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KANTIAN VIEW ON ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract

Environmental ethics explores the ethical relationship between humans and the natural world. It argues for the necessity of a well-structured environmental ethic to guide our moral responsibilities towards nature, highlighting the importance of public discourse in shaping actions that impact the environment. A Kantian perspective on the environment suggests that our understanding and ethical obligations toward the natural world are inherently holistic. It posits that nature should not be viewed merely as an instrument for human benefit but as a complex system that we are morally obliged to preserve. Kant's theories of teleological judgment and moral autonomy, contend that our duty to protect nature extends to safeguarding ecosystems as integral wholes, thereby ensuring their dynamic diversity and integrity. Ultimately, this piece asserts that our ethical approach to the environment must encompass a holistic view, recognizing our interconnectedness with the natural world and the moral imperatives that arise from it. This paper also evaluates the adequacy of Kant's ethical theory in addressing our responsibilities towards nonhuman animals and the environment. Kantian ethics differentiates between person rational beings with intrinsic value regarded as ends in themselves and things, which possess only relative worth. Regarding the broader context of nature and nonrational beings, Kant asserts that our obligations toward them are only indirect or contingent. Some philosophers critique Kant's ethical framework as being anthropocentric, leading to speciesist conclusions. This paper argues that these indirect duties can align with the interests of nonhumans, encompassing concerns like the suffering of nonhuman animals and the preservation of species and ecosystems. Therefore, Kant's moral philosophy can contribute to environmental ethics by providing a foundation for animal welfare and environmental protections, serving as limits on unrestrained human behaviour.

Keywords: Kant, Environment, Morality, Humanity, Non-human,

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I

Environmental ethics examines the moral relationship between humans and the natural world, advocating for the need for a comprehensive ethical framework to guide our responsibilities toward the environment. It emphasizes the role of public dialogue in shaping actions that affect nature. While various philosophers have touched on this subject throughout history, it became a distinct area of philosophical study in the 1970s. This shift was largely due to the growing awareness during the 1960s of the negative impact of technology, industrialization, economic growth, and population expansion on the environment. Two influential books played a key role in raising this awareness. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) warned about the dangers of chemical pesticides, highlighting their threat to public health and their role in the destruction of wildlife. Similarly, Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) cautioned readers about the strain that an increasing human population places on the planet's resources.

Since then, concerns such as pollution and resource depletion have expanded to include a range of environmental issues, including the loss of plant and animal biodiversity, shrinking wilderness areas, ecosystem degradation, and climate change. These "green" concerns have become central to both public discourse and policy-making over the years. The purpose of environmental ethics is to clarify our moral responsibilities in addressing these concerns. At its core, environmental ethics must answer two key questions: what obligations do humans have towards the environment, and why do these obligations exist? The second question typically precedes the first, as understanding *why* we have environmental duties helps clarify *what* those duties are. For instance, should we care for the environment for the benefit of current human populations, future generations, or for the sake of nature itself, independent of human interests? Different philosophers have offered varied responses to this question, leading to the development of diverse approaches to environmental ethics.

As previously mentioned, one of the most essential questions when considering an environmental ethic is: what responsibilities do we have toward the natural environment? If the answer is that humans must limit their actions toward nature to avoid our own extinction, this approach is referred to as "anthropocentric." Anthropocentrism means "human-centeredness," and in a broad sense, all ethics could be considered anthropocentric. This is because, as far as we know, only humans have the capacity to reason and engage in ethical reflection, inherently giving moral discourse a human-centered focus. However, in the context of environmental ethics, anthropocentrism typically carries a deeper meaning. It refers to an ethical perspective that grants moral worth exclusively to humans. In this view, only human beings have intrinsic moral

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value, and therefore, all direct moral duties, including those related to the environment, are owed solely to other humans.

Although anthropocentrism has historically dominated Western philosophy, it has faced significant criticism from environmental ethicists. Many thinkers argue that ethical considerations should extend beyond humanity and that the non-human natural world deserves moral standing. Some propose that this extension should apply to sentient animals, while others believe it should include individual living organisms or even broader entities like rivers, species, or ecosystems. In these non-anthropocentric ethical frameworks, humans have duties toward the environment because we owe something to the entities within it, whether they are animals, plants, or ecosystems.

Environmental ethics can help us navigate challenging questions, such as determining who is accountable for certain environmental harms, whether we have moral duties to non-human entities, and how to balance those duties against our obligations to other people. Such an ethic can inform both policy decisions and personal behavior, guiding us toward more ethical approaches in both realms. For instance, thoughtful reflection on our environmental responsibilities can shape climate change policies, as well as help individuals make ethically sound choices, like deciding whether it is morally acceptable to clear-cut a forest on private land. In this way, an environmental ethic serves as a tool for analyzing and resolving complex environmental dilemmas.

II

In *The Doctrine of Virtue*, Immanuel Kant asserts that humans have duties 'regarding' plants and non-human animals, which are derived from a more fundamental duty that a person owes to herself: the obligation to enhance her moral character. This moral improvement involves cultivating traditional virtues, such as benevolence. Kant cites examples like cruelty toward animals and the reckless destruction of plant life as behaviors that undermine one's moral integrity and thus breach the duty of self-improvement. Such actions should be avoided because they inflict unnecessary harm on living organisms, eroding the virtues required for moral perfection. Consequently, causing harm to non-human organisms diminishes one's virtuous character, violating the duty of moral self-perfection. Conversely, showing kindness or beneficence to non-human beings can foster one's moral development, as it provides an opportunity to cultivate virtuous traits, fulfilling the duty to improve one's moral character.

Kant's conception of organisms, largely explained in the *Critique of Judgment*, offers a framework for understanding what it means to harm or benefit non-human organisms. He suggests that humans are justified in viewing organisms as 'natural purposes' entities that, while part of nature, display characteristics of purposeful design. Specifically, to regard an organism as purposeful is to view it as something that should exist in a particular way, implying that harm or benefit is assessed relative to its inherent purpose.

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According to the Kantian perspective on nature, the creation of systematic unity from the multitude of experiences is the aim of understanding in Kant's theory of knowledge. Because of this innate propensity to organize, the world we live in is fundamentally a human creation that was created jointly. As a structured system of entities, nature also acts as a compass for our understanding of the natural world. Because of and through the constant organizing activity of human cognition, this structured perspective of nature emerges. While we often speak of nature as something distinct and separate from ourselves due to linguistic habits, this separation is more a feature of our language than of nature itself. Since we are an essential component of nature, it can't exist without us.

According to Kant's moral philosophy, which bases rights on fundamental obligations, morality is not only a choice for human beings but also necessary for them. Morality is necessary for us to fully realize our humanity. This implies that our life as moral actors should take precedence over our existence as physical, sensory beings. Kant's philosophy of morality, which is based on the idea of moral autonomy, presents people as having inherent worth and the capacity to harbor benevolence. We are all equally deserving of respect as individuals since we are morally independent beings. Furthermore, since Kant's morality is founded on autonomy, the obligations we have to uphold moral maxims act as a framework for our behaviour. When applying his moral theory to actions in the public sphere, such actions should stem from public dialogue and discourse. No single voice can comprehensively outline or delineate our responsibilities toward the non-human world, but one voice can initiate that important conversation.

According to Kant's teleological judgment theory, we must believe that nature has a purpose. Nature is naturally interpreted by humans as a well-planned, intentional system. With this knowledge, we can view nature as a system of ends working toward a common objective. Kant argues that humanity, not just people as physical, sensory beings like animals, but also as free, reasoning beings, or moral agents, is the ultimate goal of nature. Furthermore, for Kant, the ultimate goal of humans, as moral beings, is the creation of a "realm of ends," or a moral civil society. Therefore, the non-human parts of nature serve as means not only to satisfy our physical needs and desires but also as tools to help us achieve our moral purpose.

This perspective on nature's non-human elements as serving the "realm of ends" may suggest that nature holds only instrumental value. However, this is not the same kind of instrumental value found in the utilitarian view of nature. The utilitarian approach sees nature purely as a tool for satisfying human needs as physical, sensory beings. In contrast, Kant's philosophy frames nature and its non-human elements as also serving a higher purpose: the moral development of humans. According to Kant's moral theory, our existence as sensory beings must be secondary to our existence as moral agents, meaning we have a duty to act

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morally. Therefore, our use of nature to meet physical needs should also be secondary to its role in supporting our moral existence. We should not treat nature solely as a means to satisfy our physical desires. If we base our treatment of nature only on its usefulness for our sensory needs, we reduce ourselves to heteronomous beings, governed by external influences, rather than autonomous beings guided by moral principles. While we are sensory creatures, we are also much more than that.

From the perspective of living things as organisms, Kant develops his theory of reflective teleological judgment. An organism can only be fully understood by examining the relationship between its parts and the whole. Similarly, nature, as a system of organized ends, requires us to adopt a holistic perspective. The various entities, processes, and cycles within nature are all components of the greater whole that we call "nature." However, another element of nature is the organization we impose through our conceptualization of it. Our relationship with the non-human parts of nature exists within nature itself. As moral beings, we represent the final purpose of nature. However, humans have a position of superiority inside nature, not above it, because of our interaction with it.

According to Kant's philosophy, nature has intrinsic aesthetic worth in addition to instrumental value that is morally justified. Nature has a value apart from any practical use since it can arouse feelings of beauty and sublimity. We can witness moments of sublime beauty in nature. Kant believed that it is crucial that we appreciate beauty in an impartial manner. Something cannot be judged attractive based on a predetermined idea or intent. Determinate conceptions are excluded from our assessment of beauty, thus similarly, our enjoyment or love of the beautiful thing must be devoid of them. Because of this, our perception of the beauty of nature is limited to our observation of it, unaffected by its application or goal.

Kant does acknowledge that we can have an indirect interest in natural beauty. This interest arises when our experience of natural beauty connects to something else, specifically, the will's capacity to be guided by practical reason. In other words, the ability that allows us to appreciate natural beauty is the same ability that enables us to act morally. Through this connection, Kant links "the beautiful" with "the moral." Moreover, because we can hold an indirect interest in nature as a source of beauty, we can also develop an interest in nature's very existence. Our indirect interest in nature is rooted in our potential for morality. According to Kant's moral theory, morality grounded in moral autonomy is not only possible for us but essential to realize our humanity fully. This means we have a duty to be moral. Since our indirect interest in nature stems from this moral potential, and because this interest extends to the existence of nature, it follows that, as moral beings, we also have to preserve nature. In other words, our duty to be moral translates into a duty to protect nature. Moreover, since Kant's theory of teleological judgment presents a holistic view of nature, our

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duty to preserve it must encompass a holistic approach, ensuring the preservation of nature as a whole.

III

Nature, as a regulative Idea, represents an ideal whole made up of smaller empirical wholes, known as ecosystems. We have an obligation to safeguard these ecosystems in their totality as part of our responsibility to conserve nature. Maintaining an ecosystem's overall viability is necessary for its preservation. Ecosystems are dynamic, and change is a fundamental feature of these natural systems, just like nature is. Maintaining the diversity and dynamism of the many living forms within an ecosystem is therefore essential to its preservation. One might ask, "If nature as a system exists solely through our understanding, how can it not be preserved as long as we continue to exist?" The answer lies in the concept of "nature as a system." It is indeed possible to conserve individual natural entities without safeguarding the natural systems they inhabit. For instance, traditional zoos often preserved various animal species as isolated entities but failed to maintain the ecosystems that included these species.

Ecosystems consist of interconnected natural entities, and these systems derive their identities from their internal organization rather than merely being collections of parts. Simply preserving natural entities does not fulfill our obligation to protect ecosystems. Since we have a duty to preserve ecosystems, we are obligated to avoid actions that unnecessarily damage or destroy ecosystems as holistic systems. Our interactions with nature must be guided by an awareness of how our actions affect the viability of the natural systems we engage with. As ecological science advances, our understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependencies among different forms of life deepens. With this growing ecological knowledge, we become better equipped to determine which changes in nature are possible and what alterations can be made without compromising the integrity and sustainability of the ecosystem as a whole.

Recent studies have served to support the theory that ecosystems contain species which have a disproportionate effect upon the systems in which they are found. For example, 'one recent study found that by removing all members of three species of kangaroo rats from a desert plain resulted in the transformation of the system into an arid grassland in just ten years.[1] Even a brief observation of nature reveals its vast diversity of life forms. Over time, and with the accumulation of scientific knowledge, we have learned that many current natural entities differ significantly from those in earlier eras. For example, we now understand that grasslands naturally undergo a process of forestation, and species extinction is also a natural occurrence. While nature is inherently a process of change, it is also marked by its diversity. Therefore, preserving nature means safeguarding its diversity and the dynamic nature of ecosystems.

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To preserve nature is to maintain its viability as a system, protecting ecosystems as whole, living, and adaptable systems.

One might ask: Even if we have a duty to preserve nature, why should we prioritize preserving its diversity? If we fail to maintain a diverse nature, the aspects of nature we do protect will be limited in various ways. We might choose to preserve only what we find appealing or useful, or we could opt to save only what is essential for our biological survival. Both of these choices contradict our obligation to regard nature as more than just a tool for fulfilling our physical needs and desires.

Moreover, the world we have built over time is inherently diverse, encompassing a rich array of natural diversity. Since our understanding shapes our perception of nature, allowing nature's diversity to significantly diminish risks our own diminishment as well. Finally, the realm in which we act as moral beings includes nature itself. If the nature we choose to preserve lacks diversity, the range and complexity of questions we face regarding human interactions with nature will also be limited. A reduced sphere of nature means our sphere of action concerning it whether that action involves engaging with or refraining from engaging with nature will also be constrained. One important task we face is to identify which changes in nature should be permitted or even encouraged, and which should be prevented. This is particularly evident when considering changes related to the introduction, development, and extinction of various plant and animal species. Since our duty to preserve nature requires us to view it holistically, any changes within a natural system should be assessed based on their impact on the entire system. The definition of this whole will depend on the specific system in question.

For instance, a farm is just as much an ecosystem as the Loess Hills are. Therefore, what constitutes acceptable changes will vary based on the context of the system involved. For example, the introduction of the ring-necked pheasant (Phasianus Colchicus) to North America. This species has not negatively affected the ecosystems where it has been introduced. While it faces threats from overhunting and harsh winters, it integrates well into the existing system. The pheasant has not endangered or driven any native species to extinction, nor has it adversely impacted human activities. In fact, any potential damage to agricultural crops caused by these birds is often viewed as being outweighed by the benefits they provide for sport hunting. To maintain a truly diverse nature, it is essential to preserve various types of ecosystems. Moreover, the ecosystems we select for preservation should not be based solely on their ability to meet our immediate needs and desires. If we choose to conserve only those systems that provide us with economic or recreational benefits, we fall back into a utilitarian perspective.

When human actions that impact nature stem solely from economic considerations, those actions are morally inappropriate. Decisions based only on

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economic factors treat nature merely as a tool to satisfy our wants and desires. This perspective, as previously noted, reduces nature in a way that contradicts the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and also diminishes our understanding of ourselves to that of heteronomous beings. Moreover, human actions that affect nature occur within an ecosystem context. If such an action is determined solely by economic factors, it fails to consider the preservation of the ecosystem as a viable whole. While it's possible that such an action may not harm the ecosystem's viability, this alone is insufficient. Our duty to preserve ecosystems as cohesive wholes requires us to account not only for the economic impacts of our actions but also for their ecological consequences. Economics, in itself, is not immoral; however, an economic approach that ignores the effects on the natural system as a cohesive unit is inappropriate.

This issue is particularly important when it comes to domesticated plants and animals. Treating domestic animals, especially livestock, in ways that go beyond mere economic considerations would require reevaluating how we manage these animals. For instance, the practice of confining hogs in tight quarters is primarily motivated by economic factors. These confinement operations produce pork more quickly and efficiently compared to systems that allow hogs to roam and root. Instead of adjusting technology to suit the animals, advanced farming practices tend to modify the animals to fit the technology, resulting in what are often called factory farms.

However, as previously mentioned, a farm operates as an ecosystem. Farm animals are integral parts of that ecosystem. Farming techniques that focus on adapting the animals to the technology can impact the various components of the whole ecosystem, potentially compromising its integrity. Therefore, we should critically examine whether such adaptations can occur without harming the ecosystem's overall health. If we aim for our farms to remain viable ecosystems, we must consider how our actions regarding their components affect the ecosystem itself. The treatment of animals in factory farms arises from decision-making processes rooted entirely in economic considerations. Such decisions exemplify heteronomous actions by the humans involved, reflecting choices that lack true freedom. This type of behavior contradicts Kantian morality, which is based on autonomy.

Because our decisions concerning actions regarding nature are not morally appropriate when based solely on economic factors, we may for the treatment of disease. Finally, even slaughtering methods are required to be as humane as possible.[2] In Sweden, livestock laws reflect this understanding by requiring that human actions concerning farm animals take into account the animals' natural characteristics and needs. Rather than viewing these animals merely as tools for human economic gain, Swedish regulations recognize them as living organisms whose natural traits and requirements are vital to their well-being.

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In some instances, preserving the integrity of natural systems may actually necessitate restoring that integrity. For example, many natural systems depend on the presence of primary predators to regulate the population levels of various animal species. This population control is often achieved through sport hunting. However, in certain natural areas, such as national parks, hunting is prohibited. If these regions lack sufficient types or numbers of primary predators, a morally sound course of action would be to reintroduce these predators. The Kantian environmental ethic is partially rooted in Kant's moral theory, which emphasizes duties rather than rights. Similarly, the Kantian environmental ethic also leads to the formulation of duties. Just as Kant's moral theory is articulated through the Categorical Imperative, this environmental ethic can also be framed as a categorical imperative regarding our interactions with nature. Like the Categorical Imperative, the environmental imperative acts as a guideline for considering our actions.

We can express our duty to preserve nature as a positive and universal maxim: Act towards nature in a manner that ensures the affected ecosystem remains a viable, dynamic whole. In other words, we should strive to maintain the integrity of the whole as an integrated system. This maxim delineates the actions that are appropriate and permissible, while also clarifying those that are not. Actions that undermine the viability and dynamism of a natural system clearly do not contribute to maintaining its integrity. This formulation defines both the actions that the Kantian ethic permits and requires regarding nature, indicating what is necessary for us to be considered moral beings. Therefore, it can function as a universal (categorical) imperative guiding our actions toward nature.

IV

Our obligation to preserve nature from a holistic perspective leads to a universal moral maxim. Similar to the Categorical Imperative, this maxim serves not as a directive for specific actions, but rather as a principle for contemplating actions. The Kantian environmental ethic establishes duties that we have toward the non-human elements of nature. However, because of the inherent flexibility in ethics, these duties function as general guidelines for thinking about our actions. The way these duties are implemented will vary based on several contextual factors. Some of these factors include the type and condition of the area in question, the level of ecological understanding and technology available, and the economic considerations of the segments of the human population involved. As complete human beings, we have duties not only to ourselves and others but also to the non-human elements of nature. These responsibilities include preserving nature as a whole, maintaining its dynamic diversity, and ensuring the integrity of ecosystems. In some instances, this also involves the conservation of specific species. Since our actions concerning nature are public, they should emerge from collective discussion and decision-making. No individual can fully outline the Kantian environmental

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ethic on their own. However, each of us has a responsibility to engage in and contribute to this collective effort.

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