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PHIL 291 (Environmental Ethics) Mid Term

1. Lynn White proposes that our Judeo-Christian dominance model has to our ecological crisis. Before the progression of Christianity “every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit” (Pojman 16). “By destroying pagan animism,” he argues, “Christianity has made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. He supports his claim by stating “human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion” (16). I agree with him that our beliefs influence the orchestration of our surroundings, but I don’t think Christianity is to blame for it all.

As an example, White uses the creation story as told in Genesis 1-3. He feels that “God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes” . White also thinks that “Christianity.. insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.” (16) However, I feel that his interpretation is based too heavily on his views. If I were subscribing to a Christian world-view I’d feel obligated to apply the Ten Commandments to God’s creation entirely. The fifth Commandment pleads “Honor your father and your mother”. I always felt that this ought to refer to father The Creator, as well as mother Earth. Another less dominant interpretation is offered in Patrick Dobel’s “The Judeo-Christian Attitude to Nature”. Dobel asserts that “this gift [the Earth] does not, however, grant sovereign control” and that “no one generation of people possesses the earth” (Dobel, 24).

I believe that both Dobel and White are right in their interpretations. Dobel reinforces a positive Christian interpretation, whereas White raises an important problem of how the bible can be interpreted for a reckless modern society. I wholeheartedly agree with White when he says “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them.” (White, 16). If the Christian God leaves us with an ambiguous handbook filled with unclear instructions then he is certainly partially responsible for the ecological mess we are in.

2. In his essay “A Utilitarian Defense of Animal Liberation” Peter Singer compares the emancipation of animal rights to the race and sex liberation movement our society has just previously gone through. Singer demands that we “extend to other species the basic principle of equality” (Singer 33). His equality being a “equality of consideration” which “may lead to different treatments and different rights” (34). When making any decision, “the interests of every being affected.. are to be taken into account and given the same weight” (35). His utilitarian claim is based on the fact that any being with the “capacity for suffering” has an equal interest in not suffering. He even enforces the view that our habit of animal testing is actually a form of speciesism, which means that we “show a bias in favor of [our] own species” (36) and are less considerate towards other species. Singer requests that we weigh the feelings and interests of all. According to his view it is justifiable to experiment on one human if it were to save the majority of another species.

In “The Radical Egalitarian Case for Animal Rights” Tom Regan disagrees with Singer that it is wrong “to view animals as our resources” (Regan 40). Singer’s view “has no room for the equal moral rights of different individuals because it has no room for their equal inherent value or worth”. “Neither you nor the animal have any value in your own right. Only your feelings do” (43). Without value, our moral system would collapse since “evil means” can be justified by “good ends” (43). This means that we can burn a witch or two to save the entire Christian thought good. He agrees with Singer that our current treatment of animals is wrong and cries out to be changed. The suffering animals need to endure in the name of science, enjoyment, and business is unjustifiable. Instead of Singer’s approach, Regan prefers the use of inherent value to make us aware of our duties. “Inherent value.. belongs equally to those who are experiencing subjects of life” (44). Subjects of lives being those “conscious creature having an individual welfare that has importance to us whatever our usefulness to others” (44). This means that any being that pursues happiness on its own has inherent value, and anything with inherent value deserves to be treated with respect.

A working solution might be a fusion of both views. In our daily lives we will treat animals with respect and dignity and in extreme borderline cases, such as important medical research, we will resort to the application of the utilitarian approach.

3. Dale Jamieson’s essay “Against Zoos” lists four supportive arguments for zoos - preservation, research, amusement, and education. However he soon encounters the problem that no current facility perfectly matches that perfect blend. Amusement and education, often found in urban zoos, are generally not part of preservation and research

center and vice versa. In addition to this problem, Dale argues that “captivity does not just deny animals liberty but is often detrimental to them” (Dale 73). He reinforces this by stating that some zoo studied had “large numbers of neurotic, overweight animals kept in cramped, cold cells” as well as “excessive mortality rates” (73). In other zoos they found malnourished animals, deformed limbs, death in transportation and “cannibalism, infanticide and fighting” (73). I think pet ownership can be susceptible to this argument. If an irresponsible owner keeps an animal caged away and is ignorant about its dietary needs, then that animal suffers from captivity as well. However, most pet owners have a sentimental connection to their animals and would like to see them happy and healthy.

In his second argument, Dale criticizes that zoos “teach us a false sense of our place in the natural order” (73). Children and adults alike see animals exposed at our pleasure. He is afraid that we will get used to being in charge of nature, because we created a tame and seemingly peaceful artificial environment. Certainly some pet owners can be accused of such a view. The breeding of dog and wolf hybrids, or some backyard tigers I have witnessed in Mississippi can certainly raise an eyebrow. Granted, even in these occasions the owners care strongly for their animals, but there is a danger of disrespecting the predatory nature of such animals.

4. Aldo Leopold urges that we rethink our relationship to our environment in general. In “Ecocentrism: The Land Ethic”, he explains that “land-use ethics are still governed wholly by economic self-interest” (Leopold 121). The problem as he sees it is “the lack of economic value.. of entire communities: marshes, bogs, dunes, and ‘deserts’” (122). He proposes the view of a land pyramid. At the bottom we find soils and plants,

followed by an insect layer, a rodent layer, etc until we reach “the apex layer.. of larger carnivores” (123). “Man shares an intermediate layer with the bears, raccoons, and squirrels which eat both meat and vegetables” (123). His pyramid is based on the energy flowing through all layers - one feeds of the other. As a final guideline he states that “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (125).

This view can easily be taken to an extreme. According to Leopold’s logic it would seem fit to kill all humans if the biotic community gains in stability. Because of this problem, his view has been labeled as fascist view. J. Baird Callicott comes to Leopold’s defense by saying, “Leopold never intended the land ethic to have either inhumane or antihumanitarian implications” (Callicott 134). Callicott explains that just as all layers in the pyramid have equal value, they also have equal right. From this follows that “human beings are equally subject to the same subordination of individual welfare and rights in respect to the good of community as a whole” (134). It seems logical that the removal of all human beings would immediately violate the integrity, stability and beauty of the pyramid as it was founded. The pyramid would of course find a new status quo, but there is no justifiable reason to change it in the first place.