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Abstract:

*I apply Spinoza's accounts of individuation, power, and right to what I take to be a key problem of environmental philosophy – making sense of the array of different interests across nature, and showing why human beings ought to respect them. In particular, I approach the problem of connecting the complexity of an ecosystem with its ethical status. This occupies a theoretical gap in environmental philosophy left vacant by the most prominent philosophical account of ecosystems, provided by Lawrence Johnson. I first demonstrate that (1) ecosystems are coherent individuals within Spinoza's system, by showing that they meet the definition of individuation based upon causal collaboration which Spinoza provides in Ethics II (aided by the interpretations of this individuation by Della Rocca and Bennet). I then show (2) that Spinoza sees the right which an individual has as corresponding directly with that individual's complexity. As I argue, complexity, for Spinoza, can be understood to mean the variety of ways in which something has the power to act. I suggest that this entails (3) that a more complex ecosystem will have a greater right than a less complex one and, indeed, a greater right than any less complex individual, including those composed of human beings. This is significant because, for Spinoza, right is both descriptive and normative - one's right is part of one's nature, and so it is good for one to do only what is within one's right. There is, I will suggest, reason to believe that at least some ecosystems are in reality more powerful than human beings and societies - with reference to feasible real world cases. Most contentiously, I suggest that this entails (4) that human beings act against their own nature when they engage in the destruction of ecosystems which are more complex, and so more powerful, than they are. I attempt to show that Spinoza's fundamentally egoistic ethical framework can accommodate the idea that the greater right possessed by ecosystems directly bears on human action. To do so, I will employ Spinoza's account of self-destructive tyranny in the Theological Political Treatise, wherein when tyrants exceed the limitations of their power and bring about their own downfall, those actions are not within their right. Crucially, I suggest that it is precisely the greater power and right of complex ecosystems which renders human infringements on their right ultimately self-destructive. When the attempt to master the environment has catastrophic consequences for human beings, we should understand this as directly following from the fact that the ecosystem was more powerful, and so had greater right, than the human collective which sought to interfere with it. This will entail that, within Spinoza's system, ecological destruction does not fall within the right of human beings, and so we are ultimately bound by our own nature to respect the other individuals which permeate the natural world. Spinoza's account enables us to recognise these other individuals, to come to a more adequate understanding of our position with respect to them, and to better understand how we must act in a world suffused with ecological individuals.*