

## BOOK REVIEW

Dale Jamieson, *Ethics and the Environment. An Introduction*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 2008, 221 pages.

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### Between Ethics and Action

[...] the first law of philosophy is this: it cannot be the case that the only mistake in an argument is that the conclusion is false. (p. 128)

So let's start with Jamieson's conclusion: 'In my opinion, there are three broad scenarios for what the future may bring: [1] environmental catastrophe; [2] continuing and increasing global inequality and environmental degradation; or [3] a change in the way of life of the world's most privileged people. [...] To some extent we are living in the midst of each of them right now, and the future may hold more of the same.' (p. 196). If we do not take proper action now, it will either be option 1 or 2. If people listen to what Jamieson has to say and take proper action right now, then option 3 might come about. Jamieson himself is sceptical whether philosophy can help to save the world: 'While moral philosophy can contribute to clear-headed activism, it is not the same thing, and should not be confused with it.' (p. 75).

All three of Jamieson's scenarios are responses to an environmental crisis which we are all experiencing right now. 'But I don't see it!', someone says. Well, if you read the newspapers and watch television, bits and parts of the

problem will pass by. But you have to pay attention to the pieces, and assemble them into the big picture yourself. There is a lot of literature that does just that: making a diagnosis for planet earth. A very powerful and visual statement of this is the Scandinavian documentary *The Planet*. But why do many people not notice the problem? There are at least two answers. Firstly, many people manage to live in their own western suburban subculture and are able to ignore the global environmental problems because it hardly affects their personal lives. Secondly, people really just don't notice it. If you put a frog in a pan of water and you heat it up gently, it will boil to death. But if you throw a frog in boiling water, it will jump out immediately. (In the context of reviewing a book on applied ethics, I feel obliged to mention that both experiments with the frog are morally wrong.) So, we are the frog and the water temperature (global warming) is heating up rapidly. To follow this analogy a little longer: we cannot leap out of the problem. We are stuck with this planet, the ecosystem that we are ruining.

*Ethics and the Environment* is an academic introduction to applied ethics, focusing on environmental ethics. The first half of the book is an outline of the contemporary landscape of ethics. Jamieson follows the convention of breaking up ethics into three levels: meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Actually Jamieson considers applied ethics to be part of normative ethics. Environmental ethics is one of the many topics of applied ethics. Applied ethics is one of the new branches on the old tree of philosophy.

Jamieson sees three major challenges to morality as such: amoralism, theism and relativism. In rejecting these challenges Jamieson is clearing the road for moral reasoning about environmental problems. Amoralism states, according to Jamieson 'that there is no such a thing as right and wrong. [...] The amoralist chooses to opt out of morality altogether.' (p. 31). Jamieson shows that this position of 'anything goes' is unrealistic. A thorough-going

amoralist believes he has no moral obligation to help his friends if they are in peril: he might help or might not help, but he doesn't suppose he is under any moral compulsion to help. Amoralism in its purest form probably is unlikely to be widespread, but indifference towards the suffering of others is not uncommon. This position could be called nihilism (though Jamieson doesn't use the term).

In a short paragraph Jamieson rejects religious ethics, especially the thesis that morality is based (and should be founded) upon religion. Jamieson remarks that the view that morality comes from religion is '[...] outside of a few pockets in which Enlightenment ideals continue to thrive, [...] probably the dominant view in the world.' (p. 33) Yet appeals to supposed religious certainties can make moral debates intractable: how can you debate with someone who appeals to a god in which you happen not to believe (and who doesn't exist anyway), or, even if you believe in the same god, think god wants something else?

The third obstacle for morality is relativism, which is associated with the postmodernist turn in late twentieth century philosophy. The relativist denies the possibility of moral claims transcending the moral system of the speaker's own society. This deprives ethics of 'its critical edge' (p. 39). Is female circumcision wrong or not? Some relativists say: 'It depends. If female circumcision is an important cultural practice in some tradition, then for that society it is not wrong. But for ours it is. There is no fact of the matter as to which of these moral points of view is ultimately "correct".' The whole undertaking of ethics is to find out what is good and bad and why, independent of cultural traditions. But if relativism holds, then there can be no ethics. Questions of morality can be answered simply by appeal to culture.

Meta-ethics, as Jamieson sees it, is about the ontology of ethics: what entities are good or bad, and how do we know? This is the question of value. Is value subjective? Are values attached by us to things? Or is value objective: some things are good/bad in themselves, independently of

how we might judge them. Jamieson seeks an in-between position, which he calls 'the sensible centre'.

In environmental ethics the concept of 'intrinsic values' is often appealed to. The notion of intrinsic value is an application of moral realism: some things have value in themselves. A much used argument to show that some things have inherent value is the so-called 'last man' argument. Suppose there is a last person on the planet. Is it right or wrong if this person ruins the planet, for example, by using an atomic bomb? Jamieson believes that even if there is no one to think it wrong, it is still wrong.

Jamieson's introduction to normative ethics is practically orientated. He outlines three major strands of normative ethics: consequentialism, virtue ethics and Kantianism. (I would have added a fourth strand: social contract theories, most notably Rawls. Martha Nussbaum also applies social contract thinking concerning nonhuman animals in her book *Frontiers of Justice*). Jamieson is sympathetic towards consequentialism because it is historically linked with moral activism: 'Historically, consequentialists [like Jeremy Bentham] have a strong claim to being on the side of moral progress rather than being on the side of sexists, racists, and those who spoil the environment. Furthermore, when it comes to concerns about the moral statement of animals, consequentialists – even utilitarians [like Peter Singer] – have been in the forefront.' (p. 85)

It's easy to over-compartmentalize our thinking on environmental issues. Jamieson notes that a difficulty of environmental ethics is that we need to see the big picture about the impact of human agency on the planet. When focusing on one (important) problem, one can easily lose sight of the big picture. 'Environmental organizations often specialize in a single issue while ignoring its neighbours.' (p. 181) The relation between human and nonhuman animals is morally problematic, to say the least, especially when it comes to farm animals, mega fauna and fish. I for myself for example have been focusing on the treatment of animals studying animal rights, veganism/vegetarianism,

animal welfare, but not biodiversity and ecology. But, it is all interconnected.

Nevertheless, it is good to (sometimes) focus on one problem, without losing sight of the big picture. Why are we justified in treating non-human animals differently (worse) than human animals? Why do we breed chickens on immense scale in horrible circumstances, kill them and eat their flesh, yet don't we breed human animals for meat? Peter Singer points out that there seems to be no justification for treating animals so differently. Singer (after Richard Ryder) calls this unjustified discrimination against non-human species *speciesism*. According to Singer, because animals have the capacity to experience pain and pleasure, it is wrong to maltreat these creatures on purpose for trivial (gustatory) reasons. Singer is a utilitarian. He weighs interests. The reason why it is wrong to inflict pain on animals is because they suffer: 'It is wrong to kick me [or a dog/cow/chicken/sentient being], not because I am white, male, and human, but because it hurts.' (p. 112). However, because animals have a smaller range of experience than most human animals, when there is a conflict between animals and humans, this difference should be taken into account.

Two books have been especially influential in sparking the animal rights movement. The first one is Peter Singer *Animal Liberation* (1975) in which he argues that it is wrong to inflict pain on creatures that can experience pain. And Singer applies his philosophical conclusion on the current treatment of animals in industrial animal farming and testing on animals. This is applied ethics. 'When it comes to our treatment of non-human animals, our mathematics does not have to be very sophisticated to see how much of what we do harms them [nonhuman animals] more than it benefits us' (p. 115). 'Speciecism provides the explanation for the pervasiveness of our blindness with respect to the treatment of animals. Many of our practices persist only because we do not give the interests of animals equal consideration. We discount their suffering or ignore it all

together. Indeed, in many cases, animals are almost entirely invisible from our moral deliberations. But once the prejudice of speciesism is overcome, we see that what we do to non-human animals is justified only if we are willing to do the same thing in the same circumstances to human beings as well. Most of us would rightly recoil in horror at such a thought. [...] many of our practices with respect to animals cannot be justified from a non-speciesist point of view. And that is to say, they cannot be justified at all.' (p. 116)

The other important book is Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983). These two books are philosophically completely different, but their conclusion and application is much the same. Jamieson clarifies the different approaches schematically. Singer is a utilitarian. Regan is a Kantian who believes in absolute rights. Singer's moral criterion is sentience, for Regan it is 'subject of a life' (this covers at least a large part of the mammals). Regan is an absolutist about moral rules, Singer is not.

Regan defends the sanctity of human life and he extends this sanctity to some other animals using as his criterion the 'subject of a life', a weakened version of Kant's conception of a person as an autonomous rational being. If Regan is right, then some nonhuman animals, like cows, have equal inherent value as human animals. Slaughtering a cow, then, is first degree murder! Applying Regan's view to society makes most people accomplices to continuing unabashed genocide. One wonders if Regan has many meat-eating friends.

We are reminded of some salutary facts: 'Each year, globally, about 45 billion animals are killed for food.' (p. 121). Pause a minute and think about that number. That is more than five times the population of human animals. Each year. Jamieson refers to a website ([www.meat.org](http://www.meat.org)) which vividly depicts what factory farms are like. Yes, there is an economic logic to factory farming: people want cheap meat and this is how to produce it. If a farmer produces more expensive meat by being friendlier to his

animals, most people prefer the cheap meat. Economics does not include ethics. But it should. The gap between knowledge and action – which is motivation – is the difference between philosophy and activism. Should philosophy not also be concerned with how to change people's behaviour? 'Whatever reservations one may have about factory farming in an environmental ethics class tend to fade by dinnertime. The fact is, these practices continue because they have widespread political and consumer support (or at least acceptance).' (p. 127). This is a truthful, but frustrating observation.

People raise, kill and eat animals because that is how they have done things in the past. But: [...] if traditional values were always observed, we would be living in theocratic hierarchical societies. To some extent, moral progress and respect for traditional values are at odds with each other.' (p. 143). I think this last remark is an understatement: many cultural values, like meat eating, female circumcision, opposition to homosexuality, opposition to science, are at odds with moral and scientific progress. Thinking about Jamieson's First Law of Philosophy, when you begin the journey of moral philosophy, you might end up by seeing a lot more injustice than you had thought. This is the path taken by philosophers like Peter Singer, Michael Allen Fox, James Rachels, Tom Regan, Peter Unger, Martha Nussbaum and others. Most of these thinkers are activists as well, and their activism is a consequence of their moral reasoning.

When we have started to expand the circle of morality (as in the book by Peter Singer *The Expanding Circle*), the expansion continues. Jamieson calls this dynamics *moral extentionism*. It goes from anthropocentrism, sentienism, biocentrism to ecocentrism. Has nature value in itself or has it only secondary value because nature is needed and valued by sentient beings like human animals? Many philosophers working in the field of environmental ethics are uneasy with the animal-centric approach as favoured by Singer and Regan. The circle of morality can perhaps

be further extended, from sentience (Singer) to life. This is called biocentrism: all that lives has intrinsic value. Paul Taylor has argued this way in his book *Respect for Nature. A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (1986). A further step of moral extension is ecocentrism, which '[. . .] recognizes the moral primacy of the ecological wholes of which we are part.' (p. 149) A problem both for biocentrism and ecocentrism is how to judge conflicts between different life forms (in biocentrism), and in different ecological systems. Regan has pointed out that there is a risk of eco-facism: individual sentient beings are sacrificed to the larger ecosystem.

Jamieson points out that humans have an enormous impact on the earth. It matters what we decide to do or not to do. We humans can choose how to live and what we value. Environmental ethics is more than an academic course. It helps to sort out how we should live and interact with nature: 'The real final examination will not be a test at the end of the semester, but how we choose to live.' (p. 180) Jamieson mentions some ways to estimate the impact of an individual on the earth. One method is the ecological footprint analysis as developed by Mathis Wackernagel and William Reese. You can measure your own footprint at: <http://myfootprint.org>.

Charles Hall and colleagues measured what the consumption of natural resources of an average American citizen born in the 1990's will use in his or her entire life: '[. . .] 22 million pounds of liquid waste and 2.2 million pounds each of solid waste and atmospheric waste. He will have a lifetime consumption of 4,000 barrels of oil, 1.5 million pounds of minerals, and 62,000 pounds of animal products that will entail the slaughter of 2,000 animals.' (p. 189). 'The planetary impacts of the highly consumptive lifestyles practiced in the industrialized world cannot be generalized: the fact is that the planet simply cannot stand many people who consume like Americans, and this raises important questions of justice.'(p. 190). And what are we going to do about it? Who is going to do something about it? Governments, intergovernmental organizations like the



UN, nongovernmental organization like Greenpeace, multinationals, technology, environmental scientists and philosophers, consumers? What are you going to do about it?

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