

# Ethics

## Applied Ethics

### Environmental Ethics

### Information Booklet



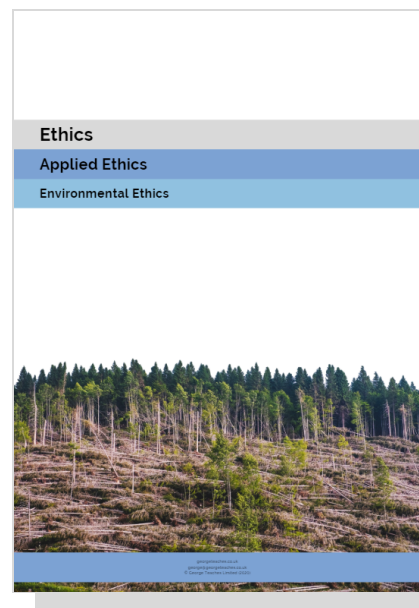


## Preface

This information booklet is all about environmental ethics. It surveys the important elements of this novel branch of applied ethics, introduces significant concepts and issues (like sustainability, waste management, and climate change), and investigates the ideas of well-known thinkers (like James Lovelock and Arne Næss). It also discusses important debates in environmental ethics, and analyses legal, social, and religious perspectives on the various issues arising from them. It is an introductory text, but it provides useful pointers throughout for those interested in further independent study.

This information booklet follows the video lessons available at George Teaches, and is designed for use in conjunction with them. It is accompanied by worksheets that can be completed online or by hand, which are also available in a single work booklet. Additional materials on James Lovelock and Arne Næss can be accessed online, which comprehensively summarise their famous works on environmental ethics. Throughout this information booklet, key questions are used as subtitles, key terms are highlighted in separate boxes, and brief reflections are offered under the heading, "George Thinks".

I am deeply indebted to my colleagues and students for the production of this publication, which has been inspired by their desire for more extensive and holistic resources for teaching and learning about ethics. At all times, I have attempted to produce material that covers popular and important content, but is not confined by the straitjacket of any particular curriculum or specification. Consequently, whilst this covers all of the relevant content for environmental ethics at A Level, it goes far beyond. My earnest hope is that it is capable of both supporting students of all abilities and challenging the most able to embark upon their own self-directed enquiries. Above all, it is my sincerest wish that it proves beneficial to both your teaching and your learning of environmental ethics, be you teacher or student (or, as I am, be you both).



George

London, UK  
25 March 2020



# Contents



**Introduction to Environmental Ethics**

4



**Issues in Environmental Ethics**

6



**James Lovelock on Environmental Ethics**

8



**Arne Næss on Environmental Ethics**

10



**Debates in Environmental Ethics**

12



**Legal and Social Perspectives in Environmental Ethics**

14



**Religious Perspectives in Environmental Ethics**

16



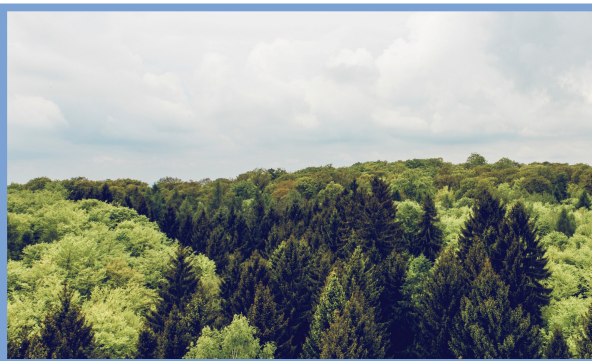
3



# 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.





# Issues in Environmental Ethics

## 1. **What** are the key issues in environmental ethics?

Human beings have an unquestionably harmful effect on the environment; however, some human activities are more damaging and destructive than others. The most harmful activities are all key issues in environmental ethics, because they stimulate significant debate about the extent to which human beings should be allowed to damage or destroy the environment. Although there are several key issues in environmental ethics, three of the most important are sustainability, waste management, and climate change.



**Melting ice:** rising temperatures threaten to melt polar ice and raise world sea levels.

**Sustainability:** the issue of whether or not human beings should be allowed to use the environment's natural resources; and, if so, to what extent. Human use of natural resources is harmful because it leads to the destruction of natural habitats, species extinction, and accelerated global warming (through the destruction of carbon stores and the extraction of carbon-based fuels).

**Waste management:** the issue of whether or not human beings should pollute the environment with waste; and, if so, to what extent. Waste disposal is harmful because it permanently pollutes the land (hundreds of thousands of acres of landfill exist globally) and the sea (eight million tons of plastic is dumped into Earth's oceans every year).

**Climate change:** the issue of whether or not human beings should pollute the environment with greenhouse gases; and, if so, to what extent. Arguably, this is the most important issue in environmental ethics because its potential impact is so significant. Climate change is especially harmful, because it threatens natural habitats with desertification or flooding, and may render parts of the planet uninhabitable. It is unpredictable, and has the ability to disrupt global systems that promote the survival of life on Earth (including human life).

## 2. **How** are the key issues in environmental ethics approached?

The two significant approaches to environmental ethics are conservation and stewardship. Sustainability, waste management, and climate change are addressed differently depending on which approach is adopted.

**Stewardship:** stewards are theocentric, which means they believe God is the most important thing in the universe. They believe that human beings should live in agreement with God's will, which can be known from the Bible (among other traditions and texts). Stewards argue that human beings should be able to use natural resources and pollute the world as necessary to fulfil God's plan for them. Nevertheless, because the environment is a God-given gift they must otherwise treat it respectfully and use it responsibly.

**Conservation (shallow ecology):** some conservationists are anthropocentric, which means they believe human beings are the most important things in the universe. They argue that people should use Earth's natural resources to the maximum benefit of humanity, and pollute as necessary (as long as it does not harm other human beings).

**Conservation (deep ecology):** some conservationists are biocentric, which means they believe life is the most important thing in the universe. They argue that human beings should only use natural resources or pollute to fulfil their basic needs (e.g. clothing, shelter, and sustenance). Generally, they seek to preserve the environment in its natural state.



**A petrol station:** continued use of carbon-based fuels is a major source of debate.



### 3. **Why** are the approaches to the key issues in environmental ethics important?

The approaches to sustainability, waste management, and climate change are important for several reasons. Arguably most important is the fact that the approaches dictate what life looks like for human beings and the environment. Deep ecologists advocate living in isolated communities; stewards advocate living in hamlets and villages; and shallow ecologists advocate living in large towns and cities (or, at least, do not see a problem with it). Deep ecologists create few environmental issues, because they live sustainably and in harmony with the environment. Generally, stewards do not live quite as sustainably; however, their impact on the natural world remains relatively modest. On the other hand, shallow ecologists create and exacerbate many environmental issues, because they do not believe in substantially reducing natural resource consumption or pollution.

Beyond what life looks like for human beings and the environment, how environmental issues are addressed is important for other reasons. First, the effects of environmental issues are universal. They affect every human being and living thing on Earth, because the planet is a closed system. Second, environmental issues are unlimited by time. They are already destined to haunt generations of the future, but the total number of human beings and living things affected will only increase if natural resource consumption and pollution is not curtailed. Finally, some environmental issues have already caused irreparable damage to the environment. In some cases, the damage and destruction caused by human activity will be impossible to repair or reverse. In summary, the approaches are important because there are several potential responses and the problems they address are significant.

#### **George Thinks**

Learning about the issues in environmental ethics exposes the importance of the beliefs that underpin both conservation and stewardship. The problems created by natural resource consumption and pollution are the same regardless of how they're approached, but the approaches differ significantly in the extent to which they attempt to address them. This reveals something interesting: some approaches don't really accept that environmental issues are problems, and this is because of their underlying beliefs. For example, conservation motivated by anthropocentrism, or shallow ecology, only considers human activity problematic if it harms other human beings; if it doesn't, then it's not a problem (even if it harms billions of other living things).

On the other hand, conservation motivated by biocentrism, or deep ecology, considers almost all human activity problematic. This is because almost all human activity causes direct or indirect harm to the environment; and, because the environment is intrinsically valuable, this should be avoided. Whilst deep ecology may be considerably more considerate of living things, it creates a different problem: it ultimately requires a significant reduction in the human population and the abandonment of much modern technology. Whilst this may be a laudable ambition for the benefit of all life on Earth, it would likely require billions of people to forgo the joy of parenthood and voluntarily subject themselves to a relatively strenuous and frugal lifestyle.





# James Lovelock on Environmental Ethics

## 1. **Who** is James Lovelock and what are his key ideas on environmental ethics?

James Lovelock (b. 1919) is a British scientist and member of the environmental movement. He has enjoyed an incredibly varied career, working for institutions including the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and Shell. He is most famous for developing the Gaia hypothesis, which he introduced and explained in his book of the same name, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (published in 1979). Although it was ridiculed by some scientists at the time, it has since become a fundamental assumption of ecology science. Three of the key ideas that James Lovelock introduced in *Gaia* are outlined below. He used them to support his view that human beings should be cautious and discerning when damaging or destroying the environment, because it could have significant consequences for the survival of human beings and other living things.

**Earth's atmosphere and biosphere comprise a single interconnected organism (Gaia):** Earth's atmosphere and biosphere (i.e. living things), as well as oceans and soils, form a single super organism: Gaia. Living things expel a reactive mixture of gas molecules into the atmosphere, which make Earth's atmosphere more volatile than those of other planets (e.g. Mars, and Venus).

**Gaia is cybernetic and regulates Earth's conditions to keep it inhabitable:** Gaia appears to regulate the relatively volatile mixture of molecules in the atmosphere, oceans, and soils. Using various mechanisms (e.g. maintaining a narrow temperature range, and maintaining a neutral pH), Gaia appears to keep Earth inhabitable for living things.

**Gaia is vulnerable and Earth could become uninhabitable if it is damaged:** it may be possible to change, damage or destroy Gaia's cybernetic system. If human beings manage to do this, then Gaia may be unable to maintain a narrow temperature range or neutral pH. Consequently, Earth (or parts of it) may become uninhabitable for human beings and other living things.

## 2. **How** do James Lovelock's key ideas on environmental ethics work?



James Lovelock

James Lovelock's key ideas support his view that human beings should be cautious and discerning when damaging or destroying the environment, because it could have significant consequences for the survival of human beings and other living things. Taken together his ideas form a tentative ethical argument that supports the following conclusion: Gaia maintains the existence of all living things on Earth, and human beings should not disrupt this process through thoughtlessness.

**Earth's atmosphere and biosphere comprise a single interconnected organism (Gaia):** this key idea is the Gaia hypothesis. James Lovelock argues that the unlikely molecular mixture of the atmosphere (and the oceans and soils) suggests it is an extension of the biosphere (i.e. living things). The atmospheres of lifeless planets (e.g. Mars, and Venus) are inert; however, the atmosphere of Earth is volatile. This volatility is only possible because living things expel a reactive mixture of gas molecules into the atmosphere, where they are then reused by other organisms. Earth's surface operates like a single super organism (named Gaia).

**Gaia is cybernetic and regulates Earth's conditions to keep it inhabitable:** this key idea is an argument in itself. James Lovelock claims that despite the molecular volatility of the atmosphere and oceans, Earth is regulated by Gaia to keep it inhabitable. For instance, there is enough oxygen in the atmosphere to support aerobic organisms (21 percent), but not so much that Earth's rainforests spontaneously combust and burn uncontrollably (anything above 25 percent). Likewise, Earth has maintained a constant temperature over billions of years despite considerable variation in solar output. James Lovelock compares Gaia to a thermostatic oven: a cybernetic (i.e. self-regulating) system that operates by maintaining a desired state of temperature. However, unlike a thermostatic oven, Gaia maintains desired states of pH, ocean salinity, and countless other molecular mixtures. Ultimately, Gaia's cybernetic systems ensure that a diverse range of living organisms can survive on Earth's surface.



**Gaia is vulnerable and Earth could become uninhabitable if it is damaged:** this key idea is also an argument in itself, and is where James Lovelock tentatively introduces his ethical agenda. Ultimately, his agenda is tentatively introduced because he generally attempts to stick to the science; however, his understanding of Earth makes him concerned about human activities that harm the environment, so he does provide some loose guidance on how human beings should behave. In brief, James Lovelock argues that human activity could change, damage or destroy Gaia's cybernetic systems, especially if important ecosystems like rainforests and continental shelves (i.e. shallow seas) are affected. Consequently, he concludes that human beings should act cautiously and discerningly when damaging or destroying the environment, because it could make Earth uninhabitable for human beings and other living things.

3. **Why** are James Lovelock's key ideas on environmental ethics important?

James Lovelock's key ideas are important for several reasons, and three of the most significant are outlined below. In brief, they are responsibility-conferring, revelatory, and revolutionary. They have changed the way that scientists and ordinary citizens understand the relationship between human beings and the environment.

**They confer human beings with responsibility for Gaia:** James Lovelock's ideas significantly strengthened the environmental movement, by demonstrating that human beings have a big impact on the natural world and conferring them with responsibility for it.



**Gaia:** a Roman sculpture of Tellus (Gaia in Greek) flanked by the spirits of air and sea.

**They reveal previously unknown truths about the way the world works:** James Lovelock suggests that the Gaia hypothesis was intuitively understood by citizens of the Greek and Roman empires, who worked closely with the natural world, but it was rejected by the scientific community of the 1970s because it did not conform to preexisting models. As such, James Lovelock's key ideas reveal truths about Earth that were previously unknown to science.

**They revolutionised ecology by dismissing previous theories about the environment:** James Lovelock's key ideas are important because they were revolutionary. Prior to the publication of *Gaia*, scientists assumed that human beings had a negligible impact on the composition of the atmosphere. James Lovelock demonstrated that the opposite was true, which radically changed most of the assumptions that underpin ecology.

### George Thinks

James Lovelock is a fascinating character, because he marches to the beat of his own drum. He's an independent scientist, which means that he's not attached to any academic institution (e.g. a university); instead he has enjoyed a career working on varied scientific problems from cryonics (i.e. storing frozen human corpses for future resuscitation) to the detection of life on Mars. It appears that he has always followed his own nose, which led him to develop the Gaia hypothesis despite resistance and ridicule from much of the scientific community at the time.

Notwithstanding this, it seems to me that James Lovelock is not entirely sure how human beings should act in response to the Gaia hypothesis. When *Gaia* was published in 1979, he seemed to advocate caution and discernment when damaging or destroying the environment. But in recent years, he has suggested that environmental disaster is inevitable, so human beings should behave as they wish. Although James Lovelock thinks technological solutions are possible, he believes the near future is bleak (and this may influence his advice).





# Arne Næss on Environmental Ethics

1. **Who** was Arne Næss and what are his key ideas on environmental ethics?

Arne Næss (1912-2009) was a Norwegian philosopher and environmentalist. He received his PhD from the University of Oslo, and was appointed as its youngest ever professor in 1939. In 1970, he resigned his academic chair and retired to his mountain hut (Tvergastein), where he spent the rest of the decade developing deep ecology and participating in environmental activism. In 1989, Arne Næss published *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, in which he described and explained his key ideas on environmental ethics (some of which are outlined below).

## Ideology

A set of personal values that guides action, but is not logically supported.

## Ecosophy

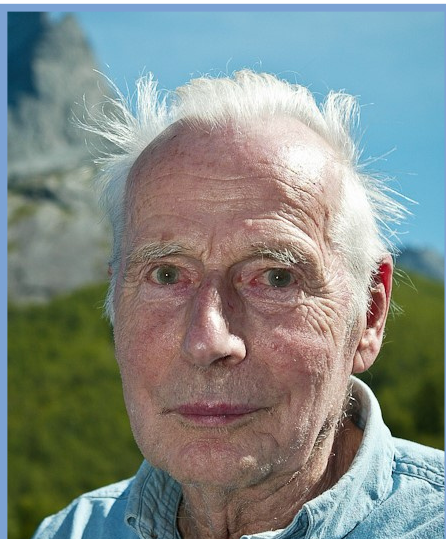
A set of personal values about the environment that guides action; a personal ethical system inspired by the environment.

**The root cause of environmental issues is capitalist ideology:** human beings are on an ideological capitalist mission to increase material wealth (i.e. produce and consume). This mission is not logically supported or necessary for survival, and it damages and destroys the environment.

**Promoting ecosophy can solve environmental issues:** to save Earth, human beings need to develop personal sets of values that are logically supported by fundamental values and inspired by the environment (i.e. philosophies developed from ecology). This should change human behaviour.

**Deep ecology recognises the intrinsic value of all living things:** the process of developing personal sets of values that are inspired by the environment leads human beings to deep ecology, which involves understanding human beings as interconnected and inseparable parts of their environments.

2. **How** do Arne Næss's key ideas on environmental ethics work?



Arne Næss

Arne Næss's key ideas support his view that human beings should radically change their ways of life to benefit both themselves and Earth. Taken together, they form an ethical argument that leads to the following conclusion: all living things have equal intrinsic value, and human beings should act in ways that acknowledge this. If human beings change their attitudes and behaviour, Arne Næss believed that environmental damage and destruction could be reduced and human quality of life improved.

**The root cause of environmental issues is capitalist ideology:** Arne Næss's first key idea is an argument itself. He argued that Earth's proximity to environmental disaster is caused by an ideological mission to increase material wealth. Arne Næss's reasoning is clear: there is abundant evidence that the environment is being damaged and destroyed. Damage and destruction is inflicted on the environment to increase economic productivity. Therefore, the ultimate cause of environmental damage and destruction is the global culture of materialism that fuels production and consumption at the expense of the natural world.

**Promoting ecosophy can solve environmental issues:** this key idea is also an argument itself. Arne Næss argued that Earth can be saved, but only if people change their philosophies (i.e. the value systems that inspire their actions). He argued that the global culture of materialism is ideological; in other words, it is a philosophy that lacks logical support. According to Arne Næss, there is no logical reason to increase material wealth beyond the level required to satisfy basic needs. Alternatively, he claimed that a global culture of environmentalism would be based on a philosophy with logical support. He argued that ecology (i.e. the study of the environment) can form the basis for philosophies that proceed logically from an understanding of human beings as interconnected and inseparable parts of their environments to environmentally friendly action. Arne Næss called these philosophies "ecosophies", meaning value systems that inspire environmentally friendly action and arise from studying the environment.



**Deep ecology recognises the intrinsic value of all living things:** this key idea of Arne Næss is also an argument itself. Although different human beings can develop different ecosophies, Arne Næss argued that they should all share eight core values: (1) all living things have intrinsic value; (2) richness and diversity of life has intrinsic value; (3) human beings have no right to reduce richness and diversity of life except to satisfy basic needs; (4) present human interference with the environment is excessive; (5) human life can flourish even if the human population decreases; (6) significant change requires political action; (7) quality of life is of greater value than material wealth; and (8) human beings who accept the first seven core values have an ethical responsibility to act to bring about the necessary change. Core values (1) and (2) recognise the intrinsic value of all living things, including the intrinsic value of the richness and diversity of all life forms, and it is from this essential insight that the other core values of deep ecology are derived.

3. **Why** are Arne Næss's key ideas on environmental ethics important?

Arne Næss's key ideas are important for several reasons, and three of the most significant are outlined below. In brief, they are rational, radical, and reactionary. They have alerted human beings to the magnitude of the change that is required to prevent irreversible damage and destruction of the environment.

**They are rational because they are logically supported:** Arne Næss's key ideas demonstrate that ecosophies are supported by fundamental values, unlike ideologies that promote the senseless production and consumption of natural resources (e.g. capitalism).

**They propose radical change to solve environmental issues:** additionally, Arne Næss's key ideas clarify the scale and scope of the change required to avoid environmental disaster. This includes the introduction of wide-ranging environmental policies, a widespread change in public attitudes towards standard of living, and a considerable reduction in the size of the human population.

**They provide a reactionary response to shallow ecology:** Arne Næss's key ideas deliberately undermine shallow ecology, which is an approach to environmental ethics inspired by anthropocentrism (the belief that human beings are the most important things in the universe). Arne Næss claimed that shallow ecology was conservation in name only, and that it would be unable to prevent environmental disaster.



**Tvergastein:** Arne Næss's mountain hut.

### George Thinks

Arne Næss is an interesting philosopher, because he actually practised what he preached. Despite becoming the University of Oslo's youngest professor (at the age of 27), and being Norway's only professor of philosophy until 1954, he turned his back on the world of academia so that he could live according to the set of personal values that he had developed whilst mountain climbing: "Ecosophy T". In the 1970s and 1980s, Arne Næss became increasingly vocal as an environmental activist, eventually launching the deep ecological movement.

It seems to me that Arne Næss became disillusioned with developed society, and began to perceive the pursuit of both social status and material wealth as misguided personal goals. Eventually, he retreated to Tvergastein to lead a life guided by his environmental principles. There is something romantic about this, and it is certainly appealing to some (including me). However, as Arne Næss ultimately realised, only a much smaller human population could live this way: Earth's human population would have to be substantially reduced over time.



# Debates in Environmental Ethics

## 1. **What** are the debates in environmental ethics?

The most important debates in environmental ethics go beyond those involved in environmental issues, like sustainability, waste management, and climate change. The debates discussed here take place at a deeper level, and their answers influence the ways that different people approach environmental issues (e.g. conservation and stewardship). However, they have wide-ranging implications beyond environmental ethics, and also influence the ways that different people approach other branches of applied ethics (e.g. animal ethics, and medical ethics).

**Value:** one very important debate is about value, and is over whether the environment and other living things have intrinsic value or instrumental value. This debate is of central importance because it affects how human beings evaluate the worth of the environment, either as something that is valuable in itself or as something that is valuable only as a tool for something else.

**Interests:** another debate in environmental ethics is about interests, and is over whether or not the environment and other living things have legally recognisable ambitions, desires or wants. This debate influences whether or not the environment and living things can ever be protected by the courts (given that their ambitions, desires or wants can never be known).

**Attitude:** a more practical debate in environmental ethics is about attitude, and is over whether approaching environmental issues requires a fundamentalist attitude or a realist attitude. Fundamentalists argue that only radical change will save Earth, but realists argue that advocating for such change is counterproductive, because the majority of people will not embrace it.

### Intrinsic Value

Worth that something has in itself, in its own right, or for its own sake.

### Instrumental Value

Worth that something has as a tool for something else.

## 2. **How** do the debates in environmental ethics work?

**Value:** ultimately, the debate over whether the environment and other living things have intrinsic value or instrumental value is a debate between anthropocentrism and biocentrism. Aristotle argued that, "Nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man." He subscribed to the belief that the environment was only valuable as a tool for human use. This perspective has a long history, stretching back to the great Greek philosophers and the Judeo-Christian tradition; however, it is no logically better supported than the more modern belief in biocentrism.

**Interests:** the debate about interests is more technical than the debate about value, and it poses a major problem for conservationists inspired by biocentrism. In brief, in order for anything to receive legal protection it needs to have recognisable interests, or rights that have been conferred by lawmakers. However, such rights or interests can only usually be established if a thing has identifiable ambitions, desires or wants; it is difficult to see how such interests can be established for most animals, or environmental features like forests, mountains and rivers.



**The United States Supreme Court Building:** where legal interests are debated.

**Attitude:** the debate about attitude is different from the debates about value and interests. The former is a debate in applied ethics, whilst the latter are debates in normative ethics. On the assumption that value and interests exist, these arguments attempt to identify things that have them. On the assumption the environment has at least some value, the disagreement about attitude attempts to ascertain how human beings should act to preserve it, and to what extent. In other words, the debates about value and interests are theoretical, whilst the debate about attitude is practical. Those engaged in this debate either identify as fundamentalists or realists. Generally, fundamentalists advocate for radical action, like population control or a prohibition on fossil fuels, whilst realists promote more modest change and technological solutions.



### 3. **Why** are the debates in environmental ethics important?

The debates in environmental ethics are important for several reasons. Arguably the most important is the effect they have on human lifestyles. People who confer the environment instrumental value and deny it has interests are more likely to have a realist attitude to environmental issues. Generally, realists favour lifestyles that revolve around human civilisation, and typically live in urban settlements, rely on complex social, political and economic structures, and are heavily dependent on modern technology. Conversely, fundamentalists (e.g. Arne Næss (1912-2009), and Greta Thunberg (b. 2003)) generally live close to nature, or promote more rural lifestyles that have a lower impact on the environment. Beyond this, the debates are important because they have a significant impact on how people respond to environmental issues. This is salient because the consequences of environmental issues are universal, potentially unlimited (i.e. they will affect future generations), and unrepairable. The debates in environmental ethics directly affect how people respond to this great threat to life on Earth.



**Greta Thunberg**

#### **George Thinks**

In many ways, the debates in environmental ethics aren't really about environmental ethics; they're about more fundamental questions regarding the nature of existence and being human. The debate about value is particularly consequential but highly subjective. Typically, we only grant moral status to things with intrinsic value; in other words, only things that are valuable in themselves are protected from use and abuse by human beings. In the past, plenty of people weren't even considered intrinsically valuable (e.g. slaves); since 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) has attempted to permanently prevent this. However, one of the unexpected consequences of the UDHR is the debate about why other living things don't get the same protections.

Why are human beings more valuable than horses, hyenas or hyacinths? And why don't we recognise or attempt to identify the ambitions, desires or wants of animals, plants, and the environment more generally, wherever possible? These questions are really difficult to answer and require a lot of reflection. The reason they're important to environmental ethics is because our answers to them govern how we behave in relation to the world around us. What I find scary is just how much of our behaviour is governed by other people's answers to these questions, from priests to politicians. In fact, as many critics of anthropocentrism point out, it is probably our Judeo-Christian history that has accelerated environmental deterioration (even in modern secular societies).



# Legal and Social Perspectives in Environmental Ethics

## 1. **What** are the legal and social perspectives in environmental ethics?

Perspectives are viewpoints, and both the international legal system and its representatives, and the people of the world in their various societies, have different perspectives on environmental ethics. There is considerable variation within these two perspectives; however, there are also enough similarities to support some general observations about them. Generally, both the legal perspective and the social perspective reveal concern for the environment; however, it is the citizens of the world, rather than their governments, who appear to be advocating for change with the greatest urgency.



**The United Nations Secretariat Building:**  
where international treaties are monitored.

**Legal perspective:** the attitude towards the value of the environment adopted by the international legal system and its representatives. This perspective is manifested in a number of United Nations environmental treaties, including the Montreal Protocol, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement, although there are many others.

**Social perspective:** the attitude towards the value of the environment adopted by the people of the world in their various societies (especially those in more economically developed countries). This perspective is manifested in environmental activism, including the People's Climate March, Earth Strike, and the activities of organisations like Extinction Rebellion.

## 2. **How** do the legal and social perspectives in environmental ethics work?

The legal perspective in environmental ethics is varied; however, there is some consensus at the international level among most members of the United Nations. The legal perspective is anthropocentric, which means it is supported by the belief that human beings are the most important things in the universe, but it is also pragmatic. Generally, obviously serious and urgent environmental issues are vigorously addressed, but others are not.

**Montreal Protocol:** signed in 1987, this treaty was designed to protect the ozone by reducing the production of ozone-depleting chemicals (e.g. CFCs) found in aerosols and refrigerators (among other things). It will likely restore the depleted ozone by 2050.

**Kyoto Protocol:** signed in 1997, this treaty was designed to slow global warming by reducing the production of greenhouse gases (e.g. carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide). However, it did not receive the support of several heavy polluters, which undermined its efficacy.

**Paris Agreement:** signed in 2016, this treaty was designed to prevent environmental issues by reducing global warming to between 1.5-2°C above pre-industrial levels. Like the Kyoto Protocol, its success was limited by the high profile withdrawal of the United States.

Just like the legal perspective, the social perspective in environmental ethics is varied. Nevertheless, it is generally more biocentric, which means it is supported by the belief that life is the most important thing in the universe, and its anthropocentric wing is weak (i.e. it is concerned for future generations of human beings, not just those alive today). Generally, it is ideological and prioritises environmental issues over all others.

**People's Climate March:** held on 27 April 2017, this protest involved over 200,000 people marching on Washington, D.C., in opposition to Donald Trump's environmental policies. It also enjoyed popular support in 300 other locations across the United States.

**Extinction Rebellion:** founded in 2018, this organisation has held several nonviolent protests in the United Kingdom designed to disrupt industries associated with climate change. It attracted a great deal of media attention, but has failed to achieve most of its aims.

**Earth Strike:** held between 20-27 September 2019, this protest involved over six million people across the world engaging in a strike for climate action. It was a significant global event, led by a number of famous environmentalists (e.g. Noam Chomsky, and Greta Thunberg).



3. **Why** are the legal and social perspectives in environmental ethics important?

The legal and social perspectives in environmental ethics govern how seriously environmental issues are taken; consequently, they are capable of affecting significant change. Even though United Nations treaties are frequently criticised, because environmentalists argue they do not go far enough, they can lead to large-scale change. For example, the Montreal Protocol was particularly successful, and is credited with single-handedly preventing a potential ozone catastrophe. Likewise, the Paris Agreement has made climate projections significantly more positive, despite the United States withdrawal initiated by Donald Trump. Contrastingly, even though large numbers of people have protested across the world, the social perspective has been less effective at changing the status quo. Nevertheless, it is possible that the pressure applied by the public will lead to more serious political and legal solutions. Beyond this, both perspectives are important because they attempt to address a universal, unlimited, and unrepairable problem, which is of consequence to everyone.



**The People's Climate March:** United States citizens express their discontent.

**George Thinks**

I certainly don't think legal perspectives on environmental ethics take environmental issues seriously enough, perhaps with the lone exception of the Montreal Protocol. However, United Nations treaties do reveal that most of the world's governments are deeply concerned by climate change and global warming, even if a small number of the worst polluters aren't. Importantly, the international system, as it presently stands, appears to require legal action if large-scale change is ever to be achieved. So, even if environmental issues aren't taken seriously enough from the legal perspective, it's this perspective that's required to achieve the ends that environmentalists seek (something even deep ecologists like Arne Næss recognised).

Nevertheless, this doesn't mean engaging in environmental activism is a waste of time. The social perspective, which is generally more extreme, exerts a tremendous amount of pressure on political systems across the world. Whilst this doesn't always translate into government action, it keeps environmental issues near the top of the policy agenda. Of course, you may have a different opinion; there are plenty of people who think environmental organisations are a terrible nuisance. However, they couldn't exist without wider support from the general public, so it's best to think of them as the tip of an iceberg. In the United States, opinion polls reveal that concern for the environment is at its highest level since the turn of the millennium; there are worried people out there.



# Religious Perspectives in Environmental Ethics

## 1. **What** are the religious perspectives in environmental ethics?

There are numerous religious perspectives in environmental ethics. Among them, the Judeo-Christian perspective is of particular importance, because of its influence over the development of Western ethics. Christianity and Judaism share some common scriptures, most notably what Jews call "the Hebrew Bible" or "Tanakh" and Christians call "the Old Testament". These scriptures are open to different interpretations about how human beings should treat the environment; some of these interpretations are grouped together under the title of stewardship, whilst others are grouped together under the title of dominion.



**The Catholic Church:** a Christian denomination that promotes stewardship.

**Stewardship:** the Christian practice of caring for the environment because it is a God-given gift. Stewards are inspired by Bible verses like Genesis 2:15 and Psalm 24:1. These passages state that Earth belongs to God, and human beings are required to tend and care for it on his behalf. Richard Bauckham (b. 1946) argues persuasively for this approach to environmental ethics.

**Dominion:** the Christian practice of subduing the environment because human beings are commanded to dominate it. Christians who adopt a dominion approach to environmental ethics are inspired by Bible verses like Genesis 1:26 and Genesis 1:28. These passages state that human beings have total control over Earth; however, critics claim they should not be read in isolation.

## 2. **How** do the religious perspectives in environmental ethics work?

The religious perspectives in environmental ethics are many and varied. Even among Christians, it is possible to adopt two distinct approaches: stewardship or dominion. Today, stewardship is the overwhelmingly popular approach to environmental ethics among Christians; however, this is not exclusively the case.

**The Anglican Communion:** Anglican churches adopt the view that responding to climate change is an essential part of the Christian responsibility to safeguard God's creation. Led by the Church of England, these churches have committed to shrinking carbon footprints (both their own, and those of affiliated organisations) and reducing plastic waste (especially waste produced by single-use plastics). Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby (b. 1956), described reducing the causes of climate change as essential to a life of faith, loving one's neighbour, and stewarding creation.

**The Catholic Church:** according to the Vatican, caring for the environment is the responsibility of all human beings, but Christians have a particular duty to protect Earth from damage. As a result of the activities of Pope Francis, the Catholic Church has become increasingly vocal on matters of environmental ethics, endorsing climate action and supporting environmentalism. In fact, Pope Francis's second papal encyclical (*Laudato Si'*, or Praise Be to You: On Care of Our Common Home) is on the subject of stewardship, and calls Catholics to make Earth a garden for humanity.



**Justin Welby**

**The Cornwall Alliance:** unlike the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church, which both adopt a stewardship approach, the Cornwall Alliance embraces the perspective of dominion. It is an organisation that represents a large number of evangelical churches, most of which are located in the United States, and denies the existence of manmade climate change. In fact, the Cornwall Alliance claims that caring for the environment is unnecessary, because God's intelligent design of Earth ensures that human beings cannot irreversibly damage the world around them.



### 3. **Why** are the religious perspectives in environmental ethics important?

One significant reason why the religious perspectives in environmental ethics are important is because there are so many religious people on Earth. Today, there are approximately 2.2 billion Christians alive (28 percent of the world population), of whom 85 million belong to the Anglican Communion, 1.3 billion belong to the Catholic Church, and 100 million belong to United States evangelical churches. The numbers involved mean religious leaders are incredibly powerful, and their views have a significant effect on how religious people behave towards the environment. Importantly, the Cornwall Alliance has the ear of up to one-third of Americans; its adoption of a dominion approach to environmental ethics could have a significant effect on their contribution to climate change.

Beyond this, the religious perspectives in environmental ethics are important for reasons that are already familiar. Environmental issues present a significant threat to life on Earth: the Holocene extinction (also known as the Anthropocene extinction) is already under way, and human activity appears set to accelerate the extermination of nonhuman species. The consequences of environmental issues are universal (i.e. they affect all living things), potentially unlimited (i.e. they will affect future generations), and unrepairable. The religious perspectives in environmental ethics affect how religious people respond to these monumental problems, and may hold out hope for their resolution.

#### **George Thinks**

Religion is powerful stuff. Some devout believers follow their religious leaders unquestioningly. I think it's this force of faith that makes religions so effective at directing people's behaviour, particularly among those who practice the most. That's why *Laudato Si'* scared so many people; so much so, in fact, that shortly after its release Republican presidential candidate, Jeb Bush, had to assure business interests he wasn't swayed by it: "I hope I'm not going to get castigated for this by my priest back home, but I don't get my policy from my priests or my bishops or my cardinals or my pope," Pope Francis has put the Catholic Church on the march to a more environmentally conscious future, and it's highly possible that this will yield results.

You don't have to agree, of course, but I think the power of the religious perspectives is often overlooked. Take Earth Strike, for example, which involved over six million people worldwide. It was comfortably the largest mobilisation of environmentalists in history, and yet five times more Catholics attend mass each week in the United States alone. What I'm trying to point out is this: the scale of religious influence is huge. In an increasingly secular society, this isn't always recognised; however, it's possible that religious leaders have the power to change people's behaviour in ways that prominent environmentalists could only dream of. If this is the case, then religions may hold our hope for environmental salvation.





**Acknowledgements:** George Teaches Limited would like to thank the following for permission to use their photographs: **front cover:** Massimo Rivenci/Unsplash; **p. 2:** Riccardo Chiarini/Unsplash; **p. 3:** Riccardo Chiarini/Unsplash; **p. 4:** Markus Spiske/Unsplash; **p. 5:** AJ Robbie/Unsplash, and Agustin Lautaro/Unsplash; **p. 6:** Melissa Bradley/Unsplash, and Kirk Lai/Unsplash; **p. 7:** Science in HD/Unsplash; **p. 8:** Bruno Comby/Association of Environmentalists For Nuclear Energy; **p. 9:** Tetraktys/Wikimedia Commons, and KeyFame/Shutterstock; **p. 10:** Ole Kristian Losvik/Flickr; **p. 11:** Helge Sunde/DigitaltMuseum; and By Paul/Shutterstock; **p. 12:** Claire Anderson/Unsplash; **p. 13:** Anders Hellberg/Wikimedia Commons, and Callum Shaw/Unsplash; **p. 14:** WorldIslandInfo.com/Wikimedia Commons; **p. 15:** Alejandro Alvarez/Wikimedia Commons, and UNclimatechange/Wikimedia Commons; **p. 16:** Wolfgang Stuck/Wikimedia Commons; **p. 17:** Roger Harris/Wikimedia Commons, and Hans Musil/Wikimedia Commons; and **back cover:** Massimo Rivenci/Unsplash.

