

VIEWPOINT

WHY PHILOSOPHERS SHOULD BE INTERESTED IN OTTERS, AND WHY OTTERS SHOULD BE INTERESTED IN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: In this article the reintroduction of otters in the Netherlands is discussed in the light of the debate in academic philosophy between ecocentric and biocentric philosophy. The ethical judgement of both ecocentric and biocentric philosophers on reintroduction are extracted and reviewed. The debate described in this article shows the ethical difficulties of the reintroduction of the otter and of reintroduction in general.

In 1988, the otter was declared extinct in the Netherlands. It was driven to extinction by road killing, drowning in fishermen's nets, habitat destruction and poor water quality. Thanks to support from the government, and a generous company, a reintroduction programme was started and, in July 2002, seven otters from different parts of Europe were released into "De Weerribben". Later that year, eight more otters followed suit. In June 2004, the birth of the first new Dutch-born otter was confirmed and five further otters were released in "De Wieden". However, four otters died from the anaesthetics used shortly after they were caught and before they could be released, and four otters were killed by traffic after they had been released. The habitat was claimed to have improved, the water quality was improved, hunting was long forbidden and fishermen were subsidised to give their nets a required otter escape route, but the risk of traffic accidents obviously still existed. It was calculated that 40 otters were needed for a healthy population, so the reintroduction programme will provide for that need. More otters will, therefore, be bred or captured to be released in Holland. This will of course draw the attention of biologists and nature enthusiasts, but why should it interest philosophers (apart from the fact that philosophers can be biologists/nature enthusiasts as well)?

In the early 1980's, a conflict arose in environmental philosophy. An article by J. Baird-Callicott (BAIRD CALLICOTT, 1989, first published 1980) in *Environmental Ethics* led to furious reactions/applause by philosophers. Up to that time, environmental ethics had two flavours: anthropocentrism and bio-centrism. Anthropocentrism defended the care for the environment on the basis of the rights or interests of people and their future generations. Biocentrism defended the same on the basis of the rights or interests of all life forms or all sentient animals. Baird-Callicott

interpreted the work of Aldo Leopold, writer and nature conservationist in the first half of the 20th century, as a defence for nature conservation on the basis of the land itself, with all its life forms included - he called this eco-centrism. Baird-Callicott concluded that Leopold's descriptions of the land were very close to what had become known in ecology as an ecosystem. Because the land as a whole was of higher hierarchical order, other life forms were, as parts of the whole, were inferior to the land as a whole.

Baird-Callicott criticised "Animal Liberation", Peter Singer's bio-centric standard work (SINGER, 1990, first published 1975). A literal liberation of all animals, according to Baird Callicott (deliberately misinterpreting Singer), would result in an environmental catastrophe as millions of released farm animals would destabilise the natural equilibrium. He went even further when saying; "if for some reason a deer population would reach numbers that would endanger some plant species, the deer should be culled". This earned his philosophy the title 'environmental fascism' by Tom Regan (REGAN, 1983) in his bio-centric work "The Case for Animal Rights". According to Regan, the need to over-rule the rights of individuals for the well-being of the land as a whole is a consequence of Leopold's ideas; those individuals can be humans as well. Baird-Callicott replied that Regan was practising rhetoric, but added that Leopold never intended humans to be potential victims of culling. Eco-centrics were quick to point out that if Regan wanted to defend all animals' rights he was in a dilemma when a wolf meets a sheep. Since one wolf eats many sheep, wolves will have to be killed to save the lives of all the sheep.

Rhetoric aside, the big question in the debate is 'what is really of moral value'? Is it the land as a whole, as the eco-centric philosophers claim, or the individuals within the ecosystem, as the bio-centric philosophers' claim?

This debate in environmental philosophy is reflected in the case of the reintroduction of otters. It would not be wrong to assume that individual otters were not gaining anything in the reintroduction programme. The ones caught in the wild surely suffered, some did not even survive. However, the land as a whole is said to improve with the arrival of the otter. Besides that, it's a success for the nature conservationists' efforts in the Netherlands, which will give them credit to do more good things for the environment and nature. A smart otter, however, will be very interested to know how his treatment is justified.

Nature is good, according to eco-centric philosophers. Nature should therefore be protected. In the words of Aldo Leopold, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the stability, integrity and beauty of a biotic community, it is wrong when it tends otherwise". To most eco-centric philosophers this means that individual animals and plants are only good in so far as they contribute to the wellbeing of the biotic community. Plants and animals in themselves do not have any rights whatsoever. The Dutch philosopher Achterberg (ACHTERBERG, 1986) noted that Leopold's rule is not exclusively formulated, so individual animals can have their own value as well. However, most eco-centric philosophers will not take individual life forms into

account; the goal is preservation of the whole. Eco-centrism is intrinsically holistic; the community as a whole has moral value. The science of ecology shows that Nature should be viewed as a whole. Though this science is mechanistic, heavy emphasis is put on the interrelatedness of plants, animals, water and the soil. One animal or plant cannot function properly without the other parts of the land. All life-forms are interdependent, and ecologists invoke the analogy with the machine to clarify their thoughts regarding the ecosystem. For an eco-centric philosopher, it is very easy to defend the reintroduction of otters in the Netherlands. Since otters were around for a long time before they were driven to extinction, they clearly belong there. They are, in other words, part of the biotic community and, with their disappearance, the ecosystem was harmed. The reintroduction of otters heals, as it were, the ecosystem. The suffering of the individual otters is irrelevant. The eco-centric philosophers, sensitive to the interests or rights of individual animals, will have to decide whether the improvement of the ecosystem counterbalances the negative effects on individual otters.

Among eco-centrics there is a debate on why the land as a whole is of moral importance. According to Baird-Callicott, with the discoveries in ecology of the interrelatedness of ourselves with the land we will see the land as our community. A feeling of respect and love towards the land will arise and we will treat the land likewise. The Scottish philosopher David Hume thought that reason did not motivate moral behaviour but, according to him, moral behaviour is rooted in our emotions. Baird-Callicott subscribes to this and argues that Darwin proved this theory. Darwin noticed that members of a tribe couldn't care less about the death of a fellow human being, but gave their lives for a fellow tribe member. Darwin thought the usage of speech gave mankind a sense of unity among its members which resulted in moral behaviour towards each fellow man. Baird-Callicott believes ecology will open our moral feelings towards Nature. It is important to note that the source of value is in mankind and not in his surroundings. According to Baird-Callicott, one sees an object, perceives it as beautiful, and projects this feeling upon the object. So the object doesn't have value in itself. Rolston III (ROLSTON, III 1988) disagrees with Baird-Callicott here. He claims that objects have value in themselves. According to him, all that is needed for value is already in the object itself. The characteristics of Nature (harmony, balance and stability) are good in themselves and, therefore, so is Nature, as it necessarily has these characteristics, i.e. it is beautiful and good in itself.

I suspect the smart otter will not be convinced. Ecology has changed. The ecology of the eco-centrics is the ecology of Eugene Odum (Odum 1971), whose ideas of a mature ecosystem first inspired the eco-centrics. However, these mature ecosystems are not to be found in reality. Rolston III could once claim that most ecologists agreed that an ecosystem is a real natural unit, a level of organisation above its individual members. A few years later, ecologist Daniel Botkin (BOTKIN, 1990) declared that scientists now know that these views (an ecosystem as a highly structured, ordered, and regulated, steady-state ecological system) are wrong. Even Rolston III admitted that his philosophy would be hard to defend if people like Botkin were right (he referred to Gleason at that time, but Botkin and Gleason have similar ideas). Our smart otter may also point out that, if there is one species damaging the

natural environment, it is mankind, and that there are a lot of people around, too many maybe. Then he might recall the deer population that should be culled according to Baird Callicott. Should the Dutch not have been decimated to save the otter from extinction in the late 80's? Baird-Callicott claimed Leopold's ethics (meaning his own) were never meant to result in genocide. But that is not very reassuring, at least for humans. Maybe being human gives rise to special rights, so they can be excluded from decimating acts?

This escape route, however, was blocked by bio-centric philosophy before Baird-Callicott could go that way (he still did, but that is not important here). Bio-centric philosophy usually starts with wondering what the ground is for moral conduct. Why should we be nice to other human beings? Different answers can be given. Humans can suffer and therefore have interests (Peter Singer) or humans can not only suffer, but also have preferences, plans, a sense of autonomy, they are a subject of a life (Tom Regan). They end up with a criterion that it is not simply about being human, but a list of other characteristics that, in their views, give an individual moral status, i.e. one cannot act morally without taking into account the interests of this individual. Regan and Singer conclude that being human cannot be a reason for having moral status, but their criteria (capacity to suffer, being subject of a life) are. Favouring a human who is in every aspect inferior, according to their criteria, over a non-human animal is plain species-ism. Discarding membership of the human species as a ground for moral status has radical consequences. Basically, vegetarianism is obliged and modern factory farming should be abandoned.

This will suit our smart otter. No more hunters, competing fishermen, a lot of effort to prevent road kills. But before he dives into the water for a nice juicy fish, he might be tapped on the shoulder by a bio-centric philosopher explaining that fish have a right to live as well. Even for our smart otter it is getting too complex, for a while. He realises that if the ultimate goal is to maximise happiness, his existence, being a predator, may be hazardous to that goal. Should all predators be exterminated according to bio-centric philosophers? Eco-centric philosophers would like to make us believe so. The bio-centric philosopher Sapontzis agrees (see BAIRD CALLICOTT 1989), predation should be prevented as much as possible. Peter Singer denies there is a problem, because the result of exterminating predation may be catastrophic, and hence it is not worth risking. However, if the consequences were known and not that bad, he would have to agree with Sapontzis.

Despite this counterintuitive point, for a predator at least, the rights of individuals are much better founded than the rights of ecosystems, if the rights of ecosystems exist at all. However, on the basis of the rights of individuals, it may also be possible to defend the reintroduction of otters. Maybe a lot of people will be a lot happier now otters are around. Maybe there is also a positive influence on individual animals as well. It remains to be seen, however, if these profits counterbalance the negative effects on some individual otters.

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RÉSUMÉ

POURQUOI LES PHILOSOPHES DEVRAIENT S'INTERESSER AUX LOUTRES ET LES LOUTRES AUX PHILOSOPHES

Dans cet article, la réintroduction de la loutre dans les Pays-Bas alimente le débat opposant philosophie écocentrique et philosophie biocentrique. Des morceaux choisis du jugement éthique porté sur la réintroduction par les philosophes adeptes de la pensée écocentrique et ceux soutenant la pensée biocentrique, sont ici passés en revue. La discussion présentée dans cet article montre les difficultés d'ordre éthique soulevées par la réintroduction de la loutre dans les Pays-Bas et apr le principe de réintroduction en general.

RESUMEN

En este artículo la reintroducción de nutrias en los Países Bajos es discutida en al contexto del debate en la filosofía académica entre las filosofías ecocéntrico y biocéntrico. El juzgamiento étoco de tanto ecocéntrico como biocéntrico filósofos sobre reintroducción es extractado y revisado. El debate descrito en este artículo muestras las dificultades éticas de la reintroducción de nutrias en los Países Bajos y de reintroducciones en general.