

The Ethics of Environmental Preservation at the Confluence of the Traditional Approach and Current Challenges

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The accumulation of environmental problems, but also the ever-increasing impetuosity with which they manifest, led, starting in 1970, to the need for the emergence and development of a new branch of traditional ethics. *Environmental ethics* is concerned with finding answers to ethical questions circumscribed to the sphere of human relations with the non-human part of nature. The new field has proven to be an active involvement factor in promoting human values that emphasize the human-environment relationship. Many environmental ethicists believe that the non-human universe has value per se. The article undertakes a theoretical approach that tries to capture the relevant aspects of the efforts by which environmental ethicists combine their activity with other entities, responsible structures, in the collective intervention approach to improve environmental problems.

Keywords: environmental ethics, environmental issues, human-nature relationship

Introductory Considerations

Circumscribed to ethics, morality evaluates human activities and practices in a social context, with a focus on how the norms are respected, the rules that are the basis of appropriate behavior accepted by society. In essence, morality is represented by what is appreciated as positive or negative, regardless of whether the reporting is done at the level of society, as a whole, to an organization or a group. Morality brings together the set of values that have certain significance for the individuals belonging to a group, found equally in laws, procedures, rules, policies, and informal norms.

Moral responsibility is objectified by factors such as *understanding of problems*, *capacity for selection*, and *meaning of value*. That being the case, for the action to be substantively responsible, the following are necessary: (1) the condition of adequate information regarding the need to be responsible (understanding); (2) possessing the useful potential for this purpose, so that option based on one's own will (selection) is possible; (3) finding the explanation for a question like “Does conduct of a certain kind affect the good and independence of others?” (meaning of value).

According to Nelson (2002), ethics builds on all that is important to the individual, being interested in how and why man assigns value to certain issues, what are the appropriate actions to reflect those values.

Not by chance, ethics is considered like a compass, with the help of which the directions to follow become clear and essential through actions governed by responsibility and conscience. Ethics turns into that tool by which individual and collective action, at will, therefore without discernment, is limited.

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The essence of ethics, including that of the environment, is captured in a particularly striking way in the statement of an American philosopher: “All ethics is in search of an answer for life” (Rolston, 1991, p. 73).

Landmarks in the Evolution of the Concept: The Interdisciplinarity of Environmental Ethics

In terms of history, attention to environmental ethics has its origins in Ancient Greece, where there is evidence of people’s interest from those times regarding the consequences of human intervention on the natural environment and animals (Westra & Robinson, 1997). Also in the ancient period, the Aristotelian approach appeared, according to which “nature made all things for the sake of man”, the value of non-human things in nature being purely instrumental (Aristotle, 1948). Considered eminently egocentric, the vision of the great Greek philosopher—a kind of forerunner of later anthropocentrism—remains a reference for what it means awareness, since the dawn of civilization, of the importance of the space in which the human individual lives, alongside other species.

The centuries that followed the ancient period were not marked by theories or actions that drew attention to environmental problems. That is until the 18th century, when Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), founder of utilitarianism, presented *the principle of utility* or *the principle of the greatest happiness*, which is intended to be a necessary moral guide for the life of the human individual. According to the principle under discussion, the person’s agreement or disagreement for an action conditions his tendency towards increasing or decreasing happiness. The conclusive reasoning is that the ethical choice is the most appropriate for the good (happiness) of the greatest number of people.

The chronology of the foundation and development of the field shows that this conceptualization with a deep ethical core is followed by the active contribution, concretely articulated by the nature of the activities carried out in the environmental sphere by the one who was nicknamed the “Father of National Parks”, John Muir (1838-1914).

High-value concerns for environmental dynamics are attested by the work of Aldo Leopold, ecologist, philosopher, and naturalist, in *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*.

Contributions such as those mentioned not only impose themselves through their scientific value in the evolution of the field but also confirm that, although environmental ethics was established as an independent discipline in the 1970s, it was not a topic that philosophy was not aware of until then.

Indeed, in terms of scientific professionalism, the period of the 1970s remains in the collective consciousness a benchmark for environmental ethics, by redefining the traditional frontiers of ethics, integrating the human and non-human world in its approaches. Thus, in 1970, the celebration—for the first time—of Earth Day triggered an awakening of collective consciousness for environmental issues. The importance of the moment resides in the signing of the “birth act” of the new discipline, being completed by the signal given by the numerous groups of ecologists on the philosophical dimensions that characterize environmental problems.

Remarkably, Aldo Leopold’s essay, “The Land Ethics” (1949) fundamentally revived the atmosphere of that time, energizing environmentalists to take a firm stand against instrumental considerations (of Aristotelian origin) in the question of environmental protection. Furthermore, arguments have been made to demonstrate that, concerning the environment, the instrumental conceptualization itself constitutes a significant part of the causes of the impasse.

The first scientific event with the theme of environmental ethics was organized at a prestigious academic institution in Athens (Georgia) in 1971. The growing interest in the issues addressed on that occasion led to the appearance, within the University of Georgia, of the journal *Environmental Ethics*, in 1978.

The collective effort to raise awareness of risks with repercussions that are impossible to quantify continued in the years that followed, with concerns for environmental ethics being intensified. Numerous studies and research, volumes, and monographs have made environmental ethics consolidate its position among academic disciplines. Additionally, decision-makers from all corners of the planet have taken a stand, allocating significant sums and organizing events circumscribed to the general objective of protecting the environment.

Awareness, on an increasingly extensive scale, of the seriousness with which the issue of the ecological context must be treated, justifies the development of environmental ethics; in relation to technological progress, the situation takes on even more serious accents. Paradoxically, however, this development is bidirectional, in the sense that, although it is designed to simplify the contemporary man's existence, its costs are measured in the submission, perhaps even the sacrifice of the general framework of existence—both human and non-human.

Like traditional ethics, which can be found in almost all spheres of social life, environmental ethics has an interdisciplinary character, offering consistent informational support to fields such as law, theology, and sociology, but also in economics, geography, and ecology. The “maturing” process that environmental ethics has gone through over the last decades is also highlighted by the development of stable links with other disciplines, the emphasis being on the social and biological ones. The effect that is to be observed, in this context, would be the change of the perspective regarding the ethical understanding of the problems.

Some authors (Ferkany & Whyte, 2012) refer to how experimental psychology succeeded in identifying those explanatory springs for conservation behavior, an aspect that required rethinking the virtues indicated by the ethics of environmental virtue. In the field of ecology, as Sagoff (2013) notes, the understanding of ecosystems has had a significant influence on their health, including in the direction of undermining some of the ecosystems. And Maier (2012) brings to attention the attitude of disapproval of specialists in environmental ethics regarding how various aspects that are the subject of so many disciplines have been conceptualized: economic conceptions of value, aspects related to biodiversity (with its prominent role in conservation biology). Also disapproved was how the real problems related to climate change are represented at the political level, where the priority is the interest and the political game, and not the problem that fundamentally objectifies the action/approach.

Currents of Thought in Environmental Ethics

The foundation of environmental ethics is represented, to a consistent extent, by theories that have at their center man and the philosophical perspective on morality. An ever-present topic of debate is that which groups philosophers into the camp of anthropocentrism versus non-anthropocentrism.

Early research in environmental ethics shows that the intention was to formulate ethical theories designed to explain as clearly as possible the moral obligations of the human individual towards the natural world. *Anthropocentrism* (“anthro” = human, “centrism” = center) promotes the idea that man and his interests morally take precedence over “the rest” (the non-human world) acquiring moral value only if it serves—in one form or another—the individual human. Furthermore, according to this current of thought, man is absolved of moral duty concerning the non-human world, because morality can only be attributed to the human individual

concerning another individual, and not extended to the connection between human and non-human. This kind of “tunnel” vision is limiting, self-centered, and fails to understand the relational aspects that flow from each other in a natural sequence. Following such a logic, in which moral duty is in a relationship of strict dependence with human interest, it follows that, in the eventuality of suppressing the human being, interests disappear, in turn. More concretely, if the non-human universe in all its complexity is meaningful only in the context in which it serves human purposes, it becomes completely meaningless by the disappearance of that role; consequently, the destruction of this non-human world would not be a problem. Unfortunately, serious charges have been attributed to anthropocentrism, such as the ecological crisis, overpopulation, and the problem of endangered species (Sarkar, 2012).

Anthropocentric ethics supports the idea that only humans have morality, and the value of the natural environment is not intrinsic in the absence of the human factor, opposed to non-anthropocentrism. Non-anthropocentrism contests the argument that moral value draws its essence exclusively from human interests, proposing, as alternatives, ethical approaches conceived by philosophical thought oriented towards defining the exact nature of value and moral status.

Other ethical approaches of interest in terms of relevance to environmental issues are biocentrism and ecocentrism.

Within biocentrism, it is argued that the moral state can be the result of a biological peculiarity of the members of a species. Even if it intends to advance a well-coagulated perspective, this school of thought fails to achieve the full character of unity. Thus, for some of the biocentric representatives, the world of non-speakers would have a moral value, only because they can feel pleasure and pain, while the other category advocates the inherent value, as their good, in all living things (Taylor, 1986). It can be seen that biocentrism emphasizes individuals, and not the diversity of species, and for such a basis, this type of environmental ethics passes as individualistic (Rolston, 1991).

Adherents of ecocentrism, delimiting themselves from the previous approach, attribute value in its entirety to the diversity of species, different forms of relief, and ecosystems, regardless of the aspect of influence on human or non-human individuals. (Callicott, 1989). For ecocentrists, the emphasis is on the ecosystem, the balance of which is given by the diversity and dynamics of interactions. However, there are differences regarding the causes and methods of solving environmental problems, which are the subject of the current agenda.

It is relevant to emphasize that cultural diversity can be related to that of ethical beliefs. To be able to present distinctly the specific elements of morality, and the relationship between it and care for the environment, within different cultures, philosophers have developed a series of concepts. Some of these may also result from other angles of approach, with a more general sphere of understanding of the world, which is codified in the field of International Law.

The staunch supporter of the anthropocentric approach is utilitarian philosophy. Moreover, moral philosophy has as representative theories the ethics of goals (utilitarianism) and the *ethics of duty* (deontology).

For the genuine utilitarian in his beliefs, an action is considered morally right if and only if it can generate general happiness for human beings, more than any other endeavor. The idea arises that for utilitarianism the sources of well-being as such, and not the tools by which it can be reached are priority, and in such a reasoning autonomy and human dignity cannot find their place.

From the perspective of human rights, human dignity represents a moral obligation per se, overcoming the possibility of some contexts in which happiness could be obtained by ignoring this dimension. In turn, autonomy has a well-determined place in terms of importance. A concept related to that of autonomy is informed consent (initially applied only in medical ethics, but) which has demonstrated its utility in the issue of public consultation regarding the decision-making process on nuclear waste disposal (Shrader-Frechette, 1991).

Even if, by its nature, utilitarianism is based on good intentions, there have been points of view that have argued that it should be adjusted by implementing certain norms and principles specific to justice. The fundamental problem with this school of thought is that, by focusing on a level of maximum well-being, it fails to recognize the importance of distributing it equally, judiciously, across the population. As things stand, it is pure utopia to imagine the possibility of the entire population having unlimited, eternal, and abundant access to the source from which supreme happiness flows endlessly. That is why the intervention of the judicial factor brings the vision into discussion in an area of realism. On the one hand, it is about the application of the principle of distributive justice, which advocates the distribution of advantages and responsibilities; on the other hand, the intervention of the principle of retributive justice, which is based on the obligation to compensate the people who have been harmed.

Three other types of visions provide an even more conclusive picture in such a concerning and current sphere of environmental protection issues.

1. The *libertarian vision*, whose main advocate is the principle of civil liberty, promotes the obligation to the idea of equal rights among members of communities, complemented by those ethical norms that take into account the relations between man and the non-human world (the specific others and plants). The logic of this vision is fundamental to the cultivation and development of social consciousness, at the same time disapproving of the conceptualization of the natural world in the exclusive terms of economic value for man. Doctrine: equal rights for all beings that populate this medium of existence.

2. The *ecological vision*: Starting from the ethical reasoning according to which the earth is endowed with its own capacity for functioning and development, in the same way, nature has resources and processes of refreshment, ways of restoring life, including when conditions are unfavorable. The argument that, for example, when climate change occurred, it occurred in a limited area, precisely to create the conditions for the recovery of life, supports the hypothesis that underpins the approach under discussion. Furthermore, combating the Darwinian thesis which claims that survival belongs to the strongest member of a species, environmentalism calls for the existence of several types of algae, resistant including to ultraviolet radiation, which would make it possible to continue life, even under the threat of this radiation, which would lead to the suppression of life on Earth.

In this frame of thought, the encouragement is in the direction of a substantial perceptual reconfiguration, in which humanity takes a broad view of the environment as part of a whole system. Such beliefs have proven to be outdated, due to increasingly accelerated climate changes, which generate cataclysms more and more frequently; hence the conclusion that there is—however—the possibility that the planet no longer can be restructured, as originally thinking. The need to admit the existing relational configuration between all biological and abiological structures is determined by the increase in temperature, globally, a context that favors the disappearance of the tropical forest, a phenomenon that—in turn—leads to the release of amounts of carbon into the atmosphere incompatible with the maintenance of life; under these conditions, even the hardest algae would fail, absorbing the carbon.

3. *Conservation ethics* seeks a kind of “extension” of the instrumental dimension on the natural environment, in the sense that attention is directed exclusively to working on the environment so that it is useful to the human individual. Moreover, this type of ethics has pioneering status, being the first approach in the matter, which encourages the establishment of national parks, wildlife protection areas, responsible use of non-renewable energy, and water conservation. Therefore, the watchword is conservation, seen as a way to achieve a goal, through which humanity has a chance to move forward.

Conclusions

1. Studying the moral relationship between the human individual and the environment, environmental ethics made its debut in the space of academic disciplines when philosophers began to consider the philosophical particularities of environmental problems. Environmental ethics has become a subject of sustained academic philosophical reflection since the 1970s.

2. The anthropocentric perspective promotes the idea, considered—by supporters—perfectly justified, that people are at the center of reality. Environmental ethics advances a new conceptualization of the human-nature relationship, arguing that both the human and the non-human environment have intrinsic value, each component that makes up this existential space having its well-defined role.

3. Values such as justice, sustainability, and predictability are those that must be promoted in a sustained manner in the human-environment relationship.

4. Against the background of technological developments and the dynamics of climate change, for environmental ethicists it seems that the challenges will continue for a long time to come.

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