Questions in Environmental Ethics
[Omission: Author’s Name]

Abstract: I argue that environmental ethics must be concerned with future possibility, and that any satisfactory environmental ethic should provide answers to the following four questions: [1] What sorts of things have obligation-generating value? [2] What is required for the future possibility of that which is identified as valuable? [3] For how long should that which is valuable be preserved, maintained, or generated? [4] What can be done now to ensure the future possibility of that which is valuable? After discussing common answers to [1], I highlight the lacuna in answers to [2]-[4], and offer my own preliminary answers to these four questions.

My preliminary thesis is that environmental ethics needs to be concerned with generating, maintaining, and facilitating that which is valuable (or valued). In other words, it is concerned with the future possibility of that which is valuable (or valued). This thesis raises four questions which I think theories in environmental ethics need to address:

[1] What is valuable (or valued) in such a way that we are obligated to generate, maintain, and/or facilitate it?
[2] What is required for the future possibility of that which is valuable?
[3] For how long should that which is valuable be generated, maintained, or facilitated?
[4] What can be done today to ensure the future possibility of that which is valuable?

I begin by providing a brief summary of the field’s answers to [1], following which I argue for my own version of an answer to [1]. I will argue for the urgency of having a widely acceptable theory in environmental ethics, ready to deploy to policy-makers and other powerful groups. In favor of my answer to [1] I will show that it is more effective because more acceptable to policy-makers, economists, and businessmen than other answers to [1]. I will then argue that many of the theories on offer either cannot answer [2]-[4] or cannot do so satisfactorily. I will then show that straightforward answers to [2]-[4] seem to follow from my answer to [1].

For the most part, theories in environmental ethics correspond to major position groups within moral philosophy. For instance, there are deontologists (Regan 1985; Stone 1974), who emphasize our obligations to respect and care for that which has intrinsic value. These theories provide accounts regarding the sources of intrinsic value, be they humans, animals, trees, biota, ecosystems, or the planet at large. Such theories then specify the nature of the obligations we have toward those entities believed by theorists to have intrinsic value. We also have
consequentialists who argue that suffering of any kind is morally salient and that we have obligations toward beings capable of suffering (Singer 1973). These theories emphasize the reduction of all suffering to the greatest extent possible, so it is incumbent on these theories to specify which creatures are capable of morally salient suffering and then to specify the nature of our obligations to those creatures. Notice that on this kind of consequentialism ecosystems can only be instrumentally valuable, since the value of ecosystems derives from their nourishment of the creatures which flourish in them. Another group of consequentialists argue that we need to maximize that which has intrinsic value, and have debates similar to those in deontology as to what has intrinsic value (usually certain states of affairs). There are also theists who consider the gift of the earth from God to be contingent upon our care of its creatures or our “stewardship” (Attfield 2003).

I am not concerned to argue directly for or against any of the theorists mentioned above. What I am concerned with here is answering some questions which I think that all of them should ask. These questions are focused on time, value and possibility. It seems to me that environmental ethics is concerned about the future; that it is essentially forward-thinking. It is less about assigning moral blame for environmental catastrophes and more about proposing solutions to pressing issues of the day with an eye toward tomorrow. Although the question of whether and how to punish groups of people whose negligent collective actions lead to disasters are important (i.e., whether and how to distribute liability and blame among members of responsible groups), I wish to leave this question aside for now in order to focus more exclusively on the forward-looking aspect of environmental ethics.

Environmental ethics concerns the future for a number of reasons. The main reason is that if something is valuable (or valued), it ought to be generated, maintained, and/or facilitated.
Other questions pertinent to environmental ethics include: Do we have obligations to future generations? (See Partridge 1990.) If so, future generations of what? Humans only? Animals too? Plants also? What about ecosystems? Do these obligations arise out of rights which future generations have against us? Could we specify obligations to future ecosystems? Similarly, how long will earth continue to be habitable by humanity? How long *should* we reasonably expect to continue living on this planet?

I suggest that thinking about the future raises these kinds of questions almost immediately. I also suggest that thinking about the future can offer some answers to these questions. I have always felt that asking the right question is more important than getting an answer, because if you never ask the right questions, you’ll never get the right answers. Thinking about the future helps us ask the right questions with respect to environmental ethics.

If environmental ethics concerns the future, then a clear question presents itself: For how long into the future should environmental ethics be thinking? All of the views addressed above should consider this question carefully, and I suggest that any serious environmental ethic should consider the question of time. A related question, of course, is the question of whether we have obligations to future generations of humans (and/or animals and/or plants and/or fungi) and if so what they are.

Part of looking forward is assessing the present situation, since something must be done today in order for that which is deemed valuable to exist in future. What environmental ethics is concerned with, fundamentally, is the future possibility of things which are deemed valuable, instrumentally or intrinsically. Once we have noticed environmental ethics is concerned with the future possibility of that which is valuable (or valued), we need to figure out what is valuable or at least what we deem valuable. This I think, like all environmental ethics, helps pose the
question of what humanity’s relationship with its environment is, and how that relationship ought to be structured. It seems clear to me that the relationship between humanity and its environment should be one of mutual beneficence, rather than domination of one by the other. A desideratum of an environmental ethic is that it can account for the fact that humans are a part of the natural world, and not somehow separate from it. One difficulty with doing this for those who assert that we have obligations to preserve, maintain, or facilitate the natural world is that if human habitats such as cities are part of the natural world, then the obligation to preserve, maintain, or facilitate the natural world includes the obligation to preserve, maintain, or facilitate cities, in which case it is hard to argue against development.

Let’s return to the question what kind of future possibility we are attempting to generate or facilitate, the question of what our environmental ethic claims is valuable. Following that, we can perhaps find ways which facilitate the flourishing of that which is valuable (or valued). There are a variety of views on the table to answer the question of what has the kind of value such that we find ourselves obligated to facilitate its future possibility. One time-honored source of value for most ethical theories throughout the history of moral philosophy is the human person. Many environmental ethicists begin their theories with a repudiation of the idea that humanity is *the* unique source of value, without of course denying that humanity is *a* source of value. The point of divergence among environmental ethicists is not the question of whether humanity has value, but whether anything else has value, and if so how those values determine our moral obligations regarding the environment.

Denials of the uniqueness of human value usually take the form of some kind of ideology critique (See e.g. White 1967). Such theories claim that the idea that humanity is the unique source of value leads to a tendency to radically devalue everything else in the world, including
the life support mechanisms to which humanity owes its existence. They also point out that the lack of value attributed to other entities leads to exploitation and mistreatment of those entities, such as farm animals in high-density feedlots or ancient forests destroyed for the sake of profit. Anthropocentrists are criticized for placing of human concerns above all other kinds of concerns.

The anthropocentrists have an arsenal of available responses to such criticism, as there are a variety of ways to be an anthropocentrist. Theists who believe that God gave the earth to humanity and charged it with stewardship can claim that the other entities, being also the creations of God, are therefore valuable, and that the source of the unique value of humans is only that they are charged with a special relationship of stewardship over the environment (Attfield 2003). Of course one need not be a theist to argue the stewardship line, but it should be recognized that this line is inherently anthropocentric. Another way of being anthropocentric is to focus on the human capacity for adapting the environment to suit its desires. This special facility is argued to confer both special value and special responsibility upon humanity. Yet another way of being anthropocentric, of course, is simply to argue that there cannot possibly be special duties to the environment, and I think it is to this kind of anthropocentric that the use of “anthropocentric” is (rightly) pejorative. But since such theorists essentially deny the possibility of environmental ethics, they are not the concern of the present paper.

In addition to the question of what is valuable enough to generate moral obligation and the question of how long into the future we intend for these obligations to hold, is the question of what shape such obligations take today. In other words, what can we do to generate, maintain or facilitate the future possibility of that which is valuable, once we have determined what is? Environmental ethics needs to be forward-looking, and needs to be grounded in the practical exigencies and possibilities of action available to humanity today.
My two preliminary theses are therefore that environmental ethics is about future possibility, and that any satisfactory theory of environmental ethics must have compelling answers to the following questions:

1. What has value of the sort that it can generate obligations?
2. What is required for the future possibility of that which is valuable?
3. For how long are we obligated to generate, maintain, or facilitate those future possibilities?
4. How do we generate, facilitate or preserve those future possibilities today?

In what follows, I will provide suggestions for answers to all of these questions while remaining as neutral as possible regarding the questions of deontology, virtue ethics, or consequentialism in environmental ethics. Specifically, wherever possible, I will try to show that my answers to these questions are compatible with a variety of possible positions in environmental ethics. Some answers, however, will be more controversial than others, and thus my answers to them will require defense and will necessarily exclude some positions. However, these are simply my answers to these questions, and I do not mean to suggest that they are the correct answers. I do think that they are the right questions for any theory of environmental ethics to ask, lest it fail to delimit and specify the range of possible current and future moral actions available with respect to our environment.

1. What has value of the sort that it can generate obligations? There are certain states of affairs that are more valuable than others in a way that they generate obligations. For instance, a world in which there is slavery is worse than a world in which there is not; a world in which there is friendship is better than a world in which there is not. The horror of slavery is sufficient to generate obligations to cease the practice, and the value of friendship is sufficient to generate obligations to create it whenever and wherever possible. So from the value or detriment of states of affairs, obligations are generated.
From here it is not much of a leap to say that a world in which we humans continue to exist is very likely better (at least from our perspective) than one in which we do not. Therefore, my answer to [1] is the following: the future possibility of a certain way of human life on earth has value of a sort that it can generate obligations to create states of affairs in which humans not only survive, but also flourish.

Here there is also a dialectical advantage. Speaking about the future possibility of human existence and growth, and how to generate, maintain or facilitate that possibility through action today should bring policy-makers and businessmen as well as staunch environmentalists to the same table for discussion. Since environmental ethics is a realm in which collective action seems almost necessary, the possibility of cooperation and coordination provided by my answer to [1] recommends it. By contrast, speaking to policy-makers or businessmen about the intrinsic value of certain trees or of ecosystems doesn’t seem like a very good strategy, whatever the truth-values of such claims turn out to be.

[2] What is required for the future possibility of that which is valuable? We gain a practical advantage from my answer to [1] when we look toward the conditions for human existence on our planet. For too long we have dreamed that we are entirely capable of creating all the necessities of life out of raw materials extracted from the earth, all the while ecosystem services have actually been keeping us alive. Looking toward the future possibility of human existence requires looking toward ecosystem services, and the obligation to maintain our own existence gives rise to an obligation to facilitate, maintain or preserve those ecosystem services which, in a sense, \textit{are} our future possibility.

Yet the future possibility of mere human existence is not sufficiently valuable. There is more to life than food, water, and shelter. But here is where the second question gets interesting.
Suppose we were able to arrange the world in such a way that everyone had these basic needs met. Such a world, it can factually be said, would be better in these respects than that in which we live, because currently there are many who lack access to clean water or proper nutrition.

But what kind of future human existence do we imagine? Some preliminary suggestions for the future possibilities of humanity which ought to be generated, facilitated or preserved include but are not limited to the following: health, companionship, equitable exchange, love, friendship, kindness, direction of one’s life, trust, responsibility, care, and many other valuable capacities, many of which are not exclusive to humans (for instance, there can be relationships of friendship, trust, and care between humans and animals, as well as among animals). I wish now to address some thoughts which have occurred to me regarding a future possibility for humanity which tie the ideas of survival and flourishing together.

Professor Wangari Maathai, Founder of the Green Belt Movement in Africa, once said:

Sustainable development must mean that we develop in a way that we can thrive on this continent. And Africans have thrived on this continent for many, many years without airplanes, without trains, without skyscrapers, without all the modern development that we think, when we look at the West, that that is what development means. To me, development means staying alive, having a quality of life; not so much a life that is surrounded by goods, things, but a life where you can live in a clean and healthy environment.

The ideas in this passage describe the kinds of future possibilities which we should aim to generate, maintain, and/or facilitate: staying alive, having a quality of life, and living in a clean and healthy environment. Staying alive we have discussed. As for having a quality of life, perhaps the tentative list above can provide some rough beginnings toward a theory. However, to that list above I would like to add that quality of life almost surely involves having clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and good, fresh food to eat, insofar as health is in that list. These three things alone improve on the bare “food, water, shelter” requirements to a high degree, and they make possible healthier people. And in general, healthier people are happier people. So in
terms of the future possibilities which we are obligated to create for the future possibility of humans, we can include clean air, clean water, and good, fresh food to eat. Add to that the possibilities of companionship, togetherness, and community, and we very are near to having a recipe for general human flourishing. Having set this stage, we can then answer our final two questions.

[3] For how long are we morally required to generate, facilitate or preserve those future possibilities? The answer to this question seems to me to be for as long as humanly possible.

[4] What can be done today to ensure the future possibility of that which is valuable? This is another very interesting question deserving of its own essay, but I think it comes down to some simple facts. Our lives are made possible by ecosystem services. We cannot, on our own, generate such ecosystem services. However, I think that we can both facilitate and maintain existing ones. Essentially this involves living more closely with the environment than we have been for some time.

The power of imagination can serve us here. Consider the state of the earth two thousand years ago in comparison with the state of the earth currently. Now, on the basis of that comparison, imagine the earth two thousand years into the future. What does it look like? If science fiction is any guide to how people imagine the future, it is either dystopian or post-apocalyptic. But there is an alternative vision. I imagine a world in which humans still survive, in which we have reconnected with the easy, natural processes which govern the weather, filter the air in the atmosphere, and keep the water clean while producing a sufficient amount of fresh food to eat. From this imagined but quite possible future paradise, trace the timeline backward to the present day, and examine the kinds of actions which produced that paradise. Once we have done that, not only have we placed boundaries on the obligations we have toward our environment,
but we’ve also taken strides toward filling in the content of those obligations. In short, I envision for the future a paradise on earth, mostly because I already believe the earth to be a paradise, and that our mistake is to assume that it is not. At least I cannot imagine a better place in the universe to live that is anywhere near practical to get to, not the least because we haven’t yet found any other planets sufficiently like earth, nor have we ever been beyond the moon or our solar system. Moreover, I do not place the same faith in technology that others do. I think it is pure fantasy that our mimicry of natural processes can ever supersede them in terms of efficiency, consistency, or quality. Why think that what we made is better than what made us? Far better to facilitate those processes that gave rise to our existence in the first place than to pretend we can supplant them with anything even remotely comparable, at least in terms of ecosystem services.

I would like to conclude by noting several advantages of this imaginative, geological-time-sensitive theory of environmental ethics. First, it does not create an artificial divide between humans and their environment; it rather demonstrates their inherent connection by emphasizing a reciprocity between humans and the ecosystems which keep them alive. Second, it remains neutral on most of the controversial questions in environmental ethics, making it compatible with a number of positions, and thus acceptable to most. Third, it is sufficiently general and commonsensical that it can be readily accepted by policy-makers, businessmen and environmentalists alike. Fourth, the generality allows for discussion as to which possible states of affairs we shall attempt to materialize. For instance, a future in which there is no needless or gratuitous suffering in humans or animals is perfectly compatible with this approach, as is a future in which there are ancient forests, planted today for the sake of tomorrow. Finally, it is practical: we imagine the paradisiacal future and then imagine the steps needed to get there. Now is the time to imagine that genuinely possible paradise and take steps to achieve it.
References


