We have a moral vocabulary of democratic citizenship, and a moral vocabulary of environmental sustainability—but can our ethics encompass both in harmony?

Robert Seddon, July 2013

If the people told you, on your first visit to a foreign land, that in their country your right not to have your fingers chopped off would be respected—well, that would certainly be better news than its converse. Still, you could be forgiven for wondering whether you were altogether safe; for why would such a specific right be recognised, unless you were in some danger of having your fingers chopped off?

I forget which seminar speaker asked it, back in my student days, but I remember the question. It's a vivid reminder that the principles we cherish emerged at least as much from conflict and mortal danger as from calm reason and conscientious reflection: that people arrived at ideas about essential rights and freedoms after seeing what happens when people lose their liberties and livelihoods and sometimes their lives. *Moral philosophy didn't actually originate as a speculative exercise that was later applied to practical use*, Mary Midgley has written, *any more than modern physics did. (Galileo was an engineer working on the flight of cannonballs.)* Insofar as ethical ideas **have** been taken up and put to new practical uses, the survivors are those which have proved applicable or adaptable to their new circumstances.

Where democratic politics has established itself, naturally we find moral ideas which fit readily with democratic values, whether as reinforcement or as a critical spur to further reform. *Edwin Chadwick, Lord Brougham, James Mill and a generation of Victorian reformers in the fields of poor relief, factory reform, local government and the provision of public utilities were variously informed and inspired by [Jeremy] Bentham's doctrine of promoting the greatest happiness of the greatest number*, writes Iain Hampsher-Monk. Meanwhile, Bentham himself came to believe *that the only government with the will to implement this utilitarian criterion was a democratic one*. Whoever rejects utilitarian moral ideals is likely to seek an alternative which is no less democratically palatable: for John Rawls's writings on social justice, for example, the source of inspiration was the Enlightenment philosophy of Immanuel Kant, *recast and [its] moral force reformulated within the scope of an empirical theory*.

The ethical ideas which we have inherited do not always emphasise the rights and liberties of a sovereign individual: as students of moral philosophy soon learn, utilitarianism in its purest form seems to leave ample room for the exploitation of 'sacrificial victims' to promote the happiness of the multitude. But our ethics broadly tends to focus on human individuals and groups of individuals. When we extend the 'moral circle' to include animal life, for example, it is typically because we recognise that individual animals of some species share morally significant traits with us, such as the capacity to suffer.

A moral vision with an emphatic focus on individuals may well be suited to underpin a democratic society, but what happens when a democratic society faces **ecological** problems? It is now widely accepted that humans ought to preserve endangered species, but it is not obvious what caring for a species should entail. *Is a species in a "better state"*,' Clare Palmer has asked, *if it has many members, all domesticated and dependent on humans, than a species with fewer members, struggling to survive independently in their natural habitats?* At least a species can be easily said to have 'members'. What about a landscape, or an ecosystem, or the Earth's entire biosphere? As J. Baird Callicott writes: *Patriotism is the name of the social sentiment directed to the nation as a superorganismic entity.*

Presently there is no name for the emergent feeling, the object of which is the biosphere per se and its several superorganismic sub-systems. We could, perhaps, call it biophilia.

Some ethicists think that a moral vocabulary of rights, for example, can be adjusted or extended to encompass our involvement with the environment. This may be so, but when we talk about 'the environment' and 'environmental sustainability' we are of course not talking about the interests of another individual like ourselves. Thinking about **environmental** harm demands that we think holistically about problems that remain barely visible while we think only about **this tree, that lake, that development project**. In fact, this way of approaching problems holistically, and looking for solutions to **systematic** failures, is so powerful that it has been adopted in other areas of enquiry: for example, in thinking about the side-effects which intellectual property regimes have on culture.

'The environment' is a powerful idea, and ideal, because it shows us the worth of the whole biosphere over and above that of its constituent organisms. From any liberal point of view, this is therefore a power to be wielded with great caution.
It's not sheer contradiction to think that the autonomous individual, the citizen, the voter, the thinking human subject is at the same time a tiny part of a vast and vastly complex system (or, less optimistically, one amongst a plague of polluters and consuming

mouths that threatens the sustainability of that system). If these visions were simply inconsistent they could be debated until one emerged a victor.

They are in tension partly because they rest on different conceptual foundations, but also for the practical reason that societies espousing liberal democracy tend, on good grounds, to be hostile to any vision which subsumes the individual human being into a greater whole. Threatened with environmental hazard, we need to be able to think ecologically; but this hardly means that we shall never again require the individualistic habits of mind which defend us from popular tyranny.

Democracy and environmental sustainability are not natural enemies; and since we can ill afford to let go of either, we had better be able to bring them into harmony. What is not certain is that we have yet developed a moral vocabulary which can wholly square this conceptual circle.