

Environmental Ethics: a short overview

Definition

Environmental Ethics (Ethics of Nature) is the area of applied ethics that discusses, reflects and reasons on normative measures (values, rules, norms, criteria) for dealing with non-human natural entities in a responsible way. Environmental Ethics is the base of reasoning for, e.g., the following fields of action within society: environmental protection, animal protection, nature protection, animal rights, sustainability issues.

Three main areas of environmental ethics

1. **Resource Ethics:** How do we legitimize the responsible management of scarce and deployable resources and environmental media (water, soil, air, climate, etc.)?
2. **Animal Ethics:** How do we legitimize the responsible treatment of animals, particularly those which can suffer from pain?
3. **Ethics of Nature Protection** (= Ethics of Nature): How do we legitimize the responsible treatment with 'collective biotic entities', for example: populations, species, ecosystems?

Positions

1. Anthropocentrism

- (Greek: *anthropos* = human being): animals, plants, etc. have no **intrinsic value** (value of their own). They are targets of protection only if they are useful for the human being, e.g. as resource, as source of aesthetic delight, as source of recreation/sports. The human being regards himself/herself as top of 'nature's ladder' because he/she has **rationality** and the ability to reason. This super-position justifies his/her dominance and power over other forms of nature. Anthropocentrism mostly goes along with individualism but can also be applied on "humanity" as such. – All classic Western philosophers are anthropocentrists (e.g. Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant) which is founded in **dualism** (body/soul; body/spirit; body/brain).
- A dominant critique of anthropocentrism in Western countries derives from **ecofeminism**. Proponents argue, that anthropocentrism is mainly sketched as androcentrism (Greek: *andros*=man [sex]). It is man who things that he is superior to not only animals, but also women and rules all of nature by his idea that he is superior.
- Note: Nature protection does not necessarily mean nature **conservation!**

2. Pathocentrism

- (Greek: *pathos* = suffering, pain). Pathocentrism is based on the assumption that all life is of the same origin and thus related. As a consequence, all living beings have the capacity to experience pain. In Christian tradition, this leads back to an 'ethics of compassion'. Immanuel Kant: When we observe the pain of suffering animals, we realize that it is wrong to torture animals (pedagogical animal rights-argument). Anthropocentrism here relates back to anthropomorphism (e.g. interpreting the animal **as if** it was human).

3. Holism

- The whole is more than the sum of its parts (→ normative „surplus“).
- Contrary to individualistic approaches, particularly anthropocentrism.

a) Biocentrism

- Albert Schweitzer: **reverence for life** („Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben“: All life wants to live, like me); Paul Taylor (1986): All living has intrinsic value, a **will of life**. Living beings have own interests and strive for their own good.
- Note: Biocentrism can be either individualistic or holistic. Ecosystems and non-living nature are excluded (water!).

b) Ecocentrism

- Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethics* (1949): the land/ecosystem forms a **community** as if it was an organism or living being. It is **self-regulating**. (See also: James Lovelock: Gaia-hypothesis)
- People should not conquer the land but protect it for the sake of themselves.
- But: Why should the **whole** be preferable to the interests of the **individual** entities??

c) Deep Ecology (Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, 1912-2009)

- "deep" because it persists in asking deeper questions concerning "why" and "how" and thus is concerned with the fundamental philosophical questions about the impacts of human life as one part of the **ecosphere**, rather than with a narrow view of **ecology** as a branch of biological science.

Note: Most holistic positions have been concerned with **wilderness and its preservation**. By contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to the **built environment**, although this is the one in which most people spend most of their time.

Intercultural Perspectives

- The „reverence for life“ (biocentrism) is less strong in Asian cultures, but because of reincarnation (to live again after death in form of an animal or a plant) there is a moral anchor in Buddhism.
- Anthropocentrism is strong in the monotheistic religions (Islam, Judaism, Christianity). However, all three holy books state rules to protect nature, particularly plants and animals.
- Ecocentrism allies well, e.g., with Shintoism (Japan)

Further readings:

- White, Lynn (March 1967). "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis". *Science* **155** (3767): 1203–1207.
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- Singer, Peter. "Environmental Values". *The Oxford Book of Travel Stories*. Ed. Ian Marsh. Melbourne, Australia: Longman Chesire, 1991. 12-16.
- Barry, J., 1999. *Rethinking Green Politics*, London: Sage.
- Jamieson, D., 2001. *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell 2001

Philosophical Classics:

- Bentham, J., 1789. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948; → Kant, Immanuel. "Duties to Animals and Spirits", in Louis Infield trans., *Lectures on Ethics*, New York: Harper and Row, 1963

Contact:

Prof. Dr. Nicole Karafyllis, TU Braunschweig, Seminar für Philosophie, Bienroder Weg 80,
D-38106 Braunschweig, Germany; n.karafyllis@tu-bs.de