An Introductory Exercise in Articulating Values in Environmental Ethics

Dr Iain Matthews

Teaching Ethics to BioScience Students:

Sustainability and the Environment Cardiff

9-12-2009

University
of
St Andrews

(ID2004) Science Ethics

- 11 week, 10 credit interdisciplinary 2000-level module

- ~ 50 students from across the faculty
  - Introduction to Ethics
  - Ethics and Scientific Research
  - Chemical Warfare and Genetic Modification
  - Ethics in a Digital Age
  - Ethics and Biomedical Advances
  - Ethics and the Environment
  - Ethics in Practice

- 4000-level Bio-ethics module

HEA BioSciences

University of St Andrews

Lifeboat exercise

- Imagine there is a large container ship rapidly sinking at sea and there is only one life boat left.

- There is an island with a small human city and a great deal of forest which can be reached by lifeboat. Decide in which order you would place the following on the lifeboat.
  - Assume that while on the lifeboat none of the potentially dangerous creatures will attack or cause any harm to the other creatures on the boat, and that all groups of creatures require an equal amount of space.

- Rank the options from 1-10, with 1 being the the option you would save first, and with 10 being the option you would be most willing to sacrifice. Where possible, try to give a reason for your ranking.

University
of
St Andrews

Lifeboat exercise

- An intelligent, healthy, morally virtuous human
- An intelligent, healthy, morally evil human
- A healthy moose (there is an indigenous moose population on the island)
- A collie with a permanently lame leg
- A severely mentally disabled human
- Ten chickens
- A breeding pair of an endangered species of bird, once native to the island
- A human in a coma (who will almost certainly never recover)
- A breeding pair of common, but beautiful, indigenous songbirds
- Two breeding pairs of a non-indigenous variety of rapidly breeding wild rabbits (with no known predators on the island, and an extensive food supply)

- Developed from Kawall, J. (1999)

University of St Andrews

Discussing rankings

- Ask students to compare where they placed the moose or collie relative to the human in a coma?
  - Does the animals' ability to experience pain play a role in your ranking?
  - The value of sentience

  - Discussion of the Home Office licensing and the Animal (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986
    - "The authors of the most detailed treatments of the issue to date … have all reached the same conclusion: while all vertebrates can probably feel pain, most invertebrates probably cannot (the notable exception being the cephalopods)." Gary Varner (1998)

HEA BioSciences

University
of
St Andrews

Assessing value

- Did anyone save the ten chickens before the single moose or dog?
  - Bentham and Utilitarianism
- Where did you place the rabbits?
  - Why?
  - Is introducing a non-native (alien) species morally acceptable?
  - Holism

- Did you save the endangered birds ahead of the chickens?
  - Why?
  - Are two rare birds more valuable than ten chickens?

University of St Andrews

Assessing value

- Where did you place the rabbits?
  - Why?
  - Is introducing a non-indigenous (alien) species morally acceptable?
  - Holism

- Did you save the endangered birds ahead of the chickens?
  - Why?
  - Are two rare birds more 'valuable' than ten chickens?

HEA BioSciences

University
of
St Andrews

Goals of the value exercise

- Fun way of introducing a number of key concepts in environmental ethics

- Allows students to see that they already have preconceived ideas concerning the issues raised
  - Helps them to explore the values underlying their initial preferences (even if they hadn't been able to explain their concerns at the time)

- Highlights the diversity of values and opinions
  - Are values absolute?
  - How valuable is rarity? Do you value all rare species equally?

HEA BioSciences

University
of
St Andrews