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Edward L. McCord: Review of *The Value of Species*

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Two truths have become apparent. First, we live in the midst of, and are indeed the knowing and primary perpetrators of, the gruesome unraveling of the earth's living systems. Second, we live in a culture that readily tolerates the idea that species might not count, might not be worthy of the attribution of moral standing in their own right. This is amazing: "Here is an opportunity and an irony perhaps never to be repeated in the universe, that a species of life has evolved with the ability to contemplate in wonder the miracle of life itself, and is knowingly engaging in the destruction of that miracle" (p. 130).

This is beyond tragic; it is perhaps the greatest moral failing ever witnessed in the history of humankind. But it is also a choice. This simple realization is at once terrifying, forcing us to confront the responsibility for our history of careless planetary abuse, but also empowering, because once we know we have a choice, we also know that we can choose differently. Edward McCord's little book, *The Value of Species*, tries with all its might to tip the scale just enough to make us choose differently, to make a convincing argument that will shift the burden of proof on to those who callously destroy or slowly barter away the myriad of kindred species with whom we share this world.

Within the lineage of other environmental philosophers who have explicitly made the ethical case for the preservation of species (for example, Callicott 1986; Norton 1987; Gorke 2003), McCord sets out to articulate and defend a non-anthropocentric ethic advancing the direct moral standing of species. He concludes, "Individual species are a phenomena in this world of such intellectual moment—phenomena so interesting in their own right—that this alone gives them a value meriting human embrace" (p. 9, emphasis in original). When

you couple this with the claim that the fulfillment of our humanity comes when we exercise "an inquisitive mind open to honest reflection" (p. 20), you arrive at the conclusion, according to McCord, whereby species possess inherent value.

What is clear is that such a line of reasoning moves McCord himself. "We move among miracles" (p. x), he states in the book's preface. As a programming and special projects director in the University of Pittsburgh's University Honors Program and the leader of the university's Yellowstone Field Course, McCord is predictably captivated by the natural world. But can we all feel this way? McCord claims not only that all humans have an amazing ability to be so moved but also claims that this ability is an essential part of what makes us human.

However, to articulate and defend an ethic is not only to demonstrate that a single person holds a given position, or even that we can all hold a given position, but also that we *ought* to hold it. That is, a fully formulated and defended ethic requires normative force, the power of persuasion over the reticent such that they cannot opt out of an obligation and at the same time claim to be a moral person. And we need a good argument to make this obligation stick. A simple claim about the moral standing of species "is only so much hot air without a convincing and honest argument to back it up" (p. 112). So an ethics according direct moral standing to species is possible, but is it obligatory? McCord believes it is.

He begins his argument by asking us to engage in a moment of self-reflection: we must first ask "who we want to be as humans" (p. 4). McCord suggests that even cursory reflection will reveal two fundamental commitments. First, we are, as a product of our humanity, committed to curiosity and intellectual honesty, which are in turn "fundamental conditions of the vital mind" (p. 29). It is by virtue of these conditions that we perceive our second commitment, to value other species: "in the contest among our values, the value of

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other forms of life for the human imagination and intellect should be accorded the weight that we place on associated qualities of character we hold in reverence—our curiosity and our honesty, for example, and our sense of respect and awe before creation...indifference to this destruction of the life of our planet is patently unconscionable when our distinguishing qualities of intellect and imagination are considered” (p. 30, 31).

McCord supports his position by making three related arguments. First, at times we see an appeal to consistency—what environmental philosophers refer to as an extensionist approach to environmental ethics (Des Jardins 2006). Here we are expected to simply exercise a commitment to a basic cornerstone of human reasoning, syllogistically (where P = premise and C = conclusion) that argument looks like this:

- P1. Species [sometimes “living things”] possess qualities analogous to those that underpin our sense of our own inherent value.
- P2. We ought to be consistent.
- C. Therefore, we ought to grant species inherent value.

If the request for consistency (to simply *treat like things alike*) is not enough, McCord delivers two other arguments for the direct moral standing of species, both rooted in our fundamental human nature. Using a biocentric, or “life-centered,” argument for species inclusion, McCord asks us to consider species as living things:

- P1. A species is “a living thing” (p. 12).
- P2. Living things, as “unique and unrepeatable in the universe” (p. 12), are “essentially interesting to us” (p. 17).
- P3. To find things essentially interesting is to grant them inherent value.
- C. Therefore, species should be granted inherent value.

If McCord’s arguments stopped at this point, he would be vulnerable to a fairly serious critique. His book is supposed to be about the value of species, but one might argue that, thus far, he has not actually answered the question of why *species*, as opposed to living individuals, have value. While his arguments do a lot of work for the inherent value of living things (i.e., individuals), they have yet to account for the inherent value of species per se.

However, in a properly holistic or ecocentric argument, McCord asks us to grant species moral standing as collective or corporate entities:

- P1. Species have intellectual significance: they are inherently fascinating and awe inspiring (consider just this one simple fact: “every living species today signifies an accomplishment in survival that is virtually beyond intuitive comprehension,” p. 13).

P2. As human beings we are endowed with “inquisitive mind[s] open to honest reflection” (p. 20) that are moved by (i.e. value) those things that are intellectually significant.

P3. To be so moved is to grant inherent value to those things that move us.

C. Therefore, species should be granted inherent value.

The interesting flip side to McCord’s argument that species preservation is intimately linked to our humanity is the realization that destroying species is not only callous or stupid or unwise but also a form of self-loathing and self-destruction (p. 32), a denial of our fundamental nature that is, in short, “unconscionable” (p. 31).

Such an argument might still have a kind of instrumentalist taste, in that it is dependent on species being “essentially interesting to us.” However, the important point is that the argument is not “species have *only* use value” or “species are *merely* a means to our human end.” This is, at times, a point of confusion in environmental discourse, and one that can be illuminated by contrasting McCord’s position to the increasingly mainstream ethics of the “New Conservation” movement, represented most notably by The Nature Conservancy, which embraces an anthropocentric ethic based upon the various ways species directly or indirectly benefit humans. According to McCord, any such strategies that fail to acknowledge the full intrinsic value of species will also fail to save or preserve species.

This is a point that McCord makes at length, as he moves from his stirring defense of a non-anthropocentric ethic of species, to consideration of a variety of topics that have stood as poor surrogates for the grounded ethic of species he is advancing. McCord works to convince the reader that there is much at stake here and that we should therefore be suspicious of positions offered as moral placebos. In this warning, McCord echoes the warning issued by Aldo Leopold in his 1949 essay “The Land Ethic”: “When the logic of history hungers for bread and we hand out a stone, we are at pains to explain how much the stone resembles bread.”

For example, McCord focuses on our perceptions about property values to illustrate how and why ethics, and his ethic in particular, matters. Specifically, our ideas about concepts such as takings and eminent domain powerfully illustrate how, when only humans and human interests matter, everything else can (will?) eventually become merely property. When this happens, eventually (inevitably?) we allow “individuals the right to reduce the living heritage of the earth” (p. 50).

McCord works through and summarizes Garrett Hardin’s classic essay “The Tragedy of the Commons” as one way to emphasize this point. The logic of the commons wherein we each maximize our own self-interest creates our current environmental crisis, and is itself the result of a reduced valuation of the commons, including species. In such a system, only

“enforced public restrictions” (p. 56)—or, in Hardin’s words, “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon” (Hardin 1968)—can address species loss. But even here, only those species that never compete with any human interests stand to survive. Hence, divorced of a strong ethical foundation, “enforced public restrictions” alone are not enough to ensure species survival.

McCord reserves his most forceful warning for certain versions of the stone he refers to as “free market environmentalism” or a “passive reliance on markets to determine goals for our civilization in the absence of direction from the public interest” (p. 88). While he is not concerned about utilizing markets to ensure efficiencies or motivate regulatory compliance, McCord does contend that it is perverse and tragic to allow markets to dictate environmental standards. Here McCord asks us to think beyond the theater of human society to the wider world of all living beings, where the decisions that impact our budgets and bank accounts are also, in a very real sense, determining who will live and who will die. McCord reminds us that such decision is fundamentally a matter of ethics, and “we do not let markets determine ethics” (p. 99), a powerful statement given the flirtations we currently have with precisely such an “ecosystem services” approach to the public good.

McCord even goes so far as to argue that market-driven approaches risk the welfare of humans as a species, given that we tend to discount the long-term value of collectives that underpin individual human well-being in favor of the short-term gratification of individuals. Simply put, we are not very good at accounting for the genuine interests of future generations. Quite often, we seem to simply get it wrong: consider that past generations believed they were benefitting current generations by working to eradicate large predators from the ecosystem, as one example. We also repeatedly fail to recognize that maintaining the fullest range of possibilities, including the preservation of species, is the core of our obligation to the future (Moore and Nelson 2010).

In short, we cannot actually get to where we need to go from where we are. The world that we envision for ourselves and for our children, a world teeming with such a rich multitude of species as dazzles the heart and mind, will fail to exist under the morally anemic status quo. A world so grand reflects an ethical commitment to the continued existence of species, and there are no substitutes for ethical commitment in making that world manifest.

The final inquiry that McCord makes is why, if species possess inherent value that we as humans are fundamentally able to recognize and appreciate, are we so timid about being “champions” for this value? (p. 11). He answers by pointing to the many obstacles that we ourselves have created. One such obstacle is the argument that a conservation strategy cannot ask people to sacrifice, to make changes, to alter their behaviors, or question their deepest values—in other words, any

strategy with costs will fail. There are many possible responses to this naysaying. The first is to deny the “cost = unsuccessful” equation; protecting the public good always has costs, and we often pay and often gladly. Also, as McCord tells us, it is a false dilemma to pit “the survival of species against human welfare...as if there were no other options” (p. 126), and it is downright perverse to weigh “the plentitude of the earth’s wonders available to our descendants against changing our ways of living,” especially if we always opt for the latter (p. 126). Finally, McCord points out a basic miscalculation, that, “there are simply no costs of taking action that remotely compare with the cost of failing to do so” (p. xvii). Such a miscalculation becomes even more obvious when we do a little full-cost accounting and include other species in our calculations, as we should have done all along.

McCord’s comments about sacrifice parallel those of the scientist and writer Carl Safina (2010), who points out that when we worry about asking people to sacrifice, we are wrongly acting as though our current course of action is the non-sacrificial path—we act,

As though our wastefulness of energy and money is not sacrifice. As though war built around oil is not sacrifice. As though losing polar bears, penguins, coral reefs, and thousands of other living companions is not sacrifice. As though withered cropland is not a sacrifice, or letting the fresh water of cities dry up as glacier-fed rivers shrink. As though risking seawater inundation and the displacement of hundreds of millions of coastal people is not a sacrifice—and reckless risk. *But don’t tell me we need a law mandating more efficient cars; that would be a sacrifice!* We think we don’t want to sacrifice, but *sacrifice* is exactly what we’re doing by perpetuating problems that only get worse; we’re sacrificing our money, and sacrificing what is big and permanent, to prolong what is small, temporary, and harmful. We’re sacrificing animals, peace, and children to retain wastefulness—while enriching those who disdain us.

But stepping back from balances or imbalances that emerge from these somewhat crudes cost-benefit calculations of human sacrifice and benefit; McCord’s book challenges us to consider the possibility that we might in fact be overestimating the profit motive nearly as much as we are underestimating the craving to be people of moral integrity. Ultimately, our choice to save other species is a choice about character, a response to the question, “what kind of a person do I want to be in the world?” It is a choice that politicians, business leaders, and natural resource managers must make very explicitly, but it is also demanded, with equal urgency, in the everyday lives of each individual person. Will I be cautious, generous, attentive, and wise—or will I be reckless, selfish, oblivious, and

imprudent? Will I be a person of integrity, matching what I know about the world with how I act in that world? These are decisions about self-respect and a matter of rational self-interest: “failure to appreciate other species of life on earth is a failure to appreciate ourselves” (p. 133).

Students in environmental science and studies programs need exposure to environmental ethics and philosophy. The challenges they face are richly philosophical. While it is not uncommon for professionals to come to this realization later in their careers (often with much frustration and exasperation), perhaps we can get them there sooner by incorporating more material like *The Value of Species* into educational curricula. Ed McCord’s book would make a really nice contribution to any level of “environmental” course—from introduction to environmental science and studies to a graduate seminar on biodiversity—and perhaps expose professors to some fresh and richly interdisciplinary thinking along the way. Chatter about “ecosystems services,” “new conservation,” or “the anthropocene” threatens to swamp our moral imagination—limiting us only to anthropocentric and instrumental valuation approaches to the non-human world. There are many dangers lurking here, but perhaps the most threatening is the belief that we can correct course simply by perpetuating slightly different

versions of the worldview that created our environmental problems in the first place. The demonstration that it is possible to enact a different ethic demands a demonstration that such an ethic is feasible. *The Value of Species* stands as a reminder that we have a choice.

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