Prologue

Environmental idealists can seem a rum lot: W. H. Auden certainly thought so: We find him in the 1930s protesting against some early proponents of respect for nature in his poem 'Against Nature Respecters':

'Besides, I’m very fond of mountains, too;  
I like to travel through them in a car;  
I like a house that’s got a sweeping view;  
I like to walk, but not to walk too far.  
I also like green plains where cattle are,  
And trees and rivers, and shall always quarrel  
With those who think that rivers are immoral.’

He continues:

'Impartial thought will give a proper status to  
This interest in waterfalls and daisies’

and  ‘Excessive love for the non-human faces.’

The conclusion is that we commune with everyone and everything else in the universe whilst leaving our domestic prejudices intact and failing to respect those whom we should who are closer at home:
For now we've learnt we mustn't be so bumptious
We find the stars are one big family,
And send out invitations for a scrumptious
Simple, old-fashioned, jolly romp with tea
To any natural objects we can see.
We can't, of course, invite a Jew or Red
But birds and nebulae will do instead.

He concludes that:

'It won't be long before we find there is
A Society of Everybody's Aunts
For the Prevention of Cruelty to Plants.'

And that:

'I'll never grant a more than minor beauty
To pudge or pilewort, petty-chap or pootoy.'

**Introduction**

It's easy to lampoon those who care for the environment and easier still to claim that such care is indiscriminate and lacking a sense of proportion. But, people care about the environment and act accordingly. Are they deluded idealists? Or sensible practical idealists? How far does a consideration of the contribution of idealism in its various forms add to our understanding of environmental problems and the action we should take in response to them?

**Senses of idealism**

The term idealism has, of course, many senses. We can distinguish:

1. Idealism in the ontological/metaphysical/epistemological senses
2. Idealism in the political or ethical sense of ideals guiding our actions
3. Idealism as what some philosophers called idealists have said
1. Idealism in the ontological, metaphysical or epistemological senses

- Should an idealist, in the epistemological or metaphysical sense, be concerned with the environment, with the natural world or with the use of animals for human purposes?
  - If so, why?
    - If not, could idealism be supplemented by other (not incompatible) reasons?
  - If so, what? What should they do?
  - If so, how? How should they go about doing it?

- Some versions of idealism deny that nature, environment, animals have appropriate status and hence cannot be direct objects of moral concern.
  - However, they might be indirect objects of our concern. But this leaves animals, for example, in a vulnerable position.
    - Idealists typically do not grant rights to animals because of requirement for a) rationality and b) reciprocity;
      - i.e. correlativity of rights and duties: rights holders must be duty bearers. This excludes animals and various humans as rights holders.
    - But it might be argued that it is the vulnerable (precisely those who lack the rationality to be full agents) who need the protection of rights. Does this imply that agent-patient symmetry/reciprocity be relaxed? Or is protection to be through afforded without granting of rights?
  - Idealists are not (or do not have to be) Cartesians or mechanists – although some adhere to an unreflective speciesism.
    - Idealists can acknowledge the existence of suffering and this might be sufficient.
      - But acknowledgement of suffering, and a desire to minimize or avoid it, would not serve to promote concern for non-living objects or beings deemed not capable of suffering
• Perhaps eco-systems, together with a recognition of the beings and objects which together comprise them, can be acknowledged as having value on the grounds that they form a whole in which both part and whole have value: a holistic/coherence view of environmental value.

• On this view a) a flourishing environment is a precondition for human flourishing (and a depleted environment is therefore antipathetic to human flourishing); b) human beings might gain positive recreational (in the full sense) and other value through interaction with nature and eco systems.

• Another note on animals: Some argue that animals, to a greater or lesser extent, form part of our moral community.

  - They might not possess the rationality required of a full moral agent but they engage with rational agents as, although to a lesser degree, rational beings and also as emotional beings:
    - We might note that rationality should not always be given priority and rationality and emotions should not be treated as antithetical.

  - However, before invoking this criterion we should note that it is largely arbitrary which animals are allowed to join this community
    - Danger of circularity: certain animals are privileged as members of the community and the fact of their membership then used as a surrogate for their supposed possession of attributes which it is assumed that others outside the community do not possess, which is why they are excluded from the community.
    - So we assert that some animals are more intelligent, have the ability to feel pain, suffer, express emotions, bond with their young, express loyalty and even perform heroic deeds. It is then assumed that a) these are the reasons for their inclusion and b) that others (who have had no opportunity
to display these attributes because of their exclusion) deserve their exclusion because they do not possess them.

- e.g. in the west dogs and horses are included in the community; pigs and cows are excluded, but not for any objective difference in the capacities or attributes of the animals themselves.

- If the supposed reasons for inclusion and exclusion were rigorously applied many more creatures would have to be admitted into the moral community. In such a case the grounds for exclusion of these would clearly be either purely sentimental or arbitrary.

  - There are two casualties in the way we currently tend to view these matters: truth and animals.

• Another tack: Perhaps the question should be framed negatively: What would an idealist deny?
  - E.g. Would she deny the existence of pain and suffering in animals?
  - E.g. Would she deny the existence of climate change?
  - E.g. Would she deny pollution caused by, and the amount of water used by, agriculture leading to enormous environmental damage?

2. Idealism in the political or ethical sense of ideals guiding our actions

- If reasons for environmental concern can be found, idealism, in the sense of an attitude towards social and political activity, can incorporate environmental concerns.

- If the common good requires a healthy environment as a necessary foundation then idealistic political philosophy and the principle of the hindrance of hindrances can be readily employed.
  - E.g. Action in pursuit of the environmental common good, with the hindrance of hindrances to its.
• Idealism as the pursuit of an ideal state of affairs immanent as the principle of one's actions makes sense.
  o A tempered idealism, not the mindless pursuit of an abstract ideal but the politically well judged pursuit of a realizable ideal.
  o It should accept that ideals are realized in some degree and yet never fully: full realization is always beyond us at a given moment.
  o Hope and optimism tempered with appropriate expectations are vital to this. As Gramsci suggests, we should adopt pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will.

3. Idealism as what some philosophers called idealists have said

• **Sprigge**: Sprigge's version of absolute idealism, derived from, among others, Bradley, is a form of panpsychism. This simplifies the issue of the nature of respect for nature. It becomes respect for life or consciousness and this is in turn a matter of degree, with the more highly developed and organized forms deserving greater respect for their well being.
  o This is a minority view among idealists. Although, if accepted, it has immediate consequences for action, there seems little prospect of its being generally accepted.

• **Collingwood**: I have a separate paper on this.

• **Kant**
  • Kantian approaches lead, generally, to the view that although we may care for nature and for non human beings, we do so ultimately for the sake of human beings because they alone possess reason and self conscious agency in the required sense of the terms. So it is possible to generate an ethic with its associated rights and duties on a Kantian basis, but it is indirect, not direct – it is mediated via human welfare.

• One lesson I take from Kant is his claim that if one wills the end one also must will the means, to which I would add, ‘and all the foreseeable side effects and consequences’. Taken seriously this principle should often
stop us in our tracks because, ‘taken strictly, [the hypothetical imperative] counsels us either to take the means or to give up the end’.\(^1\)

- We often dissociate ourselves from means or consequences, turn our eye away from them and/or assume a best case scenario.
  - E.g. we move from the fact that some animals are looked after better than some others, to the illicit claim that therefore all are and that, for practical purposes, we can therefore act as though this one is.

- Again, we might assert that we desire that animals lead a natural and unharmed life up to the point of slaughter: an admirable sentiment, but really only wishful thinking.

- Reflection on any aspect of animal husbandry, whether at the farm, the slaughterhouse or transport demonstrates this. Although we are often predisposed to believe the pictures, words and labels factory farming corporations place on their products (which are distinctly more pastoral than the real thing), the term ‘natural’ and its cognates has to be stretched a long long way to even remotely fit the practices of modern factory farming.

- To repeat: if one wills the ends one must will both the means and all the foreseeable side effects and consequences.
  - We can will the ends if we wish: no one is stopping us. But unless we will the means and consequences unflinchingly and without sentimentalism or illusion, we are hypocrites.

- One could continue with a Kantian approach, through an analysis of the idea of an end in itself, and what can be an end in itself. Also the idea of treating others as ends and never merely as means.
  - But ultimately the issue is whether concern for nature or animals is direct or indirect, and because of the rationality criterion it seems that they are excluded from direct consideration.

o What can be an end in itself? Something with interests, for whom the notion of well being and flourishing makes sense.
  
  ▪ This could include many beings, both animal and vegetable, but not rocks and sticks and stones.

o A different move would be to consider levels of reason: but, given that this still gives the priority to reason it might be better to adopt a different framework entirely.

• Hegel

• What can we learn from Hegel, if anything? At first blush it looks unpromising. Whereas Kant at least had some admiration for the starry heavens, Hegel notorious likened them to a skin rash.

  o Generating a strong non-instrumental environmental ethics on a Hegelian basis seems a lost cause. Worse, his views seem to justify a systematic attempt to remodel nature in human kind’s image.

  ▪ E.g. Hegel holds that humans have a positive duty to mould and transform natural entities without restraint: a duty to transform animals and plants and other natural objects as extensively as they like and in whatever ways they prefer.²

  ▪ In the words of one Hegelian: The evolutionary dialectical process would have to be modified in order to take into account such things as the capacity now of man to not only eradicate poverty but also to eradicate all diseases and illnesses and yet further to create all sorts of flora and fauna and reclaim lost forests and transform deserts into forests, and to populate the vast universe probably mostly empty of life with them thereby creating Nature in the universe, and the vast proliferation of civilizations human and non-human that will occur. This colonisation would begin with the taming of the planets and moons of the solar system, by cooling down planets too hot, warming up those too cold, creating the right atmosphere by manufacturing

---

the right gases, turning the rocks into fertile soil, combining gases to make water and digging holes to make lakes and rivers, and planting all types of flora. It is a project for the next fifty thousand years.³

- Where will it end? One of the crasser ways of denying intrinsic value to the natural world was Stalin’s, who remarked that “water which is allowed to enter the sea is wasted”.⁴ Rivers should not be wasted: we should suck them dry until they are no more. This will, affect the seas into which they hitherto flowed: what then? Well, as USSR government planners remarked, “may the Aral sea die in a beautiful manner. It is useless”.⁵

- But is that the end of the matter? Perhaps not, if we take Alison Stone’s recent re-reading of Hegel on nature seriously.

  - In *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel’s Philosophy*, she find in Hegel’s philosophy of nature resources for an environmental ethics. This is based on the presence of reason. Unlike certain other views (e.g. Taylor’s or Sprigge’s)⁶ this is nothing to do with panpsychism or the idea that all of nature is alive or conscious and that we can empathise with it, understand it from within. On the contrary it is a result of the idea that nature is the objectification of the Idea, it is logic in the world, it is reason externalized: petrified intelligence. It is this sense in which nature is rational. It is not that it reasons, but that it has reason embedded in it.

---

⁵ Ibid., p.45.