

“To what extent is virtue ethics helpful when answering questions about the environment?”

The first question that we need to ask is about intrinsic worth. Should we be anthropocentric, merely considering environmental issues in light of their effects on humans, or are animals and plants morally relevant? Aristotle argued that there is a hierarchy of value in the environment, and this is linked to the purpose of humans, animals and plants. All living things can grow and reproduce, but only animals and humans are conscious. As such, plants serve the needs of sentient creatures. Similarly, only humans can reason, whilst animals rely on instinct. As such, non-human animals serve the needs of humans, and have merely instrumental value. "Plants are created for the sake of animals, and animals for the sake of men," Aristotle claimed. Environmentalists have challenged Aristotle's assumptions, considering them most unhelpful when answering questions about the environment. Singer has championed attempts to show that primates display rational behaviour, using tools and demonstrating social conduct. He argues that a chimpanzee displays more characteristics of personhood than a newborn human, and as such should have a greater right to life. Other environmentalists have argued that it is not merely rationality that gives value. Routley used 'last man' arguments – that if the last ever human destroyed all animals, plants and landscapes, we would consider this wrong – to suggest that other elements of the environment have intrinsic value. Under Bentham's Utilitarianism, it is the ability to experience pleasure and pain that gives one intrinsic value. Whilst we could argue about how exactly to know which animals feel pleasure and pain, it seems Aristotle's theory is somewhat outdated given our modern understanding of our similarity to non-human animals, and not helpful in determining intrinsic value.

Some ethicists argue that only humans are morally relevant, yet still say we should treat animals well. Kant surprisingly suggested that cruelty towards a dog might encourage a person to develop a character which would be desensitized to cruelty towards humans. This sort of approach fits nicely with Virtue Ethics, which argues that moral virtues like generosity and temperance are developed by practice. As such, looking after a pet should develop patience, kindness etc. This can be taken further, to issues like recycling, saving energy etc. Green campaigners have changed the focus of their rhetoric – they have stopped talking about the huge terrible effects of misusing the environment, as this doesn't change behaviour. Instead, they make a point of showing how each individual can make a difference through turning off unwanted lights, putting on more clothes rather than turning on the heater etc. Virtue ethics seems more useful here in answering questions about how we change the behaviour of ordinary people.

Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia is helpful when answering questions about the environment. Eudaimonia means happiness, a state of fulfilment or human flourishing, the living of a beautiful life. A perfectly happy society would develop sustainably, recycle and reuse items, reduce pollution and carbon footprints etc. Aristotle's theory would protect endangered species, because a world with a variety of species would be preferable to one with fewer species. Virtue ethics could be criticised here for being too vague – do humans flourish better in cities or the countryside? It is hard to see where we would draw the line on how much pollution was acceptable, whether to force home owners to buy energy from renewable sources etc.

Greenpeace campaigns to raise awareness and change individuals' behaviour, to get governments to protect the environment with laws, and to get businesses to be greener. Aristotle's theory again seems helpful here. There are the moral virtues that focus on our habits, which covers Greenpeace's focus on the individual. In terms of society, Aristotle says that the good for the community is of greater value than the good for the individual. This would support changing laws to protect the environment. As far as businesses go, every theory struggles to get business to spend extra money on reducing the harm done to the environment. Kant would try to enforce universal laws, but businesses find ways to get round these. BP

cut corners that led to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, focusing on the letter of the law not the spirit of the law. They pleaded guilty to 11 counts of manslaughter and paid over \$40 billion in settlements, but this wouldn't bring those people back or repair the damage done to marine life. When businesses adopt a Utilitarian approach, doing risk/benefit analyses to weigh up the pros and cons of a course of action, such as using palm oil, they tend to focus too much on the business' needs, not other people and certainly not the environment itself. Virtue ethics scores more highly, recognising that people don't change their behaviour just because of rules, and even less so because of a perceived threat. Instead, they celebrate heroes who embody the right principles, and try to develop habitual good behaviour.

Virtue Ethics re-emerged at the end of the 20th Century as an antidote to the battle between Kant, with absolute rules that gave no incentive to follow them, and Utilitarianism, with its tyranny of the majority and questionable justice. Whilst students engage in debates about teleology and deontology, neither actually affect how they behave. Even Professors of Ethics don't behave very differently, on the whole, according to studies. Modern Virtue Ethics focusses on the person, not the ethical dilemma, looking at how we make decisions and where our values come from. If we are going to save the environment, it will be by helping people to care about the environment. Aristotle's is not the right virtue ethic for this job – he recognises the importance of our friendships, but would have balked at the idea of a relationship with the environment. If you look at how environmental ethics has grown in the last 50 years, it has been this idea of a relationship with the environment. Stone argued that a tree should at least have the same rights as a corporation, but Feinberg claimed that only things that have interests can have moral standing – Peter Singer made this the cornerstone of his version of Utilitarianism, and now claims that all things that have interests should have equal consideration, using terms like 'speciesism' and 'animal rights'. Some environmentalists now think it is time to "remove talk of animal rights from the centre of the moral stage and pay more attention to less universalistic moral concepts such as respect, sympathy, care, concern, compassion, gratitude, friendship and responsibility." (Val Plumwood). Aldo Leopold was a forester who argued that "the land is to be loved and respected" and said we need to "preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community". Naess developed his 'Deep Ecology' after an experience with Sherpas who cared for and respected mountains. This is an ancient idea, like the Native Americans who believed that "we did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves." The difference between this and 'shallow ecology' is that we are not just conserving out of self-interest, but are recognising the intrinsic value of all parts of the environment. Naess argues that our own identity is wrapped up in the natural world. He focused on the deep satisfaction that we receive from close partnership with the environment.

What is emerging now is a new Virtue Ethics that breathes life into a dying animal rights debate. We need to develop our relationship with the environment, get children out of the city and onto farms to show them where food comes from, sell our cars and buy bikes, walk through fields and forests, breath in the fresh air. When we change the way we relate to the environment, we will also change the way we treat it. People will demand greener energy, they will buy what they can from the local farm shop, think twice about foreign holidays, reduce consumption, car-share, live more simply. Virtue Ethics could be the best environmental ethic because it can help us to develop our character in harmony with nature. Deontological ethics will always be tied up in how to extend rights to non-humans, given that non-humans can't recognise their rights or have responsibilities. Utilitarianism finds it hard enough to convince people of their responsibilities to humans in developing countries – Singer never really succeeded in making a wider audience care about the interests of non-human animals. Virtue Ethics, with a 21st century understanding of how we form beliefs and values, could actually nurture a growing relationship with the environment that could be truly effective in changing how we behave.