

Where Do Environmental Ethics Stand?

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Conveners: Frank Uekötter (RCC), Markus Vogt (LMU / RCC), Jochen Ostheimer (LMU)

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The workshop “Where Do Environmental Ethics Stand?” took place in the Center for Advanced Studies at LMU Munich on 23–25 February 2012 and included about 30 participants. It was organized by FRANK UEKOETTER, MARKUS VOGT and JOCHEN OSTHEIMER and was conceived as a forum for discussion among specialists. It was a joint project of the Lehrstuhl für Christliche Sozialethik, the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC), the Münchner Kompetenzzentrum Ethik (MKE), and the Center for Advanced Studies (CAS) at LMU Munich. The workshop consisted of eighteen presentations divided thematically into six groups: Ideas of Environmental Ethics; Environmental Ethics in the Anthropocene Age; History of Environmental Ethics; Categories of Space and their Meaning; Assessing the Effects of Technology; and Sustainability. The focus of the workshop was on transdisciplinary discussion

Markus Vogt: The Nature in Our Head. How Useful is Our Concept of Nature for Environmental Ethics?

Because environmental ethics stands particularly close to everyday life, it is particularly vulnerable to the naturalistic fallacy. In order to avoid concluding what “ought” to be based on what is, it is important to reflect upon the normative implications of our concept of nature. In doing so one must take into account the fact that discourse about nature in contemporary German-speaking countries is a hodgepodge of remnants of various ideas about nature from different time periods.

The ethical question about which nature is worth preserving therefore cannot be determined merely on the basis of scientific and ecological data. Rather, the “nature in our head” normatively interacts with societally-influenced ideas about justice and quality of life.

Michael Reder: Ethical Arguments between Kant and Hegel: Current Directions in Political Philosophy and Their Relevance for Environmental Ethics

Contemporary environmental ethics are highly anthropocentric. Axel Honneth in particular emphasizes the importance of embedding norms in the context of daily life. Thus human rights offer normative, political, and legal guidelines for complex socialization processes. In so doing, it also becomes evident that questions of environmental ethics stand in a reciprocal relationship to other social questions, particularly those of developmental ethics.

Hans J. Münk: What Is the Moral Status of Plants?

There is no doubt that plants serve instrumental purposes for humans. Granting a certain aesthetic value to plants is also generally accepted. But what is their moral status? A broad concept of dignity which would include plants as well as animals would lead to a need to create distinctions in the degree to which different entities are worthy of being protected. This would seriously weaken our concept of dignity. Therefore it is necessary to further investigate how to justify using the concept of “intrinsic value” as a normative basis for a position that would attribute a certain amount of respect towards plants for their own sake.

Franz Mauelshagen: The Ecodynamics of Normative Systems: The Place of Environmental Ethics in Earth Systems Analysis

Attempts to locate environmental ethics within earth systems analysis which place humans within the biosphere—or which, following Vernadsky and Teilhard, suggest a noosphere—are inadequate. It makes more sense to introduce Kenneth E. Boulding’s idea of a sociosphere into the research in earth systems. Within the sociosphere normative systems, such as environmental ethics, play a particularly important role. It is necessary to investigate the “ecodynamics” of these systems of norms, that is, their interaction with other earth systems, in order to determine what must be done in order to limit environmental impact and to restore balance.

Franz-Theo Gottwald: Reflections on Problems of Environmental Ethics and the Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development

In order to develop a culture of sustainability it is important that people recognize, both as individuals and as a collective, that they are adaptable and capable of using their creativity to help determine how the world will look in the future. Conflicts regarding this should not be decided by others, nor

should they be left entirely to individual autonomy. Therefore there needs to be a culture of sustainable decision-making. It must be noted that implementing decisions becomes problematic the more they rely on worldviews to provide an intuitive justification.

Frank Uekötter: Environmental Ethics and Its History

A historical look at environmental ethics shows that in Germany the debate about the environment is still characterized by the shift in direction that took place in the 80s. Therefore structures and mentalities are still in part focused on problems which no longer exist in the same form today. Thus the German environmental debate is still suffering from the varied historical influences of decidedly teleological models, approaches intended for society as a whole (above all Hans Jonas's "principle of responsibility"), a thematization of the problem as a German *Sonderweg*, radically ecological approaches, a clear division between social, ecological, and cultural concerns, the assumption that concrete solutions are possible, and a generational gap. Dissimilar ideas from various historical periods exist side by side with one another.

Joachim Radkau: Generational Justice, Climate Justice, the Intrinsic Value of Nature and the Dilemma of the Stagnating Eco-Morality Rhetoric

The environmental movement did not develop as the result of a new, enlightened perspective, but rather from the interaction of a variety of different interests which, initially, were not at all altruistically motivated. A historical approach within the social sciences thus indicates that simple, practical solutions can solve problems for which there is no single answer so long as we are bound by dichotomous thinking concerned mostly with what is right or wrong. Thus for example the development of bicycle paths can fulfill the goals of various arguments of environmental ethics which frequently cannot be reconciled at a purely theoretical level.

Martin Schneider: Spatial Ethics as a Theoretical Basis for Environmental Ethics

A "spatial turn" is taking place in the most varied scientific and academic disciplines. For the debate about environmental ethics the concept of space could also assume the role of a fundamental category. The reasoning is as follows: Humans exist in space. A relational concept of space shows that space is closely related to societal interaction. The acceleration of time and the dissolution of spatial boundaries are directly connected. The discussion of equity must therefore be expanded temporally and spatially. Spatial relations limit the area in which equity is valid. The ecological crisis must be met by sustainable city and spatial planning. Space is comparable with a social structure, since its form is influenced by human activity and human activity, in turn, is limited by space.

Sigurd Bergmann: Space, Justice, and the Sacred: Sketches of Environmental Aesthetics

The interchange between geography and ethics (as seen in the spatial turn) is still in its beginning stages. Therefore it is desirable for environmental ethics to reflect upon how ecological justice can be understood as a quality of shaping space and how this should be implemented in city and landscape planning. There could be very interesting insights gained from asking quite pragmatically which places are felt to be “sacred,” that is, which places we maintain a special relationship. Ethics and aesthetics should be brought much more closely together (“aesthetics/ethics”).

Angelika Krebs: “And what was there, it took us in” – Heimat, Landscape and Atmosphere

The dominant question in nature ethics during the recent decades has been the problem of whether nature has merely an instrumental value for humans or whether it has value in itself. This intrinsic value is mostly considered physiocentrically as an intrinsic moral value. However, nature can also be granted a “eudaimonistic” value, which is anthropocentrically meaningful for the human pursuit of the good life. In order to strengthen this eudaimonistic value of nature three main points can be emphasized: 1) Nature should be once again more closely associated with home (Heimat). 2) Nature conservation should be understood as the protection of landscapes and ambiances. 3) The meaning of beautiful and sublime nature can offer a counterbalance to the purely pragmatic understanding.

Barbara Seegebarth: Technology Assessment and Risk Research: The Example of Nanotechnology

Nanotechnology enables us to change the known properties of materials and therefore contains huge potential for profit for industries. However, the risks are as yet barely known, due to the lack of substantial long-term studies, and consumers are inadequately informed about potential risks. This lack of knowledge about the precise effects of nanotechnology means that there is little hope of successfully prosecuting legal cases against it. Ethics, and in particular environmental ethics could, however, work towards the right to protective measures, above all at the workplace. It would be possible to develop specific ethical rules for how to deal with largely unknown risks.

Marc Dusseldorp: Environmental Ethics and a Normative Theory of Consultation: Can Environmental Ethics Benefit from Technology Assessment?

In order to justify norms, environmental ethics (just as other areas of ethics) makes use of either monological reflection, as Habermas understands it, in which a thought experiment is used to determine a moral position, or discursive reflection, which takes place through communicative interac-

tion. Those involved are always considered to be basically equal, however. But normative reflections when evaluating the consequences of technology occur primarily through consultation with experts, and are thus characterized by an asymmetry of social relations. Because environmental ethics is frequently determined in consulting contexts, and because it not uncommonly must confront a plurality of ethical theories, the particular characteristics of consultation situations should be considered more closely.

Anton Leist: Possibilities for Realizing Environmental Ethics

The most recent failure of the Kyoto Protocol during the climate summit in Durban poses the question of how ethical goals should be implemented—what strategies should be used, what the motivations are, and to what degree such goals exist at all. Behavioral motives seem to be of more actual importance than reasons. This means that ethical argumentation must position itself in relation to behavioral analysis and thereby consider issues which up to the present have not been part of its central concerns. There are three general topics to be addressed: 1) What consensus can be reached in the academic study of environmental ethics? 2) What are current research gaps regarding the content of environmental ethics? 3) What are realistic expectations for environmental ethics?

Anton Lurf: The Ignorance of Natural Scientists

The communicative practices of the natural sciences show a high degree of ignorance about ethical questions, including questions of environmental ethics. This is partly due to the fact that an education in the natural sciences disregards normative questions from the outset. This supposedly unbiased position (that is, one entirely free of value judgments) does not correspond to the reality, however, for the research of natural scientists is increasingly oriented towards practical application.

Jochen Ostheimer: Sustainability: The Moral Content of a Concept about the Use of Nature

The concept of sustainability is losing its precision and effectiveness as it becomes more popular. Therefore it is necessary to examine and define the concept, by looking at the historical roots of the discourse of sustainability as well as critically and analytically evaluating the current discussion. Sustainability is a concept that refers to how nature is used, and is thus neither a paradigm for environmental preservation nor a more general approach towards an ethics of nature. As a rule it is justified epistemically and morally-anthropocentrically. The guiding principle is “retinity,” the inter-relatedness of various interests. The concept is a normative one. From this definition we can determine that non-sustainable usage of natural resources occurs at the cost of countless people and is therefore unjust.

Felix Ekardt: Why Do We Still Concern Ourselves with Environmental Ethics Today?

Given that the efforts of environmental ethics have little effect politically, it is necessary to ask ourselves: To what purpose do we pursue environmental ethics today? “Environmental ethics” is generally understood as a normative theory about how to interact with the natural world. Provocatively, and thus hopefully in a manner productive for discussion, one could propose five alternatives, some more likely to be successful than others. 1) The task of environmental ethics can be seen as motivating people to act in environmentally sustainable ways. 2) Environmental ethics can offer normative criteria for human behavior. 3) It is conceivable that environmental ethics can be viewed as an ally to economics rather than an enemy. 4) Environmental ethicists might work together with lawyers and thus make use of legal norms and interpretations. 5) Environmental ethicists might take part in the discourse of governance and empirically approach the problem of how to bring about more climate protection.

Konrad Ott: From Deep Ecology to Deep Anthropocentrism: The Significance of Eudaimonistic Values for Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics is connected with the justification of valid norms. But on what basis are the arguments for these norms evaluated? Environmental ethics, as a specific application of ethics as a whole, is already somewhat distant from its philosophical core and cannot, therefore, rely too much on a priori arguments. However, it can still call on arguments of dependency. Also, from its basis in direct responsibility it is possible to derive weaker and stronger concepts of sustainability on the grounds of intertemporal responsibility. Finally one can adopt a eudaimonistic justification. Kant, for example, posits that there is a connection between pleasures of the senses (as enjoyment of nature) and morality.

Joachim Hamberger: Sustainability – How a Concept from Forestry developed into the Professional Principle of an Industry

The term “Nachhaltigkeit” (sustainability) comes from forestry. As early as 1368 we find in Ulmann Stroemer evidence the reforestation took place. Even if the idea was not yet thought of in a moral sense, it continued to stick around and in 1713 Hans Carl von Carlowitz succeeded in encapsulating the thought in the term “nachhaltend” (sustainable). In the economy of the time this concept was not much regarded, however, but rather developed gradually in institutes of education and higher learning until the idea finally became established in the nineteenth century as a professional principle.

Summary and Prospects

The workshop brought together a new constellation of academics and researchers in very different disciplines who are involved with environmental ethics. It brought to light a wide variety of perspectives which mutually enrich each other, but also demonstrated the extent of unanswered questions and methodological gaps. It encouraged all involved to make new contacts as a way of continuing the discourse; and indeed, in some cases future plans have already been made. The discussion papers of the workshop are to be published in revised and expanded form in the series “Beiträge zur sozialwissenschaftlichen Nachhaltigkeitsforschung,” started by Metropolisverlag in 2012 and edited by F. Ekardt, U. Kuckartz, U. Schneidewind and M. Vogt.

— Sebastian Kistler