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**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Welcome to the Free Range podcast. I'm your host Mike Livermore. This episode is sponsored by the Program On Law Communities and the Environment at the University of Virginia School of Law. With me today is Ronald Sandler, a professor of philosophy at Northeastern University. He writes on environmental ethics, emerging technologies, and ethical issues surrounding climate change, food, and species conservation.

His books include *Environmental Ethics: Theory And Practice* and the *Ethics Of Species*. Ron, Thanks for joining me today.

**RONALD SANDLER:** Thanks for having me. Happy to be here.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** So one of the themes of the podcast that we've turned over a couple of times in past episodes is the relationship between the various disciplines engaged in studying the environment. You've written in areas like conservation biology and climate change that are obviously, highly influenced by scientific practice.

So maybe, just as a kind of initial question, what do you see the role of philosophy, even more generally the humanities, but I guess specifically in your instance, philosophy-- in these conversations that are so heavily conditioned by the sciences?

**RONALD SANDLER:** Well, a lot of what's going on in conservation biology, especially but in terms of thinking about large scale ecological and climatic change, climate change, and other kinds of ecological change, I mean-- is thinking about how we ought to respond to these things. And so those questions about the arts are questions that are normative.

So they aren't the sorts of questions that could be settled just by the empirical sciences alone, or projective sciences like modeling and such things. There are questions about what we ought to do. There are questions about what kind of society we want to be and there are questions that are related to what sorts of things are valuable. What sorts of things do we care about? What sorts of things should we care about? And how do we move forward in some pretty novel contexts in terms of thinking about how to protect those values?

So good environmental philosophy, good environmental ethics, good normative thinking, thinking about what we ought to do in these contexts certainly need to be informed by our best science. Like, we need to know what the reality is of climate change, its causes. We need to understand what's driving biological and ecological change. We need to have as good an understanding as possible of extinction.

What the causes of extinction are, what sort of strategies we have available to try to prevent them as much as possible. So we need really good science. But the science alone isn't enough, because the science alone won't tell us what matters. And it won't tell us how to respond well as moral agents, as people who care about the nonhuman world going forward.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah. Great. And you know, it's intere-- I ask this question in part because, some of my scientific friends and folks in the advocacy community will sometimes say, well, we have to do what the science says. And I always like to bring in the philosophers to say, well, the science doesn't fully answer the question. A couple of straightforward ethical principles might tell us a fair amount when you combine it with the science, but the science alone is never really enough.

**RONALD SANDLER:** The science will tell us what is the case, it will allow us to think about what actions will likely have what outcomes, but it never alone is enough to tell us what we ought to do. There has to be some value or some normative principle that's there. And often they're buried a little bit, so people often have these normative ideas working in the background that they might not even be aware of, right? So something like, we ought to save all species or something, right?

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Right. Well-- So on the species question, thinking about that. Something you've obviously given a lot of thought to. This question in particular, maybe one way to say is, what is valuable about species? So one hypo that you reference in a recent paper, that I use in my law school class as well, is kind of hypothetical question of-- well, say, there's a project that has to go forward and it either is going to kill 1,000 common pigeons or it's going to wipe out the last 1,000 members of a rare and/or Endangered Species that are otherwise similar to pigeons in terms of their intelligence and their habits, or whatever.

And the question is, is one course of action worse than the other? Is it worse to kill 1,000 common pigeons? I don't think many people think that. Or is it worse to wipe out the last members of the species? Which probably many people would say is worse. And then the question is kind of, why? So I guess just to kind of turn it over. You know, obviously, you've thought about that hypo. One initial question is, do you think it is worth to kill the last 1,000 members of the species? And then if so, what is it about that that is actually worse?

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah, I mean, I do. I mean, I agree. I share that intuition, right? Or that judgment that it's worth to kill the last few remaining. And right, what the thought experiment is meant to do is to set it up so that if you look at just the individuals, the individual organisms, the pigeons, or the other species. I'll call them Smigeons maybe.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** (laughing)

**RONALD SANDLER:** That have all the same capacities, then it can't be the suffering of the individuals or the deaths of the individuals. That's what explains why it's worse to kill the Smigeons than the pigeons. But so-- so the question is, what could it be? And there's different possible answers. One could be that it just decreases the diversity of kinds of organisms that there are in the world.

And we might think that more diversity of this sort is good. And so decreasing diversity in the biological world is bad. So it's worse because of the diversity. And the way in which you might flesh that out even a little bit more is to say, what is worse about it? What explains what's important about maintaining the biological diversity, is that each of those-- that species-- are a distinctive form of life.

They have a unique way of going about the world. They encode different genetic histories, the natural history that has led up to that form of life. And they are each a locus of potential future evolutionary possibilities. And so when you lose this the Smigeons in this case, you don't just lose the 1,000 organisms, right? So not just the death of 1,000 organisms, you also lose that bit of Natural History. That unique bit of Natural History. That unique set of future possible evolutionary possibilities. Which you don't with pigeons because there's loads more there.

So I do think it's possible to substantiate those intuitions or judgments that it's worse to kill the last remaining members than it would be to kill a common species. And what it reveals to us is something about why species are valuable. Why that level-- that taxonomic unit is something that we care about.

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:** And it has to do with this kind of the information that's encoded or the relationship between the kind of Natural History of that unit, that it's a meaningful unit from this perspective of existing backward in time and projecting itself forward in time. Is that roughly the idea?

**RONALD  
SANDLER:** Yeah, and that it's connected to a distinctive form of life. Like, a distinctive way of being in the world of going about, reproducing itself, of feeding and living, and predated and being predated on. And all the sorts of things that go with being a kind of biological organism in the world that are the sorts of things that we find-- I think, rightly, kind of amazing about all sorts of different-- the diversity of the biological world is a diversity of ways in which organisms go about their lives, right?

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD  
SANDLER:** And salmon and eagles, and coyotes, or if you don't like coyotes-- wolves. If you don't like wolves, fox or whatever, are each a distinctive form of life that has evolved over many, many thousands and millions of years to be that form. Now, this isn't to say that this was done intentionally. Right? That's part of what's amazing about this is the unintentional evolutionary processes that have given rise to this thing.

But if you lose the last few members of a species, you lose that form. And that's the extra loss there. That way of being in the world, yeah.

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:** Yeah, great. And then I think it's kind of-- we talk about it's amazing, right? The variety of life, the diversity of lifeforms that we have on this planet is just something that strikes awe when we contemplate it. That seems to be, if I take it correctly, is part of what-- that's important to the claim here, I think.

Correct me if I'm wrong. Because one of the takeaways that I took from one of your earlier books *The Ethics Of Species*, is that-- and this might not still be your view. (laughing) That always happens, too. We can always revise our views. But the idea that species don't have what you call objective final value, right? That kind of value in and of themselves. Their value comes from maybe an appropriate way that humans kind of relate to the natural world, and so on.

So maybe I wonder if it's worth parsing through the distinction between the idea that there would be a kind of unique-- or sorry-- objective, final value. Or some people talk about inherent value-- that kind of thing-- versus the kinds of values that you're talking about that might spring from maybe an appropriate relationship that humans have to these things.

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah, so this-- Yeah, so this gets us into the philosophical terrain a little deeper. So suppose we take this idea that species have value above and beyond the individual organisms that comprise them. And we can talk also about what makes a species a species, and what kind of thing is a species-- those sorts of things. But suppose that we can fix that, and we can say, look, they have value.

Then we can, say, well what sort of value is it that it has. And this has been one of the main philosophical issues associated with environmental ethics over the last many decades because it's connected to how we ought to respond to their value, what type of value they have. So one view is that they have-- so one type of distinction in value is between instrumental and final value.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** And that's the distinction between something that is valuable for what it is versus something being valuable as a means to an end. So if something is valuable as a means to an end, it provides services. Or something like this, it's a resource, then that would be instrumental value. If something has final value then it's valuable for what it is, in addition to or beyond what it is-- its usefulness. And that's how we think of the value of other human beings, right?

Human beings are useful to other human beings in all kinds of ways. But we don't think they're only instrumentally valuable, right? That's why you can't treat humans in certain kinds of ways because they have final value. They have rights. They're not mere things to be used.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** So on the view I was describing before about the value of species and explaining that thought experiment, that is a view that would suggest that they have final value.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** OK, but within final value there's sometimes a distinction that's made between things that have final value because they're valued that way, and things that have final value independent of their being valued that way. So on this distinction, the subjective sort of value is when something has final value just because we humans value it for what it is, and not merely for what it does.

And there's lots of things that have value like this. Like mementos or heirlooms, or these sorts of things, right? We value them. They're just an object, but they come to be valued for more than that. When some people think of species, they think that they have that-- it's not just that we do value them that way, but that we should value them that way.

And that is my view, that they should be valued that way because it's what I think of as a fitting response to an understanding of-- as you were saying before-- the way in which they're a unique form of life and they came to be. And they are future evolutionary possibilities. Like, it's the way to appreciate them. It's a way to value them. It's the way to understand ourselves in relation to them.

But what I don't think is that if there were no people around at all that these things would still have value. That is value in a world in which they're valuable. So the way I think about it is that valuing them for what they are is the most justified response. It's the way in which we ought to value them, but we can set aside, then, questions about whether there would be-- they have objective value in the sense that there would be value in the world if there was only them, or something like that.

**MIKE** Mhmm.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah, so that's the view that I find problematic in the book. I'm not sure how to make-- I'm not sure how one would justify that adequately.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Right, right. There's kind of two forks here. There's a lot of interesting stuff. I was jumping around my little schedule here a little bit.

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** There seems like there could be two forks here that I think maybe I'd be interested in exploring. So one is part of what I take it to be the source of, kind of, this objective final value is this notion of interests. That entities that have interests can have-- we might think of as having objective final value-- and species, it's hard to imagine-- it's maybe not right to think of them as having interest.

So that might be one thing that's worth exploring. The other thing that I think is interesting-- maybe I'll let you choose which of these you think is more interesting-- is the kind of ethics versus aesthetics in this domain. Because the subjective final value-- that valuing things in and of themselves, as you said, kind of mementos or the like-- I assume that great art would kind of fit into that category of things that we think of as having value in and of themselves. And that maybe even, we might say, it's appropriate for people to value them in that way. Right?

They wouldn't have value if there were no people around. That probably doesn't make any sense. But it's appropriate for people to place value in those things, in and of themselves. Now, I guess the question is, is that kind of value an ethical value, or like something that we would think is more kind of just aesthetic or something along those lines?

**RONALD SANDLER:** So I think that it depends on the details. I mean, I suppose it depends what you mean by aesthetic value, which account is that value.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** So one thing that people say about art, right, is that its beauty is in the eye of the beholder or something like that. It's just completely subjective. If you imagine that. But actually, real understanding and appreciation of art isn't quite like that. I mean, when you understand it's not just how the thing looks, right, it's not just the intrinsic relation between the colors and the material in the painting or something like that that makes something valuable.

It's that it was painted at a certain time, by a certain person, at a certain point in the history of the development of art. What was novel about it when it was done. So there is a way in which the more you can understand what's going on, the more you understand the context of the creation and the person who created it, and the histories and the traditions. Then it becomes fitting to value certain pieces of artwork more than others.

**MIKE** Mhmm.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** Because they're a certain kind of accomplishment, right? And so it's not strictly in the eye of the beholder and those kinds of contexts. So I do think that there is some similarity there with the way in which we value species. Once you come to understand what they are, where they've come from, that they encode the natural history of the planet, that they are these unique forms of life that have arisen by these human independent evolutionary processes, and that they're the locus of future possibilities and all of these sorts of things-- once you see them that way, it's fitting to value them. It's the right response to the kind of thing that they are.

**MIKE** Right.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** And we can talk about that as a relation between our valuing and their properties without having to pause at any kind of weird metaphysical stuff, right? It's appropriate for creatures like us to value them for what they are, these sorts of things. So I do think that there's a bit of connection there.

Now, what we call aesthetic, I mean, that's a whole different podcast right there.

**MIKE** Right.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** To the question about whether species have interest. So this is something folks, some philosophers and environmental ethicists do think that species have interests above and beyond the individuals that comprise them. It's not-- I think it's a difficult view to maintain because it's hard to make sense of benefit and harm to a species.

So you can benefit or harm individual wolves, but it's hard to make sense of how you benefit or harm *Canis lupus* or something like that. I mean, they're not alive. They don't feel anything.

**MIKE** Collectively.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** Collecti-- the species, the *Canis lupus* isn't a living organism. Individual wolves, yes, of course.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Right. So part of the reason why I think the ethics versus aesthetics thing can be interesting is kind of how, sometimes I think, environmental questions are processed in the public domain, how we talk about them, and the kinds of objections people raise to environmental law and so on. So kind of where I'm going with this is if someone kind of says, look, the ethical claims are kind of different in a sense than aesthetic claims, the kinds of arguments that people can raise against them.

So if someone says, look, we're undertaking this policy, this conservation policy, because we have ethical grounds for doing it, right? Then we can do things like, say, take away someone's property or place restrictions on their activities, or the like, right? The Endangered Species Act, obviously, places all kinds of restrictions on what people can do in order to conserve species to avoid extinctions.

That's an ethical thing that-- if we're doing it in because we have to, right? We have some kind of moral obligation to preserve the species or, like, that seems like a different kind of argument to be made than one that is kind of aesthetic in orientation, right? So if we were to say, we think they're beautiful or we're going to preserve some buildings or something like that, right, in a downtown area and we're going to engage in historic preservation-- which we do do this, right?

Same thing. We place restrictions on what people can and can't do with their property in order to preserve kind of historic values. It does seem like a different kind of enterprise to say we're doing this in order for kind of aesthetic reasons versus we're doing it because we have a moral obligation to do it. Now, maybe this distinction that I'm drawing is not a useful one. So I'm just-- I'm kind of just curious what your thoughts are about if there's just a symmetry between these things, or if there is different kinds of claims being made in different domains.

**RONALD SANDLER:**

Yeah, it's a great question. So the-- I mean, what we've been talking about previously is the way in which you might ground claims that species have final value or intrinsic value, or value for what they are independent of their usefulness to people. Independent of that. Now, I gave an argument, which was essentially that we ought to value them that way because that's the appropriate response to a proper understanding of the sorts of things that they are. So it's not just a kind of aesthetic appreciation in that sense.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:**

Mhmm.

**RONALD SANDLER:**

It's not just that we like looking at them or something like that. It's not just subjective. It's that we ought to value them for what they are. Now, that whole discussion we just had was focusing just on a certain way in which species are valuable for the kind of thing, the kind of life form, that they are. But species are valuable in all kinds of other ways, too, that can ground the kind of obligations and responsibilities. And, ultimately the sorts of restrictions that you're talking about.

I mean, they can be central to cultural practice, and so have all kinds of cultural value. And so they ought to be preserved for those reasons. They can be extraordinarily instrumentally valuable to providing resources and services for everything from storm resiliency to fisheries productivity. To providing clean water and these sorts of things. And they can also be the subject of justice in the sense that-- or we might say the object of justice-- in the sense that nobody owns the biodiversity of country, or an area, or the world, or something like that, right?

They are-- it's a shared communal thing. And as a matter of justice to other people, to current people, to future people, it might be that we have an obligation not to significantly diminish the diversity of the biological world.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:**

Mhmm.

**RONALD SANDLER:** So I think that when you provide a full accounting of all the ways in which species and biodiversity are valuable. Cultural, final value, aesthetic value, as an object of justice, instrumentally valuable, then the normative justification for policies and practices that protect biodiversity are overdetermined. We have more than enough good reasons to want to avoid species extinctions and biological depletion, even when it doesn't involve species distinctions.

Now, there's going to be hard cases. And that's why we have to have a right accounting of what and how things are valuable. So we can help reason through those cases when sometimes there does seem to be trade-offs that have to be made, or compromises that have to be made. But in general, I think species conservation, biodiversity conservation, is overdetermined by all those sorts of values.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah. Yeah, no. It's one of those things that's-- there are some interesting philosophical questions, but a lot of times it almost doesn't matter how we answer them because everyone points in the same direction. And just says, OK, we should be doing more conservation.

**RONALD SANDLER:** And it's interesting in these documents, like in the Endangered Species Act, right, it calls out all these different ways-- cultural value and historical value. And it just calls out instrumental values and all sorts of things. So there's an awareness of the ways in which-- the multitude of ways in which species and biodiversity are valuable.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah. I do. Just one, kind of, maybe final question on this line is-- one, this does raise, I think, the question, though, of whether we tend to focus too much on species in environmental law and policy, say, in the US where we have-- you know, the Endangered Species Act is such a powerful-- it's such an important part of our law. And it has this peg, in particular, of species.

And now it's used in lots of ways to generate conservation that's more broad, right? You have, kind of, keystone species or you have a species where you protect the spotted owl and it protects ecosystems. And it does lots of things other than just protect an individual, animals, or a particular line of species. But I guess this comes up in the context of thinking of-- you've written about transplanting species from one place to or the other.

And one of the things that it seems that you've said in your work is that, that's kind of a mistake. That's focusing too much on species. Like, it's one thing to protect a species in its place. It's another thing to kind of pick it up and move it to an entirely different location. We actually lose a lot of value, it's not clear what we maintain when we do that. So I guess the more general question is, do you think that the kind of conservation law and policy in the States, at least, is too species oriented?

And then the, kind of, related question is about this kind of moving species around and is that a wise policy?

**RONALD SANDLER:** They're both great questions. So it is an interesting feature, I think, of the way in which conservation policy in the United States has moved, right? Is the Endangered Species Act so powerful because it creates these critical habitats and designated species can function as umbrella species for conserving lots of other things-- that it becomes focused on getting on those designations and on the species conservation.

When, oftentimes, what actually is the most important thing is getting the spaces conserved. And we do that as well, right? Parks and National Parks, and state forests, and other sorts of things restrict activities in those spaces to try to conserve and preserve the things that are in those areas. So it's not exclusively with species, but the Endangered Species Act is definitely extremely powerful in the United States.



It is a really interesting question, a question that people are beginning to think more about in the context of global climate change and macro scale ecological change, anthropogenic change more generally, whether we should think more about endangered ecosystems, for example. And about whether we need policies that focus on identifying the types of systems that are endangered, whether or not we need to focus more-- and this is increasingly being done on connectivity between different habitats and protected areas. So that species population systems can reconfigure in response to these rapid changes.

So I mean, so in answer to your question, it seems like we ought to have a broader view of conservation than just species conservation. And this is also true because you can have massive biological depletion without extinction.

**MIKE** Mhmm, right.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** So on some studies, 70% of assessed vertebrate species, the populations of assessed species have decreased 70%. Not always with many extinctions, but just the number of individuals in the population have gone way down. Or if you think about fisheries, we have over 90% of global fisheries are fully or overexploited. So that's massive biological-- you know, 100 million tons of biological diversity pulled out of the oceans every year.

And these aren't really fisheries, and we call them fisheries, but they're ecological systems. So you can have massive biological depletion and impact without extinction.

**MIKE** Mhmm.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** So I do think we need to be in conservation context, thinking beyond extinction, for all of these reasons. Because the systems and the habitats are really important. And because you can have depletion without extinction. Yeah.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Right, yeah, and that's one of the things that I talk about at the end of my Endangered Species Act portion of my class. I point out the number of species that are listed and then point to the number of species that are likely to be threatened, or go extinct in the next 100 years due to these big, kind of, macro global level things like climate change and ocean acidification, and the like. And really, the one-by-one stopping extinctions one at a time just doesn't seem like a viable policy.

It starts to seem not like a viable policy approach once you start to think about there's going to be tens of thousands, potentially millions, of extinctions in the coming years.

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah, I mean, the extinction crisis that we're facing is going to be one that you can't handle with one-offs, right? And if we think about estimates vary about 15 to 20 eukaryotic plant or animal species. And then you think about the projections on extinction rates over the next century, which we could be looking at a million extinctions. So you're not going to be able to get a million species listed under this, or that act. What we need are strategies that capture and protect large amounts of species, but also the ecological systems in the spaces where they can reconfigure.

And that's not to say that the Endangered Species Act isn't super important, and that focusing on particular species isn't important. In many, many cases, it is. And in many, many cases, the kinds of threats to species are ones that can be addressed. But it does seem like we need to think more broadly and more innovatively in the context of the massive extinction and biological depletion context. Yeah.

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:**

Yeah, so one of the-- you know, this changes topic a little bit from things that we're doing that are terrible, like global climate change, to what we could do to kind of-- I mean, what we're talking about now are mitigate some of the harms that we're engaged in, right? But one question I think is interesting-- I'd be curious again about your thoughts on this. I think it's-- I, personally, find it to be a kind of deepish question, anyway, is about things that we could consider doing that would be kind of just beneficial to creatures in the natural world, to individual animals and the like.

And I think, in part, because it might illuminate some of the ways that you think-- I'd be curious about, any way, whether it illuminates some of the ways that you think about these issues. So the basic hypo that I'm interested in is this policing nature idea, right, that we could go out and there are animals-- that there's a lot of suffering in the natural world. And that we could actually reduce some of that suffering, let's just say to animals just to start with, right? That predation causes a lot of suffering. And we could go and we could feed the predators you soy-based protein and save the prey from being kind of torn to shreds. And kind of in this interventionist way.

And I take it from-- at least some of the things from the little snippets that I've seen of yours-- that you don't find that a very attractive idea. And I'm curious just on your thoughts on why that's not. And because I think it does, in a sense, link up to some of the things that we've been talking about. About, kind of, our relationship to the natural world and the like.

**RONALD  
SANDLER:**

Yeah, so, um-- so there's both practical and theoretical reasons why I find this to be an extremely strange idea for how we should engage with the natural world. So one is that there's a background view here that all suffering is bad. And that all suffering calls upon us humans, moral agents, to alleviate it. But that seems a particularly odd view.

I mean, causing suffering unnecessarily to other people or to non-human animals, we might say that's bad. But there's suffering that happens in human life all the time that is part of life. And people need to go through it. And same with thinking about the nonhuman world, I mean, the natural world is a world of predation. I mean, there is-- it's just the way the population dynamics work.

There's more offspring than can survive. There's everything needs to get energy from somewhere else. This is the wildness, and autonomy, and spontaneity, and selection process. This is like-- this is what it is. And so looking at that and then applying a principle like what we might call active beneficence, that you ought to try to reduce suffering as much as possible, seems to misunderstand the kind of thing that the nonhuman world is.

So there's a kind of background conception there about what our relationship to the world is, what the nonhuman world is, and that sort of thing. The other thing that I just find odd about it is the practicality. I mean-- now, this isn't to say that when humans do something that injures a non-human wild animal that there's not, in that particular instance, good reason to try to redress it. Because we've caused the harm or something like that.

But that's different from saying, we ought to go into the natural world and identify predators and try to feed them something else, so that they don't do these sorts of things. I mean, how on earth are we going to implement that in any sort of scale, in ways that don't then cause other kinds of harms or wrongs? And that don't significantly diminish other things that have to do with animal welfare. Because it's not just about suffering, it's also about autonomy, it's about living species, typical forms of life, and other sorts of things.

So it also involves this kind of narrow conception of what makes for a good wild animal life. So yeah, I do have concerns about those very interventionist views on how we ought to relate to the nonhuman world.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** And so then maybe, like, a kind of follow up question is, how much of the-- you know, this is an action, inaction distinction kind of thing at some level-- do you think that carries over-- this, in some ways, is like a very general question. It's kind of, like, your broad philosophical orientation. Like, kind of consequentialist anthropological virtue ethics.

Because in reading your work, one of the things I think is really interesting about it is that you do seem to draw from these different traditions and use these different kinds of forms of moral reasoning to address these questions. So I was kind of curious, if you thought that the kind of human natural distinction marked a sharp boundary there. Where we might say, oh, within human affairs, maybe we're not going to have a very strong action, inaction distinction. Or if we're going to have it, we're going to have it for instrumentalist reasons, practical reasons basically.

But broadly speaking, it doesn't kind of have foundational moral significance. But it does have a kind of foundational moral significance once we cross over into the non-human domain. Or whether, you know, you're kind of in the philosophical school that would say, no actually, we really-- there is a difference between causing harm and alleviating suffering. And that we have obligations in the first kind of side of things that we don't have on the other side of things.

**RONALD SANDLER:** That's a good question, and a big question.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah.

**RONALD SANDLER:** So let me say-- so I think that when we think about how we ought to respond to something that is important, or has value, or that matters, or has a welfare-- there's all different kinds of things-- it's not enough to just know that that thing has value or matters. We also have to think about our relationship with respect to it.

So there is no denying that my children and other people's children have the same inherent worth or value, or whatever. But that doesn't mean that I ought to treat other people's children or have the same obligations and duties to them as I do to my children. So the same is true of my dog and a wild wolf, right?

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Mhmm.

**RONALD SANDLER:** They might both have similar capacities. They both have interests. They both have welfare and they have well-being. And it might be that in both cases, I ought not cause them unnecessary suffering. So that's a way in which I ought to respond to them. But I have duties of beneficence to my dog that are part of my taking on the responsibility of having a pet, and also that have been developed over a relationship that has built over time to take care of her in a way that I don't have to a wild animal.

So in my thinking about how we ought to respond to things that are valuable in the world, we have to think about both the value and our situatedness with respect to them. And so this is what I think has gotten off about these ideas that we should intervene into the wild, into nature, into those things. It's not a human, non-human distinction because my dog is non-human as well.

**MIKE** Right.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** It has to do with the fact that it has to do with the autonomy and independence and wildness of those particular entities. And again, that's why if I cause harm to them unnecessarily, that changes my relationship to them. And maybe I have a generative restorative justice responsibility that I don't otherwise have, or that the community doesn't otherwise have.

**MIKE** Great. Yeah, of course, every question of philosophy just leads to more questions.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I totally adopted the consequentialist anthology virtue ethics--

**SANDLER:**

**MIKE** Which is fair enough, fair enough.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** That kind of thing. Because I think that the normative relationships are laid out by understanding what's valuable, and how we stand with respect to those values as agents. And that those are articulated in different sorts of ways. So in some context, the way in which we do it, we need to respect the value of the thing, that I need to respect the autonomy of other human beings. And that's why I have to respect their rights.

And that is what people would call a deontological sort of thing. But in other contexts, I need to promote the good. And the good might be the flourishing of non-human world. And that's what more people would think of as a, kind of, consequentialist thing because you're promoting an outcome. But it's understanding the context and the values that are at stake.

**MIKE** Yeah, no, and I think part of what's fun about-- personally fun-- about environmental ethics, environmental morality is it almost requires, or it certainly challenges, a lot of traditional morality. So it's kind of so interesting about-- as we're developing a way of thinking morally that is pretty new, right? Whereas, we've been doing other types of moral reasoning for a very long time.

I mean, maybe this is another question, is that part of what attracted you to environmental ethics as a domain, is that you get to, kind of, approach really-- in the history of human thinking, anyway-- pretty new kinds of problems?

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah, I mean, the systematically thinking through our ethical relationships, and responsibilities, and responsiveness to the non-human world is a fairly-- not that it wasn't happening thousands of years ago, as people were thinking about these things in certain kinds of ways. But in comparison to thinking about our moral relationships to other people, it's relatively new. And it really does create all kinds of interesting questions that we've covered quite a lot of.

Like, how do we view these other sorts of things? How do we understand our relationship to them in a proper sort of way? What sorts of values does the non-human world have, and how should we respond to those values? And it's not clearly-- the answer is not, well, just like they were people, right? Because they're not human beings. And they can't engage in certain kinds of reciprocal relationships. And they don't have certain kinds of capacities.

So it's a different set of questions. And they're urgent questions, and they're interesting questions both conceptually and practically.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah, so just returning to the situationist question I think that-- kind of see where this goes. So the relationship to one's pet, or versus a wild wolf, or one's own kids, versus other kids, right? So the kind of two things is if there was maybe at some level, right, they all have the same objective value. But you personally have different obligations because of your situated relationship to those things.

And now the kind of meta question is, ultimately, then are we kind of really taking the broad perspective and saying, all right, everything has its own kind of objective moral value, that is pretty agent neutral. And then what we ought to do is think about how to construct, kind of, our situated moral obligations and so on, in light of that fact, right? Which is to say, the world is better for everybody when people's moral obligations are situated and relationship-based. Right? And so that's the same way that we might be cosmopolitans and say that national boundaries don't have foundational moral significance, but it is good-- at least arguably, one could argue that it is good-- to have these certain types of political communities that allow for certain types of affinity, and policies, and political discourse, or whatever else, right?

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah, I mean, all people have equal worth, but not everybody's your neighbor.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Mhmm, right.

**RONALD SANDLER:** And the fact that people have worth places responsibilities on us that we need to take seriously, and that we often have to act upon and prevent harms and promote goods. But we also have relationships with our neighbors that are built over time that place additional and different responsibilities on us.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Right. And I think the kind of addendum to that might be, we wouldn't want to live in a world where it would be a worse kind of world for everyone if those neighborly relationships didn't mean something.

**RONALD SANDLER:** Well, it's just part of, I think, this is part of understanding the kinds of creatures that we are, right? I mean, ethics is ultimately a question about how should we live as the kind of creatures that we are. And what we've been talking about is we are environmental creatures. We have biological needs and dependencies. We're part of biological world. We share an evolutionary origin with other species and so on.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Mhmm.

**RONALD SANDLER:** But we're also social creatures, and we have certain kinds of social networks and relationships, and strong social and media caring reciprocal relationships are also part of living a good human life, in addition to caring about the state of people around the world.

**MIKE** Mhmm, mhmm.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah, so thinking about the kinds of creatures that we are, I think informs both why it's important to be a good neighbor and why it's important to value the biological diversity in the world.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah, so I think this actually kind of springs from this is the kind of creatures we are question, which is this isn't fixed, right? This changes over time. People, humans, or at least, collectively, humans, are very different now than we were 50,000 years ago. Obviously, our impact on the environment is very different. Our access to information is very different. Our background knowledge is very different.

Lots of things are different from what things were 50,000 years ago. And one kind of broad question I think is, as humans change, and specifically the relationship of humans to the natural environment, right? So we know a lot more about evolution than we knew a few years ago. And so maybe to start tackling this is, one, does our state of knowledge actually-- about something like evolution-- does that directly have, kind of, consequences for how we ought to kind of engage with the world in, kind of, a basic way?

Whereas, you know, again, several hundred years ago, maybe we knew what species were, but we didn't have nearly as crisp an idea of what a species was. That species went extinct, wasn't altogether clear. And so we've learned a lot about the world. Yeah, how do you see that interplay of our scientific understanding about the world, then feeding into how we ought to kind of act in the world? And not just in the, we understand what the consequences of our actions are. Right?

That's straight forward. More of like, it changes how we kind of fundamentally relate to the world and what we are vis-a-vis the rest of the world.

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah, I mean, I think it's crucial. So the fact that having an ecologically and evolutionarily informed worldview, right, the idea that we are ecologically dependent and vulnerable in all sorts of ways. But also recognizing that we have a common evolutionary origin with other species that evolution isn't trying to get anywhere. There's no such thing as the highest species. There's just different forms of life and we're a really interesting form of life. But so are our octopi. They're a really interesting form of life, too, and a distinctive way of going about the world.

And we're really well-adapted to surviving and reproducing in one context, but not in the context in which octopi are, right?

**MIKE** Right.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** So we're a unique species, but being a unique species is nothing unique to us. That understanding undermines claims about our having a special, or unique, or highest place in the ontological or metaphysical order of the world. And that's crucial to recognizing that the rest of the nonhuman world isn't so very different from us, and isn't just a resource for us to use. Right?

It's not a clean, ontological bifurcation between human beings and all the other stuff, right? And that undermines the dichotomy between-- breaking down that dichotomy breaks down or undermines the view that we should see ourselves as distinct from the rest of the world. And the rest of the world as this resource that's just ours for use. But instead, we have an affinity within shared origins, and shared dependencies, and vulnerabilities. And that needs to go into thinking about how we should respond to the world.

And this comes up to a question you asked earlier. This relates to a question you asked earlier about thinking through what would it take to really respond to the extinction crises that we're facing, right? This is why a world in which it's just humans and a bunch of resources is a depleted world. We shouldn't see that as a good outcome. And what's driving the extinction crisis is, essentially, our consumption, right?

Humans make use of 40% of the primary plant production of the planet, that is the energy that's produced by plants. We have exploited almost all the aquatic systems that we can for our food. Ranges around 38% of the terrestrial surface of the earth is used for agricultural purposes. I mean, we could go on and on about all the ways in which we impact the world. And it just doesn't leave enough for other species.

And so the only real large scale response that's going to make a big dent in extinction crises-- and we can talk about particular species conservation strategies, and designating areas, and genetic interventions, and other sorts of things-- is going to reduce the share of planetary resources that humans use.

**MIKE** Right.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** Yeah. And seeing the rest of the world as not just a resource is crucial to the worldview that needs to shift to make that possible.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** This is a-- I don't if this is an interesting question or not, but just with respect to that of the share of resources that humans use-- have we have converted to our use versus the share of resources that we might leave to what we would call maybe natural systems. So that you point out, of course, that humans are natural in a very broad sense. We come out of the natural world, we evolved in the same conditions as other species. But do you see that as a justice question? That it's a question of justice between humans and nonhumans, or is justice the wrong framing?

And if it is, how do we get at that question? Like, how do we get traction on the question of what the right amount of, say, total aggregate resources to devote to humans versus to the rest of the natural world?

**RONALD SANDLER:** So it definitely is an interesting question. So I think there's kind of a narrow conception of justice and a broad conception of justice. So the narrow conception of justice is justice that's tied to the arrangements of social, political, and economic institutions, and the roles that folks have in those institutions and the distribution of resources made by those institutions. And the amount of power that folks have within those institutions. Like, all sorts of institutional related justice questions.

And I think that's the more common sense of-- people talk about justice. So in that sense, I think it's hard to think about justice between the species. But if you think just broadly about distributive justice, or access justice, or resource, then maybe you can make sense of, it's unfair that one species would use 40% of the planetary resources when there's 15 million, 20 million other species out there.

So that's one thing. I think the question to ask-- So I think it's hard to say. Well, there's proposals out there, right? I mean, hopefully the conservation on biological diversity is going to-- hopefully, these meetings that are scheduled to happen coming up, will happen. And there's some talk that there's going to be a proposal adopted to try to set a goal of protecting 30% of the planetary surface, land and sea, for conservation.

And the other people have talked about the Half Earth proposal, and these sorts of things. So I mean, people do try to set targets. It's hard to say what exactly the right target would be. I think the question that I try to at least encourage my students to think about is, is how can we live flourishing human lives alongside, or in relation to, other species and other organisms flourishing as well? And those are very often going to be lives that-- and it's possible, right?

Like, I think there's reasons to be optimistic. I mean, it does require making changes. Like, it's pretty clear that if we eat less beef or less meat, this is going to have positive ecological benefits on the planet in a pretty big way. Like, if everybody reduces their beef consumption, if people in affluent nations reduce their beef consumption 75%, that's, like, a huge benefit, right?

And that has costs, but is that really going to undermine the extent to which we can flourish? I mean, if people change their traveling behaviors so that they have less emissions with flying, is that really going to undermine how good a life that they can live? I mean, we just have to reorient our conceptions of what a good life is, back to focusing on relationships and certain kinds of experiences and building skills, and talents and community. Rather than the consumption and acquisition of material goods. Not that we shouldn't have material goods--

**MIKE** Mhmm, right.

**LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** Not saying we-- like, the goal here isn't zero, but it is temperance. It is thinking about simplicity. It is thinking about waste and what is a distraction from living good, meaningful lives that would also enable other species and ecological systems to flourish more as well.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Great. So this is going to be a totally unfair last question because it just gets into a ton of very complicated stuff. But it does strike me as the natural follow up, which is-- so consuming less would certainly be one way to reduce the kind of footprint that humans have on the planet. Another kind of proposal that was similar in a sense of reducing human total footprint is less discussed these days, but this is about the total human population.

So there's a lot of people. And of course, for whatever amount of consumption, you can always increase the population to have whatever footprint you want. And so I'm curious how you think about those issues. I think these days there's, I think, a standard thing is just like, look, we don't have to worry about population. It's really about high consuming individuals in the rich world. And if we were to reduce that, then the problem kind of goes away at least for a while.

But I think the issue is, over the long term, if we continue to, kind of, increase population size that that's ultimately-- you're going to run into this problem of the human footprint is just going to kind of increase over time, even if we reduce our consumption levels.



**RONALD SANDLER:** So I mean, it is absolutely the case that how much we consume, how many people are consuming, and the amount of resources that are necessary per unit of consumption, let's say. Like the efficiency of production, which is a technology and other kinds of efficiency issues, are all part of this.

Now, when we talk about reducing human share of resources, the question is-- so I don't think the way to think about it is necessarily, like, what's the goal that we set, right? We have to think about the things, or the policies, or the practices that would get us there.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** Or get us moving in the right direction. And those policies and practices, too, have to be evaluated in terms for their ethical acceptability, right?

**MIKE LIVERMORE:**

**RONALD SANDLER:** And the best options are the ones that are win-wins, or win-win wins, right? So there's pretty good evidence that increasing educational and workforce opportunities for women, increasing access to health care and family planning will reduce fertility rates in a pretty strong way. Increasing security, decreasing huge inequalities. These are all sorts of things that can be addressed that can lead to lower levels of consumption, lower levels of population growth.

And I would add this shifting of the idea that-- I mean, if you watch TV, right, the picture is still what's the good life? What's a good American life? It is the maximizing the amount of stuff that you have. But we know that people's pursuit of materialistic pursuits, actually, there's good evidence, social psychological evidence, that if that's your goal, it tends to make you less happy because it tends to undermine the amount of time that you spend with other people in positive relationships, in beneficial settings.

Like, it reduces the amount of time you spend working in your community, or the time that you spend with your neighbors or with your family, or other sorts of things. So there's lots of ways on the materialism. Like, moving away from materialism. Putting into place policies and practices that would empower people. And putting into place policies and practices that would encourage certain forms of consumption over others. Like, consumption of durable, lasting goods rather than consumable, throw-away goods, that could go a long way, right?

And the good example that people like to talk about is the eating lots of meat, a meat heavy diet, right? It's actually healthier if you reduce the amount of meat consumption. Like, that's a win, and it's good for the planet. And it's good for animal welfare because the concentrated animal feed operations cause very serious suffering to the animals involved. So there's loads of ways on population, on consumption, on conceptions of the good life, where we can find, I think, these win-win wins. And that's what we have to aim for.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Absolutely. There's certainly no reason not to be going after that if it's making everybody better off. The only question is, why we're not doing it already?

**RONALD SANDLER:** And that would probably be more of a political question, I would guess. Yeah.

**MIKE** Exactly. Well, unfortunately we probably don't have time to open that can of worms. So I guess I'll just thank you  
**LIVERMORE:** for joining me today. You know, we've covered a lot of ground, and it's been a really fascinating conversation.

**RONALD** Well, thanks for having me. This has been good fun.

**SANDLER:**

[MUSIC PLAYING]