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Environmental Ethics: An Overview [A24201]

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ABSTRACT

Environmental ethics is the study of normative issues and principles relating to human interactions with the natural environment. It comprises an increasingly significant field of applied ethics, crucial for the guidance of individuals, corporations and governments in shaping the principles affecting their lifestyles, their actions and their policies across the entire range of environmental issues. Debates include theories of normative ethics and of meta-ethics, and the adequacy of individualist, holist and ecofeminist stances. It is characteristically concerned with the good of future generations and of nonhuman species as well as that of contemporary human beings. Its scope includes the interpretation and application of the precautionary principle and of policies of sustainable development, grounds and policies for biodiversity preservation, and the nature and basis of obligations to assist adaptation to global warming, and to mitigate the anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions widely recognised to constitute one of its principal sources.

KEY WORDS

anthropocentrism, biodiversity, climate change mitigation, ecofeminism, environmental ethics, future generations, intrinsic value, non-human creatures, Precautionary Principle, sustainable development

KEY CONCEPTS

Environmental ethics is a field of study, adjacent and comparable to business ethics and bioethics, and not itself a normative stance. (For Bioethics, see also DOI: 10.1002/9780470015902.a0003473.)

Stances in environmental ethics characteristically take into account future generations and non-human creatures as well as contemporary human interests.

Environmental ethics as a branch of philosophy arose in the 1970s through the work of Richard Routley, John Passmore, Arne Naess and Holmes Rolston.

Far from being unavoidable, anthropocentrism disregards the intrinsic value of non-human flourishing and the prevalence of moral concern for nonhuman suffering.

Despite their differences of emphasis, animal ethics and environmental ethics need not conflict, and need to be informed by each other.

Environmental ethicists can adhere to a range of meta-ethical stances, but objectivism and cognitivism have clear advantages concerning the status of reasons for action.

Ecofeminists such as Val Plumwood and Marti Kheel have well argued against excessive rationalism in environmental ethics and for a greater role for the emotions.

Rival theories of the causes of ecological problems often undermine each other, but solving these problems may require a restructuring of the global economic system.

Policies of sustainable development, as presented in the Brundtland Report of 1987, seek to address these problems through combining development and sustainability.

The Precautionary Principle suggests that a global agreement is urgently needed to mitigate emissions of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental Ethics is the study of normative issues and principles relating to human interactions with the natural environment, and to their context and consequences, and thus to how ecological problems should be addressed. It comprises an important area of applied ethics, crucial for the guidance of agents such as individuals, corporations and governments in shaping the principles affecting their

lifestyles, their actions and their policies across the entire range of environmental issues. How should we respond to such issues, and which actions, policies and lifestyles best address them?

I. WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS?

While the phrase 'environmental ethics' is sometimes used to refer simply to the ethical (or unethical) character of people's behaviour where it affects the natural environment, it is important that this phrase is also used not just of behaviour but also of the normative principles applicable to it, and their critical study. This critical study is itself widely known as 'environmental ethics', the subject of this overview.

Environmental ethics is sometimes differently defined as the kind of approach to environmental issues which finds independent value located not only in the interests of intelligent or of sentient creatures, but also in natural living creatures in general, or in the natural world in general (Thompson, 1990). While many influential philosophical perspectives are committed to this kind of approach, many others say otherwise, and base their justifications on the interests of sentient creatures or even of human beings only. Since the latter kind of approach is adopted by many environmentalists, and undeniably offers not only specifications of environmental problems but also solutions to them, it is wise not to adopt a definition of 'environmental ethics' which treats this approach as lying outside environmental ethics. If the phrase 'environmental ethics' is used more inclusively, the debate about the location of independent value can continue to take place within its boundaries, and its boundaries need not be treated as themselves a battleground about values. Similarly environmental ethics can be recognised as a neighbour of e.g. business ethics or medical ethics, concerned with a different sphere, but not as a rival discipline with distinctive values of its own.

The sphere of environmental ethics has made it much more aware than ethicists have usually been of the interests of future generations and nonhuman creatures. Where the interests of prospective people used to be neglected in general theories of normative ethics, such an omission has now become unsustainable. This change is due at least in part to certain pioneering works in environmental ethics (including Passmore (1974) and Sikora and Barry (1978)). Simultaneously the anthropocentrism of traditional ethics has widely been qualified so that at least sentient animals are taken into account, as a result of the work of ethicists such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan (e.g. Singer, 1976; Regan, 1983). Thus environmental ethics tends to be based on the interests of future generations and of nonhumans, as well as current humans. Meanwhile anthropocentric philosophers have become conscious that they hold a minority standpoint in normative ethics, which cannot be assumed and needs defence.

II. ORIGINS OF MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

When Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection became widely accepted in the late nineteenth century, recognition of the interdependence of living species became possible, and at the same time recognition of the far-reaching unintended side-effects of human action. This recognition began when George Perkins March published *Man and Nature: Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (Marsh 1865). The efforts of early American conservationists to preserve wild species and tracts of wild nature soon led to the setting up of National Parks such as Yellowstone (in Wyoming) and Yosemite (in California). (For Darwin's theory, see also: DOI: 10.1002/9780470015902.a0005883.pub2.)

But an extension of ethics to cover every species of the living systems of the planet was not proposed until the mid-twentieth century, in Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. In Leopold's 'Land Ethic', the land is the community of the interdependent species of the planet, including the other components of their ecosystems. It was Leopold's claim that 'a thing is right when it tends to promote the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.' (Leopold, 1949, 224-5).

During the 1960s environmental concern became widely prevalent, with increasing alarm being voiced about nuclear fall-out, population growth, and also about pesticides, as in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962). Before long the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess was classifying ecology movements by the depth of their concerns (Naess, 1973); and the need for a new environmental ethics was presented to a World Congress of Philosophy by Richard Routley (Routley, 1973). What was distinctive about such a new ethic was investigated in a ground-breaking paper by Holmes Rolston (Rolston 1975). By this time, the first environmental philosophy conference had been convened by William T. Blackstone at Athens, Georgia, and environmental ethics courses were being taught at Universities, both in Wisconsin and at Cardiff.

Environmental Ethics, the first journal in the field, was founded by Eugene C. Hargrove as Editor-in-Chief in 1979, and is now based at Denton, Texas; Rolston serves as Associate Editor. By now there are several other journals, such as *Environmental Values*, founded at the University of Lancaster, and work in this field can increasingly be found in mainstream philosophy journals. Meanwhile in 1990 Rolston, the author of the leading monograph in the field (Rolston, 1988), founded the

International Society for Environmental Ethics, of which he became President. The Society has organised sessions at major philosophy conferences all over the world.

The discipline of environmental ethics is thus institutionally entrenched in many parts of the developed world. Third world scholars have also played an active part in its development. The late Henry Odera Oruka was the founding director of an Ecophilosophy Centre at Nairobi, Kenya, and organised in Nairobi in 1991 a World Conference of Philosophy on the links between environment, development and philosophy. A further example is supplied by the International Conference on Development, Ethics and the Environment, organised in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 1995 by Azizan Baharuddin, of the University of Malaya. Third World environmental philosophers frequently underline the importance of blending environmentalism with the need for economic and social development to remedy the problems of poverty and injustice. Priorities between these values continue to be debated.

III. SOME NORMATIVE DEBATES

Most environmental ethicists do not restrict moral standing to human beings, and distance themselves from anthropocentrism. This is sometimes argued on the basis that many nonhuman animals are sentient, and that their interest in not being made to suffer has to be recognised as morally relevant; indeed discrimination on the sole basis of species-membership has been labelled 'speciesism' (Singer, 1976) and compared to other kinds of discrimination such as sexism and racism. Others appeal beyond sentience to the capacity of all living organisms to develop and flourish in the manner of their own kind; while others again claim that rights belong to species, and even to ecosystems.

Anthropocentrists may respond that human beings cannot help appropriating resources from nature, and thus prioritising their own interests, and that, as agents, they inevitably operate within a humanity-focused perspective. However, these claims are consistent with a non-anthropocentric stance in ethics; a humanity-focused perspective is compatible with recognising ethical considerations independent of human interests, whether motivated by sympathy, by identification, or by respect for nature's otherness. Others claim that the underlying ground for identification with nature is nothing but the good of the person whose understanding is thus enlarged and humanised; but this stance has been accused of narcissism, and also seems blind to the independent significance of e.g. animal suffering.

Those who reject anthropocentrism also engage in a debate between those who regard all bearers of moral standing as having equal moral significance, and those who recognise differing degrees of moral significance, related usually to differing capacities (in point of sentience and/or intelligence). The egalitarian camp regards belief in degrees of significance as discriminatory and arbitrary; the other camp respond that environmental justice demands that priorities be observed when clashes of interest occur. While the kind of biospheric egalitarianism which makes each organism count for one may in theory be a consistent position, it suffers from the handicap of making life unliveable in practice (Attfield, 1992, 1994).

A further debate arises between campaigners for animal welfare and campaigners for the conservation of species, ecosystems or wilderness. This debate often maps onto a radical difference of values, with animal welfarists arguing from the well-being of individual sentient creatures, and conservationists, when not appealing to human interests, sometimes arguing that species or ecosystems have an independent, holistic value. These camps are allies for many practical purposes (as over preserving the last

members of an endangered species), but they often diverge, as over the culling of deer in Scotland, of seals in Canada, and of elephants in southern Africa.

Debates of this kind often turn on 'intrinsic value' (value which is neither instrumental nor in any other way derivative, but depends entirely on the nature of its bearer) and on its location. Both animal welfarists and many conservationists reject an anthropocentric view of its distribution. But while the former locate it in individual well-being, some of the latter locate it in diversity, in wildness, in independence from human impacts, or simply in nature (understood as the realm independent of human agency), sometimes adding that pain and suffering are intrinsically neutral (rather than bad), besides being instrumentally good where they contribute to the maintenance of ecosystem stability. However, the value of diversity seems to depend on its contribution to stability; the criterion of wildness would deprive all domestic animals of intrinsic value; and the independence criterion elides the distinction between living creatures and abiotic nature. Further, if pain does not count as an independent reason against what causes it, it is difficult to see what else counts. This reasoning applies irrespective of whether the pain is experienced by a human being or a nonhuman animal.

This does not mean that welfarists have nothing to learn from the conservationist camp. Conservationists, for example, can explain the importance of predation to both predators and prey, and thus why human beings should seldom if ever intervene to prevent it. Predation, parasitism and suchlike apparent evils turn out to carry a positive (but derivative) value for the species and systems involved. Further, if human society is to attain sustainability, and avoid undermining the interests of future generations, ways must be found of not undermining the ongoing operation of those natural systems on which human life depends. Unless welfarists grasp the networks of

interdependence pervading the natural world, their contribution to environmental ethics is fatally flawed. This, however, need not detract from their principled objections to factory farming, or to sport-hunting, or make them any less valid.

Another debate concerns whether environmental philosophy should concern itself with values or with ethics at all. In face of robust criticisms from Richard Routley of Deep Ecology, with its belief in the value of nature as a whole, and in the self-realization which this belief makes possible, Warwick Fox claimed in its defence that talk of value on the part of Deep Ecologists such as Arne Naess and George Sessions should not be taken literally, that advocacy of beliefs about value and ethics was futile, and that the underlying message of Deep Ecology concerned the identification of the self with the greater Self of nature. Once self-realization of this kind is achieved, agents will in any case be motivated to defend nature, and no purpose will be served by ethical talk, or talk of values either (Fox, 1990). Replies have mentioned the self-undermining character of identification with nature as a whole, the lack of guidance available once values are discarded, and the need for the interpersonal reasons that are implicit in values if action is to respond proportionately to current problems. Deep Ecology also seems to underplay nature's otherness, an equally important source of environmental concern as empathy and identification.

IV. META-ETHICAL DEBATES

In addition to enriching value-theory and normative ethics through its stress on future generations and on nonhuman creatures, environmental ethics has had to examine the status of its own claims, and has thus breathed new life into the discipline of meta-ethics. Objectivists hold that claims about value, about rightness, and about obligation admit of truth, and present interpersonal reasons for action, as opposed to being

simply expressions of emotion or prescriptions. Objectivists usually also hold that knowledge is sometimes possible in these areas (Rolston, 1988; Attfield, 1995). Subjectivists, by contrast, maintain that value is always value either for someone or some group or some valuational framework, and that ultimately there are no independent standards by which such valuing or frameworks can be compared. Such views appear to deprive claims about value or obligation from supplying reasons for action capable of being treated as serious or binding.

Related debates concern whether any single theory of value or obligation should be accepted, or whether adopting a plurality of theories might be preferable to seeking such closure. Such debates continue to figure in journals of environmental philosophy, and in mainstream philosophy journals too, such as *The Monist*.

V. ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminists often find connections between the oppression of nature and that of women, sometimes maintaining that these kinds of oppression are indivisible (Warren, 1990). Others have replied that some societies oppress women but not nature (Kelbessa, 2011), while sometimes, as in the wearing of furs and the hunting of foxes, women have apparently been among the oppressors rather than the oppressed. Each kind of oppression needs to be resisted, whether they are connected or not.

Another kind of ecofeminism has been voiced by Val Plumwood, herself one of the founders of environmental philosophy. Environmental ethics, in her account, is often excessively rationalist in approach, and has an inadequate place for the more traditionally female trait of emotion. (Plumwood, 1991). A similar point had earlier been argued by Marti Kheel, responding to J. Baird Callicott's 'Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair' (Callicott, 1980) in 'The Liberation of Nature: A Circular Affair'. Kheel objects to entrenched dualisms, and maintains that, in place of Callicott's three starkly opposed options of traditional humanism, animal liberation and holistic environmental ethics, we should envisage a continuum of stances forming a circle

(Kheel 1985). Certainly animal welfarism and environmental ethics need not be regarded as polar opposites (Attfield, 2012).

VI. CAUSES OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Problems such as pollution, resource depletion, loss of cultivable land, and loss of wilderness are often assigned common causes. For example, the theory that certain religious attitudes are responsible for these problems has often been put forward, but has also been severely criticised (Attfield, 2009). More material causes need to be considered.

Population growth is often suggested as a principal cause, and many ecologists actually advocate reductions of the human population. Yet environmental problems are more concentrated in areas of intense industrial activity than in areas of population concentration. While some environmental problems can be correlated with population growth, this kind of growth in turn is often driven by poverty, and these problems are thus unlikely to be resolved until poverty itself is tackled. Meanwhile the causes of environmental problems in industrial areas cannot be set down to population growth, since problems of this kind can be found in its absence; for those problems, the proposed causes include affluence and, additionally, modern technology, and proposed solutions sometimes commend in response an ethic of simpler life-styles, reliant on technology of a less consumptive kind.

However, economic forces, rather than levels of individual consumption, are likely to drive the polluting processes; and this has led to advocacy of limits to economic growth, and sometimes of abandonment of modern technology. But humanity is unlikely to be fed, let alone global problems to be solved, without the aid of modern technology, and, if so, then not all growth should be rejected. Nor would the adoption of self-sufficiency, whether by individuals or by regions (as is sometimes proposed), contribute much to the solution of these problems. The problems have to be understood against the background of the current inequitable international economic

order, and are unlikely to be comprehensively solved unless this order is radically restructured. Theories in which all this is neglected are likely to prove transitory.

VII. SUSTAINABILITY

Environmentalists used in the 1970s to advocate limits to growth and no-growth societies, but their successors from the late 1980s have often been advocates instead of sustainable development. 'Sustainable Development' was the central theme of the Brundtland Report (World Commission for Environment and Development, 1987), where it was defined as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Besides stressing that not all growth comprises beneficial change (or development), the authors of this report stressed that development must be sustainable, and thus introduce economic and social processes capable of being continued indefinitely, without undermining either themselves or the ecosystems on which both nonhuman creatures and human economic systems depend. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro (1992) took some promising steps toward converting this notion into reality.

Supporters of sustainable development, however, encounter problems of definition, together with opposition from diverse directions. When they attempt to specify what is to be sustained, one account, which makes this the economic value of natural resources, would allow the elimination of species and habitats whenever this would result in enhanced technological options for humanity, while another account, which would debar all such changes, would prevent almost all development in regions (for example) of rain-forest, at the cost of failure to satisfy basic human needs. Sustainable development, insofar as it diverges from policies supported by traditional economics, needs to blend the criteria of satisfying current human needs, providing for future needs, and preserving the bearers of intrinsic value (nonhuman creatures included).

Some radical environmentalists would still criticise the concept of sustainable development for permitting 'business as usual', and for being too easily appropriated into the vocabulary of capitalist enterprises. Certainly conventional politicians and business leaders often pay lip-service to 'sustainable development', meaning thereby nothing but sustained economic growth. These environmentalist critics sometimes urge an ethic which would reject development and/or industrialism altogether, and focus on stabilising economic processes. Meanwhile other critics object to departures from cost-effectiveness, and claim that sustainability is not always a virtue. However, both sustainability and development embody values which should not be discarded lightly. Hence work continues both on the theory and the practice of sustainable development, both at international, national and local levels.

VIII. PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Ideal solutions, such as a radical restructuring of the world economy would involve, are not the only concern of ethics. It is also concerned with what should be done while systems and structures remain largely as they are, by agents with limited powers and limited opportunities for action. Despite having greater powers than individuals, governments and corporations are often in this position with little more freedom of action than individuals. The approaches which follow are suited to agents and agencies in situations of these kinds.

A. The Precautionary Principle

In view of the danger that environmental impacts will cross critical thresholds or prove irreversible, and of evidence that environmental risks are often underestimated until it is too late for an adequate response, the principle has increasingly been accepted by European governments in recent years that action such as regulation may justifiably be taken to avert serious or irreversible environmental harm in advance of the availability of scientific evidence confirming that harm. This Precautionary

Principle is not a basic principle, is all too liable to be given an anthropocentric interpretation or a pro-Western bias, and needs to be applied in conjunction with principles both of sustainability and of justice. It is also often mis-represented as advocating preventive action in face of all risks. But its adoption involves little more than common prudence, and its earlier implementation could have curtailed acid rain, ozone-depletion and even global warming of the period since its anthropogenic nature became known.

B. Biodiversity

While environmentalists take different views about the grounds for preserving biological diversity (diversity, that is, of species, sub-species and habitats), there is widespread agreement that such preservation is vital for humanity, quite apart from the intrinsic value of the creatures preserved. Such preservation involves the funding of species-rich but materially poor countries (biodiversity hot-spots) on the part of richer ones, and the willingness of such species-rich countries to forego certain forms of development in species-rich areas to make possible such preservation.

Significant progress was made in an international agreement at Nagoya, Japan in 2010 in pursuance of the Convention on Biodiversity (adopted at Rio in 1992). Much now depends on the willingness of the 190 signatory countries to deliver on their commitments under the agreement.

C. Climate Change

Climate change and global warming are now widely recognised to be largely caused by human activity, through the emission of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane, and likely to raise the level of the oceans through the melting of polar ice-caps enough to threaten the continued existence of islands such as the Maldives, and the inundation of low-lying areas such as much of Bengal, plus their flora and fauna, human beings included. Even before scientific consensus existed, application of the Precautionary Principle already implied that constraints on carbon emissions, at

least on the part of developed countries, were ethically obligatory. Developing countries, however, cannot justly be expected to curtail energy generation until they are able to satisfy the basic needs of their citizens, although low-carbon forms of generation should, where possible, be used instead of conventional forms, technology transfer permitting. Emission quotas must therefore be internationally agreed and observed, preferably through the treaty which the parties to the Durban Summit of December 2011 have agreed to negotiate. (For climate change, see also: DOI: 10.1038/npg.els.0003488.)

Meanwhile, philosophers have recently turned their attentions to the study of climate ethics. Some (like Henry Shue) adopt an historical and collectivist approach, others (like Simon Caney) an individualist one grounded in human rights. The most prominent collection in this field is Gardiner et al (2010).

An agreement on carbon emissions will not make the Earth an ecological paradise, But rudimentary steps such as this one are ethically indispensable, and could supply a paradigm for the further measures which will be needed on the part of the global citizens of the future, and of their countries.

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GLOSSARY

Anthropocentrism: the type of theory of normative ethics which locates independent value solely in human interests, as opposed to nonhuman interests.

Biospheric egalitarianism: the theory that every living organism in the system of ecosystems of the planet (biosphere) has the same moral significance as every other.

Intrinsic value: value which is neither instrumental nor in any other way derivative, and depends entirely on the nature of its bearer.

Ecofeminism: the kind of feminism (the movement against the oppression of women) which relates ecological and feminist themes.

Ecosystem: a localised and more-or-less self-regulating system of interacting living and non-living organisms, such as a wetland or a forest.

Environmental ethics: the study of normative issues and principles relating to human interactions with the natural environment, and to their context and implications.

Intrinsic value: value which is neither instrumental nor in any other way derivative, and depends entirely on the nature of its bearer.

Meta-ethics: the study of the nature and status of valuational and ethical claims and discourse.

Precautionary Principle: the principle that action, involving the best available technology, or alternatively prohibitions of action, may justifiably be adopted to avert environmental harm, in advance of the availability of scientific evidence confirming that harm.

Sustainable development: development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs; or alternatively: desirable socioeconomic change capable of being sustained into the indefinite future without undermining either other desirable socioeconomic processes or natural species and ecosystems.