



Sustainability and Ethics

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Outline

1. Environmental Values and their Impact on Sustainability Issues
2. Sustainability and Justice – the Case of Climate Change
3. The Morality of Sustainable Conduct

Ethics

- **morality:** (more or less coherent) system of rules, norms, principles, guidelines, evaluations, common sense-ideas that guide human behavior and human judgments.
- (philosophical) **ethics:** theoretic analysis of morality that seeks to *justify* or *criticize* and *modify* existing systems of morality.
- **descriptive ethics:** seeks to understand the historic development and societal functions of systems of morality: historiography and sociology of morality.

Normative and Applied Ethics

Normative Ethics

- Seeks to develop theoretical answers to the questions: How should we act?, and: What is good?
- e.g.: Kantian ethics (deontology), consequentialist ethics (utilitarianism)

Applied Ethics:

- Seeks to identify action-guiding principles and values with regard to specific branches of human action.
- e.g.: medical ethics, environmental ethics, engineering ethics, business ethics

The Right and the Good

Actions can be **right** or **wrong**:

- The right: principles and norms that guide behavior.
- You shall not lie! You shall help other people! ...

States of affairs can be **good** or **bad**:

- The good: evaluative judgments about the world and the things that are in it.
- This knife is good. This game is funny. This landscape is beautiful.

One leading question: How should we understand the relation between the good and the right?

Conceptualising the Environment

How should we think of the world around us? Is it

1. **nature:** analyzable and understandable relying on scientific methods?
2. **environment:** the world that surrounds us (we are in the center!) – or the world to which we belong, upon which we depend?
3. **creation:** religious idea, more general: a world that possesses value in itself („God saw everything He had made, and behold, it was **very good**).

Which entities possess value?

Sustainability: We should use the world's resources in ways that „meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs“ (Brundtland UN Commission 1987)

- The definition looks at *future generations*.
- Comprehensive theories of sustainability ask: which other entities do we have to respect in „meeting our needs“?
 - humans?
 - animals?
 - all living species and entire ecosystems?

Anthropocentrism

The basic idea: Human beings are the only beings that possess intrinsic value.

Sustainable action and environmental protection is needed as it fosters human interests:

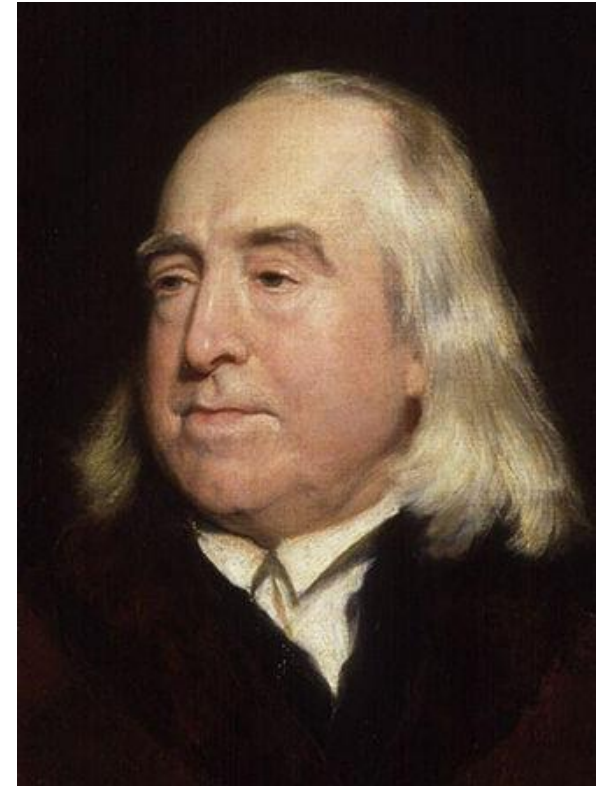
1. Economic interests: Nature as a provider of resources.
2. Safety interests: Fighting climate change to minimize risks of natural disasters.
3. Health interests: Use of natural resources for producing drugs.
4. Aesthetic interests: Humans enjoy the beauty of nature.

Pathocentrism

The basic idea: All sentient creatures, human beings and non-human animals alike, possess intrinsic value.

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832)

“The French have already discovered that the blackness of skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps, the faculty for discourse?...the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?... The time will come when humanity will extend its mantle over everything which breathes...”



Pathocentrism

The basic idea: All sentient creatures, human beings and non-human animals alike, possess intrinsic value.

Consequences for sustainable practices:

1. Non-human animals have to be integrated for their own sake (which rarely happens politically...).
2. Conflicts between, for example, climate protection and nature conservation, become much more complicated (wind engines...)

Biocentrism and Ecocentrism

Biocentrism: All living organisms possess intrinsic value.

- Non-hierarchical biocentrism: In principle, all living organisms possess *the same* intrinsic value.
 - Choices between lives are always made out of necessity.

Ecocentrism: Collectives / unities / systems like ecosystems, landscapes, or species possess intrinsic value.

A case study: invasive species

Imagine a mammal (sentient being!) as an invasive species:

1. Pathocentrism: All individuals that are sentient beings possess intrinsic value.
 - a) The hunt for the animals would only be permissible if they endanger too many other sentient individual animals.
2. Ecocentrism: Collectives like ecosystems possess intrinsic value.
 - a) Hunting the animals is permissible if they endanger existing ecosystems or landscapes.
 - b) But: What, if the animals belong to a species that is itself endangered?
3. Biocentrism: All living organisms possess intrinsic value.
 - a) Solution to the problem depends on individual circumstances: how many organisms are affected, which alternative options are available etc.

Goals and Conflicts

Key concepts like *sustainability* or *environmentalism* sometimes cover conflicts between very different goals, for example:

1. Protection of specific endangered species: requires deep interventions in ecosystems to stabilize living conditions.
2. Protection of well-known landscapes that requires to freeze the status-quo (keep natural processes in actual ways).
3. Protection of natural processes that may change the outlook of an environment dramatically: fires caused by lightnings.

Questions

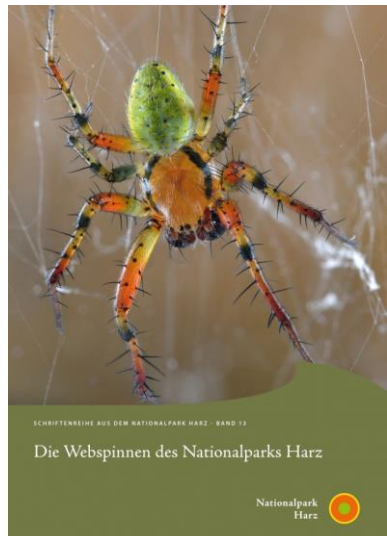
1. After this brief presentation of the *centrisms*: Which *centrism* makes sense to you and why?
2. You want to mine a rare earth in a diverse ecosystem. What to make of the two following statements that are both *anthropocentrist* ?
 - a) It's fine to mine! Future generations will benefit from the devices built with the help of rare earths. The technical knowledge will benefit them - as will the prosperity it creates.
 - b) It's better not to! Mining irreversibly destroys the ecosystem. Future generations may be more interested in the ecosystem than in the technology. We must not rob them of their freedom of choice.

Questions

You are an activist who wants to convince others to put a forest area in the neighborhood under nature protection to prevent the construction of a residential area. What arguments would you use to explain why?

- In this forest, we find a bunch of exciting species that are in danger of extinction, especially spiders like this one!
- Just take a walk through the forest and you will experience why we should protect it!
- For our nature tourism branch, the forest is crucial!

If you were the contractor building the residential area: How would you react to the three statements?





Second Part: Sustainability and Justice – The Case of Climate Change

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The ethical problem

- climate system protection as protection of human lives, human rights and the environment.

climate change fosters:

- natural disasters with serious consequences for human beings
- droughts, crop failures: the problem of famine
- scarcity of water: new violent conflicts
- political instability: displaced persons and failed states

Rights and Duties

1. Individuals are the primary subjects of rights (and of justice).
2. Collectives and groups are only subjects in a derivative sense: A person's rights can be violated due to their belonging to a certain group.
3. Rights are justified entitlements: If P has a right to X, there are good reasons that P is entitled to X.
4. Rights correspond with duties: If P has a right to X, there is some person or institution R that is obliged to provide X / not to interfere with X.

Vulnerable Groups

In the context of climate change:

- poor people in the Global North
- many people in the Global South
- future generations

If you contribute a lot to climate change (if your emissions are extremely high), you most probably belong to a group less affected by climate change's consequences.

Climate Protection and Future Generations

„Why should I do anything for posterity – what has posterity ever done for me?“ (e. g. J. Narveson)

Some traditional concepts of justice do not seem to work with regard to intergenerational issues:

- societies structured by cooperation and competition
- contracts as a model for just relations
- How could (yet) non-existent persons possess rights?

The Non-Identity-Problem

Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 1984, 351:

„If any particular person had not been conceived when he was in fact conceived, it is in fact true that he would never have existed.“

- A world in climate crisis and a world that solves the crisis are surely two very different worlds where different things happen.
- Different people meet, get children etc.
- If this is the case, how could a future person claim to be wronged because of climate change? In a different world without climate change they would never have existed!

Theories of Justice

Central topic of philosophy since antiquity

outcome-oriented theories:

- Certain distributions are just: equality of rights, goods, capabilities or chances; maximization of utility; a secured basic standard for everyone

procedure-oriented theories:

- Distributions are just, if they are the result of a fair process
- for example: justice as the result of a fair contract (John Rawls)

Climate Justice

Some important approaches:

- egalitarianism: future generations must be at least *as well off* as we are!
 - Who is „we“?
 - We received benefits from the past that we need to pass to the future.
- utilitarianism: we should maximize utility!
 - utility: pleasure and pain or desire fulfilment.
 - The best is yet to come: most human beings will live in the future – probably: radical cut of emissions to stabilize global living conditions.

A Basic Standard: Human Rights

- A third approach: sufficientarianism: future people should be sufficiently well off.

What is *enough*?

- the generations of human rights: civic, political, social and environmental
- as long as people are *homo sapiens sapiens*, they will need certain things and live a life of a certain shape.

Principles of Climate-Related Responsibility

How should responsibility be divided between states?

1. Principle of causation

- The extent of responsibility depends on the extent of causation (contribution to emissions).

2. Principle of capability

- The wealthy states are able to help and to reduce their emissions; therefore, they are responsible.
- historical responsibility? The problem of production chains?

Being an Optimist or Being a Pessimist?

- Open questions: How much adaptation is needed? Which kinds of adaptation are morally permissible – what about geo-engineering?

the optimist

- Climate models: focussing on scenarios with the highest possibility?
- trust in technology: why not try to use sulfate aerosols?

the pessimist

- Climate models: focussing on the most catastrophic scenarios
- mistrust in the promises of technology

Hans Jonas: The Heuristics of Fear

- *Principle of Responsibility* (1979)
- In situations of great uncertainty and with high moral stakes, we should be pessimists and avoid any further risks.
- The bad prognosis has priority over the good prognosis – everything needs to be done to prevent the worst case-scenario.
- „heuristics of fear“: Fear should guide our behavior in dealing with existential risks – if we are afraid, we realise what is at stake, we learn about our values.

Questions – A Scenario

Garrett Hardin: the tragedy of the commons (1968)

- Common land (Middle Ages / Early Modern Period): all villagers are entitled to graze their sheep upon.
- Too many sheep: the pasture becomes overused.
- All villagers share an interest in preventing overuse.
- The number of sheep needs to be reduced – the solution: a fair deal.



Image: MalcolmGould – own work, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3893805>

4 villagers, 100 sheep upon the common land (CL).

Investment of 100 \$ is needed to switch from sheep farming to another industry that generates the same income.

The goal: remove 50 sheep (50 sheep left). What would be a fair deal? Who has to reduce, who has to pay (to whom)?

VILLAGERS	NUMBER OF SHEEPS CURRENTLY UPON THE CL	TOTAL AMOUNT OF SHEEPS ON THE CL (CURRENT & IN THE PAST)	DISPOSIBLE ASSETS IN \$
A	43	67	4000
B	19	70	6000
C	35	165	5000
D	3	4	80



Third Part: The Morality of Sustainable Conduct

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Conceptualizing the Climate Crisis

Individual responsibility for sustainable change and climate protection?

The question that comes before: How should we conceptualize the crisis?

- What is endangered? What kind of problem is it?
- Who is responsible?
- Who is affected?

The importance of narratives

Possible narrations of the climate crisis:

- a problem of capitalism
- a destruction of creation
- a technological challenge
- a danger to home, our well-known environment

The importance of narratives: Compare the crisis of biodiversity!

The first narrative: global Injustice

“[...] This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor. [...] Inequity affects not only individuals but entire countries; it compels us to consider an ethics of international relations. A true “ecological debt” exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time. [...] The warming caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world, especially Africa, where a rise in temperature, together with drought, has proved devastating for farming. [...] Some strategies for lowering pollutant gas emissions call for the internationalization of environmental costs, which would risk imposing on countries with fewer resources burdensome commitments to reducing emissions comparable to those of the more industrialized countries. Imposing such measures penalizes those countries most in need of development. A further injustice is perpetrated under the guise of protecting the environment. Here also, the poor end up paying the price. [...]”

The first narrative: global Injustice

- quote last slide: Pope Francis, encyclical letter *Laudato si'* (sect. 2, 51, 170)
- climate crisis as a continuation of problems of severe injustice and exploitation
 - First slavery and colonialization, then the natural resources – and now the climate system.
- locates responsibility to act within the Global North.
- connects climate protection to fighting poverty and to economic development (sustainability: social, economical, ecological)

The second narrative: apocalypse

“We are facing a disaster of unspoken sufferings for enormous amounts of people. And now is not the time for speaking politely or focusing on what we can or cannot say. Now is the time to speak clearly. Solving the climate crisis is the greatest and most complex challenge that Homo sapiens have ever faced. The main solution, however, is so simple that even a small child can understand it. We have to stop our emissions of greenhouse gases. Either we do that or we don't. You say nothing in life is black or white. But that is a lie. A very dangerous lie. Either we prevent 1.5 degree [Celsius] of warming or we don't. Either we avoid setting off that irreversible chain reaction beyond human control or we don't. Either we choose to go on as a civilisation or we don't. That is as black or white as it gets. There are no grey areas when it comes to survival.”

Greta Thunberg, World Economic Forum, Davos, 25.01.2019

The second narrative: apocalypse

- the narrative underlines the urgency of the problem – the only adequate reaction: state of climate emergency
- settling priorities: climate policy first, everything else second
- highlighting personal responsibility: in a state of emergency, everyone is obliged to help preventing further harm.

The third narrative: future

Slogans from climate protection protests:

„We will go to school if you keep the climate cool!“

„Wir sind jung und brauchen die Welt“ (We are young and in need of the world“)

„Wir sind hier, wir sind laut, weil ihr uns die Zukunft klaut!“ (We are here and we demonstrate because you steal our future)

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The third narrative: future

- the narrative can be adapted within all societies
- distributing burdens of responsibility: the older generations did not do their job (Boomer against Zoomer)
- caring for one's children: a strong motivation?

But:

- what about younger people's lifestyle?
- what about „Grandparents for Future“?

Individual Duties?

Do we have sustainability-/climate-related moral duties as individuals?

- Don't travel by plane!
- Don't eat meat!
- Buy an electric car – and use bike and bus as often as you can!

These questions concern *everyday activities!*

Sinnott-Armstrong's Case

Influential Paper: „It's not *My* Fault!“ (2005)

- A pleasant journey in a gas-guzzling car, just for fun – is there something wrong with it?

No! says Sinnott-Armstrong, because:

- one person does not make a difference (even „with a little help from my friend“).
- The practice is common.
- An agreement not to gas-guzzle would be helpful, BUT: there is no agreement, therefore, there is no duty!

Avoiding Injustice

Responses to Sinnott-Armstrong:

- After all, the pleasant trip in the gas-guzzling car *does* make a difference: every additional emission aggravates the problem.
- We have a duty to refrain from unjust acts – and our gas guzzling contributes to the unjust consequences of climate change.
- We have this duty *regardless* of other peoples' behavior: If you do something wrong, „the others did the same!“ is no good excuse.

A Personal Budget of Emissions?

For example Christian Baatz (2014)

- Every person should have a personal budget of emissions.
- Free choice how to spend the budget.
- Sensitive with regard to social status and contexts (dependency on fossil infrastructures etc.).
- Implementation: budget is debited when paying for something.

Being a Virtuous Person...

- Virtue ethics: focussing on the good life of a person and the development of good human characteristics.
- “We ought to do what we can to reduce our climate impacts, because we care about others—because we are just, compassionate, and benevolent people.” (Lenzi 2022: 8)
- If we do not adapt to a sustainable lifestyle, that might make no difference.
- However, we do make a statement: We don’t care. Is this the kind of person we want to become?

... or Accepting a Lifestyle?

- German sociologist Steffen Mau: „the ecology of the working class“: many people lead sustainable lives – due to poverty and scarcity of resources.
- Buying sustainable products can be a marker of difference, a way of demonstrating one's moral convictions and social status.
- If not everyone can choose to live sustainable – how does this affect individual duties?

Political Duties

Elizabeth Cripps (2013): We all have climate change-related, individual duties – as *citizens*.

- Our abilities to fight the problem via changing our lifestyle or donating to charities are limited.
- However, as citizens (especially in rich countries), we can make a difference: demonstrations and protests, petitions, elections, running for offices or engagement within participatory political decision-making.