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Article

2015

Published version

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How to cite

HURST, Samia. Realizing interdependence. In: Bioethica Forum, 2015, vol. 8, n° 1, p. 3.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:88971>

Realizing interdependence

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The topic of this issue admittedly needs a question mark. “Caring for the environment”? Really? What does it mean? Can’t the environment, after all, care for itself?

We have always been dependent on the environment, but this may be the first time that the environment has so clearly also become dependent on us. As Huppenbauer points out [1], our recognition of this as regards our immediate natural environment need not be as politically colored as the concept of “homeland” might make it seem. This interdependence, however, has become planetary [2] and it should come as no surprise that two authors chose to address the link between bioethics and environmental questions from the perspective of an ethic of care. One of the goals of care ethics, after all, is to remind us of our interdependence.

Interdependence is sometimes very clear indeed in biomedical ethics. As Kunz and colleagues outline, it can lie at the heart of respect for autonomy itself as we realize, for example, how much assistance is required to write advance directives [3]. From this perspective it is tempting to join Vaccari’s wry “post-mortem” look at transhumanism and human enhancement [4]. Will humanism turn out to be an attempt to make us less dependent on our environment and other humans, or will it in the end strive to make us dependent on more distant humans rather than closer ones, through the intermediate steps of technologies they will continue to conceive and build?

In one sense, caring for the environment may be a straightforward requirement to do no harm: to our environment and also to ourselves as the effects of environmental degradation on human health grow ever clearer [5, 6] and sometimes outstrip the beneficial effects of medical technologies aimed at improving health. Other implications are less straightforward. Between unabashedly anthropocentric views that form the mainstream of biomedical ethics, and challengingly biocentric and ecocentric views that thrive in environmental ethics, the divide can seem unresolvable. For example, in postulating an “ecological self” as Hess outlines [7], can we escape the setting back of personal lives behind life itself? It would be a strange world in which arguments grounded in feminism seem to conclude that women – and men – should be disempowered and subjected to the mysterious demands of the otherness of life.

Yet although arguments based on the primacy of life have traditionally, and unsurprisingly, grounded oppo-

sition to personal self-determination on matters such as abortion or end of life care, this is not inevitable [8]. Moreover, as Hess quotes from the preface of van Rensselaer Potter’s “Bridge to the future”: “What we must now face up to is the fact that human ethics cannot be separated from a realistic understanding of ecology in the broadest sense. *Ethical values* cannot be separated from *biological facts*” [9, p. viii]. If the interdependence of humans and our natural environment is an inescapable fact of ecology “in the broadest sense”, to what extent does a contrast between anthropocentric and ecocentric positions in ethics still have practical implications? If human interests and those of our ecosystems are so inextricably bound as they seem to be, would arguments for one or the other not have to flow together at least most of the time? What if, as Lesch asks in a very thoughtful viewpoint [10], it was all a question of the angle from which we view the issue?

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