

How Children and Adolescents Relate to Nature

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What do children and young people think and feel about nature in general and about particular natural objects such as plants, animals and ecosystems? What significance do they attach to nature and non-human natural objects? To what extent do they regard them as moral objects? How do young people respond when confronted with a conflict of interest, for example, when extending a playground to provide children with more space to play requires cutting down trees? What arguments do young people use in defending their positions? And finally, what values and interpretive patterns are at the root of these arguments? These are questions which my colleagues Elfriede Billmann-Mahecha, a psychologist from the University of Hannover, and Ulrich Gebhard, an professor of biology education at the University of Hamburg, and I have been investigating for the past 3 years (Nevers et al, 1997; Gebhard et al, 1997; Billmann-Mahecha et al, 1998).

How have we been conducting our investigation?

The focus of our study at the moment is values and underlying interpretive frameworks, that is, mental structures that guide us in making decisions, especially in situations in which we have limited knowledge. For this kind of study we feel that hermeneutic methods are particularly informative. Inspired by the concept of philosophy for children developed by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State University in New Jersey and by the work of our colleagues Ekkehard Martens and Helmut Schreier (1994) in this area we have been conducting group discussions with children and adolescents. The following elements of these discussions have been derived from children's philosophy:

- The discussion is initiated by a stimulus in the form of a story involving a conflict or problem.
- The content of the discussion is philosophical, centered around aspects of environmental ethics and the philosophy of nature.
- The discussion is conducted by a knowledgeable adult, who attempts to direct it with a minimum of intervention.
- The purpose of the discussion is to stimulate the exchange of arguments.

As opposed to some approaches to children's philosophy we have not attempted to try to improve philosophical discourse, at least not yet. And we do not provide the children with a philosophical interpretation at the end of the discussion. I shall explain our reasons for this course of action later on.

We have conducted discussions with children and adolescents in three age groups, 6-8, 10-12 and 14-16, using stories directed towards three different kinds of objects, individual plants, individual animals and complex ecosystems or landscapes. We have also used stories involving objects that differ in the degree of artificiality, for example, a domestic pig as opposed to a squirrel. We have engaged our students in conducting these discussions in an attempt to combine research and teaching but also for obvious pragmatic reasons such as time and money. We now have an archive of more than 100 transcribed discussions that are currently being analyzed in the manner of grounded theory outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1996). We have been fortunate to receive a small grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft which allowed us to hire a researcher, Wolfram Günther, who is now helping us to sort out our data.

Why have we chosen a less structured form of children's philosophy?

Generally speaking the basic goals of children's philosophy are the following:

- a) ACADEMIC: to promote clear thinking, the techniques of philosophical discourse and the search for truth
- b) PRAGMATIC: to enable children and young people to clarify problems and reach reasonable decisions in everyday life and
- c) EPISTEMOLOGICAL: to gain insights into the way children think about philosophical problems

We have been concentrating on the third goal for the time being since it is prerequisite to the others. In order to promote clear thinking and help children find ways to solve dilemmas involving nature, one has to understand the ways children deal with such problems. In addition, it is important to be able to reconstruct the solutions that philosophers have found for such problems. However, in both instances our knowledge is limited. The philosophy of nature is a new and dynamic field that includes many and varied positions. And like other areas of applied ethics, environmental ethics is teeming with moral pluralism. Our own working group is no exception. Moreover, so far only very few researchers in the field of the psychology of moral development have directed their attention to human relationships to nature.

The various different positions that have been elaborated by philosophers in environmental ethics so far demonstrate the prevalence of moral pluralism. Some of these are outlined below:

Basic Positions in Environmental Ethics

Main question: Does nature have any value above and beyond its importance or usefulness for humans, or, in other words, does nature or some part of it have moral status?

Anthropocentrism: NO
Physiocentrism: YES

Anthropocentric Positions

Nature is only of instrumental value as a means for satisfying human needs and desires. Thus nature provides the means for our very survival but also may serve as a source of aesthetic, religious and scientific inspiration, provide the means for recreation, or serve as a resource for moral reflection. Human use of nature may vary from respectful use to despotic use.

Physiocentric Positions

1. **Pathocentrism** Only sentient organisms are worthy of moral status, that is, organisms that are conscious and capable of experiencing pain.
2. **Biocentrism** All living things can be attributed moral status by virtue of their being alive.
3. **Holism** All of nature, both biotic and abiotic, possesses moral status. However, the reasons for assigning moral status to all of nature vary. Some rely on ecological arguments. Some refer to the teleology or purposefulness of all parts of nature. Some believe that everything that exists should be protected, simply by virtue of existence (ontological arguments). Some consider all of nature to be an organism worthy of respect.

One is inclined to think that modern environmental philosophy is entrenched in what might be called a bookkeeping framework. It is preoccupied with the following questions: What objects in nature are entitled to moral consideration and what are the grounds for attributing this status? Value is the currency of moral consideration.

Moral pluralism in environmental ethics is not just a result of the newness of the field. It prevails in other areas of ethics as well, and it is enhanced by its applied nature. As scholars in all areas of ethics venture out into the world of non-philosophers, into the realms of children, bioethical commissions, citizens forums and such, they discover that it is difficult if not impossible to conduct an ideal ethical discourse of the kind philosophers used to envision. The orientation of the participants is usually not exclusively rational. They are generally not motivated towards reaching consensus on a theoretical basis. And they don't seem convinced that there are universal principles that they all share and will eventually be able to agree upon if they discuss the matter thoroughly enough. Instead we are confronted with a broad variety of views and a great deal of dissension (Bayertz, 1999). We find varied and sundry individuals with unique positions they have developed on the basis of personal experiences, feelings and intuitions, highly individual knowledge structures, rational reflection and argumentative communication. Is this something to be lamented? I think not.

As my colleague Ekkehard Martens and other ethicists have pointed out, moral pluralism is the logical consequence of enlightenment and secularization, which have given us the freedom to develop highly individual positions. It can rightly be considered a sign of emancipation. However, these developments have also left a great deal of turbulence in their wake - uncertainty, indecision, intolerance and indifference. In view of the troubled waters of moral pluralism with no land in sight, we are forced to chart a course between the Scylla of dogmatism and the Charybdis of total moral relativism (see Martens, 1999). The attractiveness of dogmatism as a means for reducing complexity is one obvious danger. But complete relativism, an "anything goes" attitude, is equally dangerous. In the traditional ethics of human relationships one can find some comfort in the observation that many Judeo-Christian values prevail in our society in spite of secularization. And certainly there are common human experiences such as love and pain that provide some grounds for common moral values. With respect to nature, however, the attitudes and experiences of people all over the world are highly divergent and common grounds probably less compelling. To deal with this situation new ways of thinking about morality must be encouraged and the role of ethical discourse must be reconsidered.

In summary then, the fact that we know so little about the way children think about nature and the fact that the ways philosophers think about nature are so highly diverse make it reasonable to at least start off with a less structured, inductive approach for philosophical discussions with children and adolescents. Another reason for favoring discussions with children that are less structured and not exclusively oriented towards identifying basic philosophical principles or exercising basic philosophical techniques has to do with the unusual asymmetry of the relationship between humans and non-human nature. Here we are dealing with conflicts between technologically empowered, rational beings and non-rational objects lacking any form of technology. Traditional ethics based on the equality of rational discourse partners is not adequate for dealing with such situations. As feminists such as Alisa Carse (1991) have pointed out with respect to bioethical education, other moral skills and capacities in addition to rational thinking are required for appropriately dealing with asymmetric situations. In particular, skills and capacities associated with the virtue of care are necessary. These include the capacity to direct attention to the particularities of the situation at hand by means of emotional attunement and sympathetic insight. They also include the use of cultivated emotion in order to discern the problem at hand and respond to it adequately. As we shall see, emotional attunement probably plays an important role in human relationships to nature.

Let us now return to examining how children relate to nature.

Stories depicting conflicts of interest

One of the stories with which we have been working is the following:

The Tree House

Peter and Sarah are planning to build a tree house. It's supposed to be a particularly fine one, in which several children can sleep and eat and read comics. Each child is to have his or her own corner in the tree house for storing candy and other private things. The tree they've chosen for their building project is a lovely old willow with big, roomy branches on an empty lot not far away. It's really the only tree around that's suitable for their purposes. The others in the surroundings are in private yards or parks. Besides, they're all too small. Flushed with excitement Sara describes her plan:

„First we have to blaze a proper trail to the tree by chopping away all those brambles. Then we'll cover it with flat stones. Of course, we have to clear the space beneath the tree as well. Otherwise we can't find things if they fall out of the tree house. We'll fasten a ladder to the trunk and saw off those two branches that are in the way so that we won't have any trouble climbing in and out. Then we'll nail boards between the branches to serve as railings and put in some kind of floors here and there. We might have to remove some more branches if we need more light in some places.“

While listening to his friend Sarah, Peter's expression becomes more and more serious. He's known the empty lot and the willow all his life and is familiar with every inch of them since he often goes there just to be by himself. He knows exactly where different birds nest in the tree and surrounding brambles and can name all the plants surrounding the tree. He finds the willow particularly beautiful just the way it is and replies to Sarah:

„I've changed my mind. I don't want a tree house after all, and I don't want other kids to build one either. I don't want to change the tree in any way at all. I think we should just leave nature in peace.“

Sarah is annoyed. She can't understand Peter's lack of enthusiasm and replies in a huff,

„I don't agree at all. First of all, we're not talking about „nature“ but about a messy old abandoned lot. I've never seen the owner, and he certainly doesn't care what we do to the tree. The tree itself can't care one way or the other. Besides, children have a right to play, and that's the most important thing.“

What do you think?

I wish to point out some particularities of this story:

- The story involves a conflict of interests, but different types of interests are involved. The "interests" of the tree addressed in this story are quite basic ones, that is, survival, remaining whole and undamaged. Those of the children are also quite basic - having the freedom to play - but not quite as essential as those of the tree, since they could possibly be satisfied in another manner. These are the types of conflicts most common in applied environmental ethics in industrial societies. In underdeveloped countries conflicts involving essential interests of both parties are probably more common.

- The conflict presented draws on everyday experience of children. It is not a „real“ one, but it is not strongly hypothetical either. A more hypothetical conflict might look like this: You are in a hot air balloon above the earth and losing altitude. You have to throw something overboard. Would you decide to toss out your African violet? Hypothetical dilemmas are used in philosophy to focus the discussion more strongly on purely cognitive aspects, but since we are interested in tapping other aspects of morality as well, we have chosen a different type of dilemma.

- The conflict concerns what Rest et al (1999, pp. 15) might refer to as „micromorality“ involving individual interests and relationships as opposed to „macromorality,“ which deals with „suprasocietal interests and organization.“

- The constellation is asymmetrical. The children are capable of reflecting upon what is right and wrong; the tree cannot. The children are potential moral agents, the tree a potential moral patient.

- The situation centers around negative duties rather than positive ones. The children discuss whether or not it is justifiable to damage the tree by building a tree house, not whether or not to water it. According to Peter Kahn (1999, pp. 63-76) a conflict involving negative duties as opposed to one involving positive duties is generally more readily conceived as being morally binding and obligatory.

- The conflict involves an individual organism, not an ecosystem. This is important since some theories of environmental ethics regard individual organisms as irrelevant, or only relevant as part of a greater system.

- A few arguments are presented by the figures in the story. Sarah's position is anthropocentric and resource oriented. She would like to use the tree for certain purposes. Peter's position is that of a preservationist, one of nonintervention.

- As we shall see, the combination of individualization, asymmetry, and the prospect of damage to the object probably tends to evoke a view of the tree as being „needy“ and may therefore stimulate a protective response. In the same line of thinking studies by Susan Opatow (1987, 1994) indicate that perception of „neediness“ of a natural object is more inclined to generate concern for its protection than perception of potential usefulness.

Anthropomorphism as a common form of reasoning.

One of the most striking results of the group discussions we have analyzed so far is the widespread use of anthropomorphic reasoning. Trees and animals are described and interpreted as if they were humans. Certain physical qualities of humans such as blood and hair are projected upon non-human objects. The leaves of the tree are thought to be like human hair; the sap is compared with blood. But mental and psychological qualities such as consciousness, the ability to feel pain and intentionality may also be ascribed to non-human objects. Thus with reference to cutting off the branches of a tree 10-year old Ben says:

"Because (if) I like saw people chopping off, you know, like, like I'd feel insane really, like someone's sticking something into you, like, or pulling skin off."

Nelly (10 years old) rejoins:

"Yes, sometimes I feel that feeling when like someone gets hurt, I just see it and then this feeling runs down my body, you know, like, ahm, feeling that I kind of feel that too, how it hurts and everything."

The children are interpreting the tree in terms of their own bodily experience. Suffering and pain are very basic to that experience, perhaps a kind of common denominator of humanity. The children's response to the story seems to be a classical example of empathy, which is an important prerequisite for developing a moral attitude towards another person. It appears that by regarding the tree as human-like, it is made a moral object. But how can we tell that the tree is considered a moral object? What exactly distinguishes a moral issue from one involving, say, a personal preference? First of all, a moral issue as opposed to social conventions or personal preferences, always involves something of vital importance such as life and death, freedom and self-fulfillment, or pleasure and pain, and this is obviously the case for the tree. Moral issues are discussed in terms of right and wrong, should and should not, and the "right" kind of behavior, character, intention, etc. is thought to be binding, obligatory for everybody, not just for oneself. Furthermore, the "rightness" or "wrongness" of an act is justified by referring to moral principles such as justice or the pursuit of happiness.

In discussions with children evidence for a moral attitude is not straight forward. The intensity of the discussion is one indication, as well as the use of words like "must" and "ought." And reference is made to common moral principles such as well-being and fairness. A normative orientation is further suggested when statements are made that indicate that others are expected to think, feel and behave in the same way as oneself. Indications of moralization of this kind can be found in connection with anthropomorphic reasoning. However, further investigation is necessary to determine whether they can be observed in other contexts as well.

According to the Norwegian environmental philosopher Arne Naess (1985), identification is a prerequisite for empathy such as that expressed by children with respect to trees. He defines identification as a spontaneous, non-rational but not irrational process through which the interest or interests of another being are reacted to as one's own interest or interests. He defines the self as that with which we identify and self-realization as a process of ever-widening identification. More importantly, identity precludes impartiality. We cannot be impartial about ourselves, and this includes the things with which we identify. According to this line of thinking, some children apparently identify with trees, regard trees' interests as being the same as their own and incorporate experiences with trees in their concept of self.

However, anthropomorphic reasoning does not exclude instrumental reasoning. Thus the same children who empathize with trees and believe that they feel pain also know that trees provide the oxygen that humans thrive on, that they filter the air we breathe and produce fruit and wood for human consumption. And children readily proffer such arguments in favor of saving trees as well.

Thus both highly subjective and objective interpretations of nature exist simultaneously. And, as my colleague Ulrich Gebhard (1994, pp. 51-57), a psychoanalyst, has pointed out, one of the basic insights of psychoanalysis is that such highly subjective ways of viewing the world are not lost or eliminated in the course of accumulating objective knowledge, as Piaget once thought. They may be modified or shifted about, and objective knowledge may become superimposed upon them, but interpreting the world in the light of one's own body, perceptions and experiences prevails throughout life as a solid foundation for knowing, judging and valuing the world (see also Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

Just how reasonable is anthropomorphic reasoning?

First of all, it is obvious, that when children talk about trees they are making statements about human experience, not about tree experience, and that they project this knowledge upon the tree. Is that legitimate? To the extent that there are commonalities between human experience and that of trees, these statements are valid by scientific standards, and truly, we may have more in common with a tree than we think, if one considers the entire span of time in which trees and humans evolved along a common pathway. But can these statements be taken literally? Do the children really believe such things, or are they metaphoric expressions, "as if" statements? How much cognitive and affective distance really exists between Ben and the tree? Is Ben's vision of the tree as a human perhaps merely a symbol that Ben has construed to explain and make sense of the world? One does become sceptical when 8 year olds vehemently maintain that if they could, trees would scream and run when the forester comes to chop them down for Christmas, and at the same time insist upon having a real Christmas tree, not a plastic one, in their living room. Children seem to be able to shift between realistic and metaphoric interpretations of these objects. The metaphoric interpretation provides more distance, perhaps even relief from a form of identification that could be stifling.

Another question that arises in connection with the observation of anthropomorphism is whether or not this way of viewing the world is the basis for assigning value to or disclosing value in natural objects above and beyond their instrumental value to humans. This question addresses a major issue in environmental ethics. Can we

find philosophically legitimate grounds for assigning intrinsic value to nature (Callicott, 1995)? Are identification with natural objects and anthropomorphism perhaps the anthropological key to assigning or disclosing such value? Could it be that anthropomorphism is programmed in our genes and results in an innate affinity towards nature such as that proposed by Kellert and Wilson (1993) in their book entitled „The Biophilia Hypothesis?“ No doubt, anthropomorphism is probably a very important factor in developing respect for nature and assigning moral status to it. But like most kinds of human behavior it is certainly not exclusively determined by genes, and it is certainly not sufficient for assuring protection of nature. There are many natural objects which do not lend themselves well to anthropomorphism - grass, insects, sand dunes and complex and more abstract objects such as ecosystems and species. These objects cannot be readily grasped by simple analogies to human experience. Furthermore, to do moral justice to a tree or another non-human object we have to take into account its "otherness," its specific characteristics and "needs." This in turn requires ways of knowing these objects above and beyond anthropomorphic analogies. And finally, as we shall see, other, more powerful ways of interpreting the world can be superimposed on anthropomorphic thinking.

A second story and a second set of group discussions

A second story with which we have been working involves something more complex, an old apple orchard, a system that includes plants and animals, some domestic and some not, as well as biotic and abiotic factors. This object is also somewhat artificial since it was originally planted by humans and thus is not the same as a wilderness area, which ranks high in the United States but is rare in Germany. Nevertheless, old apple orchards in Germany may be highly diverse, self-sustaining systems and are being placed under protection in many areas.

The New Youth Center

The community is planning to build a new youth center. It's supposed to include several tennis courts and a squash court as well as a swimming pool and body building room. A coffee bar and disco are also part of the construction plans. Many people in the community are enthused about the plans since there's no other center of this kind in the immediate surroundings. In addition the center will provide a number of jobs for young people. Other people in the community, on the other hand, are strongly opposed to the plans for the center, in particular because a lot with many lovely old fruit trees has been selected as the construction site. The local environmental protection agency has been seeking to have this lot declared a protected area.

Since the center is intended for young people, the community board considers it important to survey their opinions and organizes a panel discussion in the local high school.

Frank is against the plans and defends his position with a fiery speech:

„The orchard must not be sacrificed! It is a piece of land in which nature and culture are interwoven in a unique manner and represents a longstanding tradition in our area. For decades it has provided homes for birds, insects, rare bats and other animals, and there’s nothing comparable to it anywhere else in the surroundings. The founders of our community cultivated it with great care, and we continue to enjoy it’s beauty year for year.“

Judith contradicts him:

„With due respect for my friend Frank, „ she begins carefully. „I’m afraid I don’t agree at all. An orchard isn’t a virgin forest. It was made by humans and therefore it can be altered or replaced by humans. Priority should be given to the present needs of the young people in our community, not to ideas of the past, and young people need a place to meet and enjoy themselves.“

What do you think?

This story has been the subject of a number of group discussions with 14 and 15 year olds. In most of the discussions in this age group we have analyzed so far the majority of the participants spontaneously opt for building the youth center rather than maintaining the apple orchard. For them the apple orchard is not as valuable as the new building project. They argue that you can't do very much with an old apple orchard, whereas a youth center provides distraction.

If one or the other youth expresses interest in maintaining the apple orchard as it is, he or she usually does so by referring to the animals in the orchard. Thus Anne says:

"Why should we sacrifice the homes of animals for a youth center?"

The references to animals are often colored by anthropomorphism. However, anthropomorphic references to the needs of animals don't seem to be as convincing in this age group compared to younger children. If arguments in favor of animals and thus indirectly in favor of the apple orchard are brought forth, they tend to involve references to scarcity. The participants seem willing to consider the importance of animals if they are on the verge of extinction.

It is interesting that statements in which the participants refer to the apple orchard as a kind of organic whole have not yet been found. So far we have seen nothing of the kind of organic or anthropomorphic orientation evident in Thoreau's journals when he speaks of nature as follows: *"The earth I tread on is not a dead, inert*

mass. It is a body, has a spirit, is organic, and fluid to the influence of its spirit, and to whatever particle of that spirit is in me. She is not dead but sleepeth." (Thoreau, 1906, pp. 165). John Muir's writings (1917, pp. 236) also suggest an organic interpretation of nature: "*Contemplating the lace-like fabric of streams outspread over the mountains, we are reminded that everything is flowing - going somewhere, animals and so-called lifeless rocks as well as water (...), while the stars go streaming through space pulsed on and on forever like blood globules in Nature's warm heart.*" In contrast, the young people with whom we have conducted group discussions seem more inclined to mechanistic interpretations. The apple orchard is viewed as an entity made up of components that can be readily replaced or exchanged. For these discussants neither the apple orchard nor its components seem to possess a kind of individuality or value that might outweigh their interests. This is particularly evident in the solutions the 14-15 year olds propose:

- relocate the animals
- replant the trees in a different place
- move the entire apple orchard to a different place
- create a new apple orchard in a different place as compensation for the destroyed one
- sacrifice only half of the orchard
- allow a few trees to remain

The young people in this age group seem to be oriented more strongly towards other people rather than towards nature and non-human natural objects. Thus they could imagine maintaining the apple orchard if this act could be combined with a social activity such as establishing an ecology club in connection with the orchard. Evidence of this kind can be found in other discussions as well. For example, adolescents would be willing to protect fish in an aquarium if they were important for another person, but not for the sake of the fish themselves. And they would be willing to give up skiing if a close friend did so also, or if a friend were lost in an avalanche, but very few would be willing to give up skiing to save the Alps.

A tentative conclusion is that a shift in orientation towards other people in adolescence coupled with the everyday experience of mechanistic manipulation of nature and mechanistic interpretations of nature provided by modern science and technology including ecology weakens the persuasive power of anthropomorphic, organic

and other more empathetic forms of relating to nature. As the philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1998, pp. 91-110) has pointed out, the machine seems to have become an absolute metaphor for interpreting the world, one which we no longer question. The world is no longer like a machine in certain respects; it is a machine. DesCartes has come to have a firm grip on our minds. And mechanistic interpretations allow us to shift natural objects from the domain of obligatory morality to the domain of discretionary morality, and then perhaps even from the moral domain to the domain of social conventions, which are less loaded emotionally and less binding.

A major project of postmodern society is to find ways to loosen the Cartesian grip and to develop means conducive to greater empathy with nature. And if identity is indeed a prerequisite of empathy, then ways and means must be found to encourage identity with objects such as an apple orchard, a forest, a river or a lake. This might mean cultivating metaphors other than that of the machine for interpreting the world around us, an important facet of what the cognitive scientist Mark Johnson (1993) refers to as „moral imagination.“ For example, one could try to think about an ecosystem as a painting or as a tapestry. According to this line of thinking, repression of organic or anthropomorphic reasoning could be considered a loss, the loss of a significant metaphoric option. Of course, cultivating other metaphors would require providing appropriate experiences for building such frameworks. In addition, finding a solution to an environmental problem would require being able to shift from one way of thinking to another, from one standpoint, perspective or metaphor to another.

What is the role of ethical discourse in view of these developments? And how should we deal with these problems in children's philosophy?

Some bioethicists (see Bayertz, 1999) maintain that in ethical discourse we must cultivate a culture of dissension rather than strive for consensus on the basis of a unifying theory. Perhaps this is a more serious problem in Germany with its Kantian legacy than it is in the USA. At any rate, in environmental ethics we probably have no other recourse since the views and forms of justification are so disparate. If dissension is the rule in moral debate, perhaps we should modify our goals and aim for the explication of individual positions and pragmatic compromise. This in turn would require political and social skills in addition to the traditional philosophical skills of rational argumentation. I wish to illustrate this possibility with a final example of a discussion in which several children reached a compromise, not moral consensus, on an environmental issue.

The issue at stake is once again sacrificing an apple orchard for the construction of a youth center. However, the children discussing the problem are somewhat younger than those mentioned earlier: 3 girls, Denise (11), Claudia (12) and Lea (13), and two boys, Timo (11) and Simon (12). The discussion was conducted by a student, Sven Mockelmann, and I have translated it from German to English.

Lea, the eldest in the group, opens the discussion by voicing a position in favor of the youth center:

Lea: *"I'd be for not necessarily keeping the apple orchard. I kind of find it more fun when something happens or so. If there's a discothek and all that, I sort of think that's better."*

Her position is not particularly vindictive, not yet.

Simon immediately counters with an opposing position in which he refers to the animals that live in the apple orchard. He draws on analogies to humans and anthropomorphic reasoning to support his argument, and Timo joins him.

Simon: *"The apple orchard has to stay. Just think about it. Where are all the animals supposed to go? Look at it this way, it's just as if someone came and said: Yeah, we're going to build a youth center here. Your house is going to have to be torn down. Sorry, but you're going to have to move."*

Lea: *"That's not my problem."*

Claudia: *"Can't the animals move somewhere else or something?"*

Timo: *"I'd forget about the discothek."*

Lea: *"Oh no. The discothek is the most important thing."*

A serious conflict is clearly in the making. In the course of the discussion it becomes obvious that the boys apparently regard the apple orchard as a moral object, not as such, but because it is a home for animals. For the boys the animals possess moral status, most likely on the basis of identification and anthropomorphic

interpretation, and they express concern for the creatures' welfare. Their discourse is thus a normative one. They believe that animals should be protected on principle. Lea, on the other hand, and the other girls in the group, are not prepared to conduct a moral discourse. They are primarily interested in satisfying personal desires and therefore find the moralizing, anthropomorphic insistence of their counterparts aggravating. The discussion soon reaches a state of argumentative circularity and stagnates.

Simon: *"But the apple orchard must not be destroyed. It has to stay."*

Lea: *"It's got to go."*

Simon: *"It stays."*

Lea: *"It has to go. If I say it's got to go, it's going to go."*

Simon: *"Then it sure as heck won't go. Of course the orchard has to stay."*

Lea: *"Why?"*

Simon: *"What will happen with all the animals? Think about it. That's just like building the transrapid railroad where all the people have to move away."*

In this case the conflict is between the hedonistic inclinations of one group and the moral ones of another. According to Angelika Wagner (1995), a psychologist in our department, the same kind of conflict can occur in the mind of one and the same individual when a self-imposed imperative collides with other desires (I have to study for my examination, but I want to go skating in the park) or when two such imperatives collide with one another (I want to do well on my exam, but I don't want to be considered an egghead). If one or both imperatives are moral ones, the situation is particularly critical since moral imperatives are by nature stronger than others. Professor Wagner has identified a number of verbal indicators for imperatives, of which I shall mention only a few. These include 1) universal quantifiers such as "everybody", "always", "never", "all the time", "by no means" etc. 2) superlatives such as "very much" and "especially" 3) explicit imperatives such as "must" and "should" and 4) value attributions such as "awful", "terrible", "great", "super". These indicators pop up immediately in the moral discourse of the boys; Lea and the other girls also use them as the conflict comes to a head.

Once a conflict has arisen, either in the mind of an individual or between the members of a group, a number of different conflict avoidance strategies are mustered up. For example, by playing down one of the opposing positions, minimizing it or ridiculing it the conflict may be temporarily called to a halt. In the discussion about the youth center the children show themselves capable of applying a formidable repertory of conflict avoidance strategies. For example, both sides play down the importance of the opposing position. Thus with reference to the apple orchard Lea says:

Lea: *"Well, I don't know. One apple orchard more or less probably doesn't make much difference."*

Simon: *"Yes it does."*

Timo: *"Well one youth center more or less doesn't make much difference either."*

Or Lea tries to use her somewhat more advanced age and peer pressure as a lever:

Lea: *"If you want to go to a discothek, you have to drive there. And here you'd have it right next door. That's sure a lot better."*

Simon: *"I don't care. Who goes to discos anyway?"*

Lea: *"Maybe you don't, but those of us who are a few years older do." "If you were fourteen, you'd want a youth center too. Don't give me any of that business"*

Lea: *"I bet everybody I know would be for the youth center."*

Timo: *"I doubt it."*

Lea: *"Yes they would. Want to bet? My whole class would be for it."*

The conflict soon flourishes again, and the thoughts of an individual or those of the group once again rotate in circles. In the present case various solutions are proposed, but to no avail. The boys make several more or less plausible suggestions that would permit the apple orchard to remain untouched: You can play soccer in your back yard. You can have a disco party in your school. People can get together in an ice cream parlor. The girls suggestions are more mechanistic, more

indicative of technical optimism: You could build a disco between the trees. You could transplant the trees or find new homes for the animals. But no solution can be found that everyone can accept.

The psychologist W.T. Powers maintains that circularity of this kind is caused by clinging to certain rules thought to be absolutely inviolable.

"Logical conflicts are paradoxes. Paradoxes sound like conflicts, but only if one arbitrarily restricts himself to unrealistic rules at one level of perception. Logical conflicts are little more than a game one can play or not, as he chooses, and are easily transcended if one reminds himself of the full range of choices available to human beings." (Powers, 1973, pp. 251-252)

In order to be able to take advantage of the whole range of choices that exist, Powers and Angelika Wagner maintain that those involved in a conflict must somehow reach a state of relaxed awareness. This can be achieved by mentally conceding that a self-imposed imperative may be infringed upon, at least to some extent. It doesn't mean that the imperative is abandoned completely. One simply lets loose a bit. This in turn supposedly releases the creative potential of the mind. The decisive question is what factors contribute towards reaching this state of mind? In moral discussions additional knowledge can sometimes be of help. But not always. Humor and well-meaning irony can also help to encourage backing away from entrenched positions. I suspect that appeals to common feelings or common values may also serve the same function. Let me demonstrate how this came about in the group discussion I have presented.

In the present case, in order to deescalate the conflict and reach a state of relaxed awareness, the the moralists, in this case the animal rights advocates, must seriously consider the perspective of their opponents and entertain the thought that animals rights might sometimes have to be curtailed. The hedonists must seriously deal with the idea that their opponents' concern for animals may not be totally absurd and mentally concede that their desire for maximal happiness may not be satisfied completely.

Two factors seem to have permitted the group of children discussing the apple orchard to reach a compromise, not moral consensus, that all of them could accept. One factor is the very remarkable role of a natural mediator in this group, Timo.

Timo possesses the capacity to grasp the dilemma at stake. He has a definite position and states his own choice clearly but concedes the value of the other option as well, thus indicating that both options are worthy of consideration.

Timo: *"I'd really like to have a youth center too, but the apple orchard still has to stay."*

Whereas Simon is uncompromising in the defense of his anthropomorphic position, Timo exhibits a sense of wry irony.

Simon: *"Look, think of it this way. You're thrown out on the street and a fitness center is built in place of your house."*

Lea: *"How come I'm supposed to be thrown out on the street?"*

Simon: *"Just think about it that way ..."*

Timo: *"Yeah Lea. The animals get a fitness center and disco and all that stuff and you have to crawl around in the street."*

Timo is willing to consider both sides of the issue, but he also clearly articulates the varying importance of the underlying values.

Timo: *"Athletics and discos aren't as important for kids as a place to live is for animals."*

And he is capable of disarming the representatives of the opposition by directly confronting them with the one-sidedness of their position.

Timo: *"Are you really so opposed to animals?"*

It is also Timo who initiates a decisive change in the course of the discussion by conjuring up an aesthetic image that is only marginally related to the issue at stake, an image of aesthetically attractive animals.

Timo: *"I mean, don't you find it beautiful when a hundred wild geese fly overhead?"*

Lea (still resistant): *"Sorry, I've never seen anything like that."*

Claudia: *"I've seen at least fifty."*

Timo: *"They fly in a V-shaped formation. Do you think that's crap too?"*

Lea is now prepared to make an important concession.

Lea: *"No, I don't think that's crap. I just sort of think a disco is a lot of fun and I mean, I agree that it's bad for the animals and so, but what can you do? You only live once, and everybody wants to have fun. Of course I think it's beautiful to see things like that."*

At this point Simon presents a solution that all of the participants, even Lea, are willing to accept. The children decide to erect a tent on a nearby field as a temporary disco. They are aware that some animals will be disturbed this way as well, but they agree that far fewer animals will be harmed than if the apple orchard were cut down.

The effect of the aesthetic image of flying geese on the course of this discussion is particularly fascinating and indicates a second factor that could be valuable for solving environmental conflicts. The image of geese seems to provide common ground between divergent viewpoints by appealing to common experience. Furthermore aesthetic appreciation of nature represents a mild form of anthropocentrism (Norton, 1987, pp. 13), a position intermediate between more extreme ones. In the course of aesthetic appreciation nature provides pleasure to humans and is thus of instrumental value to them, but it is not altered or destroyed in the process. It is left to itself (providing observation through tourism doesn't get out of hand). Thus aesthetic appreciation reflects a relationship towards nature that is intermittent between the extreme positions of regarding nature as something to be exploited and assigning intrinsic value to it. Although aesthetic appreciation certainly does not suffice for establishing moral status for all of nature as environmental holists would like, it may serve to transform the values of individuals towards more respect for nature, as Bryan Norton (1987, 185-213) has indicated. And in discussions about environmental issues involving conflicting views it may serve to transform the

discussion from unproductive circularity towards constructive compromise by stimulating a temporary state of relaxed awareness, as W.T. Powers and Angelika Wagner have proposed.

Is constructive compromise what children's philosophy should aim for? Reaching compromises on environmental issues sounds more like politics than philosophy. And advocates of environmental holism, of which I am one, cannot avoid feeling uncomfortable about compromises of this kind. Every compromise means that some part of nature is sacrificed, and we really cannot afford much more sacrifice. What about philosophical truth? As a holist, shouldn't I be uncompromising in striving to convince others by rational argumentation that nature and all parts of it are intrinsically valuable? Obviously rigorous philosophical discourse is necessary for defining one's own position, even though in the long run this position may not be as clear cut and unvacillating as some ethicists think it should be. But ethics is not only a matter of philosophers, and the more ethical decisions are delegated to people outside of academic philosophy and negotiated in discourse that is not strictly philosophical, the more permeable the boundaries between philosophy and politics, between the search for truth and the search for constructive solutions become.

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