

# INTRODUCTION

REBEKAH HUMPHREYS  
AND  
SOPHIE VLACOS

Environmental ethics rose to prominence in the socially committed atmosphere of the early 1970s, an era beset by social and political uncertainties quite different from our own, and yet an era which has proved instrumental to the ongoing tenor of much of our social, political and ethical debate today. Since the time of its inception, when activists began to demand a philosophy of the environment, environmental ethics has naturally laid its emphasis upon practice, upon the need for practical solutions to the very real and present ecological dangers we now know so well; pollution, the depletion of our natural resources, our treatment of nonhuman species and overpopulation to name but a few. At the same time however, the challenges posed by environmental damage and the call to positive action have instigated a number of challenges at the theoretical level, compelling the renegotiation of a number of longstanding meta-ethical and indeed broader epistemological attitudes, towards rights and entitlements, the nature of humankind's moral responsibilities to the nonhuman world for example, and towards the philosopher's relation to empirical research, the bearing of scientific enquiry, and the very nature of ethical discourse. To this extent environmental ethics has proved itself a resolutely open and mixed discourse, one which has welcomed the challenges of global politics and scientific research as much as it has the general moral support of the wider intellectual community. The temptation of course, is to suppose that it could never have been otherwise, since environmental ethics must by its very nature be a reflective discipline, to an extent dependent upon the economic and ecological scrutiny of hard science and the shifting allegiances of the international community. Still, the blueprint for environmental ethics today cannot not be associated with the spirit of the age in which it first came to prominence, or with the overriding commitments of its founding voices. It is surely this overwhelming consensus which has enabled otherwise partisan

representatives, theists and atheists for example, to participate in fruitful exchanges—regarding the compatibility of evolution and creation, or the compossibility of a beneficent God, of natural suffering and human wrongdoing—that are of equal principled import to all philosophers, regardless of one’s environmental or ethical credentials?

A uniquely engaged, responsive and diverse branch of philosophy then, environmental ethics has developed whilst maintaining the usefulness and the purposefulness of its distinction within wider ethical discourse. To this extent Robin Attfield, a stalwart of the environmental-ethical community from the very beginning and a guiding voice in the development of the field, can be seen as something of an exemplary figure in this most exemplary of philosophical branches. One imagines that he would characterise himself as an environmental ethicist first and foremost, but he is a specialist of plural interests, with a distinguished career in ethics punctuated by some first-rate aesthetic, linguistic and theological reflections as well. For the non specialists among us, one of the most striking elements to emerge from Attfield’s career and our contributors’ reflections upon his work is the prevailing sense of restrained and rigorously garnered optimism underlying his intellectual journey and the philosophical positions he defends. It is with this sense of optimism and, if we may hazard, wonder for the natural world, that Attfield’s environmental, aesthetic and theological interests are combined. In the first chapter Attfield writes in some detail about his career and the paths which led him to the ethical positions he adopts. Naturally, there is no competing with this personal testament and so we leave it to Attfield to elaborate upon this journey.

Given the tenor and indeed the duration of Attfield’s career it was not hard to find an appropriately varied, willing and furthermore impressive list of contributors for this book. Wishing to celebrate Attfield’s career and most importantly, to provide an accurate representation of his impact, we think it of particular advantage to be able to present our contributors’ work with accompanying responses from Attfield. These comments follow individually as separate chapters between the works of our contributors. Once more we leave Attfield to present his thoughts and arguments on these matters. What follows therefore is a brief *précis* of our contributors’ arguments.

In Chapter Two Nigel Dower tackles Attfield’s ethics of climate change, emphasising the latter’s hallmark commitments to the ethical considerations of both future generations and non-human species.

Attfield's biocentrism and consequentialism do not however undermine his overwhelming conviction that climate change and the discourse of environmental ethics must be treated in conjunction with questions of human suffering and poverty in the developing world. For Attfield, and indeed for Dower, human development and environmental action are complimentary discourses; the alleviation of poverty and the alleviation of an increasingly choked and depleted planet are the aspirations of a common ethic with shared aims and goals. Such a desideratum leads both Attfield and Dower to reject the possibility of a single-handed approach to climate change (Dower, 19).

In the first part of his paper Dower examines the unilateral proposals for climate change represented by the Kyoto Protocol of 1990 (whereby a country's historical emissions were calculated upon the basis of their output in 1990 and a projective forecast for reductions made upon that basis), and by the aggregate emission proposal (wherein industrialised nations are penalised relative to their historical culpability). Dower explains why Attfield largely rejects the principle of historical indemnity as a means to calibrating future entitlement, aligning it to Attfield's wider preference for non-historical ethical principles. On the pragmatic level, historical approaches would inevitably lead to disagreement amongst countries as to their relative measures of past emissions. More generally, past emissions would set the benchmark for future goals irrespective of future demands and a changing global demographic, presently evident in the rapid industrialisation of nations such as China and India.

Whilst Attfield accepts the general principle of the Atmospheric Commons and the need to apportion these commons relative to national needs, and whilst in principle he accepts the idea of carbon trading amongst nations—given their relative industrial capacities and demands and the relative poverty of those less industrialised countries—, Attfield asserts a sage note of caution with regards the real practical and indeed moral advantages of carbon trading. The latent danger of carbon trading is the risk it poses to the very necessary future development of poverty-stricken countries. The reduction of Third World debt is of no benefit whatsoever to the poverty-stricken individual if it comes at the cost of real, positive development on the ground. The worry is that developing countries will trade their emissions rights at the expense of necessary developmental emissions. Attfield's line is that the kind of emissions involved in raising standards of living for the world's poorest must be secured against carbon offsetting.

With these considerations in sight, Dower presents three alternative means of apportioning environmental atmospheric entitlement in which both he and Attfield find some more or less propitious approaches. These include Meyer's "Contract and Convergence" approach, wherein the primary goal is a gradual contraction of global emissions and a progressive convergence of national emissions entitlements, and the proposals of Greenhouse Developments Rights, where greenhouse gas mitigation and development for the satisfaction of basic needs in poorer countries are deemed the shared responsibility of all people at or above a certain level of financial security. The great benefit of this approach, emphasised by Attfield and later developed by Dower, is the shift in moral responsibility from the conglomerate nation to the individual agent. Herein one finds the kind of loop-hole usefully curtailed whereby wealthy residents of poorer countries are shielded from the limitations imposed upon citizens of wealthy, carbon profligate countries (Dower, 19).

Drawing upon Attfield's arguments, Dower provides compelling justification for Attfield's approach to environmental ethics, but in the second part of his discussion Dower moves towards a more reflective consideration of the ethical and the pragmatic considerations at work within these different principles. From here Dower presents a minor, albeit more than academic distinction between Attfield's thinking and his own. Earlier on in the paper, Dower recognises Attfield's astute exemplification of the way in which different ethical commitments determine the tenor of one's practical solutions (Dower, 17). But whilst Dower recognises the ethical coherence behind Attfield's mode of theorising, he is wary of over-discriminating between attitudes which are practically, but not necessarily theoretically sympathetic to one's own ethical position. Proving himself a keen pragmatist, Dower's point is that we must prioritise the common practical goals of disparate ethical positions in spite of possible disagreements concerning the theoretical rationales behind them. Whilst we cannot disregard these ethical rationales altogether, we cannot afford to alienate sectors of the environmental conversation or to foreclose dialogue and co-operation amongst the disparate but more or less practically united community of environmental ethicists (Dower, 21-24). In short, different ethical positions may foster convergent practical benefits, and it is practical consensus alone which promises the brightest future for our environment. For this reason, Dower affirms the need to draw-out the pragmatic convictions reflecting our ethical distinctions at the theoretical level, all the while developing this argument in the context of two

“quintessential ‘Attfield’” commitments, namely to non-human species and to future generations (Dower, 18).

In the final instance, Dower draws our attentions to Attfield’s treatment of “mediated responsibilities”, to the fact that morally significant, in this case environmentally compromising actions, are very often carried out on our behalf at a remove, by the power companies who provide our electricity say, or the governments who establish enabling contracts and statutes with these companies or indeed other nations (Dower, 26). Touching upon the issue of democratic representation and the paradox of the undemocratic electorate—is the undemocratic policy in fact democratic if democratically sanctioned?—Dower ends by addressing the ethical responsibilities of the individual, specifically in relation to national governmental policies. Finally he makes what he calls a “constructive amendment” to Attfield’s practical, and in Dower’s opinion overly state-centric policy stance, arguing for the ethical benefits of a more individualistic, less nationalistic or centralised approach to the environment (Dower, 31). For Dower it is the vanguard minority of individually committed agents, groups often deemed radical in contrast to the prevailing majority, who possess the greatest power to transform public opinion and effect the swiftest and most profound change to environmental attitudes and habits of consumption.

In Chapter Four, Alan Holland analyses some of Attfield’s key claims in *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* (Attfield, 2006). In Part I, Holland discusses what he calls “[Attfield’s] re-working of the cosmological argument” (Holland, 41); a re-working which involves an appeal to the principle of sufficient reason (as outlined by Nozick, 1981, 140-142), which, for Attfield, states that “there is a sufficient reason for whatever could have been otherwise, except where there is a sufficient reason to the contrary” (Attfield, 2006, 57, quoted by Holland, Part I, 41). Holland interprets Attfield as follows: if one takes into account the Principle of Sufficient reason, an explanation is required for the existence of the material world; for this existence is something that could have been otherwise (there could have been nothing rather than something), and God as the creator stands as an explanation for the existence of the material world. Holland’s focus in this section is on the supposition that an explanation really is needed for the existence of the material world. In line with Nozick’s principle, Holland suggests that there may be sufficient reason for supposing the contrary, and after clearly setting out the premises of his argument he concludes that “there is no reason for

supposing, and every reason for not supposing, that the existence of material objects, per se, requires explanation in terms of something other than themselves” (Holland, Part I, 42).

Holland goes some way with Attfield in accepting that belief in creation and evolution are compatible. However, Holland makes a distinction between two senses of Darwinism: Darwinism as the belief in evolution, and “methodological Darwinism” as a method of science which places significant importance on the providing of evidence. Holland questions whether methodological Darwinism is compatible with belief in a creator. It would seem that methodological Darwinism would require “the admitting of evidence” (F. Darwin 1902, 57, quoted by Holland, Part II, 44), and it is not clear that there is sufficient evidence of a creator.

In Part III, Holland discusses Attfield’s re-working of Keith Ward’s “argument from value” (Ward, 1982, 89-120), and in particular discusses the claim that “design on the part of a purposive and loving creator is a reasonable interpretation of the immense amount of value in the world” (Attfield, 2006, 151, quoted by Holland, Part III, 45). Holland analyses what he sees as two assumptions underlying this claim: firstly, that value judgments are objective and, secondly, that the amount of value in the world is something which can be estimated. In relation to the first supposed assumption, Holland offers a preferred perspectivist account of value (Holland, 45-46). In respect of the second supposed assumption, Holland draws our attention to (among other things) the difficulties involved in weighing up the value in the world and involved in the claim that there is an immense amount of value in world (Holland, 47-48).

Holland praises Attfield’s response to a related objection against the belief in a good God; the objection being that the evil in the world casts doubt on the plausibility of such a belief. Attfield claims that “we have no reason to believe that a world with a better balance of good over evil than the actual world is possible, or that the actual world is not a world that a good God would create” (Attfield, 2006, 141, quoted by Holland, Part III, 47). While Attfield does not necessarily have to show that the world as we know it is the best possible world (something Holland recognises), Attfield does indeed try to show this by pointing out that some evils could be seen to be necessary parts of a natural world that generates value. Although Holland believes that Attfield’s case here is convincing, he argues that “the belief in a beneficent creator does require us also to believe both that there is a preponderance of value in the world, and that no greater preponderance could possibly have been brought about” (Holland, Part III,

47), and that we have no adequate reason to believe that this is indeed the case.

Holland criticises Attfield's claim that evolution is purposive in its creation of value in the world (a claim which may further suggest that the value in the world can be seen to be the purposive result of a creator). In contrast to Attfield, Holland argues that it is possible that the world and all its value came about in a non-purposive way; such as by chance and random events and, if this is the case, the value in the world cannot be explained by reference to design (Holland, Part IV, 49).

Finally, Holland discusses Attfield's view that meaningful life could be best achieved through belief in a creator; a creator that has generated the valuable states of affairs that exist in the world. In particular, recognition of ourselves as stewards of all that has value in the natural world can enhance the prospects for a fully meaningful life. Holland objects to Attfield's view here and argues that, in the light of objections outlined in Part III, the prospects for a fully meaningful life are "hostage to a value calculus of cosmic proportions"; a calculus which is "beyond... human capacities" (Holland, Part V, 50). Holland further argues that belief in a creator, far from enabling us to achieve a fully meaningful life, "casts the possibility of such a life into the greatest of doubt" (Holland, Part V, 50).

Creation, ethics and environment are the dominant themes of this book and it is in the sixth chapter by Christopher Southgate that creation, invested with its full theological resonance, comes to the fore. It is important to note straight away that neither Attfield nor Southgate question the fundamental coherence of divine creation and evolutionary development; such is the nature of evolutionary theodicy named in Southgate's title. For the sceptic of course, there is no greater challenge to the presumed benevolence and clemency of God than the endemic suffering of the Darwinian order; disease, predation, famine, and in the most extreme cases total species extinction, are the necessary conditions of evolutionary flourishing on a global scale. The beauty, ingenuity and diversity of creation feeds upon the carcass of an incalculable and irrepressible suffering, does it not? What God, whose God, could warrant such misery? To discourse upon evolutionary theodicy is thus to discourse upon natural ethics, upon the existence of natural evil and the potential balm of a greater good. But natural suffering, of which Southgate treats in the earlier sections of his paper, is no longer the full story. To this difficulty we must add the more timely evils of man-made environmental damage. No longer is it possible to pose the question of divine creation

without due consideration of man's role within the course of natural history. If creation involves design, and is a theme of theodicy, where does humankind's destructive impulse, its propensity for environmental evils, fit within the divinely sanctioned natural order? Southgate's proposals concerning the problems of natural, evolutionary suffering and human defilement are sympathetic to Attfield's approach but they are not however identical.

To emphasise the common ground between Southgate and Attfield we may begin by emphasising their shared criticism of the kind of "dualistic" interpretations of evolution and divine creation, whereby God would represent a power extrinsic to evolution itself, and a power moreover that is only present at certain critical and apparently inexplicable junctures within the evolutionary process. Both thinkers reject the notion of God as a kind of supernumerary catalyst or information encoder, opting instead for a vision of God's consistent reciprocity with nature. But this reciprocity, in Southgate's own words, "greatly intensifies the problem of theodicy" insofar as it "makes God not only the author of a process to which vast quantities of suffering and extinction are intrinsic, but it also posits that God is efficiently active in the process without commuting that disvalue" (Southgate, 63). Attfield's and Southgate's respective handling of the matter forms the common ground from whence their opinions begin to diverge.

There is a great deal of nuanced argumentation within Southgate's paper and he draws upon a compendious knowledge of other people's arguments within the field. For the sake of brevity however, it is as well to emphasise the two critical pivots upon which the paper turns. The first of these, alluded to in the "Pangloss" of Southgate's title, concerns Attfield's "only way" argument; this is the thesis that whilst no evidence exists to the contrary, we must assume the actual laws of nature and the less than ideal conditions of evolutionary development to present the only possible means for creation. In fact, Attfield's argument extends to the existence of moral evil, to the evil of human actions within the world as well as the natural evil of evolutionary suffering. We are told that according to Attfield, the "only possible way" view does not contravene the argument for moral agency amongst individuals. That the world could not be otherwise does not mean that there is not free-will amongst God's creatures. It follows for Attfield that moral evil is a consequence of free will, whilst natural evils present "systemic preconditions of the flourishing of billions of creatures



across the ages, as well as of human capacities and of the human endowment” (Attfield, 2006, 143, quoted by Southgate, 64).

Southgate’s discussion of Attfield’s “only possible way” thesis, and of his own reservations regarding it, enables him to delineate their respective modes of enquiry with economic clarity. This is because the questions occasioned by the “only possible way” thesis cut to the very heart of Attfield’s ethical commitments as a philosopher. What is more, they help to disclose something of the continuity between Attfield’s philosophical biocentrism and his theological position *vis á vis* evil and suffering.

It is Southgate’s ultimate conviction that the validity of Attfield’s position would be best served within the wider, and he claims “richer” context of eschatology; within the purview of an as of yet unrealised divine redemption or salvation, wherein Attfield’s prescription of the “only possible way”, and all wider defences of God’s justice, can be placed within the context of future good. Attfield, Southgate claims, provides a “thin defence” of God’s justice, focussed the latter feels, rather too much upon God’s disposition as a kind of “consequentialist calculator of values against disvalues” (Southgate, 66). Attfield may not agree with this characterisation certainly, but it is true to say that Southgate’s emphasis upon redemption, and what is more, upon the co-suffering and co-redemption of God and humans—God’s co-suffering with humans and humans’ co-redeemerly responsibilities to God—endows the question of divine justice, of God, suffering and necessary evil, with a singularly immediate, and if one is allowed to use such terms in this context, humane or humanistic countenance. By drawing attention to the divergence of their theodicies, Southgate proceeds to elaborate the different environmental ethics arising from this difference of opinion concerning the status of moral and natural evil. Where Attfield’s biocentrism and “thin defence” of God’s justice leads him to adopt an ethic of stewardship or guardianship with regards the natural world, a position focussed upon humankind’s duty to protect the natural environment as God’s “trustees”, Southgate states his preference for what he terms a “co-redeemerly” ethic. Here the emphasis rests upon the shared work of God and humankind, and the latter’s role within that work. Here God’s call to his people is evinced squarely in terms of humankind’s responsibility to the planet, not for the revival of a lost Edenic ideal, but in the prospect of future hope. But this distinction by no means marks an irreconcilable difference between Attfield and Southgate on the ethical and environmental plane. Southgate accordingly

ends by confirming the validity of stewardship discourse within the context of climate change.

Concentrating on Attfield's *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics* (1995), in Chapter Eight Roger Crisp examines Attfield's view about the scope of moral standing extending to non-sentient living individuals such as plants, and analyses Attfield's idea of the good of beings, understood in terms of their flourishing or wellbeing. Crisp's focus is on what he sees as Attfield's perfectionist idea of the good. Attfield's view, he claims, is perfectionist in so far as "the good of any being consists in its "perfecting" those essential qualities that make it the kind of being it is" (Crisp, 88). Crisp claims that a cultural evolutionary explanation may account for some intuitions about the view that moral standing extends to non-sentient beings: "Plants are invaluable for human beings. Without them, we could not exist, since they contribute essential elements to our environment and our health. We gain great enjoyment from eating them and in some cases from contemplating them. So it is easy to see how a group of beings that placed special value on plants might do better than a group which did not and was prepared to sacrifice them for any short-term benefit. An account of cultural evolution, in other words, may have the resources to debunk the intuitions underlying Attfield's perfectionism" (Crisp, 90). Partly by virtue of an adapted hypothetical scenario, Crisp proceeds to demonstrate why he believes talk of the good of non-sentient beings to be insupportable, and argues for a welfarist conception of the good as a notion which involves talk of what is "good for" some individual being; a notion which rests on "what it would be like to be such a being" (Crisp, 91). Thus Crisp presents an idea of the good which, unlike Attfield's, rules out non-sentient beings as candidates for moral standing.

Crisp proceeds to pose a problem for perfectionist positions (one of which he attributes to Attfield). As he claims "According to the perfectionist, we should first seek an impartial, "value-free" account of a being's essential and species-specific nature. But there is a serious danger of the perfectionist allowing her conception of well-being to guide her account of nature. Consider, for example, the remarkable number of perfectionist philosophers over the centuries (Aristotle among them) who have claimed that it is part of our nature to philosophize!" (Crisp, 91-92). He is then wary of the claim that one's good or well-being depends upon fulfilling what is thought to be in one's nature (Crisp, 92). Crisp suggests that a hedonist theory of value, which could be seen as one in which the good is seen in terms of that which increases pleasure, or diminishes pain

and suffering, should be considered as a preferable alternative to a non-hedonistic one when approaching questions about the extent of moral considerability and the idea of the good.

Finally, in Chapter Ten Clare Palmer discusses Attfield's views in respect of sentient animals and their moral standing, and what she calls Attfield's consequential "capacity-oriented" approach to animal ethics: "Attfield's view... is essentially *capacity-oriented*. Moral standing, and what constitutes ethical practice, is based on the flourishing that can flow from the intrinsic capacities that living beings have, independently of these beings' relations to others" (Palmer, 108). Palmer argues that a capacity-oriented approach to animal ethics poses problems for the consequentialist and that this approach does not take sufficient account of relational concerns in determining our moral obligations to sentient animals. There are some relationships that are morally significant, particularly where humans have created relations between themselves and animals in which the animals concerned are dependent on humans for their flourishing. She argues that in considering such relationships and the responsibilities they create, capacity-based consequentialism falls short, partly because of the forward-looking nature of consequentialism and partly because properly considering relational responsibilities requires recognising factors other than consequential ones. But in Chapter Eleven, Attfield suggests that consequentialism, forward-looking as it is, can underpin backward-looking practices such as caring for animals for which one has assumed responsibility.

The recognition of the interests of present, future and prospective individual creatures, and the good of all non-sentient and sentient living beings as that which is conducive to their flourishing or well-being, these are just some hallmark traits of Attfield's consequentialist biocentrism. It is reassuring to find that whilst our contributors provide a variable range of critical counterpoints to Attfield's own commitments, that it is still possible today, in spite of our oft' lamented social and political apathy in the early twenty-first century, and in spite of increasingly dire warnings regarding the extent of the planet's decline, that environmental ethics shows no signs of retrenching from the positive commitments and convictions of its early adherents.

## References

- Robin, Attfield, 1995, *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi).
- , 2006, *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd).
- Darwin, Francis, 1902, *Charles Darwin: His Life* (London: John Murray).
- Nozick, Robert, 1981, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Ward, Keith, 1982, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God* (Oxford: Blackwell).