

## R O L S T O N

Several billion years of creative toil have generated several million species, which have been handed over to the care of a single late-coming species, *Homo sapiens*, in which mind has flowered and morals have emerged. Only humans are moral agents, but perhaps our conscience ought not be used to exempt every other form of life from consideration, with the resulting paradox that the sole moral species acts only in its collective self-interest toward all the rest.

The main problem is that extinction shuts down the evolutionary process and its products. Every extinction is a kind of super-killing. It kills forms (species), beyond individuals. It kills essences beyond existences. It kills the soul as well as the body. It kills collectively, not just distributively. To kill a species is to end a unique story; and although all such stories must eventually end, as in natural extinctions, we seldom want unnatural ends. Humans ought not to play the role of murderers.

One form of life has never endangered so many others. Never before has a question of such magnitude — super-killing

by a super-killer — been deliberately faced. Humans have more understanding than ever of the natural world they inhabit and of the speciating processes. They have more predictive power to foresee the intended and unintended results of their actions and more power to reverse the undesirable consequences. The duties that such power and vision generate are emerging duties to specific forms of life. Ought not this sole moral species do something less self-interested than valuing all the products of evolution in purely self-interested terms? There is something Newtonian, not yet Einsteinian, something morally naive, about living in a reference frame where one species takes itself as absolute and values everything else relative to its utility.

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*A humpback whale breaches in southeast Alaska. All the great whales except eastern Pacific grays are on the U.S. endangered list.*



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