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What do you care about?

Tormod Burkey

If you're going to dedicate your life to fighting to save the world, you need a pretty good reason why. Even people considering a small sacrifice in daily life will look for a reason. It remains a prevalent view that such arguments must be measured in terms of value to humans to be effective.

In the absence of a deity with a plan, to give value to things, we have to decide for ourselves what we will care about. My choices will be different from yours. It is not even certain that your choices will be compatible with mine. We must select our values, subjectively, all the while acknowledging that we have no means of justifying or defending our decision. They are, and will always be, subjective. This is not an invitation to nihilism. I choose to care about tigers, orcas, sharks, wolves, mountain lions, the fish in the sea, nudibranchs, bees and spiders, polar bears, martens and otters, millipedes and pycnogonids, *Sequoia*, oak and mahogany, mangroves, crabs and shrimps. All the critters which humanity daily kills and annihilates, starves, drowns, abuses and tortures.

Humanists expect us to solve the problems of poverty, societal injustice, economic inequity, and inter-generational conflict of interest. But the vaunted concern we are supposed to feel for our fellow man has shown itself to be woefully inadequate in getting humanity to organize to solve these problems that our culture makes such a big deal out of. Perhaps other sensitivities are required to fight, and win, the battles that really need to be fought.

In a full world everything is political

We need to speak about values, because otherwise discourse is meaningless. We can't really understand why people think the way that they do unless we know what it is that they, ultimately, care about. If you think of it in terms equivalent to mathematics or logic, our values are the axioms from which everything else follows. We cannot really question the axioms themselves, except in terms of their consequences. And those consequences have to be couched in terms of something we care about. So we're back to the axioms. We cannot argue about the choice of axioms, merely explore what follows from them. Those axioms are where it stops when we keep asking "Why?"

OK, so blue fin tuna die out. Why should we care? OK, so humans die out, why should we care? OK, so we get run-away climate change and Earth turns into Venus, why should we care? It is practically a rite of passage that your average high school sophomore discovers that he can seemingly make himself sound sophisticated by taking the large view. On geological time scales we are all dead, and all life on Earth is set to be extinguished when the Sun expands to engulf our planet—at the very latest. It is also fashionable to say that the Earth will recover, nature will recover, that new species will arise to "replace" what is lost. The claim is that it is humanity we have to worry about. This is wrong, in so many ways.

Looking out for number one

"What's in it for me?" is the perennial marketing mantra. We are told that humans are selfish beings that care solely for themselves and theirs. And there are evolutionary reasons for that. But our society and our culture has been set up to supersede evolutionary cost-benefit analysis.

If it is true that we consider only ourselves and our ingroup, then ethics is solely instrumental. Or is ethics not that important after all, when it really gets down to it? Is comfort more important to us, and inertia too strong a force for our ethics to overcome? Or does that just mean that most of us have very weak ethics?

Some authorities say right out that we should not use cute animals and drowning polar bears as arguments for solving the climate crisis, but I disagree. Cute animals already *rulez teh interwebz*, and this may indicate an underlying force that extends beyond entertainment. Saving the world for humans holds no motivational power for me. Maybe it does for you; I can't argue with that. But I wouldn't take it for granted.

For me, the most important reason to care about environmental destruction and anthropogenic climate change is the terrible effects these will have on other species. Humans have only themselves to blame (or at least other humans), and I care more for the victims than the perpetrators.

Does a species that single-handedly exterminates millions of other species have negative value? If you really are a humanist, perhaps you also should strive against anthropocentrism, lest it cause many among the rest of us to hate the human species which is your focus. Humans deflate their own worth by being not very nice, and by being too many. Humans would do well to behave so that we would like them more.

Pragmatism?

Rachel Carson knew that she would lose adherents if she skipped too far ahead of public opinion. Sensible, perhaps, in its time, but this kind of restraint may have in turn delayed advancement in a

sustainable direction by many decades. Such pragmatism leads to self-censorship. Nothing loses a battle as inexorably as self-censorship, which causes us to not even fight for what we really believe.

It is perfectly legitimate to love other species more than our own. Those of us who do should not be forced to keep our true values hidden for strategic purposes. And perhaps now the world is ready, when we see the realities of a full world. So tell it like it is.

I speak about my values and ethics for strategic reasons as well. I want to embolden, energize and mobilize those who feel the same way as I do, and to let them (and others) know that that is a perfectly acceptable way to feel.

If saving the world enables *Homo sapiens* to have a long existence as a species, then fine—as long as they learn how to behave themselves. Quickly. It is just not what motivates me, personally. By speaking about my values I hope to help move the frontier of what it is socially acceptable to feel and speak, and help spread such values so that perhaps they may help us to take action to save life on earth before it is too late. Yes, I care about the persistence of life on earth—other species—and I refuse to be apologetic about it. We are not compelled to like humans, or to value them, or their well-being, above other species.

Subjective values

My quest has always been to save the world *from* humans. For me, the reason to care about climate change is precisely those cute animals, the polar bears, the coral reefs and the calcareous algae and all the non-human life they support—the natural world, not the world that humans have created. I think there are many of us who care more for other species than we care for humans. Perhaps our sympathy for other species can act as an inducement to change where concern for other people has failed.

It is commonly said that humanity will not act to save the world until we ourselves feel the repercussions of our past actions (or inaction). But by then it will be too late.

Could animal-lovers and nature-lovers, at the forefront of extending the domain of ethical consideration, hold the key to saving the world? Those who care only about humans need to find tricks to enable them to bear up-front costs today for a possible future reward. Animal-lovers and nature-lovers are less susceptible to the problem of irrationally discounting the future, because both nature and other species, as a whole and as individuals, are getting an extremely raw deal in the here and now. For those who care about other species, the future is already here. And for me personally, while I can love other species even as a “concept,” I cannot love humanity as an impersonal abstract. And because of the things humans do to my loved ones, my empathy is not highly developed either.

I will continue to fight for the species that I love and care about, and the individuals of those species. And hopefully, I will soon find a more powerful way to do so, against the onslaught to which humanity is subjecting my loved ones.

In the end, it all comes down to what you care about. Values. Ethics.

Tormod V. Burkey is the author of *Ethics for a Full World or, Can Animal-Lovers Save the World?* (Clairview Books) See also Thor's Hammer or @EthicsForAFullWorld

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