

ETHICS AND JUSTICE INFORMATION FOR DECISION MAKING

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Summary

Policies have been developed in response to growing environmental and social issues. This article synthesizes environmental and social ethical options that may ground public and private decisions. Environmental ethics and principles of environmental justice join those of social justice. Poverty and inequality reduction are among the principal guidelines for public policy makers. The non-traditional ethical concerns, such as welfare of nature and non-human beings, are listed as part of the social responsibilities. The political dilemmas and difficulties concerning the implementation of moral principles are discussed.

1. Sustainable Development

On October 12, 1999, the human population reached six billion. Almost all this growth was in the developing world. Of increasing concern are problems such as overpopulation, mass migration, and environmental degradation, together with patterns of increasing poverty. As resources become limited and the human population continues to grow, there will be increasing pressure on natural areas to be used for extracting timber, harvesting wildlife, and mining minerals.

Humans cannot live without modifying the environment to some extent. The environment is reshaped by individual and collective decisions made according to multiple value criteria. Some decisions are narrowly economic and some aim to protect biodiversity but it is plausible to try to balance both sides within the conceptual framework of “sustainable development.” The broad model of sustainable development

in public policy is universally accepted as the most important goal of human advancement. This key concept summarizes how the double, entwined challenges of environmental degradation and poverty should be met.

Ecosystem management, agricultural management, and industrial planning are now, in principle, structured within the broader concept of sustainability. Following the World Commission on Environment and Development, commonly known as the Brundtland Report *Our Common Future* of 1987, and the subsequent Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, nations of the world are struggling with implementing the sustainability agenda. This seeks to integrate the traditional environmental issues of resource degradation and depletion, biodiversity, pollution, and wastes with issues of security, economic development, poverty, and justice to present and future generations. All parties in this evolving global discourse agree that a society organized around this principle would measure well-being in terms of factors that reflect human fulfillment (e.g. clean air, water and soil, good health care, absence of any form of violence, just wages, high literacy, etc.). All agree that this well-being is at least partly determined by the supporting natural environment. This article examines some environmental, social, and ethical options faced by those who make decisions concerning sustainable development. These ethical alternatives may not be directly related to political decisions. However, they may awake sensitivity and awareness by changing people's perceptions of nature or capturing their imagination (see *Ethics and Justice Needs for Sustainable Development* and *Human Resource Development: Ethics and Justice Needs for Sustainable Development*).

2. Values and Choices

Decisions about global environmental impacts generally fall into the category of decisions made with elements of risk. The very idea of risk suggests something is threatened and implies value judgments in favor of human or ecosystem well-being. The solutions depend on science, engineering, logistics, and economic and moral assumptions about what is good and bad for humans or other life forms. Due to the increasing complexity of our world, complex social systems interacting with complex natural systems, we are increasingly forced to make decisions that even the most knowledgeable and well-intentioned "management" cannot regard as error-free. The technology may get better, but in the larger context of decision making, the uncertainty may remain, or even increase. Uncertainty pervades all questions of sustainability. Issues of sustainability have many spatial and temporal attributes; they connect many times and places. This is true both scientifically with natural biological processes, and politically in the ways we might respond by enacting and enforcing environmental policy. Even day-to-day decisions and management issues tax our knowledge and predictive capacities.

Environmental management practices can be addressed from at least three angles: descriptive, normative, and constructive. The first concentrates on how to describe and explain the policies, their formulation, implementation, and outcomes. The normative point of view asks about the values and norms on which such policy should be based. (Risk assessment-based decisions typically involve controversial ethical questions.) Finally, the constructive dimension points out the strategies, measures, and activities

that the various actors should take to achieve the proposed goals. Much environmental policy analysis is conducted in the policy languages of science, economics, and law. These languages are assumed to be ethically neutral but are in fact laden with a variety of contextual and methodological ethical positions. If not explicitly identified, decisions may be based on ethical criteria that are in conflict with appropriate environmental concerns. However, building ethics into decision making first requires careful articulation of value choices as an explicit part of the process. A first step is to make tacit values explicit in the discussion. Otherwise these values may be overlooked or assumed, and inadequately evaluated.

Policy makers will agree that certain basic ethical commitments are required in decisions concerning environmental management, such as human rights or environmental health. But disagreements and dilemmas arise in the attempt to realize this broad commitment in specific political policies and strategies. Moreover, ethics involves emotions, often intense when we make decisions basic to the quality of life. In the absence of any emotional involvement, unless we care about the environment and human health, there is no reason to act. Many philosophers hold that responsible moral judgment must be based on as full an understanding of empirical facts as is possible, and, beyond that, on the deeper meaning of these facts. We can understand that the native habitats in developing countries are disappearing, and that millions of people live below the poverty level there, yet for most of us this makes little difference to our conduct. Some deeper grasping of the meaning of these facts about degradation and poverty will be required before we substantially alter our judgments and our conduct. Complicated moral issues like environmental and social problems require factual knowledge. The critical assessment of facts and arguments requires ethical sensitivity and expertise.

3. Environmental Ethics

Values and worldviews determine what objectives we choose to pursue: material or spiritual wealth? justice toward just humans, or toward other living things? Values also determine whether the well-being we pursue will be assessed over many future generations or will be restricted to today and a more immediate tomorrow. What is the present generation willing to pay to protect the interests of future persons? If guaranteeing present or future social welfare and fairness requires sacrificing some current individual or collective good, who should sacrifice and to what extent? Values and value judgments are fundamental to understanding the political nature of regulations and decisions as these involve the environmental health and welfare of humans and all living things. Environmental values when shared will, it is hoped, invite a commitment to shape and reform our understandings, to compromise on differences, to bring our needs and preferences into line with the conservation of those biological riches that are in danger of being lost.

Those who address global environmental problems regularly stress the importance of values in motivating people to assume responsibility and they call for a new environmental ethics. People need a value framework with a new orientation if only to order and interpret the huge quantities of information they are exposed to, as these now mix social and environmental problems. Sustainable development is a plausible

candidate for this new ethic. Any resolution of environmental issues, including sustainability solutions, will remain firmly moral and political. Such normative environmental policy points toward developing a realistic vision of what an environmentally just society should look like and on what values and norms it should be based. Here we are interested in those values that are (or might be) directly or indirectly involved in environmental decision making.

Our traditional ethical systems may be properly described as “humanistic” or “human-centered.” Such systems focus on the human species and on what is considered good for humans. Environmental problems and violations have been treated only so far as they fit into a human-centered ethics (for example, threats to human health, to human resources, to personal fulfillment). In last quarter of the twentieth century, an environmental ethic, a system of ethical precepts that could be used to guide the treatment of the environment, was developed, asking also how much of this ethic can and ought to be incorporated into law and legal procedures. Environmental ethics is the umbrella term for a wide spectrum of ethical positions. The main division line is frequently identified as running between nature-centered (biocentrism) and humanistic (anthropocentric) positions. Within each half of this spectrum, there is a broad range of ethical standpoints (see *Cultural Justice*).

3.1. Nature-Centered Ethics

Nature-centered (biocentric, ecocentric, or non-anthropocentric) perspectives insist that non-human life forms have value that is independent of human needs and decisions. Broadly speaking, such ethics advocate respect for nature and the preservation of wild areas that are unexploited, seeking the protection of ecosystems for their own intrinsic values. A non-anthropocentric approach perceives the question of humans’ place in nature as prior to the question of what are the most appropriate social and political arrangements for human communities.

One strategy of nature-centered environmental ethics is to endow non-humans with rights similar to those traditionally reserved for humans. This extends the liberal paradigm beyond humanity, although it embraces basic assumptions of liberal ethics as common characteristics shared by individuals both human and non-human. However, one usual characteristic, rationality, is not necessary in this case as a criterion for attribution of equal rights and liberties. Animal rights advocates locate the ground for moral worth in *sentience*, the ability to experience pleasure and pain, shared by the higher animals. Animal welfare groups want to protect the lives and interests of individual, sentient animals. Rights theory has made possible a wide distribution of social justice in the human world; by now extending ethics to include animals into moral concern, such an ethic aims to alleviate unnecessary sufferings in all sentient creatures.

However, endowing non-humans with human-like rights has encountered many practical difficulties, such as a lack of reciprocity such as exists between people, and problems with applying norms of justice. Second, the animal rights view often collides with our view that humans have a right to live a life free from unnecessary harm. Extending rights to the environment may imply significant restrictions on well-

established citizens' rights. Consideration of animals could constrain human actions designed to bring about economic and social changes. We would have to redesign human conduct as an expression of a radically changing human-nature relationship.

Some argue that, from a biological point of view, it is species rather than individuals that hold the key to the understanding of ecosystems and biodiversity. Moreover, species' habitat destruction is among the most important risk factors for endangered animals. Rights-based theory is fundamentally individualistic, atomistic, and at odds with the interconnectedness of humans and non-humans. Rights theory is more likely to prove an obstacle than a means to sustainability.

More radical versions of non-anthropocentric ethics claim the right of every form of life to function normally in its ecosystem. Ecological egalitarianism rejects any hierarchy and, following such a theory, sociopolitical relations would be reformed to reflect the equal plurality of the "biotic community." This calls for a "biotic justice" that requires some form of moral reasoning that will give due weight to the interests of all living things. All life forms, both individuals and species, have a *prima facie* right to a "fair share" of environmental goods, including the habitats necessary for their well-being. This requires dramatically transforming human values to include a global and non-human perspective. Any radical form of ecological egalitarianism with its stress on nature has the potential to eliminate democratic procedures. This could prove an impediment for rational solutions to ecological problems; it might lead to some authoritarian social policy, like the imposition of some lifestyle by political means. With this risk, animal rights ethics hardly constitutes a core element of the theory of value that is to guide environmental policy.

Sustainability requires an ethical theory that takes seriously ecological interdependencies. It must be communitarian. As ethical agents we have to respect the demands of the other communities of which we are part, as well as to address the demands of social justice globally. The most viable approach was originally outlined in Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). The concept of community, in Leopold's words, "enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." Such a land ethic becomes the core expression of a nature-centered perspective. It takes account of the differences between humans and non-humans; both are treated in different yet morally considerate ways. It focuses on the interconnectedness of all forms of life, including abiotic (non-living) components of the environment. The purpose of the "land ethic" is not so much to attribute "intrinsic" value to ecosystems as to recognize multiple communitarian values and seek an integration of pluralistic values at multiple levels. This offers a means for more equal access to natural resources on regional and global scales, consideration of present and future generations, and democratic decision making. It offers the potential ground for the protection and conservation of cultural and biological diversity in socially just and economically efficient ways. However, the land ethic, too, is problematic. It raises a series of questions involving the vital functions of every community member (human versus non-human beings), the status, intensity, temporal, and spatial boundaries of the community, the kind of obligations we owe to the other members of the community, etc. These questions have been answered in different ways by environmentalists.

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Biographical Sketch

Born and educated in Poland, **Teresa Kwiatkowska** completed her Ph.D. at the Polish Academy of Sciences. Since 1982, she has been working in the Department of Philosophy in the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana, Iztapalapa, Mexico City. Dr. Kwiatkowska's primary interests are

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