

The Silent Scream of the Asparagus

You just *knew* it was coming: At the request of the Swiss government, an ethics panel has weighed in on the "dignity" of plants and opined that the arbitrary killing of flora is morally wrong. This is no hoax. The concept of what could be called "plant rights" is being seriously debated.

A few years ago the Swiss added to their national constitution a provision requiring "account to be taken of the dignity of creation when handling animals, plants and other organisms." No one knew exactly what it meant, so they asked the Swiss Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology to figure it out. The resulting report, "The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants," is enough to short circuit the brain.

A "clear majority" of the panel adopted what it called a "biocentric" moral view, meaning that "living organisms should be considered morally for their own sake because they are alive." Thus, the panel determined that we cannot claim "absolute ownership" over plants and, moreover, that "individual plants have an inherent worth." This means that "we may not use them just as we please, even if the plant community is not in danger, or if our actions do not endanger the species, or if we are not acting arbitrarily."

The committee offered this illustration: A farmer mows his field (apparently an acceptable action, perhaps because the hay is intended to feed the farmer's herd--the report doesn't say). But then, while walking home, he casually "decapitates" some wildflowers with his scythe. The panel decries this act as immoral, though its members can't agree why. The report states, opaquely:

At this point it remains unclear whether this action is condemned because it expresses a particular moral stance of the farmer toward other organisms or because something bad is being done to the flowers themselves.

What is clear, however, is that Switzerland's enshrining of "plant dignity" is a symptom of a cultural disease that has infected Western civilization, causing us to lose the ability to think critically and distinguish serious from frivolous ethical concerns. It also reflects the triumph of a radical anthropomorphism that views elements of the natural world as morally equivalent to people.

Why is this happening? Our accelerating rejection of the Judeo-Christian world view, which upholds the unique dignity and moral worth of human beings, is driving us crazy. Once we knocked our species off its pedestal, it was only logical that we would come to

see fauna and flora as entitled to rights.

The intellectual elites were the first to accept the notion of "species-ism," which condemns as invidious discrimination treating people differently from animals simply because they are human beings. Then ethical criteria were needed for assigning moral worth to individuals, be they human, animal, or now vegetable.

Rising to the task, leading bioethicists argue that for a human, value comes from possessing sufficient cognitive abilities to be deemed a "person." This excludes the unborn, the newborn, and those with significant cognitive impairments, who, personhood theorists believe, do not possess the right to life or bodily integrity. This thinking has led to the advocacy in prestigious medical and bioethical journals of using profoundly brain impaired patients in medical experimentation or as sources of organs.

The animal rights movement grew out of the same poisonous soil. Animal rights ideology holds that moral worth comes with sentience or the ability to suffer. Thus, since both animals and humans feel pain, animal rights advocates believe that what is done to an animal should be judged morally as if it were done to a human being. Some ideologues even compare the Nazi death camps to normal practices of animal husbandry. For example, Charles Patterson wrote in *Eternal Treblinka*--a book specifically endorsed by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals--that "the road to Auschwitz begins at the slaughterhouse."

Eschewing humans as the pinnacle of "creation" (to borrow the term used in the Swiss constitution) has caused environmentalism to mutate from conservationism--a concern to properly steward resources and protect pristine environs and endangered species--into a willingness to thwart human flourishing to "save the planet." Indeed, the most radical "deep ecologists" have grown so virulently misanthropic that Paul Watson, the head of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, called humans "the AIDS of the earth," requiring "radical invasive therapy" in order to reduce the population of the earth to under a billion.

As for "plant rights," if the Swiss model spreads, it may hobble biotechnology and experimentation to improve crop yields. As an editorial in *Nature News* put it:

The [Swiss] committee has . . . come up with few concrete examples of what type of experiment might be considered an unacceptable insult to plant dignity. The committee does not consider that genetic engineering of plants automatically falls into this category, but its majority view holds that it would if the genetic modification caused plants to "lose their independence"--for example by interfering with their capacity to reproduce.

One Swiss scientist quoted in the editorial worried that "plant dignity" provides "another tool for opponents to argue against any form of plant biotechnology" despite the hope it offers to improve crop yields and plant nutrition.

What folly. We live in a time of cornucopian abundance and plenty, yet countless human beings are malnourished, even starving. In the face of this cruel paradox, worry about the purported rights of plants is the true immorality.

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