The Philosophy of Natural History and Conservation

This week we will be looking at the philosophy of natural history. This will involve exploring various ways through which we conceive of the natural world and our place in it.

Natural history is, in essence, the study of the natural world – charting all of its development from the beginnings of life on earth through to the present day. Included within this study is the development of the earth's climate, its impact on life and the more contemporary practice of conservation.

Conventionally, natural history is contrasted with other forms of history. A study of the evolution of a species is, for instance, thought of as fundamentally distinct from a study of English history since the Norman Conquest – the former is natural history; the latter, human history. This is a largely unquestioned distinction – indeed, institutions have grown up in accordance with it. The BBC has a natural history unit and a history unit – they are based in different places and concern themselves with very different things. In schools and universities, history is considered as part of the humanities while biology and the environmental sciences are largely confined to the science department.

Moreover, we tend to conceive of what we do as artificial in relation to nature – sometimes we act in its interests but, more often than not, we do not. Even conservation organisations such as the RSPB implicitly make this artificial/natural distinction - their tag line "Giving Nature a Home" is an example of it. Much of our thought is focused on how we pollute and destroy nature. In some cases, we see it as retaliating or reclaiming that which we destroyed – such as when old steel works become a haven for wildflowers and forms of ecosystem that are related to them (populations of butterflies and other insects, for example). There are some wonderful examples of this in NE England.

Intuitive though it maybe to draw such a distinction, there is good reason to question whether we should. We are animals (specifically, mammals) that have, like other animals, evolved to our present state. Our habits (e.g. political unions) and inventions (such as the aeroplane) can all be seen as the natural evolution of the human species, as can the wearing of clothes (in a sense, this is case of aspect-perception).

(An aside: those who oppose homosexuality on moral grounds often appeal to the idea that it is not natural. Responses often include the fact that homosexuality in other animals has been observed and that, as such, it is not as unnatural as some people suggest. However, this response could be seen as similarly problematic. Firstly, there are plenty of things that other animals do that we would not dream of doing. Secondly, which animals do you choose as exemplars of what is natural? – Different animals have radically different habits. Even if there were no examples of homosexuality in nature, why would this make it any less natural in human beings? – It could be something unique to our species just as there are forms of behaviour that are unique to other species (the only difference being that in such latter cases, we consider such forms to be a natural traits of that particular species). The wearing of clothes is unique to our species but you do not hear nudists arguing that it is immoral to wear clothes!

So, are the activities of human beings artificial and to be contrasted with the natural behaviour of other animals? The answer to this is largely answerable to how we conceive of ourselves – our Christian heritage has, arguably, left its mark in the sense that it was God which gave us dominion over all the earth; part of that god-conferred dominance was that, as well as using the earth's resources, we should also look after it because it was one of God's creations. However, I would suggest that any conception we have needs to be alive to the fact that we are animals with an evolutionary heritage much the same as any other creature.

Recently, Chris Packham caused controversy by saying that we should let the Panda go extinct. He made this claim on the basis that the animal is largely an evolutionary dead-end with little interest in mating. (Another aside: one recent conservation project aimed at getting Pandas to mate involved the installation of big TV screens in zoos and areas in the wild where the animals are known to live that show "panda porn" or, less crudely, videos of pandas mating. The scheme has, apparently, met with some success but should we really be going to such lengths?) Packham went on to say, with some authority, that our bias towards conserving the panda over similarly threatened species is answerable to our finding it cute and fluffy. Surely, it would be more consistent to try to conserve all threatened species regardless of whether or not we find them cute? Certainly, we seem more inclined to conserve pandas than we do, say, insect species that are unprepossessing – even in light of the fact that many of these have been endangered far more by human activity than pandas (although, pandas have suffered badly from destruction of natural habitat).

He claimed to base his argument on science, in effect saying that such science demands that we treat all

threatened species in ways consistent with how they are threatened. In other words, if there is science to show that conserving a species runs against its evolutionary direction (such as the panda) then we should let it go and if there is science to show that a species would thrive were it not for human interference then we should do our best to conserve it. However, this position implicitly asserts that moral answerability is contained within the science.

This position is much less clear-cut than it might seem. Why not, instead, argue that evolution has directed us towards conserving those creatures that we find cute? – One might argue that cat and dogs have already exploited such a disposition insofar as we have become inclined to take them into our homes or, at least, domesticate them. The survival of the fittest is, after all, contingent upon the environment in which such animals find themselves – in the case of cats and dogs (and others), the fittest counts as being able to adapt to the otherwise constricting activities of other creatures (often, us humans). Analogously, in the age of the dinosaurs, mammals were unable to gain much of a foothold but after the Cretaceous/Tertiary extinction 65 million years ago, they found themselves in a much more advantageous position due to the radically changed (colder) climate that had been in large part (though not exclusively) caused by a large meteorite impact on what is now the Yucatan peninsula. Many of the remaining reptiles that had, up until that time, enjoyed supremacy suddenly found it difficult to survive in the cooler conditions, leaving the way open for mammals to develop and thrive. The large reptiles were no longer the fittest.

This leads us on to the politically sensitive issue of climate change. Again, the question is: should we think of man-made climate change as something that has artificially interfered with the natural evolution of the earth or, contrastingly, as a dimension of the evolution of the earth? Obviously, human activity since the industrial revolution have had an effect on our climate but does this amount to human beings destroying the planet or is it merely a chapter in the earth's overall evolutionary history? Certainly, there are issues surrounding climate change relating to human survival and suffering but that is different matter unless one assumes that our survival and the identity of our planet are one and the same thing (which, of course, raises questions about the identity of our planet before the evolution of *homo sapiens*.). Our political and moral thoughts are, of course, interdependent with how they matter to us but these are, fundamentally, ethical commitments consistent with how we conceive of each other as mattering in particular ways. Similarly, Packham's arguments concerning criteria relating to our conservation activities are ethical commitments – they are judgements of value that are interdependent with what matters to us. Packham's claims that we should value all threatened species equally are, in essence, an expression of what matters to him that exist in opposition to what matters to some others.

Recently, the conservationist Roy Dennis has advocated reintroducing the Lynx and the Wolf to Scotland, since they were native species that became nationally extinct a few hundred years ago as a result of human interference. He argued that, just as the Red Kite and Osprey have been successfully reintroduced to former haunts, so we have an obligation to re-naturalise other species that were the victims of artificial human actions. Such proposals have met with a good deal more controversy than the reintroduction of the Kites and Ospreys. Farmers are worried about the impact of such a plan on their livestock and many are concerned that proximity to humans will result in attacks by the reintroduced animals on domestic animals and, perhaps, human beings also. Others have opposed the plan on grounds that since their extinction we (as a human community) have moved on and the environment is not suitable for them as it once was.

Again the artificial/natural question is raised: should we conceive of reintroduction programmes such as these to be human interference that is as artificial as the ways in which we conceived of the destruction of their habitat and killing as human interference?

I am not trying to argue either way – merely show that the answers to such questions are not as clear-cut as many argue that the science shows them to be. There is a case for saying that our ethical commitments, just like the wearing of clothes, are merely aspects of our evolutionary development the nature of which is contingent upon such developments.