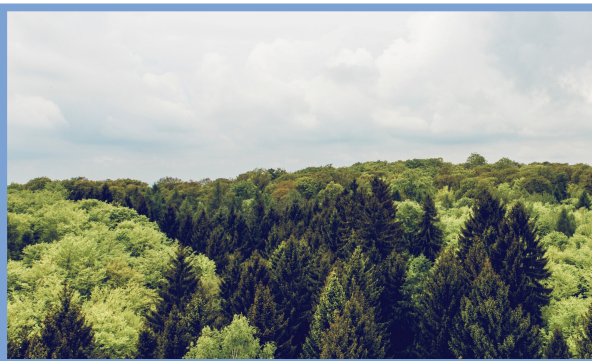


Introduction to Environmental Ethics

1. **What** is environmental ethics and how is it approached?

Ethics is a large field that can be divided into three branches: applied ethics, meta-ethics, and normative ethics. Meta-ethics and normative ethics are both theoretical. Meta-ethics is concerned with investigating whether or not morality exists (i.e. whether or not the words "right" and "wrong" describe objective reality); on the assumption that it does, normative ethics is concerned with how to make moral decisions (i.e. how to decide which actions are right and wrong). Unlike these first two branches of ethics, applied ethics is practical; it takes normative ethical theories and puts them into practice in real-world situations. One of these is how to treat the environment, which is also known as environmental ethics.



Uninterrupted forest: what a world led by conservationists might look like.

There are two significant approaches to environmental ethics, and those concerned with environmental issues usually subscribe to one of them. Although both approaches promote care for the environment, there are some important differences between them. The first approach is conservation, which is the secular practice of caring for the environment. This practice is motivated either by a desire to benefit human beings or by a desire to benefit all living things. The second approach is stewardship, which is the Christian practice of caring for the environment because it is a God-given gift. This side-by-side comparison of conservation and stewardship reveals the first important difference between them: stewardship is driven by religious belief whilst conservation is not. Fundamentally, Christians practice stewardship because the Bible commands them.

2. **How** do the approaches to environmental ethics work?

Conservation: religious belief does not motivate conservation; instead, it is usually driven by one of two different secular beliefs: anthropocentrism and biocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the belief that human beings are the most important things in the universe, and conservationists who are motivated by it care for the environment as a means of caring for other people. Anthropocentrism ascribes instrumental value to the environment, and rejects the belief that the environment has intrinsic value: its only value is as a tool for keeping human beings alive. On the other hand, biocentrism is the belief that life is the most important thing in the universe. Consequently, conservationists who are motivated by this belief care for the environment regardless of its use for human beings. Biocentrism ascribes intrinsic value to the environment, which means it would be a thing of great value even if people were not around to appreciate or benefit from it.

Stewardship: the Bible contains the earliest ideas about stewardship, which is an approach to environmental ethics driven by the religious belief in theocentrism. Theocentrism is the belief that God is the most important thing in the universe. Christians believe that God created the environment and gave it to human beings as a gift, because of this they try to treat it responsibly and respectfully. Consequently, stewards care for the environment because it is what God wants; however, they believe God's plan for human beings takes priority over preserving the environment for its own sake in cases where there is a conflict of interests.

Applied Ethics

A branch of ethics concerned with how to put ethical theories into practice in real-world situations.

Environmental Ethics

A branch of applied ethics concerned with the moral status of the environment and how human beings should interact with it.

Anthropocentrism

The belief that human beings are the most important things in the universe.

Biocentrism

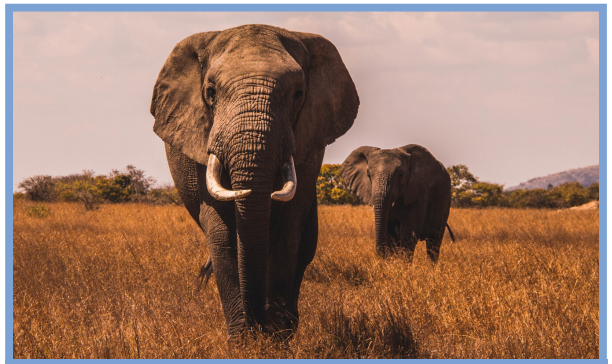
The belief that life is the most important thing in the universe.

Theocentrism

The belief that God is the most important thing in the universe.

3. **Why** are environmental ethics and its approaches important?

Although the approaches to environmental ethics are similar, because they both promote care for the environment, their differences have a profound impact on how people treat the environment. Conservationists inspired by anthropocentrism (also known as shallow ecologists) do not seek to preserve the environment beyond the level required to safeguard human survival. In practice, this means they only protect those parts of the environment that are useful to people. On the other hand, conservationists inspired by biocentrism (also known as deep ecologists) seek to preserve the environment to the greatest extent possible. They believe damage and destruction of the environment is only justified if it is done to fulfil basic human needs, which are very narrowly defined (namely, the provision of clothing, shelter, and sustenance). Consequently, the African savannah could vanish in a world led by shallow ecologists; an outcome that would be difficult to imagine under the leadership of deep ecologists. Finally, stewards sit somewhere between the two types of conservationist. They believe that God wants them to care for living things, and treat the environment responsibly and respectfully; however, they prioritise the fulfilment of God's plan above the protection of the environment. If stewards face a choice between promoting the interests of human beings and preserving the environment, they will always prioritise people.



The African savannah: an environment threatened by anthropocentric conservation?

George Thinks

I think environmental ethics is the most important branch of applied ethics, because how we choose to treat the environment has an effect on every living thing on Earth. This is not an attempt to denigrate or disregard other branches of applied ethics; however, most are concerned with areas of human activity that only have direct effects on people (e.g. business ethics, and sexual ethics). Even branches like animal ethics are only concerned with the treatment of animals in relatively narrow contexts (e.g. farms, and laboratories). Environmental ethics alone appears concerned with the effect of human activity on every living thing, from microbes to mammals; in this regard, it is strikingly different from traditional areas of ethical concern.

Environmental ethics also raises some big questions about personal beliefs and values. As we've discussed, our positions on environmental issues are largely dictated by pre-existing ideas about the importance of people, life or God. In particular, anthropocentrism is responsible for an approach to environmental ethics that is pretty problematic, unless you're human or essential for human survival. But it's not like biocentrism offers a better alternative, even though I have greater sympathy with it: at the sharp end, it necessarily involves renouncing innumerable home comforts and shrinking the world's human population. Perhaps theocentrism is what's required to find a sensible compromise, but it relies on a faith in God that many find impossible in our secular society.

