

What is Environmental Ethics?

“Environmental ethics is moral philosophy concerning nonhuman nature.”

Moral philosophy from Socrates to Sartre has always been *anthropocentric*.

“Environmental ethics is revolutionary in departing from a bi-millennial tradition in moral philosophy that has identified humans exclusively as the subject matter of ethics.”

asks questions that cut across main branches of philosophy:

metaphysics (from the Greek words *metá*, "beyond", "upon" or "after" and *physiká*, “physics”) : the branch of philosophy that concerns the nature of existence. What is real?

axiology (from Greek *axiá*, "value, worth"; and *logos*, “study of”—“the study of values”) : the branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of values (ethics and aesthetics are areas of axiology).

epistemology (from Greek *epistēmē*, "knowledge, science", and *logos*, "study of"): the branch of philosophy that concerns knowledge. What is the source of knowledge? What is truth?

aesthetics (from Greek *aisthetikos*, meaning "esthetic, sensitive, sentient"): the branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art and taste, and with the creation and appreciation of beauty.

ethics (from Greek *tà ethiká*, “The Ethics” derived from *ethos*, “character or personal disposition”)

:branch of philosophy that addresses questions about morality—that is, concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime, etc.

Environmental ethics thus takes up metaphysics insofar as it concerns the difference in reality between human culture and wild nature. Are human beings part of nature?

Environmental ethics concerns axiology in considering whether humans alone are intrinsically valuable. Does wild nature have value in itself or value only for human beings?

Environmental ethics takes up epistemology insofar as it concerns questions about how one would know what the relation between human beings and nature is or what the value nature has in itself.

Environmental ethics takes up aesthetics insofar as it concerns questions about the beauty of nature.

And obviously, environmental ethics takes up ethics in considering what moral obligations humans have to nonhuman nature.

Two points:

1) the term “Environmental Ethics” may not be the best description of the field of study. Since the field of study concerns more than just ethical questions it might be more accurately called “Environmental Philosophy.” Also, since the term “environmental” might suggest already a dualism between human beings and nature that is questioned, the term “Ecological Ethics” (or perhaps “Ecological Philosophy”) might be more accurate.

2) environmental ethics requires considerable knowledge of empirical data of the life sciences and is thus not “pure philosophy. But it is also not simply “applied ethics” as this term is usually used in simply applying standard ethical theories to contemporary ethical problems. In some ways the standard ethical theories are called into question in considering the problems of “environmental ethics”.

Environmental ethics takes up these broad questions:

What are human beings?

What is nature?

How are human beings related to nature?

How should human beings be related to nature?

Nature, Environment, Ecology, Wilderness, Technology, and Humanness

vocabulary of environmental ethics includes words loaded with various meanings:

“Nature”:

- 1) everything that is not artificial or man-made
- 2) everything in the universe apart from the supernatural; in this sense it includes what is man-made or artificial
- 3) the meaning (derived from Aristotle) of the essence of something; its teleology (its end or purpose) as the nature of an acorn is to grow into an oak tree

“Environment”

When environmental philosophers talk about “nature” they usually mean that part of “nature” with which human beings interact and influence. They usually mean the “environment” which include the four Earth systems — the *lithosphere* (the outer solid part of the earth, including the crust and uppermost mantle), the *hydrosphere* (the liquid component of the earth), the *atmosphere* (the body of air which surrounds the planet), and the *biosphere* (all the living organisms of the planet).

“Ecology”

Environmental ethics is thus related to the science of ecology: “the study of how the biota and the abiotic features of a locale function together as a living system.”

“Wilderness”

For the most part environmental ethics has been concerned with *wilderness*, that part of “nature” that is not part of the human-built environment.

“Technology”

If humans are part of the biosphere then are human artifacts such as buildings, bridges, power lines, farms etc. also to be included in the study of environmental ethics? Aristotle had argued that the artifacts of technology are value-neutral. It is only with their use that ethical questions arise. Is this adequate?

“Humanness”

It has been argued that humankind has transformed itself through its transformation of nature. In considering the human impact upon the environment, environmental ethics also touches upon the question of our humanness. What is it to be a human being?

Environmental Metaethics: The Axiology of Nature

metaethics: “investigates where our ethical principles come from, and what they mean. Are they merely social inventions? Do they involve more than expressions of our individual emotions?” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

normative ethics: “takes on a more practical task, which is to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

In terms of epistemology, metaethics it is usually framed by distinguishing between objectivism and subjectivism. Metaethical objectivism is the view that there are objective standards of ethical value independent of human consciousness. Metaethical subjectivism is the view that there are no objective standards, the standards of ethical value are determined by human beings and thus relative.

In terms of axiology, metaethics involves determining what is the proper subject-matter of ethics. Environmental ethics thus attempts to broaden the boundaries of what is considered the proper subject-matter of ethics.

Some different positions within the field of environmental ethics:

- 1) nonhuman natural objects are valuable in themselves, independent of human consciousness (metaethical objectivism).
- 2) nonhuman natural objects are valuable only insofar as humans desire them (metaethical subjectivism). Subjectivism thus favors anthropocentrism; objectivism favors nonanthropocentrism.

J. Baird Callicott's summation of this difference: (pg 4)

an anthropocentric value theory holds only humans have value in themselves, everything else has value only to the extent that it can serve human interests

a nonanthropocentric value theory holds that some nonhuman things have intrinsic value

many environmental philosophers regard the view that only human beings have intrinsic value to be the cardinal sin of anthropocentrism

Callicott is a subjective value theorist but attempts to argue that not all value is instrumental

Holmes Rolston argues for an objectivist axiology where nonhuman things have "autonomous intrinsic value."

The 1970s

this section covers a brief history of the development of the field of environmental ethics which really came to full flowering in the decade of the 70s. Some of the important precursors of the field of environmental ethics include the following:

John Muir (21 April 1838 – 24 December 1914) was one of the founders of the environmental movement. He was one of the early advocates for the preservation of wilderness areas and the establishment of the national parks. He also founded the Sierra Club.

David Brower (July 1, 1912 – November 5, 2000) is also mentioned. Following in Muir's footsteps he was one of the early environmentalists in the 20th century and served as President of the Sierra Club.

Rachel Carson (May 27, 1907 – April 14, 1964) was also an important 20th century environmentalist. Her book, *Silent Spring* (1962), is a landmark text in the environmental movement, calling attention to the destructive consequences of the use of chemicals on the environment.

Lynn White (April 29, 1907 – March 30, 1987) was a professor of history at Princeton, Stanford, UCLA and then president of Mills College from 1943-58. His 1967 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" was also an important text.

Garrett Hardin (April 21, 1915 – September 14, 2003) was an ecologist and his 1968 essay “The Tragedy of the Commons” also was an important text in establishing the background for the development of the field of environmental ethics in the 1970s.

The beginning of Environmental Ethics:

John Cobb, “The Population Explosion and the Rights of the Subhuman World” (1970) marks the beginning of the field of environmental ethics. He argued that the desacrilization of nature in Christianity set the conditions for the depreciation of nature and the development of the environmental crisis.

There was an important conference at the University of Georgia in 1971. William Blackstone and Joel Feinberg, both important ethical philosophers, made significant contributions.

Christopher Stone’s 1972 paper “Should Trees Have Standing?” (one of my favorite philosophy paper titles) argued for extending existing legal principles to nonhuman nature.

Also in 1972 the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess argued against taking an anthropocentric perspective in environmental ethics (which he called “shallow ecology”). His work led to the development of the “Deep Ecology” movement which puts forth a nonanthropocentric position. Naess argued for a “substantial reorientation of our whole civilization.”

In 1973 at a conference in Bulgaria, philosopher Richard Sylvan proposed a famous thought experiment in which he asked what if the Last Man destroyed every living thing before perishing himself. Sylvan’s essay argues that from an anthropocentric perspective the action of such a last man could not really be criticized.

[the editor here notes Sylvan may have been alluding to Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man*. One might, however, also note an allusion to Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which the overman is contrasted with the last man. Nietzsche may have had Shelley’s work in mind, and perhaps his work might be seen as a precursor to the environmental movement as Zarathustra’s constant exhortation is to “remain faithful to the earth.” The field of environmental ethics has been dominated by Analytic philosophers and thus in our textbook there is no mention of Nietzsche or Heidegger, though I contend both are important to consider.]

Peter Singer came to prominence in the 1970s arguing for extending rights to animals.

John Passmore published the first book-length manuscript in environmental ethics, *Man’s Responsibility to Nature*, in 1974.

Passmore’s position was an unabashed anthropocentrism
what is needed are new moral habits, not new moral principles

1975 Holmes Rolston proposed a new starting point
an ethics not merely about the environment
but informed by the environment
requires abandoning the atomism of traditional humanistic ethics
in favor of one derived from the “holistic character of the ecosystem”

1977 John Rodman published a critique of the ‘moral extensionism’ of Singer and Stone
criticized the “homocentric imperialism”
in favor of a biocentric approach that values the plenitude of living things for what they are

1977 George Sessions condemned Western society for the “impenetrable ontological divide” that arises from metaphysical dualism
argued that all of nature is interconnected
finds in Spinoza’s monism the insights of the science of ecology
Sessions also called attention to the priority of language
praised the work of poet Robinson Jeffers
anticipated a new approach in environmental ethics
continental environmental ethics
(poetic language in Nietzsche and Heidegger)

1977 J. Baird Callicott published “Elements of an Environmental Ethic”
human beings have moral obligations to biotic and abiotic members of ecological communities
even though those others are not moral agents
and thus do not have reciprocal moral obligations
Callicott sketched a thoroughly holistic and nonanthropocentric environmental ethic
would develop this the rest of his career
the worn-out traditional moral paradigm of individualism
fails to meet the challenge of the holistic ontology of ecological systems

1978 Kenneth Goodpaster defended a traditional individualistic ontology
deontological methodology (Kant) for environmental ethics
agreed with Feinberg and Singer that individuals are
the proper subject-matter of moral consideration
but disagreed about the proper attribute of “moral considerability”
not *sentience*, but simply being *alive*
extends Feinberg’s interest principle to all living things

1979 Donald VanDeVeer proposed making crucial distinction
between basic needs and peripheral needs
the basic needs of even the lowliest creature take priority of peripheral needs of humans
but when basic needs of humans and nonhumans conflict
human interests prevail
a hierarchical biocentrism

1979 Eugene Hargrove established the first journal devoted to environmental ethics
in sum, two schools of thought developed in the early 1970s:
1) a traditionalist approach rooted in ontologies of individualism
includes both anthropocentrists such as Passmore
and nonanthropocentrists like Singer and Stone
2) a progressive approach emphasized the need to reject
individualism in favor of holism

the second half of the 70s was dominated by the progressives
but the core arguments of traditionalists remain credible

Spheres of Moral Considerability

anthropocentric philosophers agree that moral obligations
extend only to other humans
Descartes considered all nonhumans to be machines
one cannot have moral duties to machines

Kant agreed with Descartes that humans have no direct duties to nonhumans
for he argued one has moral obligations only to moral agents
only rational beings are worthy of moral consideration (ratiocentrism)
and only human beings are rational
but humans do have indirect duties to nonhumans
for the way we treat our fellow humans is affected
by the way we treat natural objects
cruel treatment to animals violates our duties to ourselves as human beings
environmental ethics can be seen as a repudiation of
orthodox anthropocentrism
do human beings really constitute the scope of moral considerability?

we can picture the development of environmental ethics
as a widening of the sphere of moral considerability from
anthropocentrism
to *hierarchical biocentrism* of Rolston and Ferré
more intrinsic value to beings higher in the hierarchy
as humans are at the top it is a anthropocentric ontology and axiology

a further widening of the sphere of moral considerability is *psychocentrism*
it is not reason or moral agency that determines moral considerability
but sentience...the more sentient the more intrinsic value
blurs the line between animals and humans
thus includes “animal welfare ethics”
Tom Regan’s animal rights position
we have moral obligations to sentient beings with self-awareness
this would include higher order animals
chimpanzees, dolphins, whales....

Singer takes up a more classical utilitarianism
but argues that it is not self-awareness but the capacity to suffer
that determines intrinsic value
Singer’s animal welfare ethics is called “animal liberation”

a further widening of the sphere of moral considerability
Egalitarian biocentrism
not reason, moral agency, sentience, self-awareness
but all living things deserve moral consideration
egalitarian biocentrism contrasts with hierarchical biocentrism
in holding all organisms as equal in terms of moral consideration
the earliest advocates of this position were the deep ecologists—Naess and Sessions
also Paul Taylor who holds a teleological view
all organisms are teleological centers of life
all organisms have an end or purpose

how to handle conflict in all life has intrinsic value?
Taylor argues for a Principle of Self-Defense
Taylor adopts a deontological (Kantian) position
extending Kant’s kingdom of ends to all living things

we have a duty to all living things

four objections:

1) egalitarian biocentrism is inherently inconsistent
other species demonstrate no apparent concern for environmental duty
so to demand that of humans is to place humans above nonhumans

2) it is also weak in adjudicating conflicts of interests
which is the central task of environmental ethics
is the 120,000 elk of equal value as the last California condor?
[what about the coqui frog issue here on the Big Island?]

3) does not provide a basis for valuing biodiversity
[again the problem of invasive species]

4) individualism of egalitarian biocentrism
is inconsistent with real ecosystemic structure
regard for ecosystems of wholes
necessitates treating some species as more valuable
some species can be destructive on the whole system
egalitarian biocentrism and holism are thus mutually exclusive

Ecocentrism

individualism is polycentric: moral considerability is given to multiple discrete organisms
ecocentrism marks a more radical break in moral philosophy
different versions of ecocentrism

1) Rolston and Ferre: ecosystem wholes provide life support for individual beings and thus have instrumental value

2) Naess, Leopold, Callicott: ecosystemic whole have intrinsic value
deep ecology of Naess
land ethic of Leopold and Callicott
Leopold uses “land” metaphorically
the land ethic shifts the loci of moral considerability
from individual organisms to ecosystemic wholes

Individualism vs holism

the debate between individualism and holism
can be illustrated by contrasting animal welfare and land ethics
Callicott’s essay “Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair” (1980) marked a turning point
after which many philosophers consider animal welfare ethics
to be distinct from environmental ethics
Callicott pointed out the consequences of liberating domestic animals
would be catastrophic on the environment
Regan, however, calls land ethics “environmental fascism”
here the author draws attention to the problem of wild goats and pigs
in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and Haleakala National Park

These notes summarize the introduction in
Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions. David R. Keller ed. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.