Introduction

1. Synopsis of Argument

Ethics of nature is an inquiry into the value of nature: Is nature's value only instrumental value for human beings (and if so, what constitutes that value) or does nature also have intrinsic value (and if so, what constitutes that value)? Can traditional anthropocentrism be defended or must we move to a new, physiocentric moral position?

The debate on the ethics of nature is fairly young. Many of its concepts and arguments stand in need of clarification and working out. This study contributes to this task by defining basic concepts such as "nature" and "anthropocentrism" (part I.) and by developing a critical taxonomy of arguments concerning the value of nature.

This taxonomy is divided into three parts. Part II. lists seven anthropocentric arguments: arguments which explore the value of nature for a good human life. These arguments concern: the instrumental value of nature for the satisfaction of basic human needs like health (II., one); the instrumental value of nature for sensual human delight, the fragrance of a flower or the songs of warblers (II., two); the aesthetic intrinsic value beautiful and sublime nature has for human beings (II., three); the instrumental value natural design has in relieving us of "aesthetic responsibility" (II., four); the role the native landscape, the "Heimat," plays in the identity of many human beings (II., five); the pedagogic value of treating nature with care (II., six); and the meaning of life and the intrinsic value or sacredness the wise, who know that the meaning of life is life itself, accord to nature (II., seven).

Part III. investigates an holistic argument, which is neither purely anthropocentric nor purely physiocentric. This argument claims that to accord intrinsic value to nature is to further the good life for human beings, as they are part of nature.

Part IV. presents five physiocentric arguments: arguments which give reasons for respecting the "good" of nature for its own sake. The first argument concerns the intrinsic value of sentient nature, especially animals; the second concerns respect for teleological nature; and the third respect for all life in nature. While IV., one to three are extensionalist moral arguments, arguments which extend elements of the human moral point of view to nature, IV., four and five are absolute or transcendent arguments, in that they try to find some basis for an intrinsic value of nature outside the human moral point of view. IV., four claims that there is a higher order of values in nature which we should follow. IV., five is a theological variant of IV., four, the higher order IV., five talks about is God's order.
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The critical analysis of these arguments leads to the following results: all anthropocentric arguments are good arguments. Taken together, they constitute a strong anthropocentric case for the conservation and cultivation of nature. The holistic argument of III. and the physiocentric arguments of IV., with the exception of IV., one and two when they are restricted to certain animals, are bad arguments. Whereas sentient and teleological animal nature has moral intrinsic value, and anthropocentrism must be overcome with respect to II, the rest of nature lacks moral or absolute intrinsic value. Its value consists of its instrumental value, aesthetic intrinsic value, Heimat value, and (nontranscendent) sacredness for human beings. There is nothing we owe to non-animal nature itself.

2. Why an Ethics of Nature?

The ethics of nature inquires into the values or ends which should govern human conduct toward nature. Since traditional ethics concentrates on the ends which should govern human conduct toward other human beings, the ethics of nature adds a new dimension to the traditional ethical canon. What gave rise to this new ethical concern in the late 1960s was that people in industrial countries began to suffer from the way their environment looked, sounded, smelled, and felt: They get headaches from the bad air and the noise in the cities; the rivers and lakes where they used to swim were polluted; in order to get into "proper nature" they had to drive further away from the city each year. These negative, personal experiences were complemented by information from the media on global ecological problems. Important studies documenting what came to be called "the ecological crisis" were released: the report on The Limits to Growth by the Club of Rome in 1972 and Global 2000 in 1980.

The public discussion about what had gone wrong and how to do better soon revealed fundamental disagreements regarding the ends which should govern human conduct toward nature. While some claimed that nature was nothing but a resource for human use which must, however, be better managed in the future, others called for a paradigm shift in our attitude toward nature: Human beings must no longer, so they argued, regard nature merely as an instrument or a resource for their use, but show reverence for nature's intrinsic value; they must overcome their narrowly anthropocentric world view and assume their proper place in the intrinsically valuable whole of nature. The question of nature's real value is a philosophical one, which was soon taken up by philosophers.

3. The Philosophical Discipline of the Ethics of Nature

The first philosophical works on the ethics of nature appeared in the early 1970s. In the English-speaking world, some prominent titles are: John Passmore's 1974 Man's Responsibility for Nature, Christopher Stone's 1974 Should Trees Have Standing?, and Peter Singer's 1973 Animal Liberation. In Scandinavia in 1973, Arne Naess published his famous essay, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements." In Germany, Hans Jonas's 1979 Das Prinzip Verantwortung (English translation 1984 The Imperative of Responsibility) dominated the early discussion. In 1979, the American journal Environmental Ethics was founded, which soon developed into the main organ of the debate on the ethics of nature. The ethics of nature is now a flourishing discipline of applied ethics. The yearly publications and conferences are already difficult to survey. Yet because of its short history, the complexity of its subject matter, as well as its interdisciplinary character, much conceptual and argumentative confusion remains. A lot of work, clarifying the questions and improving our answers, needs to be done.

4. The Objective of This Study

This study is a contribution to the task of bringing conceptual and argumentative order into the search for knowledge about the value of nature. Its function is to provide a map which offers some orientation in this difficult territory. By defining basic concepts such as "nature," "ethics," "intrinsic value," "anthropocentrism," and "physiocentrism" in part I, the terrain of the ethics of nature is demarcated. In the taxonomy of basic arguments for the value of nature in parts II. to IV., the main paths in the terrain are mapped and evaluated on the basis of their practicability. Some of these paths are fairly easy to investigate, while others require expertise, not only in ethics but also in aesthetics, anthropology, philosophy of psychology, philosophy of religion, or philosophy of action. Often, the point where our exploration ends is not determined by the fact that everything relevant has been inspected, but by the fact that the questions have become too complex that we can go no further.

This study is a strictly systematic study, dedicated to the practical problem of how we should orient our conduct toward nature. It searches for conceptual distinctions and arguments which help to solve this problem. In this search, it tries to do without big names. It is not one of the many "Kant on Nature," "Heidegger on Nature," "Arne Naess on Nature" studies. While such historic and exegetical works certainly have their value, they do not further the current debate on the practical conduct toward nature. What is needed at present are concepts and arguments which anyone interested in what is at stake in this debate can understand and accept and which do not appeal exclusively to Kantians or Heideggerians. We will, therefore, make an effort to frame our arguments in a simple and unladen language. Nevertheless, to pay tribute to the work of classical philosophers, citations from their work are included as "classical versions" of some of our arguments. The work of contemporary ethicists of nature is not