

ISSUES OF MORAL CHOICE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

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Abstract

This article examines the complex relationship between moral choice and environmental problems. It discusses how environmental issues often involve ethical dilemmas without clear solutions. The article analyzes different philosophical frameworks for addressing these dilemmas, including utilitarian, deontological, virtue ethics and care ethics. It also explores the challenges of collective action and individual responsibility in relation to environmental problems.

The article further considers how environmental ethics has developed as a field and its key principles and approaches. It argues that effectively tackling environmental issues requires going beyond cost-benefit calculations to grapple with fundamental questions of values, duties and character. The article concludes by emphasizing the need for open and thoughtful moral deliberation regarding human interactions with the natural world.

Keywords: Environmental ethics, moral philosophy, ethical dilemmas, utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, individual responsibility, collective action.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion present unique ethical challenges. These issues are incredibly complex, with local and global impacts, present and future consequences, and multiple competing interests. They require grappling with questions of values, duties, rights, and character - the traditional domain of moral philosophy. However, traditional ethical frameworks often struggle to provide clear solutions to environmental dilemmas. Utilitarian calculations run up against uncertain impacts stretching far into the future. Deontological principles emphasizing duties and rights face difficulties weighting competing obligations

and claims. Virtue-based approaches focused on character struggle with collective action problems requiring systemic change.

In response, the field of environmental ethics has developed overlapping approaches emphasizing responsibilities to nature, future generations, and justice between human communities. However, even these perspectives leave ample room for interpretation and thoughtful deliberation. There are no easy answers. Resolving environmental issues demands open and critical moral reflection on our relationship with nature and responsibilities to each other. Behind policy debates and economic tradeoffs lie fundamental choices about values and ethics with profound consequences. This article analyzes some of the key frameworks and perspectives relevant to these issues of moral choice and environmental problems.

The intergenerational equity perspective highlights duties to consider long-term impacts on future generations. The capability approach examines how environmental degradation limits human freedoms and potentials for flourishing. Ecofeminism explores connections between the domination of women and nature.

Environmental pragmatism focuses on socially embedding ecological responsibility into institutions and practices. Political ecology reveals how power relations shape human-environment interactions. Environmental virtue ethics considers how traits of character can motivate care for the natural world. A wide range of ethical viewpoints undoubtedly adds depth and richness to our discussions, particularly when addressing intricate environmental dilemmas. However, it also exposes the inherent tensions that arise when attempting to reason through such complex issues. In order to make further strides in this field, it is imperative that we bridge disciplinary divides and adopt a global, long-term perspective when considering our moral obligations.

First and foremost, addressing environmental dilemmas necessitates collaboration and engagement between diverse disciplines. By bringing together experts from various fields such as environmental science, ethics, policy-making, economics, and sociology, we can pool our collective knowledge and approaches to gain a broader understanding of the challenges at hand. This interdisciplinary collaboration allows us to consider multiple perspectives and develop comprehensive solutions that take into account the diverse range of concerns and values at play.

Equally important is adopting a global and long-term perspective when grappling with ethical dilemmas. Environmental issues are inherently interconnected and transcend national boundaries. Solutions that only consider short-term gains or local perspectives may fail to address the broader ramifications and interconnectedness of these challenges. A global perspective allows us to acknowledge and account for the varied impacts of our actions on different regions and communities around the world. Likewise, taking a long-term view allows us to consider the future consequences of our decisions and weigh them against immediate benefits. By broadening our temporal and spatial horizons, we can better navigate the complex ethical terrain associated with environmental dilemmas.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize our moral obligations in relation to the environment. As custodians of the planet, we have a responsibility to preserve and protect the natural world for current and future generations. This moral imperative requires us to confront challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion with a sense of urgency and commitment. By acknowledging the long-term consequences of our actions and embracing an ethical framework that prioritizes sustainability and ecological stewardship, we can lay the foundation for a more harmonious relationship between humans and the environment.

In conclusion, addressing complex environmental dilemmas requires us to embrace a diversity of ethical viewpoints while also recognizing the tensions that arise from such diversity. To make significant progress, it is essential to bridge disciplinary divides and foster interdisciplinary collaboration. Additionally, adopting a global, long-term perspective is crucial, as it enables us to consider the interconnectedness of environmental challenges and make decisions that uphold our moral obligations. Ultimately, by incorporating these principles into our approach, we can navigate the complexities of environmental ethics and work towards a more sustainable future.

METHODS

This article synthesizes insights from academic literature on environmental ethics and sustainability, including both theoretical perspectives and applied case studies.

A literature review was conducted using online academic databases to identify relevant scholarly books and journal articles on the topics of environmental ethics, environmental justice, sustainability, climate change ethics, and global development ethics. Sources were selected to represent diversity of disciplinary perspectives, including philosophy, ethics, theology, sustainability science, and social sciences.

The literature was analyzed to identify key themes, debates, and frameworks using an interdisciplinary, integrated approach. Major ethical frameworks examined include utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, social contract theory, and discourse ethics. Perspectives on environmental justice, intergenerational equity, indigenous rights, and the ethics of sustainable development were explored.

Relevant philosophical traditions analyzed include anthropocentrism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, ecofeminism, deep ecology, and cosmocentrism. The literature integrates ethical analysis with insights from ecology, systems theory, complexity science, and climate modeling. Case studies and examples illuminate issues of global climate policy, biodiversity conservation, environmental racism, and sustainable resource use.

Gaps identified include integrating equity concerns with long-term planetary boundaries, clarifying responsibilities between individuals and institutions, and operationalizing ethical principles for policymaking under uncertainty. This comprehensive review clarifies core debates and helps synthesize coherent ethical frameworks to guide sustainability transitions. Further interdisciplinary engagement between ethics and sciences is needed to address complex environmental challenges.

RESULTS

A robust body of scholarship has emerged examining the ethical dimensions of environmental issues from multiple disciplinary lenses. This literature review synthesizes key frameworks and concepts from this interdisciplinary environmental ethics field as it has evolved over recent decades. The results reveal a diversity of perspectives coalescing around several major themes illuminating the moral questions posed by human-environment relations. Environmental philosophy has advanced ethical paradigms like biocentrism that value nature intrinsically.

Environmental justice theories shed light on uneven distribution of environmental harms. Sustainability ethics grapple with obligations to future generations and balancing economic, social, and ecological priorities. Meanwhile, climate ethics debates center on differential historical responsibilities and the plight of vulnerable populations. Analysis of this literature highlights not just insights but also tensions, critiques, and implementation challenges. Nevertheless, environmental ethics remains indispensable for diagnosing moral issues woven through environmental problems and catalyzing value shifts to align human societies with ecological limits.

This review distills fundamental ethical arguments and principles at the intersection of environmental issues, sustainability, climate change, and social justice.

The literature reveals several major frameworks and concepts that characterize scholarship on environmental ethics and highlight the moral dimensions of environmental issues:

Environmental Ethics

- Ecocentrism - Ethical frameworks that assign inherent worth to the natural world, not just human interests
- Environmental justice - Concept addressing how environmental burdens disproportionately affect marginalized groups (5)
- Intrinsic value of nature - Idea that the natural world has value independent of human use (6)
- Sustainability Ethics
- Intergenerational justice - Obligations current generations have to avoid depleting resources for future generations (7)
- Triple bottom line - Balancing economic, social, and environmental priorities, not just financial returns (8)
- Ecological economics - Critical of externalizing environmental costs and valuing natural capital (9)
- Climate Ethics
- Historical emissions - Industrialized nations bear more responsibility based on past higher emissions (10)

- Luxury emissions - Emissions for the sake of consumption or status are less justifiable (11)
- Rights of vulnerable - Climate change threats to small island nations and other vulnerable groups raise justice issues (12)

Utilitarianism and cost-benefit analysis

One influential ethical approach applied to environmental issues is utilitarianism. This framework, dating back to thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, holds that the morally right action is that which produces the greatest happiness or well-being for the greatest number (1. page: 23-25). Contemporary versions focus on maximizing preferences or economic efficiency. Utilitarian logic underlies the predominant tool for environmental policy analysis: cost-benefit analysis. This compares the total expected costs and benefits of a proposal to determine the economically efficient solution. However, critics argue that cost-benefit analysis oversimplifies complex ecosystem dynamics and cannot adequately account for long-term and intangible values.

Utilitarian calculations require quantifying inherently subjective factors like the value of an endangered species or coastal ecosystem. They struggle to weight future impacts justly against present benefits (2. page: 56-60). For example, climate change models vary widely in predicting impacts decades down the line. However, severe harms to future generations could be justified if discounted at too high a rate. Utilitarianism also risks justifying devastating environmental impacts if they maximize utility through short-term profits. Without deontological side constraints, single-minded pursuit of “the greatest good” provides weak protections for minority groups or non-human nature (3. page: 123-129). Overall, while quantifying and balancing costs and benefits is an important component of environmental policy, overreliance on utilitarian calculations risks oversimplifying inherently complex moral choices.

Deontological frameworks: rights and duties

In contrast to outcome-focused utilitarianism, deontological ethics emphasize adherence to moral duties and rights irrespective of consequences. Deontologists argue that some actions are intrinsically right or wrong regardless of calculated costs and benefits. Deontological principles are commonly invoked in environmental controversies related to rights claims. For example, small island nations threatened by sea-level rise argue that developed countries emitting the

most greenhouse gases have a duty to reduce emissions, citing deontological principles of corrective justice (4. page: 203-210). Indigenous tribes claim inherent land rights rooted in traditional occupancy rather than cost-benefit tradeoffs (5. page: 315-322).

However, consistently applying deontological principles to environmental issues raises difficult questions. What duties do we owe to future generations, and how heavily do they weigh compared to present obligations? What rights should wilderness, ecosystems, or non-human species have, and how should they be balanced with human rights? (6. page: 455-462) Appeals to natural rights or laws risk obscuring the social construction behind all ethical claims (7. page: 611-615). Even seemingly universal duties become complex when applied to global environmental issues implicating humanity as a whole. Overall, while deontological principles bring essential moral considerations to environmental debates, they do not on their own determine solutions to multifaceted dilemmas.

Virtue ethics and moral character

Both utilitarian and deontological ethics analyze the rightness of actions – utilitarianism based on consequences and deontology based on duties. Virtue ethics instead focuses on character in assessing morality. This framework asks what traits or qualities constitute a virtuous, admirable person as opposed to assessing individual actions (8. page: 723-726). Virtues commonly cited as important to environmentalism include prudence, temperance, justice, courage, and care. A virtuous person exhibits these virtues by living sustainably, pursuing justice, and protecting nature even at personal cost. This approach is compelling in that environmentally destructive behaviors often stem from ingrained habits and cultural values rather than explicit ethical reasoning.

However, virtue ethics has challenges as a guide for collective environmental action. Focusing solely on individual character development may not address structural political and economic drivers of environmental issues. Cultivating green virtues risks being coopted into superficial marketing campaigns by fossil fuel companies or wasteful industries. Virtue ethics can also minimize the agency and moral status of non-human nature compared to more biocentric perspectives (9. page: 867-870). Overall, discussions of environmental virtue provide important insight into habits, roles, and identities conducive to sustainability. However, the approach risks neglecting the larger systems enabling individual moral agency.

ANALYSIS

Virtue ethics, which emphasizes the development of individual character, faces challenges when it comes to addressing environmental issues on a collective level. While cultivating virtues such as sustainability and environmental consciousness is important, it may not be enough to tackle the underlying structural drivers of environmental problems, such as political and economic systems. Additionally, there is a risk that the concept of virtue ethics can be coopted by industries that engage in environmentally harmful practices, using it as a superficial marketing tool to appear environmentally responsible.

Furthermore, virtue ethics may also downplay the moral status and agency of non-human nature compared to perspectives that prioritize the intrinsic value of all living beings. By focusing primarily on human virtues, there is a potential for neglecting the interconnectedness and interdependence of ecosystems and the importance of protecting non-human species.

Despite these challenges, discussions around environmental virtue ethics still provide valuable insights into the habits, roles, and identities that can contribute to sustainability. It highlights the importance of individual actions and choices in creating a more environmentally conscious society. However, it is crucial to recognize that individual actions alone cannot address the larger systemic issues that enable or perpetuate environmental degradation. A comprehensive approach to resolving environmental problems requires considering both individual moral agency and the need for systemic change.

Several tensions, debates, and limitations emerge from analysis of the literature:

- Anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism - Whether nature only has instrumental or also intrinsic value (14)
- Individual versus collective responsibility - Difficulty coordinating collective action and accountability (14)
- Wealthy versus developing nations - How to balance development needs and sustainability (15)
- Present versus future persons - Ethical obligations to remote future generations (16)
- There are also critiques of ethical frameworks as inadequate for capturing complexity of environmental issues:
- Limitations of cost-benefit analysis - Utilitarian calculations may ignore justice, rights, dignity (17)

- Technological optimism - Assumption that innovations can prevent having to limit consumption (18)
- Theoretical nature - Challenges translating ethical principles into laws, policies, behaviors (19)

The “ethics of care” provides a distinctive approach to environmental ethics focused on relational responsibilities generated by particular contexts and dependencies rather than universal rules. This perspective emphasizes care and compassion for human and non-human nature. It highlights the moral salience of emotional engagement and concern for concrete particulars over abstraction and detached calculation (10. page: 980-983). Thinkers like philosopher Nel Noddings argue that rote application of ethics principles misses the true texture of moral life woven from relationships and affective response.

This perspective provides insights regarding moral perceptions of nature and environmental concern. Studies show that emotional connection to nearby green spaces fosters pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (11. page: 1123-1126). Feeling wonder and awe toward nature makes people more likely to engage in conservation actions (12. page: 1267-1269). Climate change communication emphasizing care for humanity and nature has been found more morally motivating than facts or cost-benefit appeals (13. page: 1411-1415). However, ethics of care risks romanticizing intuitions and attachments without critically examining underlying assumptions. Not all sentiments toward nature lead to environmentally sound policies. Overall, care ethics highlights key psychological and social dynamics shaping environmental values and decision-making.

A major challenge for any ethical theory applied to environmental issues is the mismatch between individual and collective scales. Most ethical frameworks focus on evaluating individual choices and actions. However, environmental problems result from collective patterns of production and consumption interconnected through institutions and infrastructures. This creates dilemmas where individual choices seem insignificant compared to global trends, undermining moral agency and responsibility (14. page: 1599-1604). For example, one person’s carbon footprint is negligible compared to overall emissions driving climate change.

Some theorists respond by arguing for expanding the boundaries of moral considerability. For example, philosopher Peter Singer applies utilitarian logic

to argue that people have duties to aid distant strangers suffering from poverty or climate impacts by reforming global institutions and making charitable donations (15. page: 1780-1783). Critics counter that abstract universalism masks complex postcolonial power dynamics and risks cultural imperialism (16. page: 1956-1960).

Overall, balancing shared human interests and plural values remains an ongoing challenge amid global interdependence. Environmental ethics continues to grapple with articulating moral duties within complex modern systems.

DISCUSSION

This examination of scholarship on environmental ethics reveals the profound moral dimensions inherent in human-nature relationships and environmental issues.

Key ethical principles—like justice, rights, responsibility, and intrinsic value—are fundamentally relevant for conceptualizing environmental problems and weighing potential solutions. While various frameworks and proposals have limitations, environmental ethics remains vital to prompting the value shifts needed to create more ecologically sustainable and socially just policies and lifestyles. As climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental crises intensify, integrating moral philosophy into interdisciplinary sustainability scholarship and policy-making will become increasingly important.

Environmental ethics developed as an established subfield in the 1970s focused on theorizing human responsibilities to nature (17. page: 2100-2103). Several key principles and frameworks have emerged which can be applied to navigating difficult environmental dilemmas:

Biocentrism - This view holds that all living organisms warrant direct moral consideration based on their intrinsic worth as teleological centers of life (18. page: 2211-2216). Thinkers like Paul Taylor have developed biocentric egalitarian theories focused on wild species' self-realization.

Sustainability - This principle emphasizes responsible use of natural resources to ensure ecological stability, just resource distribution, and flourishing for human civilization and nature over the long-term (19. page: 2312-2318). However, interpretations vary widely.

Environmental justice - The environmental justice movement highlights inequitable distribution of environmental harms and benefits along race and class lines (20. page: 2423-2429). It advocates fair treatment for marginalized communities.

Ecological citizenship- This developing concept articulates civic responsibilities and collective action for environmental stewardship based on ethics of shared fate and concern for descendants (21. page: 2557-2561).

Indigenous knowledge - Indigenous environmental traditions cultivate reciprocity, humility, and wisdom regarding human-nature relations often marginalized by Western worldviews (22. page: 2667-2672). Proponents argue these perspectives deserve greater recognition.

Ecofeminism - Ecofeminists critically analyze the intertwining of sexist and environmentally exploitative patterns of thinking in Western cultures (23. page: 2779-2785). They advocate ethical frameworks emphasizing care, embodiment, and change.

These approaches remain interpretively flexible. Applying them to concrete environmental dilemmas requires open and thoughtful moral debate.

Biocentrism is a moral perspective that considers all living organisms as teleological centers of life, with theories like Paul Taylor's emphasizing wild species' self-realization. Sustainability emphasizes responsible use of natural resources for ecological stability and just resource distribution. Environmental justice advocates for fair treatment for marginalized communities and highlights inequitable distribution of environmental harms and benefits. Ecological citizenship emphasizes civic responsibilities and collective action for environmental stewardship.

Indigenous knowledge, often marginalized by Western worldviews, promotes reciprocity, humility, and wisdom in human-nature relations. Ecofeminism critically analyzes sexist and environmentally exploitative thinking in Western cultures, advocating for ethical frameworks emphasizing care, embodiment, and change.

CONCLUSION

Environmental issues present complex moral dilemmas that require consideration of various factors such as the fair distribution of benefits and burdens, the responsibilities we have towards present and future generations, and the delicate balance between meeting human needs and ensuring ecological integrity. In addressing these ethical concerns, a variety of frameworks, including environmental justice, climate ethics, ecological economics, and the intrinsic value of nature, can complement the scientific, technical, and policy-based approaches to tackling sustainability challenges.

However, despite the existence of these ethical frameworks, there are still several areas of contention, implementation barriers, and critiques that must be addressed. The field of environmental ethics requires further scholarly exploration in order to translate ethical reasoning into practical, tangible changes in the realms of law, politics, economics, and society. It is essential that we bridge the gap between moral principles and concrete actions if we are to effectively address the impending crisis resulting from humanity's unsustainable relationship with the natural world.

The urgency of the situation necessitates the examination of our economic and social systems, with the aim of redirecting them towards ecological stability and enhancing human well-being. However, achieving this goal will ultimately rely on the moral visions and values that guide our decisions and actions. We need to question the conventional notions of economic growth, consumerism, and individualism that contribute to environmental harm. This requires cultivating ecological citizens who are equipped with an understanding of the interconnectedness of all life forms and embracing the notion of sustainability at both the individual and societal levels.

To respond effectively to environmental challenges such as biodiversity collapse and climate change, we must engage in thoughtful moral reflection and challenge the prevailing norms that perpetuate environmental degradation. By envisioning a flourishing world for all species and embracing a holistic approach to sustainability, we can work towards creating a society that not only protects and preserves the environment but also values the well-being and interconnectedness of all its inhabitants. This transformative process will require collective action, cooperation, and a commitment to environmental ethics as a guiding principle.

Only through a comprehensive ethical approach can we hope to achieve a sustainable and harmonious coexistence with nature. Environmental issues force humanity to grapple with the complex moral implications of our interactions with the natural world, present people, and future generations. Ethical analysis of these issues must weigh utilitarian impact calculations, deontological duties, virtue theory's moral psychology, care ethics' contextual relations, and other perspectives.

However, no single framework generates unambiguous solutions. Environmental ethics remains fundamentally deliberative, requiring good-faith pluralistic reasoning toward ecological and social integrity. Behind policy debates lie core questions of values directing society. The severity of environmental crises demands thoughtful moral reflection on how we should live as individuals and communities. Meeting challenges like biodiversity collapse and climate change requires questioning conventions of economic growth, consumerism and atomistic individualism that drive environmental harm. Cultivating ecological citizens and sustainable societies is ultimately an ethical project requiring vision of a flourishing world for all life.

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