

HL IB Environmental Systems & Societies (ESS)



Your notes

11.3 Ethical Approaches

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Virtue Ethics

Virtue Ethics

- Traditional ethics includes three major approaches:
 - Virtue ethics**
 - Consequentialist ethics**
 - Rights-based ethics**
- These ethical approaches differ in their basic beliefs about what makes actions **right or wrong** and how they decide if something is **ethical or not**

Virtue ethics overview

- Virtue ethics places emphasis on the **character** of the individual performing the action, rather than only focusing on the consequences of the action or whether or not the individual is closely following moral rules
 - In other words, virtue ethics cares more about the **kind of person** you are than the outcomes of what you do, or sticking to rigid ethical guidelines
- Central to virtue ethics is the belief that a virtuous person will naturally tend to act in **morally good ways**, guided by their internal virtues and moral character

Key virtues

- There are a few fundamental virtues that play a central role in guiding ethical conduct (i.e. actions and behaviours) within virtue ethics:
 - Respect:**
 - This involves recognising the **inherent worth** and **dignity** of all living beings and treating them well
 - For example, showing respect for the environment by conserving natural resources and protecting biodiversity
 - Another example might be companies implementing environmentally sustainable practices to minimise their ecological footprint and preserve fragile ecosystems
 - Compassion:**

- This involves empathising with the **suffering** of others and being motivated to **alleviate it** (i.e. to minimise suffering)
- For example, participating in humanitarian efforts to aid communities affected by environmental disasters
- Another example might be individuals volunteering for reforestation projects or wildlife conservation initiatives to protect endangered species and their habitats
- **Responsibility:**
 - This involves acknowledging one's **duty to fulfil obligations** (i.e. the duties expected of someone) and being **accountable** for one's actions and their consequences
 - For example, taking personal responsibility for reducing one's carbon footprint through lifestyle changes and advocating for environmental policies
 - Another example might be governments enacting policies and regulations aimed at mitigating climate change and promoting renewable energy sources to ensure a sustainable future for current and future generations



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Applying virtue ethics to environmental actions

- In the context of environmental ethics, virtue ethics emphasises the importance of demonstrating virtues such as respect, compassion and responsibility **towards the natural world**
 - Actions that embody these virtues, such as **sustainable resource management, conservation efforts** and environmental advocacy, would be considered ethically commendable by this ethical framework



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Consequentialist Ethics

Consequentialist Ethics

- Consequentialist ethics is a moral theory that evaluates the morality of an action based on its **consequences**
- According to this ethical perspective, actions are judged as morally right or wrong solely based on the **outcomes** they produce
 - In other words, actions leading to positive consequences are seen as good, while those leading to negative consequences are seen as bad
- In consequentialist ethics, the **intentions** behind an action are **not considered to be relevant** to its moral evaluation
 - Instead, the focus lies solely on the results or consequences of the action

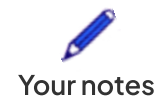
Determining good and bad consequences

- Within a consequentialist framework, morally good actions are those that result in the greatest overall benefit or "good" for the greatest number of people (sometimes referred to as the **greatest common good**)
- Conversely, morally bad actions are those that lead to harmful or negative consequences for individuals or society as a whole
- There is significant **debate** among ethicists regarding how to determine what actually constitutes good or bad consequences
- Some consequentialist theories propose that human **happiness** or **well-being** should be the standard metric for evaluating consequences
 - This perspective suggests that actions promoting happiness or enhancing the well-being of individuals are morally good, while those that cause suffering or reduce well-being are morally bad

Applying consequentialist ethics to environmental actions

Examples of Applying Consequentialist Ethics to Environmental Issues

Environmental Example	Ethical Assessment
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Transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, such as wind or solar power	Within a consequentialist framework, this action is often seen as morally good due to its potential positive consequences, including reduced carbon emissions and mitigating climate change
Clearing forests to make way for agricultural activities, such as farming or cattle grazing	While this action may have short-term economic benefits, consequentialist analysis might highlight its negative consequences, such as habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity and contribution to climate change

- When applying consequentialist ethics to real-world situations, determining the **net consequences** of an action can be **complex**
 - Environmental issues present particular challenges, as the consequences of human actions on the natural world are often interconnected and far-reaching
- Scientific understanding of ecological systems **changes over time** and this can lead to changes in how we view the consequences of certain actions
 - What may initially seem like a positive consequence may later be recognised as negative, or vice versa, as our understanding deepens

Changing Perceptions of Environmental Consequences

Environmental Action	Initial Perception	Changed Perception
Use of DDT (insecticide)	Viewed as beneficial for controlling pests like malaria-spreading mosquitoes	Now recognised for its detrimental effects on wildlife and the environment, including persistence, bioaccumulation, and harm to non-target organisms
Introduction of non-native species	Seen as beneficial for agriculture and pest control (e.g. cane toad) or ornamental purposes (e.g. Japanese knotweed)	Now acknowledged as causing ecological disruptions such as competition with native species, predation, and habitat alteration, leading to invasive species, ecological imbalances and declines of native species
Clearing of wetlands	Considered necessary for agricultural expansion, urban	Now understood as vital for flood mitigation, water filtration, and habitat provision, prompting

	development, and flood control	conservation and restoration efforts to preserve ecosystem services and biodiversity
Overfishing and marine ecosystems	Regarded primarily as a vital means of food production (source of protein) and economic activity	Now recognised for its negative impacts on fish stocks, food webs, and ecosystem stability, leading to increased awareness of sustainable fishing practices and conservation measures to protect marine biodiversity and health



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- These examples illustrate how advancements in scientific understanding have led to shifts in our **ecological awareness** and perception of the consequences of human actions on the environment
 - This highlights the importance of **ongoing research** and **informed decision-making** in environmental management and policy



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Rights-Based Ethics

Rights-Based Ethics

- Rights-based ethical systems focus on actions and whether they **conflict** with the rights of other entities
 - These entities can include humans, non-human organisms and even ecosystems
- However, there is ongoing debate about the specific rights that individuals or other entities might possess
 - Different perspectives may derive rights from religious texts, philosophical reasoning, or societal norms
 - For example, if a religious text states that killing animals is wrong, then an individual might consider killing animals for food to be ethically incorrect because it conflicts with the rights of the animal (if that individual takes their own ethical rules from the religious text)
- Other ethical frameworks may also acknowledge rights, but rights-based ethics places a **central importance** on respecting these rights in all **decision-making, actions** and **behaviours**

Understanding rights

- Humans are often attributed with a range of rights such as the right to life, freedom of speech, and property rights
- Non-human organisms, including animals, may be granted rights to life, freedom from cruelty and habitat preservation
- In some cultures and societies, certain **ecosystems** are also considered to possess rights, such as the right to exist, thrive and be protected from harm
- Actions that **protect** or **maintain** these rights are seen as morally correct
- **Violating** these rights therefore makes an action morally incorrect

Disagreements and perspectives

- Debate persists over the nature of rights and who or what possesses them
 - Some argue that only humans possess rights, while others extend rights to non-human organisms, or even non-living entities (such as rivers) and whole ecosystems

- The perspective on the rights of an individual or society greatly influences their ethical decision-making
 - For example, if only humans are attributed rights, actions that uphold human rights but also damage the ecosystem may still be seen as ethically correct
 - If non-living components of the biosphere are attributed rights, a rights-based approach might conclude that increasing air pollution is ethically wrong due to the violation of the atmosphere's rights
 - The debate over factory farming and the ethical treatment of animals is another example that highlights the conflicting perspectives on rights-based ethics

Applying rights-based ethics to environmental actions

- When applying rights-based ethics to environmental actions, considerations extend **beyond human interests** to include the well-being of ecosystems and non-human organisms
- Actions such as deforestation, pollution and habitat destruction must be evaluated in terms of their impact on the rights of **all affected entities**
- Environmental conservation efforts, such as establishing protected areas and implementing sustainable practices, align with rights-based ethics because they prioritise the protection of ecosystem rights

Appeal to Nature Fallacy

- "Appeal to nature" is an argument or rhetorical technique, which suggests that if something is natural, it is automatically good or right
 - People often use this argument to justify certain behaviours, practices, or beliefs because they think natural things are better
 - For example, some people argue against vaccination because they believe that allowing the body to naturally fight off diseases is ethically correct and superior to artificial intervention, despite overwhelming scientific evidence supporting the effectiveness and safety of vaccines
- However, whether this reasoning is **valid** is a big debate among ethicists and philosophers
- Those who think this perspective is contentious and subject to debate often refer to it as the **appeal-to-nature fallacy**
 - A **fallacy** is a mistaken belief, reasoning, or argument that appears logical but is actually flawed or misleading, often leading to incorrect conclusions
- Some simple examples demonstrating this fallacy are:



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- **Medicine and health:**
 - Traditional or alternative medicine often claims natural remedies are better than synthetic drugs
 - For example, herbal supplements are marketed as "natural" and healthier
 - However, they might not always work as effectively
- **Food choices:**
 - Some people believe eating organic, unprocessed foods is healthier and more ethical because they're natural
 - But not all natural produce is safe or good for us to eat

Evaluating naturalness

- While nature can sometimes provide inspiration for ethical principles, not everything natural fits ethical norms or values
 - In other words, considering everything '**natural**' to be good does not always act as a reliable ethical guide
- For example, **diseases** like malaria or cholera are natural, but they cause **harm** and **suffering** to humans
 - This raises questions about whether it is ethically justifiable to allow the spread of disease-carrying organisms in the name of preserving nature
- Also, some people might see certain human actions, like war or pollution, as natural, even though they are widely considered to be **unethical**

Ethical considerations

- Making ethical decisions means looking at more than just whether something is natural or not—saying that everything natural is good is too simple
- We need to think about things like what will happen, what society thinks, the rights of individuals, organisms, or ecosystems and how our actions affect these entities
- Relying only on the appeal-to-nature argument ignores these important ethical factors and could lead to **wrong conclusions**
- Consider this **ethical dilemma** that could be created:
 - Protecting natural habitats is seen as important

- But saving endangered species or restoring ecosystems often means humans have to step in, sometimes "interfering" in quite significant ways
- Some might argue that such interventions contradict the principle of leaving nature untouched
- Therefore, they may want conservation efforts to be stopped or limited to allow nature to take its natural course without human interference



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