A Jamesian Approach to Environmental Ethics

Todd Lekan

James’s moral philosophy is a valuable resource for environmental philosophy because it reveals and impugns some deep, unhelpful assumptions about the relationship between moral theory and the moral life. In particular, James’s ethics demonstrates that the debates in environmental ethics are better regarded as disputes about ideals of the kind of self and world we want, rather than as disputes over abstract propositions about the intrinsic value of nature.

1. Introduction

Among the classical pragmatists, William James might not seem to be best the candidate to contribute to current environmental ethics debates. Besides sporadic remarks about non-human animals and experiences of nature, he says little that would lead one to believe that he was concerned with issues like the intrinsic value of nature. His writings on pragmatism espouse a human-centered account of truth according to which those beliefs that satisfy human needs or, as James puts it, “agreeably lead us,” count as true. And, in the “Moral Philosopher and Moral Life,” he explicitly says that the essence of good is the satisfaction of demand. If one confines one’s attention to the that essay, it is easy to attribute to him a kind of desire-satisfaction utilitarianism according to which the best action is the one that maximizes as many demands as possible. Among its claims, this essay defends the following two normative propositions:

1) EG: The essence of good: Whatever satisfies a demand is a good.

2) JONT: James’s objective normative truth: We are morally obligated to satisfy as many demands as possible. Or, among our available actions, we should take the one that frustrates the fewest demands.

Given these claims, it would be easy to think of James’s ethics as an early version of the many preference utilitarianisms developed in the twentieth century. Such views are prominent in economic and public policy. Sagoff criticizes one such approach – contingent valuation – on the grounds that it
TODD LEKAN

6

TODD LEKAN

treats moral beliefs as preferences. The idea, in brief, is that environmental managers or policy-makers should include the preferences of environmentalists into the mix of those players who might have a stake in some environmental issue such as development or pollution. One might determine what policy would satisfy the most preferences by, for example, doing surveys about what environmentalists might be willing to pay to go to a park versus what developers might pay to develop it. The error, Sagoff argues, is treating moral beliefs as preferences. For one thing, a belief that it is morally obligatory to preserve a bit of untouched nature is typically not a desire for anything like the welfare of the believer. Even more fundamentally, moral beliefs are not mere preferences but rather conclusions of arguments that offer more or less persuasive reasons. Thus, to treat moral convictions as mere preferences to be included with other consumer wants in a maximizing decision procedure is to make a fundamental category mistake. The very content of the moral beliefs of many environmentalists are about the objectively intrinsic value of nature. This moral belief contradicts the idea that decisions about nature are simply decisions about how to satisfy the most preferences possible. James’s definition of the good in terms of demand satisfaction appears vulnerable to Sagoff’s criticisms. Moreover, it would seem that James’s ethics is at odds with the mainstream eco-centric environmental ethical theories that would be used to defend moral beliefs about the intrinsic value of nature which, according to Sagoff, are not to be treated as mere preferences or desires. Most such ecocentric ethics defends two basic claims: the value of non-sentient nature and the value of wholes such as ecosystems and species. James’s ethics appears to reject these claims. He seems to be an individualist about the locus of moral values – it is the desires of individuals that count. And, he seems to reject the notion that non-sentient nature has intrinsic value, at least if that claim is read as “value independent of conscious valuers.”

It is true, I think, that James’s moral philosophy would reject those environmental ethics approaches, which seek to demonstrate abstract moral truths about the intrinsic value of nature. Moreover, his philosophy does seek to harmonize disparate ideals, be they the wanton anthropocentric ideals of developers or the most expansive eco-centric ideals of environmentalists. Yet I would hasten to argue that his philosophy is hardly best read as a simple instance of preference utilitarian thinking. EG and JONT are core elements of his moral theory, but an exclusive focus on them distorts the more radical dimensions of James’s ethical thought. This might not be apparent upon a casual reading of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” By drawing on other writings, especially James’s account of the psychology of belief, I intend to show that James’s moral philosophy points in a more radical direction than received interpretations that would align him with some kind of preference utilitarianism. James himself is somewhat responsible for muting the nature of his radical proposal because he does not make explicit the links between his official account of ethics in “The Moral Philosopher and Moral Life” and his