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Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics is a subdiscipline of philosophy originating in the early 1970s. It is principally interested in questions of the nature and value of the human and nonhuman world, and with what an appropriate human-to-nonhuman relationship might look like, or how it is that humans ought to interact with nature.

Environmental Crisis and Environmental Ethics

From the early 1960s until the present, nearly every work dealing with environmental issues begins with and assumes the truth of the premise that the world is in the throes of an unprecedented "environmental crisis." In fact, some works contain nothing but a recounting of the myriad of global and anthropogenic environmental horrors. Over this same period, environmentally concerned philosophers began to explore the philosophical issues underlying this sense of crisis in order to both understand and remedy it.

In the 1960s and 1970s the assumption of the presence of an "environmental crisis" was manifest in a growing awareness of and concern about such things as the noticeable increase in air and water pollution in large cities, rapid and irreplaceable soil erosion, and the threat of industrial and agricultural chemical poisoning (no doubt due in large part to the widespread success of Rachel Carson's landmark 1962 book *Silent Spring*). This first phase of the environmental movement was centered principally on local and regional environmental concerns. It was also characterized by the conviction that the environmental crisis was a problem of an inequitable distribution of environmental "goods" (e.g., clean water and air) and environmental "bads" (e.g., water and air pollution). This era of environmental thinking also spawned much of the "doomsday literature" that contended that we are rapidly heading toward an ecological and social (as these things are intertwined) catastrophe, and that the only thing that will avert our course is a significant alteration in our most fundamental institutions (e.g., "abandon capitalism," "reject the market economy," "stop consumerism," etc.). In short, the distinctive feature of this first wave of environmentalism was the intense concern for the survival of the human species and the view of the nonhuman environment as simply a means to secure this continued human existence. Anthropocentrism, then, underlies the era's concern about various environmental goods, their longevity, and their

Aldo Leopold Defines the "Land Ethic"

The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.

This sounds simple: do we not already sing our love for and obligation to the land of the free and the home of the brave? Yes, but just what and whom do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter downriver. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, and carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already extirpated many of the largest and most beautiful species. A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these "resources," but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.

Source: Leopold, Aldo: (1987). A Sand County Almanac. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 204.

distribution. Interestingly, some philosophers came to suggest an expanded anthropocentrism as the appropriate response to the environmental crisis at this same time.

The late 1980s to the present have witnessed the second phase of this environmental crisis. In addition to the more local, point-source issues of the 1960s and 1970s, the present focus of concern has become planetary in scope. Such things as rapid global warming due to the greenhouse effect, massive and abrupt loss of biological diversity, the poisoning of the world's lakes and rivers by acid rain, and the suspected hole in the Earth's ozone layer due to CFC (chlorofluorocarbon) emissions, have become the rallying points of more recent environmental concern. It appears that we have now attained the never before imagined (much less realized) ability to alter the condition of the planet itself. With this second phase of the environmental crisis, we are forced to grapple with the realization that our ability to increase the amount and rate of environmental damage has so greatly increased in degree that it has actually changed in kind. Primarily because global damage by its very nature precludes replenishment or regeneration from elsewhere—as more localized point-source impact does—environmental degradation on a global scale is an entirely different condition. While some philosophers view this second phase of environmental concern as perfectly compatible with anthropocentric concern and are still clearly arguing from this point of view, others find such a position lacking. For them, this second phase of environmentalism is marked by a turning away from solely anthropocentric

justifications for environmental concern and action in favor of more expanded and non-anthropocentric ethical motivations: granting value directly to the nonhuman, as well as the human world, and rejecting the narrow view of "nature as resource." Additionally, during this second era of environmentalism, a belief developed that our environmental situation is not only, or chiefly, a matter of resource distribution and human survival but equally (and maybe even more fundamentally) a cultural and value issue. A primary assertion of this current era of environmental concern is that our inherited and collective ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and values are also in part responsible for our environmental situation and are also therefore in dire need of examination.

Origin of Environmental Ethics

In the early 1970s a small cadre of philosophers began to realize that underlying our concern for and discussions about land use, biodiversity loss, and pollution were very real, interesting, and novel ethical questions. They also began to see that at the core of our disagreements about what we should do with land, how we should value other species, and which policies we should enact to mitigate pollution were very complex philosophical notions about the nature of humanity, the nature of the nonhuman world, and the nature of an appropriate relationship between the two. These philosophers quickly realized that environmental issues are inherently and intractably philosophical and ethical issues.

Those outside of philosophy have increasingly recognized how critical the work of environmental ethics and environmental ethicists is to natural-resource issues. Courses in environmental ethics were promptly required for natural-resource majors in college. Environmental ethicists were granted joint appointments in colleges of natural resources, invited to sit on natural resource advisory boards, on editorial boards of natural-resource journals, requested to participate in and join typically scientifically orientated organizations and conferences, and welcomed to contribute articles to journals and chapters to textbooks in conservation biology, forestry, environmental policy, and other natural-resource areas.

Typology of Theories

As the subdiscipline has evolved over the past three decades, environmental philosophers have separated into a number of distinct camps. Such camps distinguish themselves most profoundly by the value that they assume nature possesses and hence by the method or standard by which they believe we ought to go about addressing our environmental woes.

Anthropocentrism

First, there are those who believe that environmental policies ought to be motivated and justified by their effects upon humans. Of course these anthropocentrists often (but not always) recognize both the full range of human values and the fact that human well-being is intimately entwined with the well-being of at least certain parts of the nonhuman world. For the anthropocentrist, only humans possess intrinsic value (i.e., value beyond merely instrumental value as a means to an end), all else is only instrumentally valuable: the nonhuman is valuable only insofar as it impacts humans. Anthropocentrists, then, agree with Immanuel Kant who argues that "all duties towards animals, towards immaterial beings and towards inanimate objects are aimed indirectly at our duties towards mankind," or John Passmore who claims that "the supposition that anything but a human being has 'rights' is . . . quite untenable" (1980). Hence, for the anthropocentrist, we ought to be concerned about environmental destruction and act to mitigate it only because such destruction does or might negatively impact human beings: plant biodiversity in the rainforest is valuable, for example, because it might provide cures for certain human diseases.

Zoocentrism

Second, there are philosophers who believe that, in addition to humans, certain nonhuman animals possess intrinsic value and garner direct moral standing. These animal-centered, or zoocentric, ethicists argue that for all the reasons that we directly consider humans as intrinsically valuable, logical consistency demonstrates that we ought also to value certain nonhumans as intrinsically valuable given only that these nonhuman animals possess the same trait that makes humans morally relevant. For the zoocentrist, humans and certain nonhuman animals possess intrinsic value, all else maintains only instrumental value. Hence, the zoocentrist would be concerned about environmental destruction because of the actual and potential negative impact that it has on both humans and certain nonhuman animals: rainforest biodiversity preservation is important, for example, because it might provide cures for both human and certain nonhuman animal diseases.

Biocentrism

Third, some philosophers have argued that the only way to avoid logical moral inconsistency is to directly include all living things within the moral community. These life-centered, or biocentric, thinkers argue for the intrinsic value and direct moral standing of all individual living things, leaving only non-individual living things as possessive of merely instrumental value. Albert Schweitzer, perhaps the most popularly recognized "biocentrist," summarizes the position: "Ethics thus consists in this, that I experience the necessity of practicing the same reverence for life toward all with a will-to-live, as toward my own. Therein I have already the needed fundamental principle of morality. It is good to maintain and cherish life; it is *evil* to destroy and check life" (1923, 254).

For the biocentrist concern for, or policy regarding, environmental degradation is motivated and justified by the impact that it might have on *all* individual living things: we ought to be concerned about biodiversity loss, for example, because of the effect it has on humans, fish, and trees.

Universal Consideration

Fourth, some have even gone so far as to argue that the only sensible and logically consistent moral community would be one inclusive of all individual things, whether living or not. Those advocating this "universal

consideration" suggest that we live in a morally rich world where we ought to begin with the assumption that everything is imbued with intrinsic value and possessive of direct moral standing. As Thomas Birch puts the position: "Universal consideration—giving attention to others of all sorts, with the goal of ascertaining what, if any, direct ethical obligations arise from relating with them—should be adopted as one of the central constitutive principles of practical reasonableness" (1993, 313). Hence, their reaction to or policy proposals attempting to curb environmental degradation would be motivated not only by the impact that such loss has on all living things, but also by the impact that such loss has on even nonliving things such as mountains, rivers, or rocks.

Ethical Holism

Fifth, reacting against the atomism or individualism of all of the above approaches to environmental ethics, and appealing to the science of ecology and the notion of holism, some philosophers have argued that the biosphere as a whole, as well as the systems that constitute it ought to also be directly morally considerable. Although their approaches and arguments vary, this ethical holism refocuses moral concern on the maintenance of the health of biotic communities, species, ecosystems, and even the earth as a whole—if one were to extend this idea as far as James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis. The most recognized version of this ethical holism is expressed by Aldo Leopold when he asserts that "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (1949). The various forms of deep ecology are also popular representations of this position. Hence, environmental degradation, as it manifests itself in biodiversity loss for example, is a matter of concern because the health of species as well as specimens, watersheds as well as rivers, and forest ecosystems as well as individual trees are negatively impacted.

Ecofeminism and Ecojustice

The discussions within environmental ethics have also spawned a variety of interesting and exciting areas of specialty. For example, "ecofeminism," as defined by leading ecofeminist scholar Val Plumwood, "is essentially a response to a set of key problems thrown up by the two great social currents of the later part of this century—feminism and the environmental movement—and addresses a number of shared problems"

(1993). Ecofeminists have developed most insightful analogies between the historical oppression of nature by humans, and that of women by men; suggesting that Western environmental problems should be—perhaps even that they can only be—understood in light of a larger historical attempt to bifurcate the world in such a way where women and nature are linked with that which is morally degraded or downgraded, and men and the nonnatural are conceptually tied to the morally relevant or superior.

Other thinkers have focused on how it is that various forms of environmental degradation, and even various proposals to remedy this degradation, play out in terms of justice between and within societies. Critiquing such notions as gross national product (GNP) as a measure of progress, capitalism and free market economics, technological fixes to environmental problems, wilderness area and park importation to third-world countries, and economic development, those interested in issues of environmental justice (or ecojustice) have dramatically illustrated the negative global result of our current environmental problems but especially how the costs of environmentally negligent behavior must be unfairly borne by some but not others. As philosopher Peter Wenz puts it, "questions about justice arise concerning those things that are, or are perceived to be, in short supply relative to the demand for them" (1988). Given that the Earth's resources are finite, and given that we are all concerned with getting our fair share of those resources, environmental issues and ethics are inherently a matter of justice.

In his classic 1949 essay "The Land Ethic," Aldo Leopold declared that conservation would remain trivial—unable to assert itself as a genuine alternative to the rampant despoliation of the land—until it could muster an ethical underpinning; unless and until, in Leopold's words, philosophy and religion had heard about it. The work begun by environmental ethics in the early 1970s and continuing today serves to fulfill Leopold's vision. Environmental ethics is proof that philosophy has indeed taken serious notice of conservation.

Michael P. Nelson

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Environmental Impact Statement

An environmental impact statement, sometimes called an environmental assessment, generally refers to a public document, prepared by a governmental agency, which discusses the potential environmental consequences of a proposed project, as well as alternatives and a recommended course of action. In preparing the