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Justice Through a Multispecies Lens

Citation for published version:

Celermajer, D, Chatterjee, S, Cochrane, A, Fishel, S, Neimanis, A, O'brien, A, Reid, S, Srinivasan, K, Schlosberg, D & Waldow, A 2020, 'Justice Through a Multispecies Lens', *Contemporary Political Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00386-5>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1057/s41296-020-00386-5](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00386-5)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Contemporary Political Theory

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Justice, Conflict and Shared Vulnerabilities in a Multi-Species World

In order to explore the possibility and shape of multi-species justice, we need to address questions about its scope. How far can justice be extended: to humans, to sentient animals, to all living organisms, to collectives such as species and ecosystems? How can conflicting claims of justice between these entities be reconciled? This paper explores various ways of delineating the scope of justice. It argues that traditional anthropocentric theories are untenable and that all sentient creatures possess certain enforceable claims. While a sole focus on sentient individuals can neglect the collectives which sustain individual flourishing, attempts to extend justice beyond individuals raise profound problems: first, they can at times have harmful implications for individuals; and second, as we show, ‘ecological justice’ can quickly collapse into the prioritisation of human over nonhuman interests. In order to begin a discussion of ways to overcome these limitations, the final section of the paper briefly sketches the possibility of grounding justice in ‘shared vulnerabilities’. This reorientation, we suggest, helps to avoid the filtering in of anthropocentrism into decision-making about common conflicts between nonhuman individuals and collectives.

1. From Anthropocentric to Sentientist Justice

Traditionally, most political theorists have thought that justice applies solely to human beings. David Hume (1975, 190), for example, writing on animals claimed that while we ought to ‘give gentle usage to these creatures’, we are not ‘under any restraint of justice with regard to them’. This anthropocentric understanding of justice has important implications for nonhuman nature, as it means that what is owed to nonhuman beings is dependent upon human interests and concerns, since only humans possess *enforceable claims*. Crucially, this anthropocentric framework is reflected in the legal and institutional structures of existing political communities.

Two rationales are usually provided for reserving justice for humans. First is the idea that justice only applies between members of a ‘shared scheme of cooperation’ (Rawls 1999, 96). Since, on this view, nonhumans do not directly contribute to the common pool of social goods, they are not entitled to take from it. Second, theorists sometimes argue that justice requires some particular characteristic – like ‘moral personhood’ – which only humans are believed to possess (Garner 2004).

These rationales are problematic on many counts. With respect to the criterion of social contribution, it is obvious that many nonhumans contribute to societal flourishing (Valentini 2014; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). Moreover, there is good reason to doubt the relevance of social contribution for meriting justice. Human infants certainly possess entitlements of justice in spite of not visibly contributing to the common pool of resources in obvious ways. Furthermore, they possess such entitlements in spite of the fact that they might lack the characteristics of moral personhood.

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In light of these shortcomings, theories have emerged (Nussbaum 2006; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Garner 2013; Cochrane 2018) which claim that justice should be extended beyond humans to individual sentient nonhuman animals. Perhaps their most important claim is that justice should not be dependent upon any kind of social contribution or capacity, but rests on something much more basic: possession of ‘well-being’ – a life that can go well or badly for oneself. On this view, being a sentient being, a creature who is aware of themselves, who can feel the effects of others’ actions upon them – in short, a being who is a ‘*subject-of-a-life*’ (Regan 2004) – is sufficient for justice.

2. From Ecological to Anthropocentric Justice

Some thinkers have argued for the extension of justice beyond sentient creatures to include all living organisms, including plants (Taylor 1986). Others have argued that ‘collectives’, such as ‘species’, ‘population’, and ‘ecosystem’ ought to be considered subjects of justice (Baxter 2004; Schlosberg 2007). These calls for ‘ecological justice’ make some sense. For one, no sentient animal is just a single solitary organism; rather there are all sorts of bugs and bacteria who inhabit our bodies. More important, however, is the inextricable link between the wellbeing of sentient individuals and the health of other sentient and non-sentient life-forms. Living organisms and biophysical processes provide a whole range of ‘services’ that allow human and nonhuman individuals in multi-species communities to flourish (Schlosberg 2007).

Indeed, Schlosberg (2007, 149) argues that simply extending justice to individual animals without recognising the importance of the flourishing of the systems in which they reside is not only counterproductive, but ‘atomizes nature’ and ‘devalues a form of life’. As such, we need to respect, recognize and acknowledge the claims of the system as a whole; this is also the only way in which we can do justice to the individuals who make it up.

The extension of justice to ecological collectives however raises some important questions about the competing claims of all of these putative subjects of justice (see also Waldow and Scholsberg in this volume). One of the most discussed areas of conflict is that between nonhuman collectives and individuals. Specifically, a focus on the justice entitlements of the ‘system’ can lead to significant harm to individuals. Such problems have been written about widely when initiatives that are meant to benefit ecological collectives harm people, for example, when human individuals and communities are displaced, and even killed, in the pursuit of biodiversity conservation (Duffy 2016). Similar conflicts emerge when there are competing justice claims between nonhuman individuals and collectives. Such conflicts are starkly evident in the domain of biodiversity conservation, since it is oriented towards the protection of nonhuman collectives.

For instance, the negative justice effects of the focus on ecological collectives are obvious where individual sentient animals are exterminated in vast numbers for the sake of the ‘ecosystem’, as is seen in efforts to manage invasive alien species such as rabbits and cane toads in Australia, and grey squirrels and mink in Scotland. Less obvious, but equally troubling examples lie in zoos, and in captive breeding, de-extinction, trophy hunting and wildlife ranching programmes which subject individual animals to serious harms in order to safeguard or promote the flourishing of a larger collective such as a ‘species’ or a ‘population’.

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Analyses of the everyday politics of conservation have shown that the valorization of collectives often serves the purpose of meeting *human interests* of one kind or the other (Srinivasan 2017), and thus tends to collapse back into anthropocentrism. For instance, by prioritizing a larger collective over individual animals, trophy hunting for conservation allows for (human) recreational interests to be met even while seeming to fulfil obligations to nonhuman nature. Similarly, de-extinction or captive breeding programmes are ultimately about addressing the human desire to preserve certain animals for a certain type of aesthetic value; any ecological function that endangered wildlife may have had has usually disappeared following the habitat loss that usually accompanies their endangerment, while surviving individuals face highly compromised life-experiences.

Indeed, this is becoming more evident with the recurrent failure of species reintroduction programmes: these animals are brought back into highly modified social and biophysical landscapes and face almost immediate persecution for the threats they pose to people (Lorimer et al. 2015; Doubleday 2018). Even if ecological functions are restored, the aim is almost always towards preserving a state of affairs that benefits humankind. The prioritization of human interests is also seen when it comes to dealing with invasive species: it is usually only those organisms that have negative impacts upon human economic, material or aesthetic interests that are targeted for control and extermination (Sagoff 2009). Creatures that have deleterious impacts on 'native ecosystems', but that serve some (human) interest, such as sheep in New Zealand, are never subject to such eradication. In effect, when nonhuman individuals are harmed in the name of the flourishing of nonhuman collectives, it is often the case that human interests are at play.

3. Grounding Justice in Shared Vulnerabilities?

How can these issues be navigated? Is it possible to extend justice beyond humans, recognise the importance of collectives to individual flourishing, whilst neither losing sight of the value of individuals, nor collapsing into anthropocentrism?

One possible pathway to negotiate these competing justice claims lies in the concept of 'shared vulnerabilities' (Derrida 2008; Plumwood 2002). This concept highlights the vulnerability that is inherent in being a living entity on this planet - one that cuts across all organisms, human and nonhuman (Srinivasan and Kasturirangan 2016). This shift in attention to our shared state of vulnerability foregrounds questions relating to how the risks of living on this Earth are distributed within and across our multispecies communities. Humans are one among many creatures who inhabit this planet, and we share with nonhuman others certain risks and vulnerabilities that underpin our embodied existence.

Justice, in the simplest sense, is about ensuring equity in how 'goods' and 'bads' are distributed. Insofar as the idea of shared vulnerabilities refocuses attention on 'bads', and specifically, who is harmed and how, it can offer fresh insights on how to navigate justice conflicts. These can be illustrated by returning to the example of conservation and showing how starting from our shared vulnerabilities problematizes common decision-making in this area.

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If we revisit the examples discussed above with renewed focus on the *different and unequal harms* faced by various members of our multispecies communities (and not only any positive gain or 'goods', such as species preservation) the calculus through which individual organisms are sacrificed in the name of the collective radically changes. For instance, the (human) interest in preserving the panda as a species would *not* trump the lived experiences of individual pandas. The extreme vulnerabilities of individual pandas in captive reproduction programmes would raise the questions of *why* and *whether* they should disproportionately bear the harms of species preservation efforts that try to mitigate *human-caused* ecological harm and loss.

This approach radically alters how different interests are balanced when attempting to do justice to all. For example, the anthropocentric classification of particular species as invasive or vermin that need eradication would not be automatically privileged over the fundamental harms that individual members of these species experience as a result of these classifications. So, for example, if red squirrels in Scotland are vulnerable and need protection, then this would not entail eradicating grey squirrels, but rather require preventing those human activities that erode red squirrel habitat and endanger them in the first place. Overall, the framework of shared vulnerabilities complicates the implicit prioritization of human interests (or, specifically, the interests of *privileged* humans) that often (but not always) colours conservation practice.

By flagging that human beings are one kind of life-form among many, the notion of shared vulnerabilities, also challenges the assumption that humankind somehow knows what is 'right' and 'best' ecologically (see also Chatterjee and Neimanis, this volume). Conservation actions that harm individual organisms to protect the collective rest on the premise that humankind can fully understand, predict and control how the rest of the world works. Human history, and in particular, the history of environmental problems, shows that knowledge is always incomplete and fallible (Harari 2014). The framework of shared vulnerabilities reminds us that *humans are part of nature*, as opposed to having special oversight, knowledge, and control. Qualifying human hubris means that actions which cause harm to vulnerable others in the name of doing ecological 'good' become far more difficult to justify; it also generates an approach based on greater respect for the agency of the rest of nature, as exemplified by rewilding initiatives that relinquish control.

The framework of shared vulnerabilities does not provide a detailed roadmap outlining how the various claims of members of multispecies communities ought to be balanced. Instead, it offers a reorientation of approach: one that urges critical attention to who is harmed and how. This reorientation offers a way of overcoming the implicit anthropocentrism that often shapes how we think of nonhuman wellbeing, especially in the context of conflicts between nonhuman individuals and collectives. This approach thus calls for engagement with these problems in a manner that is attentive to the subtle ways in which human interests enter decisions about justice trade-offs among nonhumans, that do not *a priori* privilege human interests or human knowledge, and that foreground questions of harm. It calls upon us to experiment with social and political institutions which see humans as just one creature amongst many, living in multi-species communities of shared vulnerability.

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