

Citation: Pichl, H. (1997) Basic philosophy for environmentalists. *Verge (Amsterdam)*, October, 25–27.

Full text: © 1997 Hanno Pichl.

Environmental Ethics:

Is it morally wrong to kill a whale? If you think it is, do you know why you think so? Is it because the whale suffers, or because Greenpeace made you think that all whale species are endangered? It is questions of this kind the science of normative ethics deals with. I shall now try to explain how you can derive normative statements in environmental questions – after having told you in the *last Verge*, that you can't derive them from facts.

Many normative statements do not have a universal validity. Many people think that one ought not to smoke, while others do not have ethical problems with smoking. But there are some ethical statements that are so widely accepted that they have been turned into law: killing other people is not only perceived immoral by nearly everybody, it is even against the law. The decision which moral rules are sufficiently accepted to be turned into laws, is not taken by philosophers of ethics, but by the legislative power of a state, such as the parliament.

We shall now have a closer look on environmental ethics – that means the branch of philosophy that wants to answer how humans ought to behave towards nature. But first, I would like to mention the two main direction in ethics that can be used to group the different ethic schools: deontological and consequentialistic ethics.

Deontological or "duty ethics" is represented by, among others, Immanuel Kant who wanted to structure ethics as consisting of a set of rules that one never ought to break. For example: you ought to tell the truth, you ought not to kill. Another version of duty ethics was presented by John Rawls with one single procedure: imagine, you don't know who and where and in which position you are after having decided on an ethical rule – when you can accept the rule, no matter which one of the group of afflicted people you are, it is a good rule.

Consequentialistic or utilitarian ethics is only interested in the outcome, the consequence, of an action. When the action leads to a growth in welfare of all humans affected, it is morally good (Jeremy Bentham). How you achieve this consequence is irrelevant, you are for example allowed to lie if this increases the welfare of all people involved.

It is, of course, also possible to combine these two directions, and many philosophers have tried to do so. You could for example think of a "check list" with priorities, like: "1) never violate others' rights – 2) maximize welfare within the limits given by rule 1 – 3) when there is more than 1 alternative, chose the one which has the greatest value in its own – 4) respect your own preferences" (Thomas Nagel).

The distinction between deontological and utilitarian is also valid in environmental ethics; additionally you can ask whether an ethic is anthropocentric or not (see [figure](#)). Anthropocentric means that it is only humans that are morally relevant.

After this introduction, we will have a short look at some of the most influential schools within environmental ethics. There is not enough space to discuss all of them in detail, but I will mention some of the respective criticisms and problems with all of them.

Theological natural ethics

The Christian church has been accused to justify the destruction of nature by picturing nature as the possession of humans. The biblical words "and bring the earth under your control" – supported by the view that sacred trees etc were to be considered heresy – lead to a distant and hostile relation to nature. And in combination with a linear perception of history in the jewish-christian tradition, it was used to justify exploitation of animals and resources.

But there were other traditions than this "Christian mastership": Franciscus Assisi was the most prominent representative of a "Christian stewardship" and used the biblical Noah as inspiration. He perceived the whole creation as equal, not only including animals and plants, but also the sun and the moon. Humans had the duty of taking care of this creation, not as masters, but as gardeners or shepherds.

It is this school of thinking that is the source for the church's engagement in environmental questions today.

Two problems should be mentioned:

- As belief is voluntary, nobody can be forced to follow environmental rules that are based on religion alone.
- Nature has, in the Christian view, no intrinsic value (= no value by itself).

Nature management

Also the mechanistic way of thinking has a great deal of responsibility for the destruction of nature. The perception of animals as machines (René Descartes) and of nature as an infinitely large source and sink are central in this view. This way of thinking was characteristic of the 16th and 17th century, but still today some elements are alive, like technological optimism (the belief to solve environmental problems by means of technology alone) and market liberalism (the belief that an "invisible hand" will direct resource use such as to achieve anyone's best).

But there exist other ways of thinking economically: key words are "wise use", "safe-fail instead of fail-safe", "precaution principle", to mention some. What they express is that it is also economically best not to overexploit sources and sinks, and to use small-scale technologies that are not dangerous when they fail, instead of using large-scale technologies that allegedly are safe from failing, but have unknown consequences when they fail after all.

The main difference between these two ways of thinking economically is in time horizons: instead of calculating profits for the next months or years, nature management thinks in time scales of decades or generations.

But still, the gravest criticism of this ethic is:

- that it is no ethics at all, but just maximization of profit, only over larger time scales.

Human right on undestroyed nature

The two previous ethics were consequentialistic, the criterion to judge an action was: is its consequence good for humans. A more deontological approach is the branch of environmental ethics that concentrates on human rights. The basic idea is that environmental destruction would be impossible when human rights were guaranteed. Most activities that are destructive to nature, do at the same time violate some basic rights of people, often of minorities like indigenous people or future generations. Ecological catastrophes will often be followed by ethnical conflicts and have therefore to be avoided.

The main criticism against this school – in common with the other ones discussed so far – is:

- There is no trait in humans that justifies that only humans shall have rights. This is simply speciesism – "racism" against other species.

Animal protection

There have been various attempts to include also non-humans into the group of morally relevant beings. The oldest one argues in a consequentialistic way: we are not the only creatures on earth that can perceive well-being or sense pain. Therefore we ought not only to increase the welfare of human beings, but the well-being of all beings that can perceive well-being – namely of all "feeling beings". In this perspective, it is immoral to make animals suffer because they suffer.

The Animal Rights Movement goes one step further and introduces a deontological aspect

by demanding an "Animal Liberation". That means that Animal Rights philosophers (like Regan and Singer in the 1970s) argue that it is now the animals' turn to be liberated, after (more or less) successful liberation movements for slaves, women, and other groups that had been suppressed. In other words: after racism and sexism, Animal Lib wants to fight speciesism.

But it does not really succeed: by drawing a line between feeling and non-feeling organisms (like swamps, plants etc), there are again many species regarded as morally irrelevant. In an Animal-Right based ethics it is, for example, not immoral to make a plant species extinct. The distinction feeling/non-feeling is biologically as arbitrary as human/non-human.

And there are further philosophical problems:

- Animals do also kill each other, often with not quite humane (!) methods. Are these raptors to be regarded as immoral? Do we have to teach wolves complete vegetarianism? But that would definitely not increase their well-being.
- Animal Rights can be in direct conflict with species protection. Imagine rabbits that have been introduced to an island with an endemic (= existing only on that island), well-tasting (to rabbits!) flower species. Species protection would demand a removal of rabbits – which factually means shooting or poisoning them – even though rabbits feel pain and flowers do not.

Biocentrism

Some of the mentioned problems are avoided by the biocentric individualism which defines well-being in a much broader sense, namely as the "fulfilment of a desire to live". This definition of welfare turns also plants and other non-feeling organisms into morally relevant parties. If we adopt this view, we have to increase the well-being of all "living beings".

But, again, we create new philosophical problems:

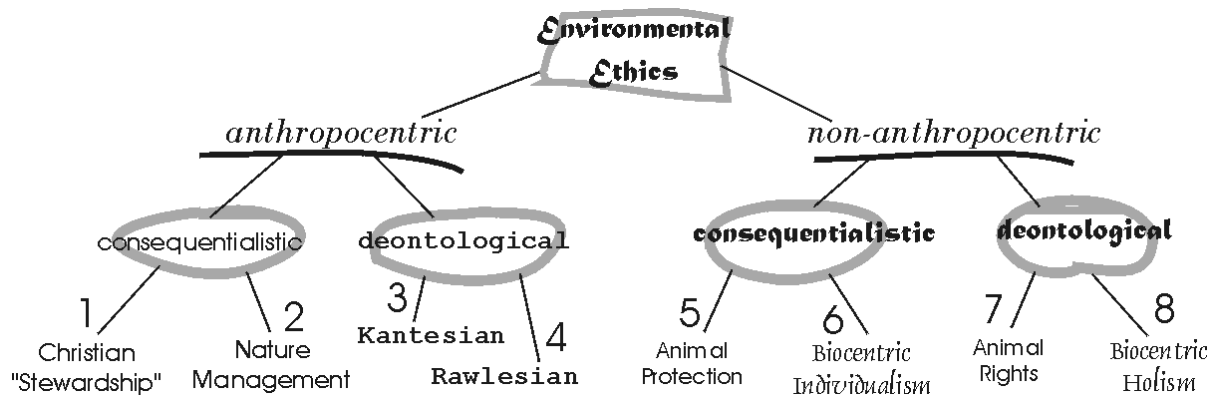
- A biocentric individualist has to repeatedly violate her/his own principles in order to survive her/himself. Albert Schweitzer considered himself – as a doctor – a mass murderer of bacteria. The desire to live includes the suppression of other life. This problem can be countered by defining any avoidable violation of a desire to live as unethical. But the perception of what is avoidable will remain quite subjective.

Another school within biocentrism is holistic: not individuals, but the ecosystem as a whole has a right to exist and to function. Some philosophers (like Aldo Leopold in the 1940s) include also abiotic elements of landscapes into their ethics – mountains, rivers, etc – and are thus more correctly entitled as ecocentrists. Leopold defined an action as morally good "if it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community". For bio/ecocentric holists, the suffering of single individuals is neither moral nor immoral (rather amoral), because cruelty belongs to nature. It is nature's complexity and diversity that has an intrinsic value, including biotic interactions like animals preying upon others, parasitism etc.

- But when the individual doesn't count, and when the ethic is truly biocentric (= not giving a special role to humans) – how about individual human beings?!

As a summary, I drew this (simplified) figure [[view a larger version](#)], and I will illustrate the differences of the schools by their respective answers on one question (numbers refer to the figure):

Why ought I not to kill a whale?



- 1) *because it is mankind's task to take care of the creation.*
- 2) *because later generations might have use for this species.*
- 3) *because rawness against animals advances rawness against humans.*
- 4) *because another human being might starve (or simply become sad).*
- 5) *because the whale feels pain.*
- 6) *because the whale has a desire to live.*
- 7) *because the whale has an intrinsic right to live.*
- 8) *because the marine ecosystem as a whole has an intrinsic right to be undisturbed.*

It is interesting to notice that answers 3) through 7) regard the killing of the individual whale as immoral, while it wouldn't be worse to kill the last individual of the species. Answers 1), 2), and 8), on the other hand, do not consider killing of an individual whale as a problem unless the survival of the species as a whole is at stake.

Which one's best?

When you have a look at the [figure](#) once more, you can perhaps agree that there is a tendency for the different ethical schools to become increasingly "radical" to the right side. At least the set of morally relevant beings and the extent of their rights increases. But does "more radical" always equal "better"?

It is here important to distinguish between two main aims with normative ethics: voluntary changes in opinion on the one hand, and laws and obligatory rules on the other hand. This distinction must also be made when we ask which environmental ethic is "best". You can adopt a rule for yourself that you don't kill flies. But can you demand everybody else to adopt the same moral rule?

As there is no ready answer, I will instead finish this overview with a personally coloured conclusion:

For laws and obligatory rules I want to rule out biocentrism, as the way is quite short to ecofascism: a government that has the power to force citizens to believe into something they cannot rationally understand, can easily force citizens to also accept other than ecologically motivated actions they cannot understand. That a single person does not count when the interest of the "community" (as defined by the one[s] in power) is concerned, is the very essence in all totalitarian ideologies.

The same applies – though in a weaker fashion – to the Animal Rights school of thinking. Additionally, the idea of animal protection builds, in my opinion, on a romanticistic and simplified perception of nature.

That means that there are only anthropocentric views left, the theological of which also has to be excluded unless one accepts that a government can decide about what people have to believe. Some biocentrists (for example Arne Næss) call anthropocentrism for "shallow ecology" – as opposed to their own "deep ecology". But I want to emphasize it once more: biocentrism should not become a state philosophy – not because it is a bad ethic, but because a state must never get enough power to make a way of thinking obligatory.

In my eyes a combination of nature management – given that the number of future

generations considered is long enough – with deontological environmental ethics is totally sufficient as a state philosophy. That the destruction of the ecosystem has been able to proceed so far, was not caused by applying the *wrong* ethics, but because *no ethics at all* were applied! Exploitation of natural resources could have been stopped long ago if the rights of future generations had been taken into consideration. And the clearcutting of for example the rain forests could have been stopped, when the human right on undestroyed nature (for the peoples living in the forest) had been realized.

Anyway, I have no problems of combining this anthropocentric view with a personal conviction, located somewhere near biocentric holism, that nature does have an intrinsic value.

[\[back / tilbake\]](#)