

# Ken's Problem: Environmental Activism in an Age of Deconstructionist Biology<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

*New biological perspectives describe the members of the ecosystem as less tightly connected than earlier models. This deprives many environmentalists of one of their most important arguments that claims that harm to one species will harm all others. The nature of argument in ethics is raised and it is claimed that its structure is closer to analogical argumentation in the law than to the deductive model in logic or some parts of science. The loss of the "house of cards" argument is only a problem if one misconstrues the nature of ethical argumentation.*

**Keywords:** *ethics, ethical reasoning, deconstruction, practical ethics*

*In the book of Genesis Noah built an arc and saved all living species from destruction. It was God's command. Well, today God's creatures are threatened by our own great flood of pollution, of habitat destruction, and that's why America has built an arc: the Endangered Species Act. This arc has already rescued some of our most threatened wildlife from extinction — the whooping crane, the American Bald eagle. But now the arc itself is threatened. Powerful special interests are pressing Congress to weaken and undermine the Endangered Species Act. As Evangelical Christians we urge Congress to strengthen the Endangered Species Act with funding adequate to meet the needs of wildlife preservation.*

(The Evangelistic Environmental Network, 2/1/96)

## **The Problem**

This is a good advertisement. The implied argument is pretty powerful: "God made these creatures — you mess with them, you mess with Him." I think that most environmentalists would like to have an argument like this. Some have suggested a somewhat parallel argument that appeals to the intrinsic worth of different species or various natural objects.

But this line of approach clearly doesn't have as much snap to it. It would be hard to imagine the effectiveness of standing in front of a bulldozer and shouting "These species have intrinsic worth!" Whereas, "You mess with them, you mess with Him" can empty many a cab.

Perhaps the closest thing that many environmentalists have had to a God-argument is the House-of-cards argument which declares "If you pull this species out, the whole thing will come tumbling down." This threatens chaotic disaster and intense personal discomfort — something that should give pause to anyone. But this house-of-cards picture of nature has recently been seriously challenged and its companion concepts of "balance," "natural order," "stability," "ordered development," "succession" and "maturity" have been called more metaphysical than biological. I was at a recent scientific meeting where someone was hooted and jeered for mentioning the idea of "forest climax" in his presentation.

With the downfall of deterministic and teleological models, the various actors in an ecosystem are for the most part seen as weakly interacting, so that the removal of one species, unless it is what is referred to as a "keystone species," leaves everything more or less as it is. According to Drury (1974, 18), "...experience indicates that one can seldom prepare an ecological model that will allow a priori predictions of the effects of manipulations of parts of a natural system ... because most of the elements of a system operate largely independently of most other elements."

With the study of "natural disturbance" and "patch dynamics," natural systems are now seen to be in constant change and to succeed one another with little law-like regularity. Armed with this new biology, the informed bulldozer operator can retort: "Yes, well these trees may have intrinsic value, but they're going to be replaced anyway by natural change. We're just helping nature along." The really sophisticated operator might even argue that "extinctions have almost always been followed by outbursts of biological creativity and novel forms; we are helping to set the stage for

biological diversity.” Nature has no preferences, all the preferences are ours. Nature does not prefer a diverse tropical jungle to a barren desert with radioactive cockroaches (Visvader 1991).

Preferences are very weak things to argue — dozers roll over them all the time. In the absence of a God-argument it seems as if the strongest thing the environmentalist has to work with is the self-interest argument. “If you cut all the redwoods you’ll lose the tourist business,” etc. The environmentalist is also assaulted by “social constructionist” arguments that anxiously demonstrate that the concept of nature varies from time to time and place to place. In an earlier essay, I noted that “As we have seen with the different perceptions of wilderness, the characterization of nature even changes within the history of a particular culture as the boundaries between the self and not self are reimagined and reconfigured in response to the evolution of common experience ... In this sense the idea of nature is more of a cultural concept than a physical or biological one” (Visvader 1996, 16).

The point of these often well-meaning arguments is to shift environmental discussion away from metaphysics to concentrate on questions concerning the conflict of values, and bring the debate into the realm of practical ethics. But such arguments, by stressing the changeableness of both the concept and the values associated with it, make it appear as if the values are almost arbitrary. The net effect of “de-mythologizing” biology and social constructionism is to make environmental values appear to be subjective and relativistic, in short mere preferences that might even be considered, from the point of view of mainstream America, individualistic and idiosyncratic. This brings us into a strange and giddy realm. This is also a problem for Ken who is an environmental activist.

### The Problem with the Problem

I have called this new biology “deconstructive” or “deconstructivist” in order to make a conscious alignment with the current intellectual movement associated with “post-modernism.” There is a giddy feeling produced by this latter movement as well when all “grand narratives” are shown to be social constructions often created in the interests of the powerful, and all ideas of progress and human ascent are teleological fictions of the human imagination. The world has no preferred states, only humans have preferences, and these preferences are governed by variable needs and power struggles. Subjectivism and relativity again. This is a giddy realm especially for the social activist, for though such arguments bolster our appreciation of cultural diversity, they leave the activist with nothing but subjective preferences to counter

aggressions, indiscretions and abominations of other people and other cultures.

The problem here is that this is a God-like view of human values and their interactions. From the perspective of history or epistemology the philosopher assumes a superior perspective above the humdrum clash of values and cultures, a perspective that itself must not have the kind of values it analyzes. Many so-called deconstructionists suffer from severe problems of self reference. This helps to explain in part Derrida’s peculiar convoluted style — he keeps trying to deconstruct himself. Michel Foucault, who had been very personally concerned with the rights of minority groups, developed an Olympian view of the role of value in culture which deprived him of the ability to justify his own value commitments and maintain the truth of his analysis at the same time.

This little discussion is meant to warn us of the great dangers of theoretical ethics. If in order to examine values one has to decontextualize the point of analysis then an element of falsity and exaggeration has entered into the situation. The problem with the problem, as I have stated it, is the illusion that once you have lost the God-argument you fall into a value vacuum and the only way to get out of that is to find some other God-like argument. Ever since Descartes, philosophers have been trying to fight their way out of vacuums of various kinds. The feeling is that unless you can find an indubitable premise or argument, you cannot anchor the field you’re interested in.

The loss of the House-of-cards argument is a rhetorical loss and is not a philosophical catastrophe. The environmentalist does not have to fight to keep from falling into subjectivism. Values lose their anchoring only when they lose their context. Values are woven into particular contexts, they only make sense there, they have life there. People don’t live in vacuums or disembodied contexts — they are value creatures. There are many kinds of values; only some of them look like preferences. Important values are not held subjectively. It is impossible to be a consistent relativist or subjectivist in ethics — we hold our central values absolutely.

### Practical Ethics

The arguments of the social constructionist should have little effect on ethical discourse. If someone tells me that at one time Roman fathers had life or death power over their sons, I do not thereafter lose my revulsion for filicide. I may say something airily philosophical such as “Well, when in Rome, do as the Romans do...,” but if I *were* in Rome and witnessing such an event, I could not take it as lightly as my rhetoric would suggest.

This disparity between what I say and what I feel is

important. If I were to state that filicide was never permitted in any society, then the information about the Romans will undercut my claim. When I make a statement or propose an hypothesis what I say stands in need of justification of a certain kind, it can be mistaken or “go wrong” in a certain way. But saying that filicide is *wrong* is not to make a general statement or hypothesis about human actions — historical observations don’t undermine it. Despite the language we use on occasion to talk about ethical statements, they are not mere expressions of feeling. If they were the latter then all argumentation in ethical disputes would be irrelevant, and we know that arguments play an important part in ethics. But the kind of argumentation in ethics is different than that appropriate to factual claims.

Reasoning in ethics is much closer to legal reasoning than it is to scientific reasoning. Much of legal reasoning is analogical in nature and involves the classification of particular problematic cases. There are a number of clear precedents which act as models for the application of terms like “negligence,” “assault,” “act of God,” “duty of care,” “reasonable expectation” and so on, and various arguments are given by each side in the dispute as to whether the case at hand is more like one or the other models. Suppose, for example, that someone trips over a crack in my sidewalk and tries to sue me. My defense will turn on making the case as close to one where the other person is more responsible for the accident than I am. The facts in the case will be extremely important, but the conclusion of the case is not, strictly speaking, factual. It depends upon whether the facts, creatively assembled, make the event appear under one classification rather than another.

Ethical reasoning proceeds in a similar manner. We do not have to prove an ethical statement as we do a scientific statement. Though facts are relevant, they are used differently. Ethical dispute usually takes place in a shared background understanding of clear cases of right and wrong, of what is permitted and what isn’t. Without this background agreement there would be nothing that we could say in the short run.

Is abortion moral or not? A large part of the debate depends on how the entity in a pregnant woman’s stomach is classified. Everyone agrees that infanticide is immoral, no one in the debate tries to establish or dispute this. Infanticide is the clear case in the background. The debate takes place about whether this entity is to be thought of as a human child or an undeveloped biological fetus. Facts are important, but they need to be assembled to present a convincing *interpretation* — if you take it this way, these values apply, if you take it the other way, those other values apply.

The environmentalist does not have to deduce certain values out of a vacuum, nor are the values held in solipsistic

solitude. Extending our duty or care to entities in the environment will, for the most part, involve analogical arguments. They are *like* members of our community who have respectable and protectable interests, they are *like* pets or farm animals to which we have a duty to care and maintain, they are *like* works of art or works of God that have intrinsic worth. Nowhere is our duty to pets or community members at stake, nor the value of works of art in dispute.

In Aldo Leopold’s argument for his “Land Ethic” in *The Sand County Almanac*, it is no accident that the ethics come after all his personal descriptions of various animal episodes. It is an essential part of the presentation of his case that we see wild creatures in a strong and familiar way so that we can take them as members of more than our biological community. He increases the value of woodland creatures by familiarity — a kind of value by acquaintance, which is more or less the purpose of environmental education — and then argues by analogy for the reclassification of these creatures. I have never met a logger who did not love the woods. In the argument between the logger and the environmentalist there is a strong overlap of shared values though the ranking may be different in particular cases. In these cases one argues for a change in ranking, making the economic factor more or less important than the intact forest.

## Discussion

This paper has taken us through some difficult territory. It would have been nice if I could have come up with another God-argument or House-of-cards argument for the environmentalist, but it may be that such arguments only incur the wrath of the philosophers and plunge one into some giddy and unfamiliar realms. The only consolation I can offer in the loss of a good argument is that such a loss doesn’t plunge one into relativism and subjective preferences. The realm of practical ethics is still intact. The environmentalist does not have to deduce the correctness of environmental values — no one can do this anyway as they are not deducible kinds of things. All that has to be done is to convince others to value things differently and extend the range of the things they already care about. This is a difficult enough job in itself.

## Endnote

1. The “Ken” in the title refers to Ken Cline who is both a faculty member of the College of the Atlantic and the President of the Maine chapter of the Sierra Club. Ken has felt that the new biology that describes the ecosystem as only “loosely connected” has taken away one of the important arguments of environmental activists. At the College we refer to this issue as “Ken’s Problem.” A good account of what I have called the “new biology” can be found in Botkin (1990), Allen (1986), Warren and Cheney (1993) and Real and Brown (1991). Philosophical

discussions of “deconstructive biology” can be found in Brennen (1988), Bennett and Chaloupka (1993), Cronon (1996) and Soule’ and Lease (1995). A reviewer has asked me to mention that in *Human Ecology Review* “there is other literature dealing with the issue of making decisions and justifying action in the face of complexity, uncertainty, and conflict ... Some of the literature that seems relevant to this discussion includes Dietz (1994), Keister (1996), and Merchant (1997).”

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