

PSCI365/ENST 365
ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS
Micro-essay #3

Write a 750-900 word essay on the following topic. Your essay is due in the Google folder by 4pm On MONDAY April 8. Be sure to single space, use a title that captures the gist of your argument, define terms carefully, and include at least one claim-objection-rejoinder sequence.

Martha Nussbaum argues that because humans know so much more about animals today and because we are responsible for an exponential increase in species extinction, we have a collective responsibility to seek justice for animals. As she notes, “today’s extinctions are between one thousand and ten thousand times higher than the natural extinction rate” (xiii). Her argument appeals to the “you broke it, you fix it” logic of popular morality.

Yet, Nussbaum’s capabilities approach focuses only the moral considerability of a small subset of the natural world we humans have broken, namely the individual non-human animals or sentient strivers as she calls them. Under the schema environmental ethicists have created, she would be termed a “moral extensionist.” She argues that justice for sentient animals with their own form of life is “thin” enough metaphysically to be accepted by almost all people who make up an “overlapping consensus” but also taking in enough of nature to allow an “indirect” support for species and ecosystems.

Environmental holists like Callicott and Rolston argue instead for a metaphysically thick view of intrinsic worth of wholes like species and ecosystems. Nussbaum would likely view this as one of those “comprehensive theories of value” (93) which it would be wrong for members of a community to try to force on others. Instead, she agrees with Rawls that matters of justice in a politically liberal society should be based on an “overlapping consensus” (94), e.g., on many overlapping conceptions of value, many of which individuals are free to choose to endorse or not. “Thin” conceptions of value and justice, such as the capabilities approach offers, allow for different grounds for defending the value of sentient strivers.

Nussbaum’s approach thus only goes so far as to argue that species and ecosystems matter because “biodiversity is usually good for creatures” (111). She adds: “species preservation has great instrumental value for the individual creatures who are ends in themselves” (111).

So, who has the better view?

Should environmentalists limit moral extensionism to sentient strivers?