Intro (00:01):

Yale Podcast Network. Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, YDS alum, Emily Judd interviews Ryan Darr, assistant Professor of Religion, ethics and Environment at Yale Divinity School, professor Darr reflects on the threat of species extinction and why it is cause for concern.

Darr (00:27):

There's something deeply troubling about the thought that species that have been on this earth for this long are potentially being wiped out by us.

Intro (00:34):

He counters any Christian theology that gives greater value to humans over other creatures, arguing that all creatures reflect God in different

Darr (00:41):

Ways. I think it's hubris to think that we can tell which creatures reflect God more or less than any other creatures.

Intro (00:48):

And Professor Dhar argues that the question, what can I do to help the environment can be dangerous.

Darr (00:54):

We don't need a whole bunch of individuals trying to figure out what they can do individually. We need communal action.

Judd (01:02):

Professor Darr, thank you so much for joining us today. We share the planet with countless animals, plants, insects, yet some are vanishing right before our very eyes. Why should people care about this? Why should people care about species extinction?

Darr (01:21):

Well, first of all, thank you for having me. It's a privilege to be here and talking to you. This is, I think, a very important question. So our era is a time in which, as you say, species are disappearing at an increasingly rapid rate. Estimates have it between a hundred and a thousand times faster than the ordinary rate at which you'd expect species to go extinct, which has some people warning that we may be entering the sixth mass extinction, which refers to the fact that geologists have discovered five mass extinction events over Earth's history. So why should we care about the loss of other species? I mean, one very straightforward reason is Prudential, which is to say that human lives depend in crucial ways on the existence of other species. So there's the obvious fact that we eat them. There's the fact that they function to clean water, to clean air, make the planet beautiful in ways that make life more worth living.

(02:17):

I once heard an interview from scientists at one of the top meetings for biodiversity. This was a few years ago, in which the scientist was asked about the greatest threats to humankind. And her answer was, the greatest near term threat to the stability of human life on earth is climate change. But the

greatest long-term threat to human existence is biodiversity loss. And that's not at all to downplay the significance of climate change, which is already killing hundreds of thousands of people every year. But it's to say that at least according to her, the greater threat to the existence of human life on earth is the loss of other species. So that's one straightforward reason. I think if we leave it there, we lose something crucial, which is that the existence of other species matters for its own sake. And there are plenty of arguments you can offer here and I think are worth offering. But I am always wary to start with arguments. I think that simply attending to this issue, paying attention, reflecting on it, is usually enough for people to recognize that they do in fact care. Many species have been on this planet for millions of years, some tens of and hundreds of millions of years.

Judd (03:32):

You can see them at the Peabody Museum. They have a lot of the different species and how they evolved and fossils, et cetera.

Darr (03:40):

Yeah, no, that's right. I mean, one species that I was thinking about recently is horseshoe crabs. They're relatively simple species, live primarily in the ocean and have been around for over 400 million years longer than the time of the dinosaurs have survived. All of these mass extinction events and now are endangered by human activity because we're harvesting them both for eating but also for medical technologies. And I think if we just learn about them and pay attention to them, I think we just in fact do care that there's something deeply troubling about the thought that species that have been on this earth for this long are potentially being wiped out by us. I mean, the question that it gives drives to is what right do we have to claim the earth as only a home for us and not make space on it for these other creatures who have mostly been on earth longer than we have? They're also, of course, theological reasons to think that other species matter. I mean, the Christian tradition declares all species and everything God made good. There's been a long tradition of reflecting on other creatures as manifestations of the goodness of God, that God's goodness is too much to be reflected by one's single creature. But God had to make all sorts of creatures so that creation could and better reflect the goodness of God. And every time a species is wiped out, we seem to be impoverishing creation's ability to do that.

Judd (05:01):

Just because you're bringing up Christian theology and teachings. There are some people that would say the Bible, and it says it in the Bible that God tells Adam, you have dominion over all the other animals. And so that implies that there's a hierarchy among all living things. But you have said that there can be a Christian theology that rejects this hierarchy. Can you outline that?

Darr (05:31):

Yeah, so I mean, first off, we have to clarify what we would mean by hierarchy. So what I have in mind is a hierarchy of value among creatures. And I think this is a standard way of thinking. This is often traced back to the notion of the great chain of being, which does have a long history in Christian thought, which sees creation as a kind of continuum from the lowest non-living creatures up through plants and animals, and with humans at the top of earthly things, and then potentially angels higher. And that's the kind of hierarchy. I don't think that we have a justification to accept it. It's often founded on the idea that the higher creatures get, the more they're like God, because God is of course the highest standard

of goodness. But I think that the distinction between God and creatures is far greater than any distinction among creatures.

(06:20):

And I think it's hubris to think that we can tell which creatures reflect God more or less than any other creatures. I think, as I said before, we should see all creatures as reflecting God in different ways. So I want to reject the idea that there's a value hierarchy in creation, but what the passage and genesis you're referring to talks about is a particular role given to human beings. And I think a role is different than the idea of being of greater value. So I mean, in a democratic country, we think one person holds the role of president, and yet nobody is of any higher value than any other. And I think we can think creation in ways like that. Of course, that doesn't tell you exactly what it means that we have dominion over other creatures. So we have to then fill out what exactly do we think that means. And I mean, one thing I think Christians have to do is read any idea of dominion or lordship through the example of Christ who says that though he has dominion over us, he comes to serve and not to be served. So again, I don't think you get a picture of humans as having a kind of dominion in which they can do whatever we want to other creatures out of this,

Judd (07:27):

Funnily enough, I was just at the Yale Center for British Art, and I think it's on the fourth floor. There's a huge painting of a man with whips and tigers and lions and cages. And then on the frame, there's the biblical verse that I just mentioned that says, essentially God gave Adam or humans the dominion over all living things on earth. And I mean, the clear message from that is then you can treat them however you want to treat them. You can abuse them, et cetera. But you're saying something obviously different than that, and you have said that the way we treat other species is a matter of justice. What did you mean?

Darr (08:11):

Yeah, so I mean something pretty straightforward by this, which is the way we treat other species. We have obligations, which is to say that we can wrong them, that if we treat them in ways that violate these obligations, we wrong them. And the flip side of an obligation is a right. And as soon as obligations and rights are in play, I think we're in the realm of justice. I think what this means is that our relations to other creatures are relations in which justice is relevant. And then once justice is in play, I think we have to think not just about what kind of individual duties do we have, but what kind of social structure do we need to protect rights and to ensure obligations, which is what we do in relation to other humans. So I think that this then raises questions of law and of animal protection and other environmental protections.

Judd (09:00):

Laws are there to protect endangered species. But how can ethics, religion, spirituality, where does that come in in terms of protecting endangered species?

Darr (09:12):

Yeah. Well, I think they're crucial. So the first thing I'll say is that laws are very, very important. I don't want to say anything to denigrate laws. We need laws, and they're at the foremost of what's important in our efforts to protect other species. But the laws that we have are at present sufficient, which again isn't to say anything negative about law or the laws that we have. So I mean, for example, the most relevant law here is the Endangered Species Act, which is one of the most powerful environmental laws

in the world. And it has done tremendous work protecting species that would've otherwise gone extinct from growing extinct. But the endangered species law is only relevant to species that get listed as endangered, which means that it's only relevant when species reach a certain threshold of threat. It does very little to protect the actual number of species.

(10:07):

So I mean, one way to put it is it protects species or at least tries to protect species against extinction, but it does very little for the thriving of other species. And one of the great threats we face right now is often described as deformation. So it's not about the actual disappearance of other species from the world, but about the numbers of other species going down. There was a World Wildlife Fund study that was published, I forget maybe just last year, that estimated that over the last 50 years, wildlife populations have dropped 73% globally, which is just a stunning

Judd (10:42):

Globally,

Darr (10:42):

Globally a stunning number. And that's an issue that's obviously related to mass extinction, but it's different from extinction. It's about the number we need, I think broader protections for wildlife for this reason. But as you said in your question, law alone is not enough. I mean, part of the reason is that this is democratic country and the law is going to reflect the ethics and views of the citizens. So I mean, at present, the Trump administration is trying to undercut the endangered species act by arguing that, so it protects any listed endangered species against harm. And the Trump administration has decided that harming the ecosystem or even destroying the ecosystem of the species doesn't count as harm. It only counts as harm if you directly harm the creature, which is of course an absurd argument to destroys ecosystem. Where is it going

Judd (11:38):

To live to

Darr (11:38):

Destroy its existence?

Judd (11:40):

But

Darr (11:41):

This is exactly why law can't do the job alone. We need people who will see this and push back against this. And I mean, religion and spirituality are crucial here mean so many of us get our moral orientation and our view of the world from our religious traditions and our spiritual practices. And there's so much richness there in the Christian tradition and in other traditions that I think religious leaders can be doing more to highlight in order to teach us to attend to these issues more.

Judd (12:11):

You did mention climate change earlier, and you teach on environmental ethics, climate change, and you've written about climate change and moral responsibility and how difficult it is for an individual

person to comprehend that long-term firm threat of climate change. What can be done to help people understand the individual agency and responsibility that they have in relation to environmental destruction?

Darr (12:42):

Yeah, I think that this is such an important question because people, when they try to think through this question, often do find themselves overwhelmed. I mean, I personally find myself overwhelmed. I think the first thing to say is that climate change is not an individual problem. It's first and foremost a structural problem. It's about the laws, the economy structures of production distribution. And so individual who looks at the problem and feels overwhelmed is just noticing the truth of the matter, which is that this is not a problem that can be solved by an individual, especially an individual acting individually. That said, it would be too easy then to say, well, it's not an individual problem, so individuals can walk away from it or can ignore it and let systems figure it out. I mean, this is an emergency and it requires all of us to do what we can.

(13:34):

And I think this is especially urgent for those of us who really benefit from the fossil economy, and I include myself among those who do and therefore have sufficient economic and social power to act on this in important ways. So I think we all need to think about what it can mean for us to act on this issue. Again, sensitive to where we find ourselves in terms of social location, opportunity, power. But even there, I think it's dangerous to frame the question as what can an individual do? So here I like to draw on the wisdom of the great climate activist, bill McKibbon, who's often asked the question, what can I as an individual do in the face of this global problem? To which he responds, stop acting like an individual. And I think that's exactly the right perspective. We don't need a whole bunch of individuals trying to figure out what they can do individually.

(14:27):

We need communal action. I think the first step is to recognize that there are already so many organizations and leaders out there doing amazing work on this issue. And if we're not trying to act as an individual, we need to look for ways to join what's already happening. And again, that work is going on and it's not hard to find. So what I would say to people is don't think of yourself as an individual. Don't think in terms of your individual contribution, think in terms of your joining with others. The other thing I always want to add here is that there's a temptation to think that the first place to start us with consumption. And I don't want to say that purchases don't matter, that consumption patterns don't matter, but it's dangerous to think that what we need to do first is buy different things. I mean, I think anytime you think your solution to environmental problem is buy more stuff, you've taken a wrong step. It makes sense to replace inefficient things with efficient things when they're being replaced. I'm not against any of that, but anytime we foreground consumption, I think we're just falling into the same kind of capitalist consumerist logic that has this in this problem in the first place.

Judd (15:40):

What would you say to some, when you talk about community, for instance, that it needs to be on the community level? Are you talking about local community or institutions or what did you mean by that?

Darr (15:55):

Yeah, all of it. I mean, I think we're in a situation where this is enough of an emergency that all of us should be acting at whatever level we find ourselves with some kind of agency. So I mean, given that we're at a moment in which national politics in America are very unlikely to be responsive to climate

concerns, I think it makes sense to invest a lot of attention in the local and state levels, because a lot, I mean, what happens in cities is crucial. I think it makes sense to even direct activism at companies who may be more responsive than the national government. But I mean, here in New Haven, we have, for example, a youth led organization called the New Haven Climate Movement, and that's doing work at the city level, and I think that that's crucial. We also have multiple state organizations that are up in Hartford lobbying for environmental legislation. So I'm thinking about those kinds of things, but also, I mean, just ways in which we learn to live more communal lives in which we can change consumption patterns, not by buying more and things, but by needing less because we find ourselves living in new kinds of community. I mean, I think that's crucial, both as part of the solution to climate change, but also as adaptation as we learn to live in a rapidly changing and more threatening world.

Judd (17:12):

Bringing it back to YDS in terms of different solutions that are being offered for climate change. The Living Village, this eco-friendly sustainable housing complex for students is going to be opening in August. And I'm wondering what excites you about that project?

Darr (17:33):

Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, there's a lot to be excited about it. It is really an important time at YDS around this issue. I think the thing that excites me most is to see what impact it has on the culture here. I mean, we're going to have a good chunk of our students living in this housing that generates its own energy. It filters its own water that is built from materials of the highest standards of sustainability. And that is hopefully going to create a kind of community around those values and bring those into our conversations here. We're also thinking a lot about how the Living Village can start to inform the curriculum and what we teach here. So some people will talk about a living curriculum to go along with the Living Village, and it's those prospects the way, not just the building itself, but what it'll do to this community that most excites me.

Judd (18:26):

Yeah, I can't wait to see it myself. So before you became an assistant professor of Religion, ethics and environment at YDS, you were actually a postdoctoral associate at Yale Institute of Sacred Music. There is the Religion, ecology and expressive culture initiative there. I'm wondering how did that affect your own teaching and interests? And if you can explain a bit about that initiative that I think started, was it 2022? I think

Darr (19:00):

That's right. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I was really privileged to be brought on as the first postdoc for that and help get that initiative launched. Although, I mean, the kind of planning it and dreaming of it went way back before my time. So it's an initiative that takes the resources of the ISM, that it's a attention to liturgy and to the arts and to religion and focuses those on issues of environmental concern. And in particularly, it supports artists and scholars who are doing work at the intersection of religion, ecology, and expressive culture in ways that allows them to put on performances, to do art exhibits, to put together edited volumes, trying to get that work out in front of people. I mean, one of the convictions behind it is that the environmental crises we face can't be solved simply by arguments that of course, we need to be out there.

(19:57):

We need to be making these arguments. I mean, that's primarily what I do as a scholar, but we need more than that. We need storytelling. We need art, we need music. I mean, we need to bring all the powers of human imagination and artistic production in order to communicate what really matters here and in order to transform ourselves to be up for the moment that we face. So that's the motivation behind it. And we've put on a number of art exhibits and performances and poetry readings and conferences, many very powerful events. For me, I mean, one of the things that it did was it gave me a lot of time to think about the role of arts in pedagogy. And I think this is probably the thing I most carry away from it. I put together several classes that use particularly and stories to address issues of climate and environmentalism.

(20:51):

So I'll talk a little bit about one, it's a class called Eco Futures Theology, ethics and Imagination. And what the class does is pairs speculative fiction, particularly environmental speculative fiction with theology and ethics to think about the kind of stories we tell about our future and the ethical questions they raise. I designed this course in part because of the number of times I heard students express a kind of despair towards the future, which in some ways is justified. And yet I would often find myself thinking that under the surface of that despair is a certain narrative that's assumed that often isn't sufficiently reflected on critically, and that maybe is coming from popular culture and the kind of dystopian storytelling that we're so familiar with. And so what we do is we read more what you could call optimistic or hopeful stories, which isn't to say that they in any way paper over the trouble that's coming, but what they do is they tell stories of people who survive, who make it, and communities that find new ways to thrive, new ways to pursue justice and sustainability in a rapidly changing world. And then we think about the kinds of ethical questions these stories raise, and we think about the kinds of stories that we tell ourselves and how we might change the stories we tell ourselves and others.

Judd (22:07):

And my final question, what gives you hope when it comes to the climate crisis or the response, let's say, to the climate crisis that you're seeing? Is there any new technology or ethically new methodologies that are being developed that's giving you hope?

Darr (22:28):

I don't think the hope that I have comes from something I would point to that's new. I think it has more to do with what's old, which is the capacity humans have had and shown over many generations to survive the catastrophic. I mean, climate change is often described as apocalyptic and for good reasons, but many have responded, and particularly indigenous authors by saying, we've been through the apocalyptic before and we're still here. And that's one of many stories of human beings facing tragic and difficult situations and finding ways to survive and even thrive in the face of it. And it's that more than any particular technology or particular idea or event that gives me the hope that however bad it looks, it's been bad before and we need to do what we can.

Judd (23:23):

Well, thank you so much, professor Darr for joining us today for this conversation.

Darr (23:28):

Thank you. It was a

Intro (23:28):

Pleasure to be here. Thanks for listening today. We hope you'll tune in again for the next episode of the YDS Quad Cast.