holocene climate with the biota which is adapted to it, and human civilization.<sup>66</sup> These candidates are clearly wholes, and acceptance of these wholes as objects of moral concern – acceptance of ethical holism – could be a very simple way out of the non-identity problem.

The Holocene climate, with the biota which is adapted to it, is Callicott's way of phrasing, in a more technically correct way, what most people mean when proclaiming that they want to save the planet. Our planet itself is not seriously threatened by the actions of humans; it is difficult to imagine how humans could inflict more than slight scratches to the planet, even if they had the express desire to cause as much damage as possible. What is under serious threat, however, are the conditions on the planet's surface (and just beneath the surface) as well as all the life forms that these conditions support. Taken as a whole, this is something which exists now and can exist for a very long time – certainly for as long as we can reasonably profess to care about the future. This is also a whole which already incorporates future individuals, insofar as they are parts of that whole. Now, this may look like a cheap trick in the eyes of the individualist but Callicott's argument is certainly interesting. What's more, it appears to me to be a twist on a common individualist attack on holism. It is sometimes contended that there is no need to grant moral status to things like ecosystems because the moral status of the individuals within the ecosystems is enough to ensure just treatment of the whole. Similarly, Callicott is advising us not to bother troubling over problems in identifying the moral status of future individuals: if we recognise the moral status of the whole which will provide the possibility of future individuals then we will effectively secure the moral status of those individuals – at least until they actually come into existence, at which point more intimate ethics of family and

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<sup>66</sup> Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, 298.



community will take over in important respects. The Holocene climate, with the biota adapted to it, is a strong candidate for an object of direct moral concern which allows us to easily talk about harms to future people, without getting embroiled in the non-identity problem. This candidate is non-anthropocentric, because it promotes concern for all life and conditions for life.

Callicott's other candidate is anthropocentric: human civilization. The reason Callicott settles on this is because he doubts that the human species as such is at serious threat from our treatment of our environment. Humans are a hardy bunch when pressed and, even should our environment be utterly despoiled and ruined, resulting in the deaths of huge numbers of humans, there would in all likelihood be survivors who could adapt to the new world. Some environmental activists talk as if we threaten the survival of our very species, but Callicott is keen to distance himself from such a claim. He is not concerned with survival of the species, but rather the state in which the species will be; the species is therefore not a candidate for an existing object of moral concern, but human civilization is. From an anthropocentric point of view, we can be genuinely concerned about the quality of the lives future people will have because we are genuinely concerned about human civilization as such. Surely, says Callicott, all moral beings must care about the continuation of civilization, the failure of which would lead to global barbarism. This is an environmental concern because certain environmental policies (or lack thereof) could potentially lead to such severe ecosystem damage that human civilization would no longer be sustainable and would collapse; humans may still survive but society as we know it could be impossible. Recognition of the whole of civilization as an object of direct moral concern is a specifically anthropocentric option for evading the non-identity problem in environmental ethics.

What are we to make of Callicott's candidates for objects of ethical concern, proposed to ensure adequate responses to global environmental challenges? Broadly speaking, I am sympathetic to his choices; however, they can be questioned. Take the first one: the Holocene climate with the biota which is adapted to it. It is not exactly the stuff of popular slogans. He probably has reasons for not simply proposing the global ecosystem, or even just the environment; but if the goal is to effect a shift from the individualism dominant in western societies towards a popular ability to speak of ethical concern for wholes – as it surely is – then one may wonder at this phrasing. Furthermore, his suggestion that we cannot really harm the planet as a whole is interesting given my previous discussion about the relationship between part and whole. There seems to me to be a slight tension for a proponent of ethical holism to argue that destruction of a part of the planet (the conditions at the surface) is not a harm to the whole (the planet itself). I would think that a harm to the part is a harm to the whole and so, for this reason, we can add the planet itself as a viable candidate for an object of ethical concern. His anthropocentric candidate, human civilization, also requires further

explication. Callicott does not really specify what he means by this, and his initial description is vague: 'Think of the magnificent achievements of global human civilization – its architecture, its literature, its graphic arts and music, its sciences, its technology, its philosophy.'<sup>67</sup> I would not exactly wish to question the good of these things in themselves, but on first reflection it does seem that the good of human civilization is far more difficult to specify than, say, the good of a single living organism. Which aspects of human life count as part of human civilization? At which point does civilization turn into barbarism? These are difficult questions but the holist should have an idea of how to answer them before the individualist will be convinced by this proposed candidate of ethical concern.

Let us accept for now, though, that Callicott's candidates are viable, and that wholes as objects of ethical concern can help environmental ethicists deal with problems regarding the future. Such holist concerns help us to avoid certain other conclusions which we may find absurd. Recall the argument from chapter five concerning the problem of motivation when we have so many duties: the idea was that a single duty to the whole is more motivating than a vast number of duties to the individual parts. That is already a mark against contemporary individualism; think of how much more effective it is if we extend the temporal scope. The future will bring about unimaginable numbers of humans, let alone other species which are also the objects of moral concern. It is difficult to imagine how people can be motivated to act upon duties to so many objects. Furthermore, by reducing to the level of the individual, it seems as though we require a kind of temporal endpoint in mind. Callicott mentions quite explicitly that there is a limit to what we can care about, certainly about what will happen in the future.<sup>68</sup> At some point in the future – unless we wish to dispute modern scientific estimates – our planet will cease to exist; at some earlier point, probably, it will cease to be able to support human life. These points in time could be millions of years from now (I am no expert) and the point is that we are talking about a future so far away that we cannot reasonably have ethical concerns over it. When, then, do our ethical concerns end? One of the advantages of holism is that we need not worry about this question: we can have concern for the whole – be it the Holocene climate or human civilization – as it exists currently and its potential for continuing to exist. These wholes will end at some point, but because they already exist we do not need to specify an endpoint. On the other hand, individualism seems to require a specification as to the extent of our ethical concern: are we concerned with individuals who will exist in 10,000 years? 100,000? Ten million years? Where do our concerns stop and why? It is surely impossible to answer this question. Yet it seems to me that individualist ethical approaches must have a go at it.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

People are often interested in environmental ethics because they care about the future – what this means, though, is unclear. I believe Callicott is correct to highlight this topic as it is sometimes overlooked or avoided in the literature, but of the utmost relevance to everything that we are working on. There seems to be no need to specify a point in time at which our ethical concerns end, and this is perfectly consistent with ethical holism; moral concern for contemporary wholes – as well as moral concern for contemporary individuals, such as family members – is adequate to ensure suitable environmental policy. Refusal to isolate individuals from their environment allows us to incorporate future individuals in our moral deliberations, as they are not distinct from the current object of concern. Individualism, however, conceives of future individuals as distinct objects worthy of moral concern without reference to a contemporary whole; this seems to require that we quantify our duties somehow – an impossible task, one would think. Given this, the problem of motivation from moral judgment, and the controversy of the non-identity problem, it is difficult to deny that individualism in ethics has real problems when talking about the future. Ethical holism can help deal with these problems, and I suggest that it should no longer be resisted in environmental ethics.

# Conclusion

With this thesis I have tried to develop ethical holism as it is found in environmental philosophy. As indicated in the introduction, ethical holism has pivotal questions to answer before it can be accepted as a suitable alternative to individualism in environmental ethics; I have attempted to answer them. The first main criticism of ethical holism was that it supposedly permits or accommodates the subordination of parts to wholes, and would thus act as philosophical justification for policy which, though aimed at the good of the environment, could be harmful to human welfare. I argued that this criticism results from a misconception of the relationship between parts and wholes, and that holism no more accommodates subordination than individualism does. The other main criticism of ethical holism is that it is not required for moral philosophy, and that ethical individualism can do all the work. I argued that this is not the case. Conceptually speaking, the traditional concept of the individual is looking more and more suspect, and resistance to ethical holism seems increasingly arbitrary. Practically speaking, individualism has serious difficulties explaining our moral requirements toward the vast numbers of living beings encountered in global problems, as well as problems regarding the treatment of living beings which do not yet exist but will in the future. I argued that ethical holism is in a much better position to deal with these global environmental problems. Given all this, I contend that ethical holism is required in order to meet the global challenges of environmental ethics.

A complete version of ethical holism is still required, however. There are certain parts of my account which are in need of further research. Most pressing, in my opinion, is my suspicion – mentioned at the end of chapter four of this thesis – that the very way in which holism is contrasted with individualism is dubious. Investigation into the meaning of terms such as ‘part’, ‘whole’, ‘individual’ and ‘system’ indicate that the holism/individualism dichotomy itself is problematic – holism can be seen as dealing with individuals, and individualism can be seen as concerned with wholes. The suitability of this dichotomy for analysing answers to environmental ethical problems is questionable, and I believe this to be a topic worthy of further investigation. This work will involve more detailed historical and metaphysical research.

Furthermore, I think that there is far more to be said about the concept of subordination. A more detailed exposition of this phenomenon is probably required in order to effectively support my claim that subordination is not really a problem for ethical holism. There is research to be done as regards

subordination in practice, in order to make clear how it is related to individuals and wholes – whether the focus is political or environmental. I foresee that this work will require real-world analysis, in addition to the conceptual work I restricted myself to in this thesis.

Additionally, critical analysis of the holist proposals for dealing with the practical problems discussed in chapters five and six is to be welcomed: Callicott's book is very recent, and I have given only minor criticisms of his arguments. In particular, the holist must work out the implications of Callicott's suggestion to promote the Holocene climate (with the biota which is adapted to it) as well as human civilization as objects of ethical concern suitable to meet the global challenges of environmental ethics. These candidates have potential, but there are questions as to why individualists should consider them as viable alternatives.

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