

“Utilitarianism is the best approach to environmental issues.” Discuss.

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory and therefore when evaluating ethics and the environment they would look at the end result and not necessarily the action. Utilitarianism is a teleological theory and would look at the purpose or the end goal of an action. With regards to deforestation the end goal is to create space for new homes, particularly in Brazil and therefore according to utilitarianism this is ethical because it brings great pleasure to those who are provided with homes. Utilitarians believed that ethics could be found in what brought about the greatest amount of pleasure and providing these homes would do just that. This also according to Mill who was concerned with qualitative pleasure rather than quantitative pleasure is a good and ethically just thing as having shelter, a basic human need, is a high quality pleasure. However, the quantitative part of the theory with regards to deforestation seems flawed. It is inaccurate to calculate whether more pleasure will be gained from homes being provided for those without one, or whether more pleasure will be gained from preserving the forest, not only for those who are concerned with the environment, but also for future generations who will have to pick up the pieces. Instead it makes sense to select an ethical theory that is more practical in its method of dealing with deforestation. Kant would state that we should not be allowed to pursue in deforestation because if we made it a law of nature that trees automatically came down to make room for development and homes it would not work, as we would soon run out of resources and oxygen. This seems like a more practical way as it is absolutist and ethics based on pleasure when dealing with this topic is unhelpful.

On the other hand Bentham can be helpful when dealing with environmental ethics. For example in recent days even farming cod is not sustainable to stop them from becoming extinct and Bentham would not only look at the pleasure of the humans involved but the animals too. He would state that pain needed to be reduced before pleasure increased and the threat of extinction would cause a great deal of instinctual pain as they have an instinct to survive. This seems fairly sound as it preserves the life of the cod without causing pain to humans as it isn't necessary for us to eat cod to be happy and survive. Furthermore Singer stressed that morality should not consider humans only as this is speciesist and this is sound in this case as it prevents not only cod, but animals such as tigers to be safeguarded by human hunters.

This is also helpful with regards to global warming as consideration for animals, certainly in the case polar bears helps to protect the polar ice caps from melting. Utilitarians would state that overall doing small things to help reduce the carbon footprint and therefore protect the environment will bring about more pleasure than pain and therefore it is the ethically just thing to do. However whilst this may be true, act utilitarians would look at each case individually and if on an occasion it brought about more pleasure to do something harmful to the environment then they would allow this. Therefore it is better to consider a rule utilitarian that would see that the overall greatest pleasure comes from preserving the environment and therefore would make it a rule that this was prioritised.

With regards to the summits that aim to reduce CO₂ emissions, utilitarians would state that everyone is to count for one and no one is to count for more than one. This means that when the Americans decided that they could use the allowance of other countries that would be less likely to exceed their allowance, this is unethical. The Americans are counting themselves for more than one country and therefore Utilitarians would state that they should stick only to their own allowance. This seems fairly sound in that this way of utilitarian thinking helps to reduce CO₂ emissions and therefore with regards to the environment it is very helpful. On the other hand it must be noted that without the CO₂ emissions that America produce, many of us would have very different lifestyles and we would not be able to enjoy many of the things we do today. Therefore according to Singer this would be against our preferences and therefore from this angle it seems unhelpful to use utilitarianism to evaluate the environment. Instead it may be better to take a Kantian approach when looking at the environment because it is absolutist and unlike Utilitarianism is cannot be taken advantage of. According to Kant, if sharing CO₂ allowances was universalised it would not function because it could not happen that everyone uses everyone else's allowances, as this would lead to chaos and the planet could not cope with this level of CO₂. Therefore Kant's theory is much more helpful in evaluating the environment in this case as it faces much fewer contradictions.