Introduction: What is Environmental Philosophy?

Scientists, economists, politicians and lawyers are not professionally qualified to address all the questions raised by environmental issues. Take the clearing of rainforest to provide open land for cattle ranching. Ecologists can explain the effects of this practice on rainforest ecosystems; economists, politicians and lawyers can assess its financial, political and legal ramifications. But various questions remain: Are we *morally* obliged to protect the rainforests? If so, *why* are we so obliged? Because they are more useful to us if they are left unfelled? Because they are wild (or at least, wild*er* than urban parks and botanic gardens)? Because they harbour so many endangered species? Because we owe it to ourselves not to permit such destruction?

These sorts of questions cannot be answered using the methods of science or economics. They cannot be left to politicians and lawyers. It might seem that they could be addressed using the research methods of the social sciences, and it is true that one could use such methods to find out how most people would answer them. But empirical approaches are not enough. For although surveys and the like can tell us what people *believe* to be right or wrong, they cannot tell us what really is right or what really is wrong. To determine that – or at least to do so in a systematic and critical way - one needs philosophy. (Granted, one could object that when it comes to morality there are no absolute standards and that rightness and wrongness in such contexts are merely matters of opinion. But that is itself a philosophical claim - a statement of moral subjectivism - and in order to assess whether it is true one must, again, do some philosophy.)

So the questions set out above are philosophical questions. They are the sorts of questions that moral philosophers – more precisely, environmental ethicists – try to answer. Yet not all the philosophical questions raised by environmental issues fall into the category of moral philosophy. Just as people's views about morality are to some extent a function of their views about other aspects of the world, so reflections on the subject of environmental ethics tend to raise issues that are also of concern in other philosophical fields, such as aesthetics, epistemology and metaphysics. Environmental ethics, that is, tends to merge into the broader discipline of environmental philosophy. For example, it has been argued that when people think it morally permissible to use nature in any way they see fit, they often do so not (or not just) because they have chosen to adopt certain moral principles, but because they take an unjustifiably human-centred or *anthropocentric* view of reality. Consider the belief that human beings are distinguished from the rest of creation by virtue of their possession of souls or minds. A number of writers have argued that this dualistic belief encourages the notion that humans are essentially *superior* to the rest of creation, and that this notion, when supplemented by certain assumptions about the permissibility of lording it over 'lower-order' entities, encourages the conclusion that humans are *morally entitled* to use nature in any way they see fit (see, e.g., Warren 1990). If these writers are correct – and we will assess whether they are later on - then

dualism, a thesis about *reality*, tends to encourage a peculiarly anthropocentric conception of *morality*.

Assessing the plausibility of dualism and other philosophical theses frequently requires one to consider the results of science. But one cannot rely on science alone. The claim that minds are essentially nonphysical, for example, can be neither proved nor disproved by the methods of science. The same may be said of the proposition that biological species are not real entities but merely artefacts of the classificatory conventions of biologists. Such claims are to some extent philosophical rather than scientific. So whether or not those who wish to investigate them will need to consider the results of scientific inquiries, they will certainly need to engage with philosophy.

Nature

Although environmental issues raise questions that are best addressed using philosophical approaches, 'environmental philosophy' is an unsatisfactory term in at least three respects. First, much of the research in the discipline focuses not on environments so much as their constituents. For instance, discussions of our moral duties to nonhuman animals are typically grouped under the heading 'environmental philosophy'. Yet it is often thought that if we have any duties to nonhuman animals, then this will be because the animals in question have certain morally-relevant properties in themselves, independently of their environments. Thus Peter Singer - a prominent Australian moral philosopher of whom we will hear more below - would argue that we have moral duties to giant pandas not because of the roles they play in the environments they inhabit, but simply because individual pandas have interests (notably, an interest in not suffering) that we are morally obliged to consider when our actions are likely to affect pandas.

Second, the term 'environmental' can encourage the notion that the nonhuman world is merely the backdrop for the main show – the drama of human life. However, as writers such as Patrick Curry (2011: 7-8) have argued, that peculiarly anthropocentric picture of reality is hard to square with some sorts of moral concern for the nonhuman – or, if you like, more-than-human - world. How, for example, could one value forests, mountains and rivers for what they are in themselves, if one sees them as nothing more than *context*?

A third problem with the phrase 'environmental philosophy' is that 'environmental' is too general and vague a word to convey what the discipline is about. To what environments is it meant to refer? In one sense, each and every organism – from wombats to hookworms - has an environment, a milieu within which it operates. It may be replied that environmental philosophers tend to focus their attention on the sorts of environments with which we human beings tend to be familiar – woods, wetlands and rocky shores, rather than hydrothermal vents, say, or the insides of mammalian intestines. Yet even talk of human environments remains vague. To indicate just one problem: as I write, my environment includes a sofa, a television set and a bookcase filled with books, maps and

DVDs. But of course environmental philosophers are not primarily concerned with such mass-produced artefacts. Their main concern is with *nature* or *the natural world* (terms I shall use interchangeably).

'Nature', in this context, does not denote everything that falls outside the realm of the supernatural (if any such realm exists). It is true that environmental philosophers do not focus their attention on supernatural entities such as angels and demons, yet in this respect they are no different from the practitioners of most other academic disciplines. To say that they are primarily concerned with nature is, rather, to say that their main interest is in those parts of the world whose current states are not, for the most part, the intended products of human actions. Flicking through a journal dedicated to environmental philosophy, one would not be surprised to find papers devoted to the topics of wilderness preservation, the aesthetic qualities of wetlands or our moral relations with biological species. But discussions of, say, multi-story car-parks and combustion engines will be less numerous.[1]

So environmental philosophy tends to be about nature, where nature may be conceived – albeit roughly and provisionally - as the nonhuman part of the biosphere. This, however, should not be taken to mean that something only counts as natural if it has been *entirely* unaffected by human beings. This is just as well, since entities, places, processes and events that meet this criterion will be difficult – if Bill McKibben (1990) is correct, impossible – to find. In view of this, I will, like many environmental philosophers, adopt a broad conception of what is natural in this book, one that includes some parts of the biosphere that have been extensively shaped by human beings. So although nature, on my account, will not include car-parks and combustion engines, it will include reservoirs, hedgerows and heaths.

We will return to the question of what nature is in later chapters. In Chapter 7, in particular, we will consider some objections to the proposal that what is natural can be contrasted with what is human. But I will not say more about these matters here. If we refuse to move on until we come up with a watertight definition of what nature is, we'll never get round to considering all the other interesting issues that fall under the heading of environmental philosophy.

[1] In recent years, an increasing number of moral philosophers have turned their attention to our moral relations with built environments (see, e.g., Fox 2006). Nonetheless, such inquiries have not traditionally been conducted by environmental ethicists, most of whom have shown more interest in our moral relations with what I have referred to as nature.