

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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**Keywords:** Environmental justice, environmental risks, environmental harms, ethics, intra-human, non-human, distribution, rights, interspecies ethics, moral dualism, assimilationism, colonialism, othering, neo-Cartesianism, minimalism, speciesism, anthropocentrism, instrumentalism, counter-hegemonic virtues, centrism

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### Summary

This article addresses the debate about environmental justice for humans, whether concepts of justice are confined to the human, and how concepts of justice apply to the non-human sphere.

#### 1. Varieties of Justice

In *The Republic*, Plato introduces the concept of justice as a matter of giving others their due, or what they deserve. In this dialogue, Plato's leading character Socrates goes on to reject a narrow understanding of this concept in terms of paying back debts. But, understood less narrowly, this basic concept of justice can have a rich range of applications for both the human sphere and for the environmental sphere.

Considerations of justice apply to the way we see and represent others, as well as to how we treat them economically or politically. Justice comprehends not only questions of distribution of goods, but also the avoidance of obstacles to giving others their due,

such as prejudice, partiality, and the kind of epistemic and methodological reductionism that minimizes the other and represents them as less than they are. Justice as giving others their due is proportional, involving the avoidance of disproportionate reaction, and is applicable to enemies as well as friends. In cases of conflict, justice invokes conflict resolution, which seeks to hear from both parties and to change the situation so that conflict does not arise. Justice as giving others (including non-human others) their due involves respect for individuals, species life and difference, respect for others on their own terms, and acknowledging fairly their contributions to collaborative undertakings. Justice, as something that is owed to strangers as well as to intimates, can come into conflict with other ethical modes of action such as care, as when we are tempted to protect those near and dear by actions that give less than just consideration to strangers. The main modern concern of justice though has been the distribution of goods, especially economic goods, to individuals.

## 2. Distributive Environmental Justice for Humans

Although questions of environmental justice are broader than both human and distributional questions, the concept of environmental justice has been employed especially to focus on the distribution of environmental risks, harms, and benefits among human populations. As one of its major theorists, Robert Bullard, writes, environmental justice raises questions of “differential exposure and unequal protection . . . the *ethical* and *political* questions of ‘who gets what, when, why, and how much’.”

Until recently, environmental theorists have often been reluctant to take these questions of ecological harms distribution seriously. They prefer to frame their explanatory and remedial focus and appeal in the blander political terms of universal harm and common good. Thus, according to Ulrich Beck the politics of class conflict is mainly concerned with the distribution of social rewards, which is inequitable in class-differentiated societies. In contrast, he claims, in risk society ecological ills and risks tend to be distributed more evenly, cutting across boundaries of class and power. This view is summed up in his memorable and widely quoted aphorism: “Poverty is hierarchical, while smog is democratic.” Unfortunately for Beck’s theory, many ecological harms, including smog, are distributed just as unevenly as most commodities. A smog map of Sydney, Australia, for example, correlates the heaviest air pollution areas very closely with low socioeconomic status.

For a range of environmental ills some considerable degree of redistribution and remoteness from consequences is possible along lines of social privilege. This is the basis of the eco-justice phenomenon known as “environmental racism,” which noted the tendency to site toxic facilities in the living areas of the least powerful groups, especially on the basis of race. Explanatory foci for what has been established in these empirical studies can be established in general terms. Socially privileged groups in a society can most readily make themselves remote from easily perceived and particularized forms of environmental degradation; if their suburb, region, or territory becomes degraded or polluted, they can move to a more salubrious place. When local resources become depleted, they will be best placed to make themselves remote from local scarcities by taking advantage of wider supply sources and markets that continue to deplete distant communities in ways that elude knowledge and responsibility, such as

expensive fish from a non-local fishery. They can buy expert help and remedies for environmental health and for other problems, and they are better able to mobilize in the public sphere for action on the ecological and other problems that concern them. Their working life is likely to involve a minimum of environmental pollution and disease compared to marginalized groups—for example, compared to the U.S. farm workers whose immediate life expectancy is estimated to be 20 years below the national average. At the same time, privileged groups are those who consume (both directly for their own use and indirectly for income generation) the greatest proportion of resources, and who have the strongest economic stake in the forms of accumulation that generate environmental harms. That is, the most socially privileged groups can make themselves relatively spatially, consequentially, and epistemically remote from redistributable ecoharms, will usually have the most to gain and the least to lose from the processes that produce ecoharms, and their interests will often be better satisfied if ecoharms are redistributed rather than prevented. Some parallel conclusions may be drawn for ecological goods.

The situation is not much better for generalizable harms and damage to collective goods. Because socially privileged groups can most easily purchase alternative private resources (clean water, for example), they have the least interest in maintaining in generally good condition collective goods and services of the sort typically provided by undamaged nature. In terms of their own experience, privileged groups are also likely to be more epistemically remote and distanced from awareness of both their own and nature's vulnerability and limits. For some very general forms of environmental degradation (such as nuclear radiation or biospheric degradation), the ability of privileged groups to buy relief from vulnerability to environmental ills is ultimately an illusion. But for the key groups who are active in political decision making it may still be the master illusion, fostered by their remoteness in other areas, sustained by their social privilege and influential in their choices and attitudes. The socially privileged also have a political opportunity to redistribute collective goods in their favor, via privatization, which guarantees them superior access, and insulates them from many kinds of limits and scarcity.

Beck's "risk society" thesis can therefore most plausibly be reinterpreted as a normative rather than a descriptive thesis prescribing that effective political action to stem ecological harms is most likely if ecological risks are equally borne and no group can be confident of escaping them. Thus in societies where levels of inequality are high and the socially privileged have the main or central role in social decision making, decisions are likely to reflect their relatively high level of consequential, epistemic, and communicative remoteness from ecological harms. From the perspective of effective ecological action, then, these are among the worst groups therefore to be allocated the role of problem framing and decision making. The fact is that in most contemporary societies, including many of those celebrated as democratic, they are precisely the ones who have that role. For example, the finding that it is socially privileged groups who are selected as politically active and effective in the liberal democratic political structure is so well supported by empirical studies that political theorist Carole Pateman describes it as "one of the best attested findings in political science." That there is a complementary silencing of those marginalized citizens on whom most ecoharm falls is attested by the unresponsiveness of liberal systems to their redistributive deprivation and cultural

subordination. Several indirect sources are available to provide information about the ecoharms of the marginalized and about prevalent ecological ills, including, in liberalism, the discourse of the public sphere and the market. If the market, considered as an information system about needs, registers information not equally but according to “market power” (income), information about the needs of those without market power registers very little. The bad news from below that would provide information about redistributed ecoharms is not registered well by any of liberal democracy’s information systems, hardly at all by the market, and often poorly by liberal democratic, electoral, and administrative systems. Yet it is precisely this bad news from below that has to be heard if many crucial forms of ecological damage are to be socially registered fully and opened to real political action for their elimination (rather than redistribution).

There is clearly a serious problem about the ecological rationality of any system that allows those who have most access to political voice and decision-making power to be also those most relatively remote from the ecological degradation it fosters, and those who tend to be least remote from ecological degradation and who have to bear the worst ecological consequences and risks to have the least access to voice and decision power. Inequality, including in the present context of globalizing markets, inequality between nations as well as inequality within nations, is a serious problem for good ecological decision making. To the extent that inequality provides systematic opportunities for such consequential and epistemic remoteness from environmental risks and harms, for both noncollective and collective goods, it tends to encourage cosmetic action plus redistribution of ecoharms onto marginalized groups rather than effective action to take the steps necessary to stem these harms at their source. These links between environmental and social justice do a good deal to explain why many environmental problems are so persistent, since it is only in situations of substantive social equality that the stable forms of uncertainty needed for cultural change and better ecological decision making are likely to be found (see *Environment Well-Being and Human Well-Being*; *Economic Security and the Environment*; and *Ethics and Justice Information for Decision Making*).

### **3. Justice for Future Generations**

This is often thought of as a form of distributive justice, but other concepts of justice also have application in relation to the generations of the future. The main distributive issues here are whether the consumption and life patterns of the present generation should be allowed to inflict serious environmental risks and costs on the people of the future, either by depriving them of resources they would benefit from that previous generations have enjoyed or by leaving them a legacy of pollution or other environmental damage or impoverishment. This issue is particularly serious where losses are irreversible or nearly so, as in the case of species extinction, land salination, loss of biodiversity, and nuclear waste production. The concept of environmental justice for future generations thus raises questions that overlap with questions of sustainability.

One suggested answer is that the ethical position of people who are removed from us in time is not essentially different from that of people who are removed from us in space. If justice is to be done, the impact of environmental policies on future generations must be considered and given due weight. The main problem that arises in the case of both

temporal and spatial removal is that of uncertainty. In some cases there is uncertainty about what the needs of future people will be, whether they will be the same as or very different from our own. But even if future people and their needs are very different, this does not excuse exclusion of future impacts, since however much the future may change socially and technically, the basic needs of future generations for a healthy biosphere are unlikely to be substantially different from our own.

#### **4. Interspecies Justice**

The dominant position in the West has insisted that concepts of justice are confined to the human sphere and to intra-human relationships. I will argue, to the contrary, that we can map a range of ethical stances and components of justice onto interspecies relationships and human treatment of non-human nature, and that there are important insights to be gained from doing so and to be lost from refusing to do so. There are some important choices between different ways to make such mappings, some of which I discuss below. I will argue against closed, extensionist mappings of justice that try to confine interspecies ethics to sentient or conscious beings, recognizing only those non-humans who are believed most closely to resemble humans. These positions may avoid the most extreme and blatant forms of species injustice, but they retain most of the problems of moral dualism and do little to help us change our perceptions or behavior in ways relevant to the environmental crisis. But primary concepts of justice as giving others their due, and as distributional and proportional justice, are not confined to intra-human relationships, and have an application to the non-human sphere and interspecies relationships. An important concept of injustice as “prejudice” is concerned with the impediments to justice presented by prior reductive or oppressive conceptions of the other, as in colonialism, racism, and sexism, and this concept of justice has, I shall argue, a clear application to the non-human sphere. The denial of concepts of justice to the non-human sphere, which is thus treated ethically as “other,” is itself a form of injustice.

##### **4.1. Prejudice and Injustice**

There is injustice in the traditional stances of the dominant culture that would deny any application of ethics to non-humans, treating humans, and only humans, as ethically significant in the universe, and derive those limited ethical constraints they admit on the way we can use nature and animals entirely indirectly, from harms to other humans. These extreme positions are fairly obvious and easy to recognize as forms of anthropocentrism. But just as other forms of supremacism and centrism, for example those based on race and gender, appear in various forms and guises, so there are weaker and stronger, more upfront and more subtle forms of human centeredness. Despite our contemporary context of accelerating human destruction of the non-human world, traditions of general and direct ethical exclusion for non-humans are strongly defended by many philosophers and some environmentalists.

Some philosophers, most notably Kant, have advocated admitting the others of the earth indirectly to ethical status, because we can learn from cruelty to animals “bad habits” that affect our behavior towards those who really count, human beings. Such indirect positions are heavily human centered because non-humans are admitted to value only in

a secondary way, entirely as a function of their relationship to humans. Other philosophers are critical of these strong forms of human centeredness, but nevertheless cling to subtler forms that remain anthropocentric and are overly restrictive in their ethical recognition of non-humans. Recent environmental ethics has produced many examples of more subtle anthropocentric forms, for example assimilationist positions that allocate moral consideration or value to non-human beings entirely on the basis of their similarity to the human. Such claims are unjust for non-humans in the same way that assimilationist frameworks that allocate worth to individuals of another culture, for example an aboriginal culture, just on the basis of their similarity to the dominant (white) colonizing culture are unjust.

We should not begin this inquiry into justice for non-humans with the assumption that we start from a condition of *tabula rasa*, that we have no conceptual mappings already, or that they are neutral. On the contrary, those of us from Western backgrounds start out from a tradition that has consistently mapped non-humans onto human others, and accorded both less than justice. Dominant traditions over at least 25 centuries have identified the human normatively with the rational, and both the non-human and the human other with relative absence of reason and corresponding proximity to nature and the earth. Women have been consistently identified with lack of reason and with animals and, by Hegel, with a plant-like form of existence.

The humanistic revolution of the Enlightenment replaced the rational hierarchy built on a complex set of reason/nature dualisms with a simpler and starker mental and moral dualism between humans and non-humans. In the Cartesian mind/body dualism, for example, non-humans are hyper-separated from humans by their alleged lack of “thought,” and are subject to an extreme form of homogenization that consigns them uniformly to the same inconsiderable category as the least considerable and most instrumentalized among them, which for Descartes was the machine. Modern conceptions of nature, even those of supposedly liberatory versions of environmental ethics, have not fully broken with these traditions of human and rational supremacy, although they minimize our ability to render justice and our sensitivity to the other, human and non-human.

Questions of justice for non-human nature—including the question of ethical recognition and the critique of human-supremacist or anthropocentric values and ethical standards—were intensely debated over the three decades of environmental philosophy at the end of the twentieth century. I am among those environmental philosophers who say that Western culture is locked into an ecologically destructive form of rationality that is human centered, or “anthropocentric,” treating non-human nature as a sphere of inferior and replaceable “others.” Human supremacism and anthropocentrism are incompatible with justice to other species. Human supremacism in its strongest forms refuses ethical recognition to non-humans, treating nature as just a resource we can make use of however we wish. It sees humans, and only humans, as ethically significant in the universe, and derives those limited ethical constraints it admits on the way we can use nature and animals entirely indirectly, from harms to other humans. But just as other forms of supremacism and centrism, for example those based on race and gender, appear in various guises, so there are weaker and stronger, more obvious and more subtle forms of human supremacism and human centeredness.

Despite our contemporary context of accelerating human destruction of the non-human world, some philosophers and traditionalists have been reluctant to censure even strong forms of human supremacism. Others are critical of these strong forms, but nevertheless cling to subtler forms that remain anthropocentric and are overly restrictive in their ethical recognition of non-humans. The most human-like “higher animals,” who are claimed to be the only possessors among the non-humans of the supposedly defining human characteristic of awareness, says Peter Singer, may be admitted to the ethical sphere, but the door is firmly closed against all others. This strategy is aptly termed “neo-Cartesianism” or “minimalism.” It aims to enlarge the human sphere of justice rather than ethically to integrate human and non-human spheres, a strategy that results in minimal further admissions to the privileged class. It minimally challenges anthropocentric ranking regimes that base the worth of beings on their degree of conformity to human norms or resemblance to an idealized “rational” or “conscious” humanity; and it often aims explicitly at minimal deviations from the prevailing political assumptions and dominant human-centered ethic they are tied into. It tends to minimize recognition of diversity, focusing on ethically relevant qualities like mind, consciousness, and communication only in forms resembling the human and failing to recognize that they can be expressed in many different, often incommensurable, forms in an ethically and ecologically rich and diverse world. I contrast below this minimalist ethical stance of closure with a more generous eco-justice stance of openness and recognition towards non-humans that acknowledges ethical diversity and critiques anthropocentric moral dualism as the “othering” of the non-human world, a form of injustice that closely parallels racial and gender injustice in both conceiving and making the other radically less than they are or can become.

Moral dualism makes an emphatic division of the world into two starkly contrasting orders, consisting of those privileged beings considered subject to full-blown ethical concern as “humans” or “persons,” and the remainder, considered beneath ethical concern and as belonging to an instrumental realm of resources (or, in the prevailing political context, of “property”), available to the first group. Both the traditional human-supremacist position that refuses any extension of ethics beyond the class of humans and the minimalist animal rights variation that refuses any extension of ethics beyond the class it considers conscious (persons) are moral dualisms. Typically, moral dualism organizes moral concepts so that they apply in an all-or-nothing way: for example, a being either has a full-blown “right” to equal treatment with humans, or it is not subject to any form of ethical consideration at all. As I will show below, there are good reasons to reject moral dualism. We have many opportunities to organize the ethical field differently; some ethical concepts and practices of recognition and justice, for example, can be applied to humans and also to non-human animals and nature more generally. And ethically relevant qualities such as mind, communication, consciousness, and sensitivity to others are organized in multiple and diverse ways across life forms that do not correspond to the all-or-nothing scenarios assumed by moral dualism.

In both the human and the non-human case, a politics of conflict can be played out around these moral dualisms, in which the moral exclusion of the class defined as “resource” is represented as a benefit or even a moral duty to less fortunate members of the human or person class, and the rejection of moral dualism is represented as depriving underprivileged humans of resources that are rightfully theirs. Much humanist

rhetoric has involved policing exaggerated boundaries of moral considerability and forming a pan-human identity in the same way as racist and macho (male-bonding) identities, building solidarity within the human group through creating an inferiorized non-human out-group of others that the pan-human identity is defined against.

The exclamation “What are we—animals?—to be treated like this!” both implicitly appeals to such an identity, and implies that ill treatment is appropriate for animals. Moral dualism helps to construct concern for non-human nature in this conflictual way, as a deficit of attention or concern for some less privileged human group, although the remorseless conflict scenario this assumes can usually be reconceived in complementary rather than competitive ways.

As in the case of conflicts within the sphere of human justice, we have, I believe, an overriding, higher-order obligation to try to circumvent and reduce or eliminate such justice conflicts where possible, and to avoid multiplying and reinforcing them. This translates into an obligation to favor, where they are available, complementary over competitive constructions of justice spheres, other things being equal.

We need then to attend to the ways in which both human and non-human spheres of justice, although not free of some limited and sometimes manufactured conflicts of this kind, can be constructed not as competitive but as complementary approaches that need and strengthen each other. Thus we should note that moral dualism is also a moral boomerang that too often returns to strike down humanity itself when allegedly “lower” orders of humans are assimilated to nature and to animals, as they have been systematically throughout Western history. Conversely, many forms of ethical practice and sensitivity to others are not only not especially sensitive to whether these others are human or non-human, but can actually be strengthened and deepened generally when we refuse the arbitrary exclusion of non-human others and the self-impoverishment and blunting of sensibilities exclusion involves.

One reason for rejecting moral dualism is that its stance of closure unnecessarily blunts our sensitivity to the excluded class and those assimilated to them, and this can involve prudential hazards as well as injustices. It is in our interests as well as the interests of the other to adopt a less impoverished ethical stance and view of the other. Thus, by refusing recognition to nature we lose not only an ethically but also a prudentially crucial set of connections that link human and non-human movements for liberation and justice.

By blunting our sensitivity to nature and animals we lose a prudentially important set of insights that can help us to reflect on our limitations as human actors and observers and correct crucial blind spots in our relationships with the more-than-human world. Further, the attempt to articulate various forms of recognition for nature, and to counter anthropocentrism, is important for practical activism in a number of ways, and also affects the way political alliances between groups can be formed. Such a recognition is crucial for the birth of the new communicative and care paradigm for the human–nature relationship that must now, in an age of ecological limits, take the place of the mechanistic paradigm associated with the past centuries of human expansion and conquest.

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### Biographical Sketch

**Val Plumwood** is an Australian Research Council Fellow at the Australian National University. She has published over 100 papers as well as four books, including *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) and *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Routledge, 2002). Dr. Plumwood has lectured on environmental philosophy in the United States of America, Canada, Finland, Germany, Indonesia, Spain, and the United Kingdom.