

ETHICAL RELEVANCE OF BIODIVERSITY

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Summary

There are various kinds of biodiversities to protect: species, biotopes, ecosystems, genetic resources, etc. The reasons and needs to protect biodiversity need an explanation. This explanation depends on a closer look at the normative elements of the human-nature-relationship and the anthropological dimension of common human goals of a good life regardless of cultural diversities.

What needs to be explained is the question of the relationship between the protection of biodiversity to recent and future human desires and the value of other living beings. Only then the protection of biodiversity can be seen as a central element which is necessary to fulfill recent and future human desires in a global community of living beings. Those ethical and anthropological elements give an idea of the protection of biodiversity in a qualitative rather than in a quantitative way.

The listed elements of links between the biodiversity protection and normative elements of humanity combine exclusive-anthroporelational and trans-anthroporelational approaches from the perspective of human moral agents. They aim at universal basic needs and desires shared by human beings. Those aspects can be used in the decision-making processes to weigh up biodiversity protection measures against measures to reach other—competing—goals. Ultimately, the ethics of biodiversity has to be linked to political and social ethics, to our ideas of justice and a good life as members of the global community of life.

1. Introduction

The normative issue to protect the diversity of current species and genetic resources needs to be ethically reflected, if we want to avoid falling into the trap of 'natural fallacy'. The questions which are in need of clarification are why we should be obliged to preserve the current quality and quantity of species and what are the arguments against or in favor of increasing the number of species by breeding or genetic engineering. The demand for preservation of biodiversity implicitly includes the notion to preserve diversity, extensiveness or richness in general. But it is not possible to generalize such a premise as a claim. In order to argue consistently, it would also have to cover for instance all kinds of toxic microorganisms. The demand may therefore not be to protect diversity as such, but to decide what kind of biodiversity needs to be protected. This depends on a closer look at the normative elements of the human-nature-relationship and the anthropological dimension of common human goals of a good life regardless of cultural diversities. What needs to be explained is the question of the relationship between the protection of biodiversity to recent and future human desires and the value of other living beings.

2. Human beings and nature: a complex relationship and its normative implications for the conservation of biodiversity

Man's relationship with nature is, and has always been, ambivalent in two senses. Nature is for man both threatening and essential for his survival; and he encounters nature both as the familiar, which he is, and the other, which he is not. The threat posed can take the form of natural disasters (volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, etc) or disease from other organisms (pathogenic bacteria, etc), and it lies not least in his own, imperfect, contingent and therefore vulnerable, finite existence. With the growth of human knowledge of nature, man has gained ever more power over nature and—as a consequence—increased his ability to shape nature. In this way human beings keep on transcending and pushing forward the natural limits of action. While Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas understood Nature simultaneously as the fateful "pre-given" (ontological) *and* as the open-ended "given-to-do" (de-ontological), Francis Bacon saw man's power over nature as central and Descartes even describes man as "master and owner of nature". [cf. Hager et al. 1984; Honnefelder 1992; Dreyer, Fleischhauer 1998] With the onset of the modern age, nature became more and more a pure object (of research). At the same time increasing control over nature meant that the demonic, threatening element of 'wild nature' retreated from man's perception. This allowed the aesthetic dimension of human observation and experience of the wild to evolve more strongly. Yet human beings living in modern technical civilizations are still repeatedly overwhelmed by the threatening element of nature.

The lives of modern humans continue to be dependent on nature. By breathing air and consuming food, human beings are engaged in a continuous metabolic interchange with nature. Intact nature is therefore a necessary condition for human survival and cultural achievements. Today's threats facing humanity are often related to a lack of control over nature. Yet unlike natural threats to man posed by the natural world, we now see threats via "Nature" resulting from cultural-technical interventions. The latter are always the responsibility of those who interfere with natural systems: we could mention here

landslides and avalanches unleashed by logging in the mountains, floods caused by ecologically artificial river regulations, and also the unintended and possibly irreversibly negative consequences of genetic manipulation. If nature is only understood as "the other" that must be controlled, and no longer as the foundation of the metabolic integration of the human Self, then the associated loss of naturalness will lead to threatening of man by man himself. Human exploitation of their environment is not, however, basically wrong, as long as the resources are protected. Humans are meant to 'consume' their environment. Human nature even requires this. And this is also true for other species. "But humans have options about the extent to which they do so; they also have, or ought to have, a conscience about it. The consumption of individual animals and plants is one thing; it can be routinely justified. To the contrary, each species is something else; it cannot be routinely justified. To the contrary, each species made extinct is forever slain, and each extinction incrementally erodes the regenerative powers on our planet" [Rolston 1988, 158]. The awareness of one's own nature and its integration into the surrounding nature enables human beings to experience not only the unity of nature but also its complex diversity. It is not only a diversity in terms of the benefits drawn by man from nature but also an inherent diversity, established through evolution over millions of years. This natural differentiation has led to the formation of an inherent gradation of the entities formed by nature. Under the concept of a *scala naturae* this gradation has long shaped human understanding of nature and the way nature is treated [cf. Siep 1998a].

Nicholas Rescher claims that this justifies ethical grounds for the particular protection of species, in view of their embodiment of metaphysical value in their own right [Rescher 1980, 85]. "For example, in circumstances where a species that stands 'higher' (in order of appraisal of metaphysical valuation—presumably in terms of its overall repertoire of capabilities) is imperiled by the continued existence of a lower species, it will be permissible (and presumably in some circumstances even a matter of duty) to endeavor to eradicate the latter" [Rescher 1980, 87]. As criteria of differentiation, we encounter the distinction between inanimate and animate nature and, again, within the realm of animate nature distinctions based on the extent of the formation of 'selfhood' that is inherent to life, i.e. on level of differentiation and self-organization. Here, the level of awareness of animate beings plays a special role, since according to everything we know from physiology and ethology, the ability to feel pain and to suffer depends upon a capacity for conscious perception.

2.1 The practical-normative function of the concept of "nature" and the human life-world

The nature surrounding human beings, and of which they feel themselves to be a part, is—notwithstanding minor parts—a nature that has in fact been profoundly shaped by man. Not only are parks or agricultural and forestry lands examples of culturally transformed nature, but the majority of "nature" reserves are also the result of extensive human use (peat bogs in England, calcareous oligotrophic grasslands in the Eifel uplands etc.) and therefore considered 'semi-natural' rather than 'natural', if 'natural' is to imply something 'untouched'. And these landscapes can only be conserved via human uses, since if given over to 'pure nature' they would sooner or later disappear. This nature is an integral part of our socio-culturally created world in which we live, our 'life-world'

(*Lebenswelt*). It is the place where human beings lead their lives as acting subjects. This life-world of man in his simultaneity of diversity and unity is not only a fundamental condition for human survival but must also be understood as the space from which man attains his personal, social, cultural and economic achievement. If this is the case, then not only living nature as nature in an intrinsic sense outside of human beings, but also the socio-cultural synthesis felt by man to be a valuable source of meaning, should be regarded as a good to be protected. For instance, domestic and working animals are understood as central elements in their respective cultures and, as such, play an integral role in forming identity and could not be replaced arbitrarily [cf. Honnefelder, Lanzerath, Hillebrand 1999; Honnefelder 1999].

Against this background, nature with respect to human action appears neither as mere material, nor as a plan open to a normative reading. While the former would contradict the experienced 'selfhood' of nature, the latter would contradict its developmental openness and complexity. The possibility that remains is to grasp nature as a meaningful and open-ended magnitude. This has traditionally been expressed in the understanding of nature as creation or, in secular terms, as cosmos; in other words, an order which does not only consist of orderly causal processes but one in which something similar to a 'social' order is possible, with a balance between existence and well-being of very different life forms here. Conditions are well-ordered if they allow a variety of life forms to co-exist and thrive that do not merely stand in an ends-means relation to each other [Siep 1998b, 197]. Thus, a natural order conceived in this way would not only serve human ends. Although human action can play a role in its development, human action alone cannot bring it about.

We clearly have here a notion of "naturalness" in which the descriptive elements are combined with normative elements. Since only a subject can set norms, we cannot dispense with man as the addressee of norms—also with regard to his very own nature. The sphere of our action, however, opens within nature understood as *limit*, a nature always assumed, given and ascertainable [Kluxen 1974]. This relationship to nature allows a normative view of nature by including normative judgments in propositions of naturalness, but without making nature *directly* normative. Understood naturalistically, natural phenomena are only knowable or misconceivable. Determining ends, making interpretations or prescribing actions do not logically flow from the description of 'nature, otherwise it would operate as an 'ought-to-be'. Such a deduction is referred to in the philosophical discussion of this question as the 'naturalistic fallacy'. Rather, as standards for our action, natural phenomena must be interpreted in a particular socio-cultural context and find their justification in relation to a socially lived or determined end. Only then do they become *normative*.

Taking into account this relationship to nature, new questions arise in our modern world, as the scope expands for intervention using new technologies, such as biotechnology and genetic engineering. It becomes possible for a deliberate action to have enormous consequences beyond just limited parts of nature. As this suggests, the need for responsibility over our actions is becoming increasingly clear. Man can only meet this responsibility if he keeps an eye on the other aspect, namely that his actions are not only related to nature but that he himself is also part of a nature that has its own *strivings*, independent of man.

2.2. Responsibility of human beings for and towards nature

If we understand man not as a being organized in two parts, with nature (body) and mind (soul) understood as separated modes of being, but as a single entity containing both attributes, then the human person himself is also nature [Lanzerath 1998]. We have here a relationship, which is both mediated and unmediated, of human beings to nature, understood as the nature he is and as the nature he confronts as an active subject. This relationship can be taken as a foundation on which to build the ethical judgment of the application of, say, genetic engineering methods. For it is precisely man's position as a subject, with the unity of the moral subject and the human organism, which requires respect for the claims arising from his own nature and the nature that surrounds him. In the first place this is demanded by reason of enlightened self-interest. After all, if man can only thrive as part of nature which, for its part, needs to thrive by having its own requirements respected, then it is essential to provide protection for surrounding nature. This nature is the condition for human life and man's resource, as well as part of the cultural and socio-economic life-world valued by man.

Yet, man is the subject of morality not only because he has an interest in his own wellbeing, but also because he has an interest in being able to give reasons for his own actions, i.e. being able to answer to his sense of reason. The interest in following what reason knows to be good implies, however, recognition of the same interest in every other rational being; indeed, it also demands—in accordance with the principle of treating the same things in the same way—a recognition of similar strivings in the case of non-human life forms [cf. Regan 1988; Honnefelder, Lanzerath, Hillebrand 1999]. Thus, the pain felt by an animal, analogous to human pain, has to be taken seriously, which is why the idea of animal rights has found a special place in man's ethical conscience.

On the other hand, man differs again from the other more highly organized animals in terms of his sentience, since man is able to step back and reflect on his relationship to his own experience of pain. This enables human beings, for example, to experience severe or chronic illness not only as a painful condition but also as, say, a feeling of impotency and loss of meaning, and indeed it can also allow them to come to terms with such conditions [cf. Lanzerath 2000]. All interventions in nature which alter the dynamic structure and order of nature to such an extent that natural systems collapse and ultimately deprive man of his nature and thus of the foundation of his subjectivity cannot therefore be ethically justified. Every human intervention must take account of the complex interactions between nature and culture and the associated tolerances regarding sustainability.

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