Utilitarianism and Preservation

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In “The Concept of the Irreplaceable,” John N. Martin claims that utilitarian arguments can explain the environmentalist position concerning the preservation of natural objects as long as human attitudes toward preservation are considered along with the direct benefits of environmental preservation. But this type of utilitarian justification is biased in favor of the satisfaction of human preferences. No ethical theory which calculates goodness in terms of the amount of human satisfaction can present an adequate justification of environmental preservation. Since human interests must be considered primary, natural objects will only be preserved when their preservation is in accord with human preferences.

I

At the end of his analysis of arguments for the preservation of the irreplaceable,1 John N. Martin discovers that he is puzzled by the peculiar two-sided use of utilitarian reasoning in debates over the environment. His conclusion is that “the vast majority of preservationist cases can be explained by a version of utilitarianism,” and by the term explained he seems to mean “justified.” However, he continues, “Given that the major foes of preservation are utilitarians, this consequence is surprising. It looks as if the foes may be defeated by turning their own theory against them and using it more carefully.” Martin is thus proposing that with more careful philosophical groundwork, a complete utilitarian justification of the environmentalist-preservationist position can be formulated, routing once and for all the anti-environmentalist forces of development.

I argue that Martin’s view is wrong, that utilitarianism in its most basic forms cannot explain or justify the preservationist position in the preservation vs. development debate—although it often appears to do so. In fact, the widespread use of utilitarian arguments to justify policy decisions about the protection of the environment is detrimental to preservation. The essential elements of utilitarianism only provide a justification for the satisfaction of human need, for this satisfaction is the standard by which utilitarianism measures goodness or moral worth. But human needs and the needs of the

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natural environment are not necessarily similar or in harmony; thus, any ethical theory—such as utilitarianism—which tries to explain the preservation of the natural environment by means of the satisfaction of human wants, needs, and desires will be only contingently true: it will depend on the factual circumstances, the actual desires of the human community at any given time. This empirical limitation does not bode well for the security of the preservationist argument.

II

What then is the preservationist position? Essentially, we can define it as an argument for the protection and preservation of some object or state-of-affairs in an unaltered condition. Martin himself is concerned with irreplaceable entities, but environmentalists do not always restrict themselves to that class of objects. Generally, they use the argument to justify the preservation of plants, wildlife, rock formation, the land, ecological systems, wilderness areas, etc.

Martin believes that the major problem in the application of utilitarian ethical theory to this preservationist position lies in the justification of the importance of genetic properties. Any worthwhile argument for preservation would have to explain why a perfect reproduction of a work of art or an artificially produced Yosemite Valley is not as valuable as the original. The reason—of course—is that the historical genetic properties of the object—the process by which it was created—cannot be separated from the nongenetic properties in a determination of the worth of the object. Martin, however, claims that utilitarianism is unable to evaluate the genetic properties of an object because of its “blindness to the past.” When evaluating the consequences of an action in order to determine its moral worth, the utilitarian has his “eyes [directed] towards the future.” The sole concern of the utilitarian is whether a world in which a certain entity is preserved will be a better world than one in which the entity will not be preserved. According to Martin, the utilitarian is not interested in the historical properties that the entity may possess, and thus how the entity came into being is a fact which is

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2 In a somewhat trivial sense, of course, all objects are irreplaceable: any object replacing a unique individual object is a different individual. Martin seems concerned with objects which are irreplaceable in a nontrivial sense: species of life, strange and beautiful natural formations and ecosystems (Yosemite Valley, the Everglades, etc.), and works of art. Environmentalists generally place less emphasis on the absolute uniqueness of the entity they wish to protect. A marsh is protected from development into a golf course, not because it is the last marsh in the world, nor because it is a uniquely beautiful marsh. Exactly why it is protected is, of course, a question which only a more detailed system of environmental ethics can answer.


4 Ibid., p. 43.
irrelevant to the moral calculation. The utilitarian is forward-looking: the measurement of future utility is the criterion of goodness or moral value.

Martin admits to being troubled by this apparent inability of utilitarian moral theory to evaluate entities on the basis of genetic properties. As he notes, it creates numerous instances in which preservationist intuitions are in conflict with utilitarian calculations. “The utilitarian counts astro-turf as the equal to grass; he allows roads and motels within the boundaries of national parks; he dams rivers and lumbers forests. In all cases he is unswayed by genetic considerations.”5 In order to alleviate this problem with utilitarianism, Martin proposes a method by which genetic considerations are indirectly introduced into the utilitarian calculation of benefit and harm. Since it is an obvious truth that people “have special attitudes towards objects based on genetic considerations,” the utilitarian ought to consider these attitudes when calculating the utility of an act of preservation. Thus Martin concludes that preservation may be a better policy of action, not because of any intrinsic worth of the object being preserved, but because preservation—given present attitudes—produces a more satisfied population.6

This indirect calculation of genetic properties of objects—by means of an evaluation of the population’s attitudes—yields a number of problems. Martin notes three areas of possible controversy. The first is the “contingency of [a] preservationist obligation” which is based on human attitudes. Because the utilitarian bases his policy of preservation on the satisfaction of certain human attitudes, the policy will be justified only as long as these attitudes remain in effect. As Martin comments: “If people did not now and in the future care about Yosemite Valley, arguments for its preservation based on genetic properties would not seem to carry any force.”7 Arguments for environmental preservation, then, depend for their validity on the contingent existence of certain human attitudes.

This reliance on contingent human attitudes creates a second problem: the “possibility of deception.” If the utilitarian argument for preservation rests on the satisfaction of human attitudes and feelings, then actual objects considered important need not be preserved as long as people believe that they are. The belief that a certain object is “natural” or “real” will satisfy human needs and increase social utility. As long as the population continues to be deceived, there will be no decrease in the levels of satisfaction. What is preserved, then, is the belief that objects with important genetic properties continue to exist—the actual objects need not be preserved. Tourists to Paris, for example, do not have to know that the original Mona Lisa was slashed by a knife-wielding intruder. Martin does not approve of this conclusion: “What

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 44.
7 Ibid.
we see here is that serving people’s feelings is sometimes not enough.” As traditional arguments against utilitarianism have stressed, there exist some values—such as truth and justice—which are important regardless of consequences. The prima facie value of truth would thus seem to override a utilitarian calculation about the benefits of deception in actual cases of preservation. Martin thus calls for a further elaboration of utilitarian theory.

Finally, Martin notes the actual “unpopularity of preservation.” People seem to get more satisfaction from using motor boats on lakes, damming rivers for hydroelectric power, and building access roads into national parks than they would by preserving these natural resources in a pristine state. Thus it seems that “the utility derived from serving the attitudes of those favoring preservation is an insignificant part of total utility.” Given the actual state of contemporary society, utilitarian arguments concerning preservation appear to clash with the intuitive judgments of environmentalists.

III

This analysis of certain problems in an indirect utilitarian argument for the preservation of objects with important genetic or historical properties is the key point of Martin’s essay. It is therefore surprising to discover that despite these problems, his conclusion is that a more careful use of utilitarian arguments can buttress the environmental cause. I believe that the contrary conclusion is much more obvious: these problems reveal the complete failure of utilitarian arguments to explain the subtlety and crucial importance of the environmentalist position on preservation.

Martin employs a standard version of utilitarianism in his analysis. In his argument a given world is better than an alternative if and only if it possesses more social utility, and utility “is identified with the satisfaction of citizen preferences.” The significant fact about such an ethical theory is that the criterion of moral value is the satisfaction of human preferences—the satisfaction of human needs, wants, and desires. Any natural resource, object, or ecological area will only be preserved, therefore, if its preservation satisfies some obvious human need. Moreover, because of the utilitarian calculus, the satisfaction derived from the act of preservation will have to outweigh any or all satisfactions produced by the development or nonpreservation of the resource, object, or area.

Basing moral value or goodness on the satisfaction of human needs and desires can only harm the environmentalist goal of preserving natural entities. A result of this theory is that the preservation of nature as a policy of

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8 Ibid., p. 45.
9 Ibid., p. 46.
10 Ibid., p. 39.
action has only secondary and contingent value. The only primary value is the production of greater amounts of social utility: the satisfaction of human preferences and needs. The promulgation of environmentalist or preservationist policy will thus depend upon the contingent existence of relevant preservationist needs of the human community. To use one of Martin’s examples: the chincona tree will be preserved only as long as the human community needs the quinine which is produced from it. 11 But this act of preservation is only a contingent moral obligation: if no human need is satisfied by the tree’s preservation, if, for example, an artificial source of quinine is discovered, there will be no moral reason to preserve the species. Thus the best result which an environmentalist can achieve by the use of a utilitarian argument is an unstable, contingent justification of his position. Preservation will be the acceptable moral position only when human beings want it as a social policy.

The problems associated with contingency which Martin raised in his discussion of the indirect utilitarian argument forcibly demonstrate the precarious nature of a utilitarian justification of environmental preservation. I have noted these problems in the previous section and need not repeat them here. What Martin fails to see, however, is that even his “safe,” nongenetic cases of preservation—those involving conservation, cost-benefit analyses, externalities, and ecology 12—are not sufficiently explained or justified by a direct utilitarian approach. A good counterexample is the preservation of endangered species which are of little or no importance to mankind or the world ecological system. The preservation of the snail darter, a fresh water fish whose protected status has halted the completion of the Tellico dam, 13 cannot be explained rationally by the concept of utility. No cost-benefit analysis could favor the preservation of the fish: the loss in dollars spent and energy unused is staggering. Nor can the preservation of the snail darter be justified in terms of ecology: except for the interest of scholars in the field, the fish has no known beneficial effects on the human community or environment. If utilitarian arguments are presented to fortify the environmentalist-preservationist position, absurd claims have to be made. The environmentalist is forced to argue that the existence of a fish (or a plant, or a wilderness area) which is not utilized by the human community has more social utility than the obvious economic gains resulting from the nonpreservation of the fish (or plant or wilderness area) and the development of the affected region. It seems clear that this kind of utilitarian argument for preservation will rarely justify the environmentalist position.

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., p. 40.
This point has been amply demonstrated by Martin H. Krieger in an article entitled “What’s Wrong with Plastic Trees?” described by Mark Sagoff as “a reductio ad absurdum of contemporary ‘utilitarian’ arguments for preserving the environment.” Krieger states that “Artificial prairies and wildernesses have been created, and there is no reason to believe that these artificial environments need be unsatisfactory for those who experience them.”

In fact, since “the way in which we experience nature is conditioned by our society,” public choice and desire can be manipulated so that “people learn to use and want . . . environments that are likely to be available at low cost.” Here then is the ultimate utilitarian position: environments artificially created to produce the most human satisfaction, and human minds conditioned to enjoy the artificial environments. Surely no greater amount of social utility could be imagined! Unfortunately, the effect of this theory on environmental policy would be disastrous. Any or all natural objects and environments could be destroyed to further the interests, to increase the satisfaction, of the human community.

An artificial but satisfying utilitarian world clearly demonstrates the flaw in Martin’s analysis and the danger that analysis holds for the policy of preservation. Utilitarianism, as Martin conceives it, only measures the moral worth or goodness of an action by the satisfaction of human preferences and needs which is produced. These human needs are connected only contingently with the preservation of any given natural object, resource, or ecological system. Mankind could enjoy an artificial, plasticized world which produces more social utility than a world filled with natural objects and resources. As our space program has demonstrated, man can survive even in an artificial environment. The simple fact of the matter is that the interests of mankind are not necessarily connected with the preservation of the natural environment. Any ethical theory which places its emphasis on the satisfaction of human needs can support a policy of preservation only on a contingent basis. Obligations to preserve natural objects and resources are overridden whenever a greater amount of human satisfaction can be attained by nonpreservation.

There is no danger then, as Martin believes, for the foes of environmental preservation who use utilitarian arguments. On their side is the essential premise of utilitarian theory that the satisfaction of human desires and needs is the sole criterion of goodness or moral worth. The real danger lies in the use of utilitarian arguments by preservationists. Basing arguments for environmental preservation on the premises of utilitarian moral theory will only reveal the precarious relationship which exists between the satisfaction of

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17 *Ibid*.
human needs and the preservation of natural objects. Once it is accepted that the satisfaction of human needs is the primary measure of value, the continued existence of the natural world is reduced to a mere contingency.

IV

In conclusion, I would like to note two different approaches which the preservationist might take to avoid Martin’s “more careful” formulation of utilitarian arguments. These observations are not meant as finished theories of environmental obligation, but as suggestions for further work.

(1) Utilitarianism might be salvaged for use in the environmentalism debate if it is stripped of its bias towards the satisfaction of human needs and preferences. Bentham, it should be remembered, considered the pains and pleasures of the animal kingdom to be of importance in a utilitarian calculation. According to this kind of position, the needs and desires of the wildlife in a given area would have to be considered prior to any development or destruction for the purpose of human betterment.

Unfortunately, the problems with this kind of broad utilitarianism appear insurmountable. How does the satisfaction of animal needs compare in utility with the satisfaction of human needs? Can we bring plant life into the calculation? What about nonliving entities, such as rock formations (e.g., the Grand Canyon) or entire ecological areas? Does a marsh have an interest in not being drained and turned into a golf course, a need or desire to continue a natural existence? It is clear that difficult—if not impossible—problems arise when we begin to consider utility for nonhuman and nonsentient entities.

(2) A second alternative, highly tentative, is a movement away from a “want-oriented perspective” in ethical theory. Rather than evaluating the moral worth of an action by the consequences which satisfy needs and desires in the human (or even nonhuman) world, we can look at the intrinsic qualities of the action, and determine what kind of values this action manifests. The question which the debate over environmental preservation raises is not “Does preservation of this particular natural object lead to a better world?” but rather “Do we want a world in which the preservation of natural objects is considered an important value?” The question is not whether the preservation of a certain entity increases the amount of satisfaction and pleasure in

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19 In an oft-quoted passage, Jeremy Bentham discusses the importance of animal suffering as a criterion of moral respect. See An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789), chap. 17, par. 4, note.

the world, but rather, whether these pleasures, satisfactions, and needs ought to be pursued. The question, in short, is about what kind of moral universe ought to be created.\(^{21}\) Only when the preservation of natural objects is seen to be an intrinsically good policy of action, rather than a means to some kind of satisfaction, will a policy of environmental protection be explained and justified. The development of an ethical theory which can accomplish this task will be a difficult undertaking, but it is the only choice open to preservationists who wish to avoid the easy, self-defeating trap of utilitarianism.

\(^{21}\) It should be noted that Mark Sagoff, although a critic of the view suggested here, appears to agree that something is wrong with simply satisfying human desires: “As long as policies are intended to maximize the general satisfaction, they will be no better, morally or spiritually, than the interests they serve.” The problem then becomes one of replacing hedonistic human desires with desires more in harmony with the preservation of the natural environment. See Sagoff, “Natural Environment,” p. 225.