

Ben Hale

The Wild and the Wicked: On Nature and Human Nature

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In contrast to recently popular pragmatist, consequentialist, and virtue-theoretic approaches to environmental ethics, Ben Hale's wide-ranging book *The Wild and the Wicked* is the best and most authentic Kantian contribution to environmental thought in memory. The book is intended for a general audience and is written in an engaging and conversational tone, and deserves to be widely read and (I hope) influential in generating more public attention to environmental preservation. While others have used Kantian notions to argue for animal or environmental concern, most have departed significantly from Kant's own thinking. Not Hale's book, which is thus a must-read for environmental philosophers. In what follows, I will highlight aspects that I take to be of greatest interest to environmental philosophers.

Three main theses in *The Wild and the Wicked* stand out: (1) Nature does not have intrinsic value, or, at least, one need not appeal to the intrinsic value of nature when arguing for environmental protection. (2) Causal reasons are not justificatory reasons. As persons, we must rationally justify our actions, and in particular, for Hale, our actions regarding the environment. (3) Such justification – and this is a Habermasian point – is public. We must be able to justify our actions to others, and actions that destroy the environment cannot, in many cases at least, be justified, regardless of consequence.

Hale discusses in some detail several examples of nature's awfulness, such as a bear killing a child, poisonous mushrooms, and the Boxing Day Tsunami. I think Hale is right to call attention to negative aspects of nature, and likewise is right to criticise the naïve idealisation of nature among some environmentalists. I fear, however, that Hale does not get to the heart of nature lovers' attitudes. To love nature is not to think nature to be all good, just as loving another person typically involves no such belief. Rather, to love nature is to take the (intrinsic) good along with the (instrumental) bad. So even though a reasonable nature-lover ought to wish that the bear did not maul the child because of its negative effects on child and family, the nature lover might, contrary to Hale (p. 74), nevertheless find something of value in the very same event – the bear's exercise of its own natural essence as an apex predator.

Moreover, to blame nature for its horrors without also appreciating its positive value fails to recognise at the outset that we ourselves are natural beings, subject both to natural joy and flourishing as well as to decay and death. Although the desire for supernatural immortality is not uncommon and perhaps not unreasonable, many of those unpersuaded by such immaterialism seem to find solace in being part of nature, despite it all. So the kinds of examples given by Hale may fail to sway the committed nature lover to abandon appreciation of nature. Nonetheless, environmentalists may mistakenly overestimate the degree to which *others* in the public sphere hold nature in high regard, and for practical purposes, Hale is right to look elsewhere for justification for environmental preservation.

Although Hale argues at length for a distinction between explanatory and justificatory reasons, my own sense is that a strict Kantian distinction has not stood the test of time. Why did a certain thief steal? Perhaps the thief's parents were themselves criminals, and never gave their children the skills to live a decent life above the law. This answer is both causal and (at least partly) exculpatory. More generally, it is now well documented how human reason often has difficulty navigating all the non-rational forces that constantly get in its way, and recent ethical theories that accept this as a core component of human existence fare, on my view, better in generating both appropriate individual moral norms and public policy.

Normative justification plays a central role in *The Wild and the Wicked* because of Hale's emphasis on justifying our actions to others. A dilemma, perhaps analogous to the Euthyphro dilemma, presents itself, however: either normative justification of environmental claims simply consists in what others accept, which subjects Hale's view to a worrying kind of relativism; or, such justification ends when the moral truth – perhaps about something's intrinsic value – is discovered, in which case public justification does not ground normativity. Here is a revealing passage:

You ought not to kill an animal that is an endangered species (whenever it suits you); but the reason... isn't because the rule is good for you, or even because it will be bad for that individual animal (or won't be good for it), but because the animal is an endangered species. If you were to kill it just for fun, say, and you had knowledge of the endangeredness of this animal, many would charge that your actions were *indefensible*. If called upon to defend yourself to a community of your peers, you would invariably come up short (p. 250).

This is partly an intrinsic appeal to the value of a species-as-a-whole as a final reason why it is bad to kill the animal. But that seems to ground the justification in just the kind of intrinsic positive attitude toward a part of nature that Hale discourages. It is also an appeal to the community. But what if one's community applauds such acts? Our current community has not shown adequate concern for the environment quite generally, even if it does get outraged when a trophy hunter kills a lion.

Hale's overarching aim is to encourage reasoned public debate about not just individual actions that affect the environment but policy as well, and for this *The Wild and the Wicked* should be applauded. Given how things stand, the more we are able to collectively employ our reason, in the public domain, to overcome special interests and biases, the better both we and the environment will be.

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