

Environmental Ethics & Human Values

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Abstract

*Environmental ethics is the philosophical discipline that considers the moral and ethical relationship of human beings to the environment. Environmental ethics helps define man's moral and ethical obligations toward the environment, but **human values** become a factor when looking at environmental ethics. Human values are the things that are important to individuals that they then use to evaluate actions or events. In other words, humans assign value to certain things and then use this assigned value to make decisions about whether something is right or wrong. Human values are unique to each individual because not everyone places the same importance on each element of life. For example, a person living in poverty in an undeveloped country may find it morally acceptable to cut down the forest to make room for a farm where he can grow food for his family. However, a person in a developed country may find this action morally unacceptable because the destruction of forests increases carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere, which can negatively impact the environment.*

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Environmental ethics, along with human values, make for challenging philosophical debates about man's interaction with the environment. Water and air pollution, the depletion of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, destruction of ecosystems, and global climate change are all part of the environmental ethics debate. And we see that within the discipline of environmental ethics there are tough ethical decisions humans must consider. For example: is it acceptable for poor farmers in undeveloped countries to cut down forests to make room for farmland, even if this action harms the environment? Is it morally wrong for humans to continue to burn fossil fuels knowing that this action leads to air pollution and global climate changes? Is it ethically permissible for a man to build a hydroelectric dam knowing that this will disrupt the migration pattern of certain fish, leading to their extinction? Does a mining company have a moral obligation to restore the natural environment destroyed by their mining techniques?

Why we protect nature is at the fundament of environmental policy. There are currently two major ways of framing this paper : intrinsic values, which reflect nature's inherent value, independent of people, and instrumental values, which relate to the value of nature for people (nature provides commodities — such as food, water and precious metals — and valuable ecosystem services — such as regulating climate). Instrumental values can become blurred with commercial values, which can make nature into a commodity, and have thus been criticized by some. Nature's value can be expressed and realized in other ways and this paper — an opinion piece based on a review of the academic literature on environmental values — argues that focusing only on instrumental and intrinsic values fails to resonate with views on human wellbeing or what people believe to be the 'right way to act towards the environment, and may not lead to the fairest or desirable environmental policy outcomes. Intrinsic and instrumental values are important to conservation, thinking only in these terms misses a "fundamental basis of concern" for nature. These two values are often presented as alternatives, while in fact, they can co-exist, and many environmental concerns could be better understood as connected to both, via a third group of values called relational values. Relational values, prominent in a range of philosophies, can be defined as the "preferences, principles, and virtues associated with relationships, both interpersonal and as articulated by policies and social norms".

Many human actions affect what people value. One way in which the actions that cause global change are different from most of these is that the effects take decades to centuries to be realized. This fact causes many concerned people to consider taking action now to protect the values of those who might be affected by global environmental change in years to come. But because of uncertainty about

how global environmental systems work, and because the people affected will probably live in circumstances very much different from those of today and may have different values, it is hard to know how present-day actions will affect them.

This complex causal structure makes projecting the human consequences of global change a trickier task than is sometimes imagined. It is misleading to picture human impacts as if global change were like a meteorite striking an inert planet, because social systems are always changing and are capable of anticipation. So, for example, an estimate of the number of homes that would be inundated by a one-meter rise in sea level and the associated loss of life and property may be useful for alerting decision-makers to potentially important issues, but it should not be taken as a prediction, because humans always react. Before the sea level rises, people may migrate, build dikes, or buy insurance, and the society and economy may have changed so that people's immediate responses—and therefore the costs of global change—may be different from what they would be in the present.

One may imagine human consequences as the output of a matrix of scenarios. Assume that four sets of scenarios are developed for the futures of the natural environment, social and economic organization, values, and policies. Joining together all combinations of one scenario from each set, and adding assumptions about people's immediate responses, would generate an extensive set of grand scenarios. The human consequences of global change could then be defined as the difference between the state of humanity at the end of one grand scenario and the state of humanity at the end of a base case or reference scenario with a different natural-environment component. By this definition, a particular change in the natural environment has different consequences depending on the scenarios assumed for society, values, and responses.

The tradition of post hoc case analysis involves assessing the actual human outcomes after past environmental changes (and given the responses that actually occurred), in the hope of drawing more general conclusions. Research in these traditions, combined with analysis of human response, can offer valuable insights into the human consequences of global change. Changes in society that incidentally affect human responses to global change are important both directly and because they could become tomorrow's deliberate responses. For example, gasoline taxes, which were not initiated with the global environment as a consideration, could be increased to cut CO₂ emissions. Studies of the incidental effects of such actions might inform decision-makers about what could happen without deliberate intervention and about which present policies might make societies more robust in the face of global change. Both kinds of knowledge are essential for informed policy debates.

Response to global change may be coordinated, as through the policies of governments or trade associations aimed at eliciting the same action from many actors, or uncoordinated, as with independent actions of households or small firms. Both types of response can be either anticipatory or post facto; both can affect global change either deliberately or incidentally. Moreover, coordinated and uncoordinated responses can be connected to each other, in that coordinated actions by governments and industries can create new options for uncoordinated actors, prohibit responses, or raise or lower their costs. For example, global warming is the direct result of a change in the earth's radiative balance; humans can mitigate global warming by any actions that slow the rate of change or limit the ultimate amount of change in the radiative balance. (3) They can intervene in the environment for example by directly blocking incident solar radiation with orbiting particles or enhancing the ocean sink for carbon dioxide by adding nutrients. They can intervene in the proximate causes by regulating automobile use or engine design to cut carbon dioxide emissions or limiting the use of certain nitrogen fertilizers to reduce nitrous oxide emissions. They can intervene in human systems and indirectly control the proximate causes, by investing in research on renewable energy technologies to replace fossil fuel or providing tax incentives for more compact settlements to lower demand for transportation.

Mitigation of ozone depletion might, in principle, involve the release of substances that interact chemically with CFCs, producing compounds with benign effects on the stratospheric ozone layer limiting emissions of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and other gases that deplete ozone, or developing alternative methods of cooling buildings that do not rely on CFCs. Mitigation of threats to biological diversity might include, at least in principle, engineering new varieties, species, or even ecosystems to save diversity, if not individuals; limiting widespread destruction of tropical forests, estuaries, and other major ecosystems; or promoting systems of land tenure and agricultural production that decrease the pressure for extensive development of tropical forests.

Humans can intervene in several ways on the response side of the cycle. Such actions are sometimes generically called adaptation, but there are important distinctions among them. One type of response, which can be called blocking, prevents undesired proximate effects of environmental systems on what humans value. It can be described by example. If global climate change produces sufficient warming and drying (drought) on a regional scale, it may threaten the region's crops; development and adoption of drought-resistant crops or crop strains can break the connection between environmental change (drought) and famine by preventing crop failure. Similarly, loss of stratospheric ozone threatens light-skinned humans with skin cancer,

through exposure to ultraviolet radiation; avoidance of extreme exposure to sun and application of sunscreens help prevent cancer, although they do not mitigate the destruction of the ozone layer. Tropical deforestation threatens species with extinction by eliminating their habitats; the creation of forest preserves would provide many species with sufficient habitat to survive, while doing little to slow net deforestation.

All social systems are vulnerable to environmental change, and modern industrial societies have different vulnerabilities from earlier social forms. Modern societies have built intricate and highly integrated support systems that produce unprecedented material benefits by relying critically on highly specialized outputs of technology, such as petrochemical fertilizers and biocides; hybrid seeds; drugs and vaccines; and the transmission of electricity, oil, and natural gas from distant sources. Although these complex socio-technical systems contain great flexibility through the operation of global markets, they may have vulnerabilities that reveal themselves in the face of the changes that these systems have helped create. For instance, modern societies have become highly dependent on fossil fuels and vulnerable to a serious disruption of supply or distribution systems. They also support much larger and denser populations than ever before; such populations may be vulnerable to ecological changes affecting the viability of their food supplies.

Evidence from studies of disasters suggests that the poor, who lack diversified sources of income, political influence, and access to centralized relief efforts, tend to be worst off (Erikson, 1978; Kroll-Smith et al., 1991; Mileti and Nigg, 1991). However, studies to assess the vulnerabilities of larger human systems, such as national or world food or energy systems, are rarely done (e.g., Rabb, 1983). The far side of vulnerability is also little studied: When a system fails to resist environmental pressure, under what conditions does it return to its previous state? If it undergoes permanent change, what determines the nature of the new state?

Human Values as a Source for Sustaining the Environment

Every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings. -Earth Charter, Principle 1a Due to the overwhelming dominance of homo sapiens, natural environments are no longer self-sustaining, and their continued existence will depend on human agreement to sustain them. Given present commercial historical realities, such agreement will require new kinds of moral reasoning about the relationship between human beings and ecological systems. The preservation of natural environments is obviously of great human utility as a source of valued things. But the sustenance of natural ecosystems and their inhabitants, on the basis of their intrinsic worth, does not yet have an effective theoretical defense against human speciesism, the continual expansion of capitalistic systems, and the present dependence of humans

on human-made physical and social environments. The intrinsic worth of natural ecosystems has been explained by proponents of deep ecology and maintained within traditional indigenous cultures, but such advocacy seems thus far to operate in a cognitive dimension separate from the rest of Western (i .e., “Northern/Euro-American/ secular-technological”) moral reasoning .

Conclusion

Virtue ethics looks more promising because the moral ground is higher and provides a perspective from which we can value natural beings in a way totally apart from their use to us. We can value them and teach our children to value them as an expression and extension of what is best in our character. Indeed, our own flourishing may require an appreciation of, and respect for, natural beings in ways that treat such beings with the utmost moral and aesthetic seriousness. Thus, Thomas Hill (1983) explains how our behavior toward natural beings reveals the presence or absence of human traits such as sensitivity, humility, and gratitude. The problem with the virtue ethics approach is that it seems to relegate the sustenance of natural environments and beings to the province of manners and sensibility. This aspect of human life is personally and socially important only after pressing problems of survival have been solved, and it is not usually a priority in the face of human need and suffering. More problematic, the sustenance of natural beings as part of the development of human virtue remains an enterprise in which humans, and not those natural beings, are central. On a good day, when I am not too pressured by concerns directly affecting my livelihood, I may make a contribution to the preservation of rainforests. And why, as a matter of virtue? Because it will reflect well on me in contexts where I have to account for myself, and more importantly, will strengthen my virtue of generosity. Something stronger than this kind of rationale would seem to be necessary if sustenance of natural environments is a serious moral issue.

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