

Species Extinction and Collective Responsibility

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In this article I explore, from a philosophical perspective, what the responsibility for biodiversity means. Biodiversity is a peculiar thing because it consists of the variety of life in its all manifestations, that is, in all its forms, levels and combinations. Variation is a main characteristic of life on earth.

Because of its vastness a collective has not only a right but also a duty to take responsibility for biodiversity conservation, and furthermore it has a *prima facie* duty to implement those measures the accomplishment of this requires. This includes the appropriate legislative and policy means. My argument for collective responsibility is mainly based on contrafactual reasoning, that is, *if* a collective takes no responsibility for the conservation of biodiversity, *then* no one takes responsibility. Providing that species extinction is something we definitely want to avoid, collective responsibility is well founded.

It is generally taken for granted that a person cannot be held responsible for those occurrences that take place outside the scope of his or her control. Because many nature-affecting activities and practices can be characterised in this way, we face a great number of issues concerning the enforcement of environmental ethics. To be beyond the scope of control can be understood in many ways, one of the ways being that of social control. Consider the following example: the small and remote island Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean, was once inhabited by the species of bird called dodo. The first Europeans to find it were the Portuguese navigators who arrived at the unpopulated island in the early 16th century. Their ecological footprint, like that of the Arab and Hindu traders who had visited the island earlier, was probably light. The Dutch were different in this respect when they took over the East-Indian trade at the end of 16th century and started calling at the island. The Dutch sailors hunted the fearless bird one by one and within less than a century it was wiped out. They also introduced exotic animals such as pigs and monkeys which ate the eggs of this slowly breeding bird. (Quammen 1998) Ever since, the dodo has been the symbol of the destructive force of humanity in nature; we are somehow responsible for the fact that something was lost in perpetuity.

What characterises the extinction of the dodo largely characterises other instances of extinction as well: as it happened there seems to be no one to blame for it. Each of us is in some sense incapable of preventing it. This human incapacity is particularly tricky in the case of a series of individual acts that cause minor harm though the payoff is positive for the individual, but when the harm accumulates,

it can turn out to be major and overall negative even for the individual. (Note that it is difficult to determine when advantageous activity becomes detrimental.) Accordingly, it has been said that in most cases of anthropogenic species extinction no one particular person is to be blamed, because the actual extinction resulted by way of accumulations from several independent acts rather than just one. These separate, uncoordinated acts share the characteristic of reducing the size of a population of animals or plants but none of them is decisive for the extinction of the species. To accept this is also to accept the following implication: no one intentionally wiped out the dodo; and hence it is intuitively rather dubious to put *all* the blame on some particular Dutch citizen who is the last person known to have killed a dodo.

I think that this intuition of the innocence of the last dodo's killer is mainly correct. Although his act completed the tendency towards extinction, the omission of this particular act would by no means have implied that the species was saved: a population presumably consisting of one individual is doomed to extinction anyway. In brief, even though there is a causal relationship between the killing of the last known member of a species and the extinction, this act of killing is rather insignificant in comparison to the aggregate of preceding acts directly or indirectly accelerating the downfall of the population. However, this blamelessness seems to lead to a repugnant conclusion, as this moral evaluation should be universalisable, and then no one act is worse than "the fatal blow". It leads to a regression: if each individual act of killing a member of the species preceding its extinction is of equal moral and causal significance and if none of the hunters is *solely* responsible for it, then no one is responsible for the extinction. Put in this way it seems somewhat wanting: certainly we must be able to identify an actor (or a group of actors) that can be blamed for the extinction; otherwise there is a risk that the value of species is totally neglected, as persons cannot be obliged to preserve them. As a solution to this evidently unfortunate logical conclusion I want to suggest that in most cases like this there is a party that *ought* be regarded as blameworthy.

What is at stake here is the issue of how to understand the relationship between collective and individual responsibility under different institutional settings. The extinction of the dodo is a classic example of what Garrett Hardin (1968) has called "the tragedy of the commons." The dodo was an instance of an unregulated common resource: no one took responsibility for the conservation or the sustainable use of the dodo and benefited from restricting his own use of the dodo population. Despite the fact that the utilisation was not regulated, it eventually took place in an organised society that

could have implemented certain exploitation rules. This raises a question about the distribution of responsibility: is the collective responsible for the loss of biodiversity, if it has not imposed a set of norms without which individuals are in practice allowed to use units of biodiversity freely, or are individuals responsible not to contribute to the extinction? My answer is “yes” to each. The extinction of the dodo is a case in point: the individuals have *caused* the extinction by their deeds and the government, or the imaginary government, has *contributed* to the extinction by omitting to regulate the use of this resource and monitor individual hunters. It might be best to say that the community or society is incapable and possibly also unwilling to take responsibility. A number of reasons may explain this: the constitutive principles of societies outlaw excessive social intervention in matters that are ultimately private, or society may be normatively undeveloped.

Much of the debate over collective responsibility has focused on the question of the sense in which the responsibility for harm brought about by a collective “radiates” or is reducible to individuals. Are Germans collectively guilty of the Holocaust and Americans of the atrocities in the Vietnam war? In such cases the presumption of guilt relates to something the collectives have done. The anthropogenic loss of biodiversity is best characterised (in many cases) by individual action and collective inaction. In regard to biodiversity protection there seems to be no alternative to collective responsibility because individuals are at most responsible for the unit of biodiversity in their own control, while the whole of biodiversity falls into collective control. But if and when the collective intentionally avoids taking responsibility for biodiversity, is it blameworthy? Thus I would like to ask what the responsibility of the collectives is for the acts of its individual members in the intentionally unregulated state.

The starting point is May’s question (1992, p. 109): “Could the collection of people have avoided inaction?” Yes, it could—insofar as it is a well-functioning collective; capable of regulating the use of biodiversity by legal means. But, as mentioned, collective inaction is often a deliberate stance of liberal-democratic societies that stress individual responsibility. But while this may be the case in regard to purely private matters, things are different with regard to those things that fall into the ambiguous line between the private and the public. Biodiversity is a typical example of this; the atmosphere and the ocean are others. These are known as global commons, and their utilisation was unregulated until the end of the 20th century. The belief that humans affect them in a significant manner changes the situation and implies a requirement for regulation. My argument can be schematised as follows:

- (a) There are qualities of the natural world the existence of which is beyond the control of individuals, but not that of collectives.
- (b) These qualities are of intrinsic and instrumental value to us.
- (c) It is generally known that without enforcing collective responsibility these values are at risk of being lost.
- (d) The collectives are agents that act through law and policies to protect valuable things.
- (e) If laws and policies on biodiversity do not exist, the collective is responsible for the loss of biodiversity.

Is there such a thing as non-reductive collective responsibility? My answer is positive. Insofar as we have certain duties either to or regarding the natural environment, the idea of non-reducible collective responsibility matters. Provided that there is a well-organised society that consists of vital institutions such as the state and the government, the responsibility of the government is to be involved with the processes that aim to protect the health of the physical conditions of living and its suitability for humans. In pursuing this, the government may adopt different approaches and policies that are compatible with its (other) constitutive rules.

In our understanding of nature, extinction is part of nature and we know that extinction can be caused by our activities and, moreover, we are inclined to disapprove of those activities that cause the reduction of biodiversity. The idea that biodiversity depends on us and we should foster it has gained general acceptance, as indicated by international treaties (e.g. the *Rio Convention on Biodiversity* of 1992) and by amendments in national legislation. Accordingly, the loss of biodiversity constitutes a harm and acts that decrease biodiversity are harmful acts. Were this responsibility unrecognised, as it was for ages, the loss of biodiversity might not be conceptualised as a harm, not at least in any legally significant sense. I want to emphasise that collective responsibility for biodiversity does not necessarily imply the disappearance of individual responsibility. Rather, in virtue of this change in legislation, it is possible to recognise that the individuals and the collectives *share* the responsibility in matters like this; they both contributed to the extinction of the species by hunting (the individuals) or by not regulating or banning the hunt (the government). The responsibility of the government is particularly tied to the existence or non-existence of laws: for example, whether there is a law for the protection of endangered species or not and whether the government enforces it and implements preservationist policies or not. The responsibility of the government seems undeniable if it promotes, for example via a taxation or bounty system, the hunting of rare species, even though

those who actually realise the policies are individual members of that society. In such cases the moral evaluation of the promoted practices parallels the evil done by collectives, for example, when they attack a neighbouring nation. In addition to this, insofar as the government is inactive in these matters, it can be held *partially* responsible for individual activities that ultimately result in the ecological losses. Thus the responsibility for biodiversity must necessarily be collective, because it is too much for one individual to eradicate it to the full; and shared, because it must be distributed to each member of a collective.

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