

Chapter 2

Environmental Ethics: When Human Beings and Nature Are Not Two

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces some core issues in environmental ethics (EE) from a multidisciplinary perspective. This approach's primary purpose is to make explicit the richness and complexity of the subject, where arguments coming from natural sciences, politics, philosophy, economics, or psychology often intertwine. Moreover, although it is risky, the diversity of views tries to engage interested readers from different fields and non-specialists. After the introduction, the chapter focuses on the characteristics of the different views on non-anthropocentric EE. Next, five of the main ethical frameworks are presented. This is followed by some specific points of view, which are capital in the subject (intergenerational ethics, precautionary principle, deep ecology, environmental justice, indigenous peoples, and feminism). An exploration of consumption and population follows. Finally, some key points on sustainability and human development precede the conclusion of the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

A radical new conception of man's relationship to the rest of nature would not only be a step towards solving the material planetary problems; there are strong reasons for such a changed consciousness from the point of making us far better humans. If we only stop for a moment and look at the underlying human qualities that our present attitudes toward property and nature draw upon and reinforce, we have to be struck by how stultifying of our own personal growth and satisfaction they can become when they take rein of us. (Stone 1972)

Traditionally, ethics has focused on analyzing a specific set of questions about relationships and behaviors affecting rational beings. Under this paradigm, only individual human beings have to be considered

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by ethics. Nevertheless, since the 20th century other non-human living beings have been recognized by many as deserving moral consideration (e.g. conscious animals or trees). In fact, this widening of the ethical concern has extended itself even to encompass the whole biotic community of our planet. As a result, there is now a far more complex setting for human beings because many new questions have appeared and the answers are still being discussed, with different points of view, inside several subjects (natural sciences, economics, politics, philosophy, psychology and law, among others). In this sense it can be said that the field of environmental ethics is a necessary opportunity to undertake a full revision of the pursuits and responsibilities that human beings assume in relation to Earth, all its inhabitants and to future generations.

This ongoing revision arisen by environmental ethics is, and will be, a huge task. Certainly, ethics is playing a necessary role in it, but ethics alone is not enough. What follows here is an interdisciplinary attempt to introduce some of the most relevant concepts, perspectives, issues and difficulties involved in both the study of its many implications and the proposal of actions and policies that could help leave the dead end we are in.

BACKGROUND

Since the 17th century many philosophers have criticized the ill-treatment of animals or the unnecessary pain that we provoke to them. Based on different reasons, J. Locke (1632-1704), J-J. Rousseau (1712-1778), I. Kant (1724-1804) and J. Bentham (1748-1832) appear among these first voices. Nevertheless, the origin of Environmental Ethics (EE) as a branch of applied ethics, a subfield of philosophy, dates back to the early 1970s and inherits the increasing environmental worries reflected in several works published in the previous decade. Three of them are often highlighted due to their subsequent influence on contemporary debates. Carson (1963) reported how some pesticides used in farming could poison the environment and also, through food, have consequences on public health. White (1967) argued that one of the reasons of our ecological crisis could be found in the justification provided by the Christian theology of human exploitation of nature, as if it had been created to serve the necessities and desires of human beings. Finally, Hardin (1968) exposed how the unrestricted private use of public resources together with the continued increasing of population was going to provoke serious shortages and several environmental damages.

According to B. A. Minteer, EE is “[...] the field devoted to understanding the character and structure of environmental values and clarifying the responsibilities these create for moral agents and for society as whole” (Gardiner 2017, p. 528). Let the concept of anthropocentrism be our starting point for exploring EE. Anthropocentrism defends that only human beings have intrinsic moral value. Therefore, all the other organisms, species and systems have no moral significance to human beings. A distinction can be made between weak and strong anthropocentrism. Thus, the previous definition corresponds to strong anthropocentrism, while weak anthropocentrism accepts that non-humans can possess some inherent moral values, but they always being second-class to human values. In addition, epistemological anthropocentrism recognizes that every perspective on the world is inherently human-centered. Or, in other words, all our concepts and ideas depend on particular characteristics of perception and mental processes in human beings.

In non-anthropocentric ethics the set of moral subjects is more comprehensive, while moral agents remain to be limited to rational beings. Different versions of ethical non-anthropocentrism (sentiocentrism,

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