

Our treatment of the natural environment

One central question in environmental ethics is whether to think about the issues, such as overpopulation, depletion of resources, and pollution, in terms of the effects on human beings or in terms of changes to the environment itself or both. For example, pollution can undermine the quality of life and even kill human beings, but also has many effects on other species. Carbon emissions from human activity appear to be an important cause of global warming, which is affecting almost everything on the planet one way or another. But which effects matter morally, and why?

UTILITARIANISM

Hedonist utilitarianism claims that the only thing of moral value is pleasure and pain. So only human beings and animals count. Plants, ecosystems, natural objects and resources like mountains and icebergs, and species – none of these experience pleasure and pain. If Mill is right that higher pleasures are worth much more than lower pleasures, then we should focus mainly on human beings, as only they experience higher pleasures. So hedonist utilitarianism approaches a question like global warming in terms of its effects on people now and in the future.

Preference utilitarianism is broader, because people want more than their own pleasure. Someone might want the rainforests not to be demolished – not because they will have any experience of the rainforests, nor because they think this will affect the experience of people in the future, e.g. by new drugs being discovered, but because they simply want them to continue existing. Our desires relating to the natural environment are not just concerns for ourselves.

On this view, plants, ecosystems, species have value because we value them; but they only have as much value as we give them. Some philosophers have argued that this is enough to support a very ‘cautious’ policy towards the environment, so that we should minimize pollution and the use of non-renewable resources. The adverse effects on people alone dictate this, they claim; if you start counting all the animals that are affected as well, and the preferences people have for the natural environment to continuing existing ‘unspoilt’, then surely we must move towards a more ‘sustainable’ way of relating to the environment.

But others argue that utilitarianism does not support this. Instead, the effects of how we now treat the environment may not be as bad as some predict, and technology will provide solutions to the problems that arise. Furthermore, preferences for an ‘unspoilt’ environment are outweighed by urgent needs for food and other resource. So what action utilitarianism supports depends on what you think the consequences will be.

If you think that the natural environment matters in itself, independent of how we care for it, then you must defend a different view from utilitarianism.

DEONTOLOGY AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

A good person respects the values that things have. If something is good, then they will seek not to destroy it. When something has a value in itself, then we have a duty to respect that value. But does anything apart from human rationality and well-being have value in itself? Some philosophers have claimed that all life has value in itself and even that ecosystems do, as complex life-supporting systems.

A second approach makes an analogy between exploiting and polluting the natural environment and vandalism. Even if something doesn't matter in itself, destroying it can be bad if done from a bad motive. We could argue that much environmental destruction involves greed, or lack of concern for others, or wantonness, or an inability to appreciate beauty. If this is right, then even if the natural environment isn't of value 'in itself', certain ways of treating it could still be wrong.

A third approach considers the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. We are who we are because of relationships to other people and society – and so there are virtues like justice and concern of others. Likewise, we are who we are because of our relationship to the natural environment. This is partly a physical relationship – the physical needs of breathing, eating, recycling waste; but it is also obvious in our aesthetic and personal relationships to animals, plants, landscapes, and in science. Something about the human spirit is caught up with and responds to the environment. A sustainable, respectful relationship with the environment is part of a good life for us.

These arguments are all contentious. Historically, the relationship between human beings and the natural environment has been one of mastery as well as respect. Great benefits to us have resulted from the development of technologies that use and control the natural environment. Any duties to the environment must be weighed against duties to human beings.