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Moral Responsibility and Nature

In recent times, there has been much discussion regarding environmental concerns such as climate change. This has become a politically charged topic, something that draws divisions between groups of people. It is necessary to get to the root of the problem, to what is at the core of the issue, which involves to what extent it is the responsibility of people to care about the state of the environment. Human beings have a moral responsibility toward nature, which can be seen through moral responsibility toward other people.

In order to fully understand the reasoning behind my claim, it is important to first define what moral responsibility is. To say that a person has a moral responsibility toward something is to say that a person is morally obligated to treat it with care. In other words, there are things that a person ought to do concerning that something simply because it is the right thing to do, rather than because it would be a nice thing to do or because it would make them look good in front of other people. But who or what determines what is right versus what is wrong? That is where moral reasoning comes in. When a person deciphers between what they believe is right and what they believe is wrong, and they are able to give an explanation as to why that is their belief, they are using moral reasoning. Moral reasoning involves a person actively shaping their own perspective on things, instead of basing their views solely on what would benefit them at that moment.

There has been plenty of debate over whether humans are inherently selfish or not, but regardless, I think that everyone can agree that the environment a person is raised in has an incredible influence on the way that they act. In this day and age, people are constantly exposed to competition and are taught, whether directly or indirectly, that those who are the most attractive, have the most material goods, or are the most successful are the people that have the most value as a person. And, as a result, people believe that they must strive toward being those things that have everything to do with their own self-interest, irrespective of how their actions affect others around them. This is where moral reasoning and moral responsibility come into play. In the commencement speech that he delivered at Kenyon College in 2005, "This is Water," David Foster Wallace indicates that feeling a moral responsibility toward others offers a kind of freedom unlike any other. He says that this kind of "freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day" (Wallace). To keep from unconsciously falling into only caring about ourselves, we must actively combat the selfish thoughts that invade our minds.

The topic at hand here, though, is that this is not just limited to being about the people around us. Moral responsibility does not have to be applied solely to human beings. In this situation, I am applying the concept of moral responsibility to nature. I believe that people are morally obligated to respect and care for the environment around them. In Jennifer Kobylecky's article "Understanding the Land Ethic," this idea is explored. She cites a quote from Luna Leopold, the daughter of the author of the original essay, "Accepting the idea that the cooperations and competitions in human society are eased and facilitated by concern for others, [Leopold] saw that the same consideration extended to other parts of the ecosystem would tend

to add integrity, beauty and stability to the whole” (Kobylecky). Just the thought of everyone cooperating to work to keep our common space in good condition broadens our focus to include community and the good of everyone around us rather than keeping our focus narrowed onto ourselves as an individual separated from the rest of the world.

But beyond that, I believe that caring for nature extends to caring for people. Personally, being Catholic, I examine what the Bible says and I see that God created the earth and everything on it, and knowing that it is the duty of man to care for all of God’s creation, I translate this over to applying to the environment around me. Regardless of religious belief, the foundation of this principle can still apply. Taking care of nature is equivalent to taking care of the home of every human being on this planet. It means making sure that the earth remains habitable for the people living today and for future generations. In this way, moral responsibility toward nature is very much interrelated to moral responsibility toward other people. Even though a person’s harmful actions toward the environment do not directly harm another person, the repercussions can be seen clearly when looking at the bigger picture. Likewise, a person’s beneficial actions toward the environment may not directly benefit another person, but they can certainly have favorable effects in the grand scheme of things.

It is up to each individual to decide whether or not they believe nature is something that must be protected. But I think that if everyone were to evaluate the crux of the matter, it would be clear that to take care of the environment is to take care of fellow man. In this way, human beings do have a moral responsibility toward nature.

Works Cited

Kobylecky, Jennifer. "Understanding the Land Ethic." *The Aldo Leopold Foundation*, 29 May

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