

Reconsidering Foster's Aristotelian Environmental Ethic

Introduction

In the article, "Aristotle and the Environment," Susan E. Foster argues that "an Aristotelian type of virtue theory provides a reasonable account of why non-humans merit consideration and also provides a reasonable account of why some things merit greater consideration than others."¹ Further, she writes that "My contention is that the virtuous person will consider nonhumans in his or her calculations for precisely the same kinds of reasons he or she considers humans."² In this paper, I analyze the Aristotelian environmental ethic that Foster has proposed. There are two main problems that I will address. First, even if it can be said that those goods that exist apart from the human good are deserving of consideration, it is unclear how much consideration they deserve. Second, Foster contends that an agent's motivation for advancing the human good will be the same for advancing the good of a nonhuman. I argue that this is not the case. Since the human good is separate and unique from any other type of good, the recognition of a common good can not offer motivation for advancing the end of a nonhuman.

Section I – A Brief Summary of Foster's Article "Aristotle and the Environment"

In "Aristotle and the Environment," Susan Foster argues that an Aristotelian type of virtue ethic can provide reasons for the warranting of the consideration of nonhumans in a moral agent's deliberation. Foster begins by explaining that for Aristotle, human beings and all individual living things are substances. That is, they are things that have a

¹ Susan E. Foster, "Aristotle and the Environment," *Environmental Ethics* 24 (2002): 411.

² Foster, 411.

nature; for something to have a nature means that it has an internal principle of motion and rest. On the other hand, those things that Aristotle characterizes as artifacts have no internal principle of motion and rest. Foster writes that artifacts are “substances to a limited extent.”³ According to Foster, the measure of an artifact’s being is a collection of its integrity, its structure, and its suitability. Artifacts have a lesser degree of being than natural substances. Foster goes on to write that artifacts possess goodness in that they have both instrumental and aesthetic value. She considers ecosystems and the biosphere to be more like limited substances (artifacts) than natural substances. Like an artifact, the biosphere and ecosystems have both aesthetic and instrumental value. Further, both possess a measure of being (a collection their structure, integrity, and suitability) and thus some degree of goodness.

Continuing, Foster explains that Aristotle believed that it was in the interest of all living bodies to realize their natures. To realize one’s nature is to be actual, and all natural bodies strive to be actual. The actualized nature of an individual is that individual’s good. Thus, what is aimed at is the good. Therefore, as Foster explains, “being is good unqualifiedly.”⁴ An individual actualizes its nature when it carries out those activities that are particular to it. The less that one is able to realize its nature, the less being it has. Plants, animals, ecosystems, and the biosphere all have a measure of being and therefore goodness.

³Foster explains that like substances, artifacts have both structure and purpose “which is analogous to a principle of movement.” Further, artifacts possess integrity. Foster claims that the “possession of integrity is analogous to the structure that natural bodies preserve through a principle of rest.” Additionally, Foster claims that artifacts may have suitability – “the object is suited to its function.” Foster writes that an artifact’s suitability is a derivative of its function. Its function is what gives an artifact its being. Thus, “suitability adds to the being of an artifact.”³ Foster, 413 – 414.

⁴ Foster, 416.

Next, Foster sets out to explain why agents should concern themselves with the welfare of others. First, according to Aristotle, it is in the agent's interest to consider the well-being of other humans. (By exhibiting the virtues of character, one will necessarily be treating others well. In acting virtuously, the agent will be closer to achieving real happiness.) Second, Foster cites Thomas Hill's claim that failing to value the environment is a defect in character, and therefore harmful to the agent. Finally, Foster writes that Aristotle believed that agents should and do act for the sake of others. Referring to Aristotle's discussion of friendship, Foster explains that the morally wise person is "one who understands his or her place in the world and the goodness or value of the things he or she deals with."⁵ Foster continues and writes "We cannot reason correctly in moral matters if we have a distorted view of the goodness of some element in our calculations. It is essential, then, that the good person recognizes the goodness of the nonhuman."⁶

Finally, she offers a sort of decision procedure for the Aristotelian environmental ethic that she has proposed. When deliberating an action an agent should ask, "Am I doing ill or good?"⁷ An agent should answer this question by considering the value and goodness of the things that will be affected by the action. Given that existent things are good, it would be wrong to destroy them needlessly. Further, since ecosystems and species have a measure of being (like artifacts), then they have some degree of good, and should thus be objects of consideration in the deliberation of an action: "insofar as things are, they are good, and they are objects of concern."⁸ Since natural substances have the

⁵ Foster, 423.

⁶ Foster, 423-24.

⁷ Foster, 425.

⁸ Foster, 427.

greatest degree of being, they should be the objects of the greatest concern. Since the environment is similar to an artifact, but has more being than an artifact, it too is deserving of moral concern.

Section II – Aristotle’s Conception of the Good

Aristotle rejected the idea of a universal good (the Idea of good). He wrote that there cannot be a common idea of good because the term “good” is used in multiple categories (such as substance, quality, and relation). Further, since good is predicated in all the categories, it cannot be a universal and single idea; if it were a universal and single idea it could only be predicated in just one category. Additionally, if there were a universal good, there would be a science that studied this “since the things answering to one Idea there is one science.”⁹ Aristotle pointed out that there are many sciences that fall into the category of the study of the good. Moreover, he believed that a distinction could be made with regards to the universal good: there are two types of goods - goods in themselves and useful goods. One who believes that there is a universal idea of good would claim that there is a single Form for all goods in themselves. He explained that if goods in themselves are those goods that are pursued even in isolation from other things (ex. intelligence, honor), the account of goodness in each will appear identical in all. However, the account in each is distinct and diverse. Further, if the Idea is the only good in itself, then the Form would be empty. That is, it would fail to explain the goodness of anything. “The good, therefore, is not something common answering to one Idea.”¹⁰

⁹ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics,” in *Intelex Past Masters* (1997), 1096a30.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096b25.

Consequently, the good for man would be distinct from any other good, as the good for an individual plant would be distinct from any other good.

In his account of the human good in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote that there is one composite end that includes all the ends that we aim for. The good which is chosen for its own sake rather than as a means to an end is the highest good. Aristotle believed that happiness was this end; happiness is the good of man.¹¹ But what of the goods of nonhuman things such as plants and other animals? In book five of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle wrote, “that for the sake of which other things are, is naturally the best and the end of the other things.”¹² He explained that

excellence is a completion; for each thing is complete and every substance is complete, when in respect of its proper kind of excellence it lacks no part of its natural magnitude...The things which have attained a good end are called complete; for things are complete in virtue of having attained their end.¹³

Additionally, in the *De Anima*, Aristotle wrote;

because for any living thing that has reached its normal development and which is unimpaired, and whose mode of generation is not spontaneous, the most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature

¹¹ Happiness is an activity in accordance with virtue, which is an activity that corresponds to the best part of man. (Aristotle makes a distinction between two types of virtue: moral virtue and intellectual virtue. Moral virtue is a state of character, concerned with choice, lying intermediate between excess and defect, relative to us, determined through reason by someone with practical reason. In order for an action to be morally virtuous, the passion guiding the action, the action itself, and the resulting state of character must all be intermediate. Intellectual virtue is virtue that stems from the rational part of the soul and is in no way affected by the passions. There are five intellectual virtues: art, science, intuition, practical wisdom, and theoretical wisdom. An individual comes to possess these virtues by being taught them.) The activity of the intellect is the best human activity because it corresponds to the highest part of man, is concerned with the best objects, is the most continuous activity, is self-sufficient, and is loved for its own sake. The activity of the intellect is contemplation. Therefore, the perfect happiness for man can be found in a life of contemplation. However, since man cannot spend his life in contemplation, living in accord with the moral virtues provides a secondary, less divine happiness. (This is according to Aristotle's later works. In earlier works, the active life provided a secondary, less divine happiness.) Happiness (a rational activity of the soul performed with the best and most complete virtue), for Aristotle, is the highest good and the most complete good.

¹² Aristotle, “Metaphysics,” in *Intelex Past Masters* (1997), 1013b17-1013b28.

¹³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1021b12-1022a3.

allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine. That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for that sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible...it tries to achieve that end in the only way possible to it, and success is possible in varying degrees; so it remains not indeed as the self-same individual but continues its existence in something like itself – not numerically but specifically one.¹⁴

So, for every substance there is an end towards which it moves. This end is its good. In striving for its good, all things strive toward the eternal, the divine. In other words, the good for an animal or the good for a plant is to actualize its own nature. Through actualizing its nature (fulfilling its end), the animal or plant reaches towards the eternal.

To reach one's individual good, certain external goods are necessary: "Yet evidently, as we said, it needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment."¹⁵ For humans, these goods include things like good birth, friends, money, honor and luck.¹⁶ Additionally, in order to live a virtuous life, one must also have the opportunity to act virtuously. (One could not exhibit the virtue of bravery if he was not placed in situation in which he could act bravely.) This type of opportunity is also an external good. For Aristotle, these types of good have a certain type of value. It seems that value, in the Aristotelian sense, is a function of usefulness. That is, the more useful a thing is (presumably in one's endeavor to live the good life), the more valuable it is. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle wrote, "They [young men] are fonder to their friends and companions than older men are, because they like spending their days in the company of others, and have not yet come to value either their friends, or anything else by their usefulness to themselves."¹⁷ So, it may be said that external goods, inasmuch as they are required and helpful in living the good life, are valuable.

¹⁴ Aristotle, "De Anima," in *Intelex Past Masters* (1997), 415a23-415b8.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a32-1099b8.

¹⁶ Aristotle, "Rhetoric," in *Intelex Past Masters* (1997), Book I.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1389a3-1389b12.

Hence, the goodness of a thing does not determine its value. So, a plant can't rightfully be considered to be valuable based on the fact that it has a good, and in actualizing its nature may achieve this good. Rather, a plant may be said to have value for us based on its utility.

Section III – Critique of Foster

Problem One – To what extent should each good be considered?

Foster contends that “insofar as things are, they are good, and they are objects of concern.”¹⁸ She points to the fact that for Aristotle there is a hierarchy of being, and the higher things are in this hierarchy, the more deserving of concern they are. Complex natural substances are of the most concern followed by secondary substances, and then artifacts. Even within each of these categories, there is a hierarchy of beings with varying degrees of concern.

Foster admits that, “It is true that the guidelines that Aristotelian virtue theory provides are only general guidelines. The agent must apply them to the particular situation, and doing so requires experience and moral perception.”¹⁹ But how helpful are these guidelines? In any given action that an agent deliberates on, there may be vast number of goods that are deserving of consideration.²⁰

¹⁸ Foster, 427.

¹⁹ Foster, 427.

²⁰ Consider the following situation. In an attempt to expand its company, a multinational corporation from a powerful, wealthy country has offered to buy some rural land from an impoverished, third world nation. The land that the company is interested in is part of a tropical rainforest where an indigenous tribe has lived for hundreds of years; the company wants to clear this land in order to raise cattle. How does the virtuous man in charge of the impoverished country decide what to do? According to Foster's interpretation of Aristotle, the leader merely needs to ask, “Am I doing good or ill?” The answer to this question lies in the amount of goodness that will be promoted, preserved, or destroyed as a result of the decision. In an effort to answer this question, the man begins compiling a list of all the goods that should be considered in his calculations: the good of the citizens who will benefit from the new revenue in the country, the good of the

It doesn't seem likely that it would be practical (and even possible) to assign a degree of consideration to each good affected and then do the required equation. This is true for two primary reasons. First, it is presumably the case that each individual agent making a decision would consider each good with different weight. So, it would be difficult to justify or universalize such decisions. Second, it is possible that many lesser goods might be looked over for the sake of a greater good. This possibility allows for the destruction of ecosystems or the extinction of species if doing so would promote some greater good.²¹

Can these problems be addressed within the Aristotelian framework that Foster has offered? Perhaps the solution lies in Aristotle's account of value. For Aristotle, however useful a thing is in helping one to live the good life, the more value it has. One thing that has value in the Aristotelian sense is the opportunity to practice virtuous activities. Thus, for an Aristotelian environmental ethic, one question that may arise is whether or not the environment, individual ecosystems, individual species, and individual plants and animals offer a unique opportunity to practice virtuous action. If these things do offer this type of opportunity, then they have a certain degree of value. Moreover, if a thing has value, it should be preserved to some extent. It can certainly be argued that those things listed above may offer the opportunity to practice virtuous actions. The

natives that live in the rainforest, the good of each individual nonhuman inhabitant of the rainforest that will be effected by the clearing of the land, the good of each individual head of cattle that could be raised on the land, and the good of the people in the multinational corporation interested in buying the land.²⁰ How much consideration is each good warranted? (How does the good of a monkey compare to the good of a cow? How does the good of a person compare to the good of one thousand individual trees? How does the good of a species on the brink of extinction compare to the good of the corporation? The list goes on.)

²¹ Take the above example. Imagine the land in consideration to be the home of a rare species of lizard that is only found in the area in question. According Aristotle, a species is a secondary substance. A secondary substance is deserving of a lesser degree of consideration than natural substances. Presumably then, the good of an individual cow or the good of the owner of the corporation would deserve more consideration than the lizard species. Thus, more good could be promoted by allowing for the extinction of the lizard species in favor of the good of an individual cow or person.

study of nature, the environment, or different plants and animals may allow one to aim towards the perfection of one or several of the intellectual virtues.²²

The next question that arises is how much of the natural environment, and what parts are the natural environment, are necessary and sufficient for the opportunity for virtuous action of this sort. One answer may be that the opportunity for this type of virtuous action requires that the natural environment, and all the elements that comprise the natural environment, should be left untouched in their most natural form. However, if this were the case, then many practical problems would arise, such as using trees for lumber, using land for farming, and reserving areas to dispose of waste. This type of situation would make it very hard, if not impossible, to focus on living the good life, primarily because attaining those things necessary for survival and health would take up so much of one's time and energy. Consequently, it does not seem reasonable to demand that all of nature be preserved in its most natural form in order for there to be the opportunity for virtuous action of the aforementioned sort.

Another answer may be that all that is needed is some sort of natural reservation where individuals can go and study the natural environment. Inasmuch as this type of opportunity is available, the opportunity for virtuous action exists. Under this view it wouldn't be necessary to preserve different types of ecosystems or species where they are naturally found. It would be enough that a few members of a species be preserved (allowing for them to have interaction with other animals, food to gather or hunt, etc.). It would seemingly be allowable for activities such as the destruction of unique ecosystems and the killing of endangered animals for sport. As long as some form of the ecosystem

²² The intellectual virtues include science, art, practical wisdom, intuitive reason, philosophic wisdom, and the relations between practical wisdom and political science.

or species existed somewhere, even if in a manmade enclosure, it would be sufficient for the opportunity for virtuous action of the sort mentioned. Under this view, only segments of the natural environment are required for the opportunity for virtuous action; therefore, only segments of the natural environment would have value. Thus, the natural environment need not be preserved or protected so long as there exists some sort of natural reservation that people can use as a tool to help them attain the good life.

While both answers to the question (What parts are the natural environment, are necessary and sufficient for the opportunity for virtuous action?) are undesirable, it seems as if the solution would be closer to the latter answer than the former. Within an Aristotelian framework, the only value that the environment would have would be a function of its utility. For Aristotle, to overvalue or undervalue the environment would be vicious. The former example would seemingly be a case of overvaluing the environment. The latter example is closer to rightly valuing the environment. This is true because to undervalue the environment would certainly be illustrated by acts that did away with the opportunity for virtuous action altogether. While the latter solution would do away with large parts of the natural environment, it would still allow for ample opportunity for virtuous action. Hence, it seems that the latter answer is the closest to rightly valuing the environment in the Aristotelian sense.

In summary, the Aristotelian environmental ethic that Foster has proposed fails to offer a viable answer to the question “To what extent should each individual good be considered?” First, the decision procedure that Foster has offered would result in outcomes that would be difficult to universalize or justify. Secondly, with this method, many lesser goods would be looked over or marginalized. Finally, while characterizing

the environment as an external good (and thus adhering to it a degree of value) may offer a more practical answer to the question above, the results are highly undesirable.

Second Problem - Does the goodness of a nonhuman warrant consideration for the same reasons that the goodness of human warrants consideration?

A second problem that exists with Foster's interpretation is her account of Aristotle's conception of the good. Foster wrote that humans should consider the welfare of other humans as a type of recognition of the goodness or being of the other, it is in the agent's self interest, and it is part of the virtuous life. Further, "the virtuous person will consider nonhumans in his or her calculations for precisely the same kinds of reasons he or she considers humans."²³ Foster cites Aristotle's account of friendship in defense of this claim.²⁴

Unfortunately, Foster fails to make a critical distinction; the good that is recognized by the other in friendship is a good that is unique to man. Aristotle believed that complete friendship is based on self-love. He wrote:

Now each of these is true of the good man's relation to himself (and of all other men in so far as they think themselves good; virtue and the good man seem, as has been said, to be the measure of every class of things). For his opinions are harmonious, and he desires the same things with all his soul; and therefore he wishes for himself what is good and what seems so, and does it (for it is characteristic of the good man to work out the good), and does so for his own sake (for he does it for the sake of the intellectual element in him, which is thought to be the man himself); and he wishes himself to live and be preserved, and especially the element by virtue of which he thinks.²⁵

²³ Foster, 411.

²⁴ She writes, "Complete friendship is based on the experience of the other as good. The complete friend is a second self. He or she is loved not because of any benefit the agent receives from his or her friend (though, of course, it is beneficial to be the friend of the good person), but simply for him or herself. A good friend will even give up his or her own good for the sake of his or her friend." Foster, 422.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1166a10-1166a29.

Thus it seems that in friendship a good man recognizes the good for himself and recognizes that this good is uniquely human. By virtue of this recognition, a good man seeks friendship with another good man. Since the good man loves himself, friendship with another good man is akin to true and proper self-love. To want the best for one's friend, then, is in a way wanting the best for one's self. Thus, it seems to be the case that in wanting the good for another, one moves closer to actualizing his own nature; he moves closer to achieving the good for himself.

So what of Foster's claim that nonhumans merit consideration for the same reasons that humans do? Specifically, does the goodness of a nonhuman warrant moral consideration for the same reasons that the goodness of a human warrants consideration? As shown above, humans have a good that is uniquely human. The good man recognizes the good for himself and the good for others. This is evident in both Aristotle's discussion of friendship and parenthood, and is noted by Foster. Through the recognition of this common good, in acting to promote the good of others who share this good, an agent is more fully actualizing his nature. Is the same true of an agent who seeks to promote the good of a nonhuman? While it seems apparent that a human can recognize the good of a nonhuman (for example, I can recognize that the good of a dandelion plant is to grow into healthy maturity and to reproduce), it may not be the case that by promoting this good a man further actualizes his own nature. Again, here it is important to note that Aristotle does not hold the view that there is a universal good. So, by promoting the good of a dandelion, a man does not promote some overall good, of which his good is a part. Also, humans care for other humans because they recognize the common good that they share. As shown in Aristotle's discussion of friendship, to promote the good of

another is to promote the good of one's self. Since a human and a dandelion do not share the same end (they do not have a common good), to promote the good of a dandelion (qua good) does not seem to allow for an individual to more fully actualize his nature.

Aristotle might argue that in considering the good of other people and other things, a man is acting virtuously, and is thus more fully actualizing his nature. In this instance, though, it seems that a man is considering the good of other nonhuman things for the sake of his own good, not the good of the nonhuman thing. That is, acting virtuously is in his interest. The agent is not acting for the sake of the other thing's good. While it is the recognition of the common good that humans share that warrants consideration for other humans, it is the recognition of an individual's own good, and for his good alone, that moves an agent to act virtuously towards nonhumans.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems as if Foster's account of an Aristotelian environmental ethic fails to do the work that she claims it can do, for two reasons. First, even if it can be said that those goods that exist apart from the human good are deserving of consideration, it is unclear how much consideration they deserve. This lack of clarity potentially results in unjustifiable moral outcomes and the marginalization of lesser goods. Second, the motivation that Foster has offered for the consideration of nonhuman goods is weakened by the fact that nonhuman goods do not merit consideration for all the same reasons that humans merit consideration.