

## Three Points of View on Ethics

As an aid to thinking about ethics, we offer the following three perspectives or viewpoints. Think of them as question generators. The idea is to ask questions from each viewpoint about the issue you are considering, taking them in any sequence you like.

These are not three *alternative* viewpoints, and they are not independent of each other. Rather, looking at things from one viewpoint will often lead you to another. It might be better to think of them as different seats at a ball game, or different camera angles on an event. Each perspective shows you something that you might otherwise have missed. Each of them derives from common intuitions about ethical life. If you find them useful, please adapt them to make them your own, and send us suggestions for improving them!

While they bear some obvious relationships to the ethical theories discussed later in this chapter, these perspectives are not a substitute for an ethical theory, and they will not provide answers to the questions they raise. You will need to find your own ways to do that! As we introduce each perspective, we will list a few of the typical questions that arise when you look at an ethical question from that point of view.

### PERSPECTIVE ONE: GOALS, CIRCUMSTANCES, BENEFITS, AND HARMS

Every ethical decision requires knowledge of the facts, including the consequences of any proposed action. From this point of view, we ask what possible course of action will produce the most beneficial results for all concerned. Typical questions to ask are: What is the situation? What am I or are we trying to accomplish? What choices do we have? What benefits and harms will result from each choice, and who will receive them?

The method of “stakeholder analysis” now common in business and policy discussions has its natural home in this first point of view. That method seeks to identify the various parties that have a stake in the decision or policy under discussion, balance their interests appropriately, maximize their benefit, and minimize their harm. The term *stakeholder* was introduced to acknowledge the legitimate interests of others beside stockholders (for example, employees, customers, suppliers, and communities) in corporate decisions. It

has migrated from business to government policy discussions, and by now it is used more generally in many discussions of social ethics. Some participants in these discussions (e.g., many economists) tend to frame them in terms of financial cost-benefit analysis, giving a dollar value to each benefit or harm done to each stakeholder. Others recognize a wider range of benefits and harms that cannot be readily quantified. Such a broader approach is almost certainly necessary if one is to take the interests of future generations and nonhuman life-forms into account. It is, however, much harder to arrive at clear answers by means of it. One must decide what counts as a benefit or a harm, and how stakeholder interests should be weighed against one another when they pull in different directions and share no common metric. Such decisions belong to our second and third viewpoints as much as to the first, and we will discuss them further when we introduce those viewpoints.

Like discussions about business ethics and social policy, discussions in environmental ethics frequently begin with questions that belong to this first viewpoint, trying to determine facts, agree on goals, and calculate potential benefits and harms. It's not hard to see why. The subject matter is complex, and there are often significant gaps and outstanding questions in our understanding of it. Questions about what counts as a benefit or a harm, and whose benefits and harms should be taken into account, are more pressing and difficult in environmental ethics because of the need to consider future generations, nonhuman life-forms, and distant effects.

One final note before we leave this first perspective. For clear ethical vision, we need a *relevant* description of the situation. We don't know a recipe for producing one. But our first perspective provides some guidance. A relevant description of the situation will say how it is related to our goals and what actions within our power might bring us closer to those goals. It will identify the parties who stand to benefit or be harmed by our choices, and indicate how our different options might benefit or harm them. The next two perspectives will provide further guidance.

#### PERSPECTIVE TWO: NORMS, PRINCIPLES AND VALUES—FAIRNESS, RIGHT, AND WRONG

Ethics is about doing the right thing. When we say so, we are thinking of ethics as similar to law. Our second viewpoint focuses on this lawlike dimension of morality. Here are some questions that belong to this second perspective: What values are at stake in this situation? What principles apply? What does fairness require? What are we morally obligated or forbidden to do?

Many ethical notions have legal parallels. Obligation, duty, rights, and fairness are all legal notions. We speak of fundamental moral principles, just as we speak of basic legal principles; and in morality, as in law, basic principles can sometimes pull in different directions, challenging us to find a way of reconciling an apparent conflict of duties.

*Why* do we think of morality as lawlike in this way? What might the moral law be, and where does it get its binding force? We will not attempt to answer these important questions here; to do so would be to begin formulating a moral theory. But we note that whatever answers one gives to these questions, the lawlike dimension of ethics is hard to avoid (see Anscombe [1958] for a contrary view). No doubt it is true that Western cultures, especially under the influence of Christianity, put more stress on moral law than do some other cultures. But it is hard to find a culture that lacks notions of duty, fairness, right, and wrong. (We are not suggesting that all cultures take *the same things* to be right and wrong. Nor are we suggesting that all cultures separate what we are calling *moral* obligation from religion, civil law, or kinship or tribal loyalty.)

Moral principles like “show respect for life” are one sort of norm, but there are others. When we take a certain state of affairs or kind of character to be ideal or unacceptable, so that we are bound to seek or to avoid it, we are also thinking from this second point of view. When we take a certain way of living to be ideal, the same is true. In environmental ethics, the long-standing discussion about the intrinsic value of nonhuman life is an investigation into such normative issues.

PERSPECTIVE THREE: MOTIVATION, CHARACTER, AND RELATIONSHIPS—  
THE PERSONAL AND INTERPERSONAL POINT OF VIEW

Not only actions but people and societies are said to be ethical or unethical as well. When we say so, we are often thinking not just about particular actions or intentions, but also about their whole character, relationships, and way of life. Our third viewpoint, then, has to do with motivation, character, and interpersonal relations. From this perspective, one might ask questions like: What kind of person am I? Am I living a life I can be proud of? What do I value? Does my life reflect my values? Why (really) am I taking this action? How would I sleep at night, if I did it? How would I explain it to my family and friends? One may also ask such questions about smaller and larger social groups: Is our form of life a worthwhile one? Are our relationships what we think they should be?

Integral to this third perspective is the idea of relationship and the notions of responsibility and accountability. When face-to-face with another, what does the presence of that other require of you? Environmental ethics challenges us to ask this question, not only about the people with whom we interact daily, but also about distant contemporaries, future human generations, other living things, species, ecosystems, and the whole process of life on Earth. What response shall we make to these various entities? Perhaps it is here, more sharply than anywhere else, that environmental questions force us to rethink our ethics.

Our third perspective highlights the idea of *character*, and the virtues that contribute to it. Character seems to include your motives and values, but to be more than just the sum of them; it is something like a set of habits or dispositions to adopt certain attitudes and to act in certain ways. Writers on the virtues have discussed these matters at length; we regret that we cannot do so here. But we note that several thinkers have emphasized the relationship of individual virtues and character to the continuing conversation within a culture about goals and values. An example is Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981) and in his other books. If one accepts this insight, it is clear that character is a social as well as individual matter. Environmental ethics adds new challenges to this conversation about character, as several authors in this book point out. To successfully address environmental problems, they argue, we must somehow find a way to get morally serious about our social character, about the way we live together, about patterns of small, everyday actions that seem individually trivial, and about the impact of our way of life on people and entities with which we are not “face-to-face” in any obvious way. Aldo Leopold’s notion of membership in a biotic community as a foundation for a new “Land Ethic” (see chapter 10) is a well-known proposal that moves strongly in this direction.

A NOTE ON THE THREE PERSPECTIVES AND ETHICAL THEORY

It would be easy to see the ethical theories we are about to survey in our next section as explaining ethics in terms of one or another of these three perspectives, and neglecting the others. Seen in this way, deontological theories, like that of Kant, would be said to favor the second or lawlike viewpoint, with some admixture of viewpoint three; conse-

quentialist theories like Mill's utilitarianism would appear to emphasize the first perspective of goals and results; while Aristotelian virtue ethics, and the ethics of care, might be said to major in the personal/relational. Such a classification, however, would at best be superficial. A good ethical theory will have a way of answering the questions raised by all three points of view. Rather than trying to identify a theory with one or another perspective, we recommend using all three viewpoints to ask questions about ethical theories. For example, how does Kant, when talking about maxims, take account of the relationship between intentions and results? How does Mill try to do justice to normative notions (e.g., fairness, rules, and the binding force—he calls it the “ultimate sanction”—of his principle of utility), without making moral law a basic element of his system? How do normative notions feature in Aristotle's system, for example, in his account of the virtue of justice? In the ethics of care, does care function like a duty?

Asking questions like this will lead you to a fuller understanding of these theories. It may also lead you to revise, supplement, or replace our three perspectives with your own question generator, as you learn what helps you ask the most fruitful questions. If so, our three viewpoints will have more than accomplished their purpose.

#### USING THE THREE PERSPECTIVES TO THINK ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Let's see how these three viewpoints might be used to raise questions about an issue in environmental ethics, namely how we should respond to biodiversity loss (see chapter 12). Our purpose here is not to generate an answer to this question, but to open it up by means of the three perspectives.

#### Biodiversity Loss: Questions from the First Perspective

Here are some obvious questions about the relevant facts: What is biodiversity, how should it be measured, and how fast are we losing it? Should we look at the number of species that are going extinct? The rate of species extinction? The loss of key habitats? The health of ecosystems? The loss of “ecosystem services” necessary for human survival? What can we possibly do about biodiversity loss, and what would be the benefits and harms of doing any of those things?

These questions may seem overwhelming. Like many questions that arise in the field of environmental ethics, their scope is huge, and the average reader will probably assume that he or she is in no position to make any judgments about them. To answer them requires sophisticated analysis of huge amounts of data from around the world covering long periods of time, and even to know that they are good questions requires some familiarity with current discussion. Fortunately for nonexperts, scientists around the globe have been studying biodiversity for many years now, and although there are many open questions and unresolved issues, a reliable overall picture of the current state of research on biodiversity, including the areas of agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty, is available to the lay reader online. In the introduction to chapter 12 (see below) we have relied heavily on one of the best and broadest such sources, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), a UN-sponsored summary (with policy recommendations) of the current state of global scientific knowledge about biodiversity loss and its consequences for human life and for the rest of life on Earth.

What actions might we take in regard to biodiversity loss, and what benefits and harms would they produce? Again, reliable and readily available sources provide a great deal of information about this question. Suppose the evidence you find in these sources shows that if we want to stop or even slow biodiversity loss, we need to preserve large,

connected areas of untouched habitat in “hot-spot” areas of biological diversity, halt the spread of invasive species, drastically reduce our emission of pollutants, farm organically, control our climate-changing activities, and bring the growth of human population to a halt as quickly as we can. What would it take to accomplish these things? Who are the stakeholders? How do we balance the interests of rich and poor countries? What weight should we give to the interests of future human generations? Suppose (as the MA suggests) that in order to feed the growing human population in the years before it is expected to level out, we need to cut down more forests and plant more agricultural crops? What should we do then?

#### Biodiversity Loss: Questions from the Second Perspective

Choosing among these different options raises questions about more than a simple balance of benefit over harm. We are led unavoidably to questions from the second point of view. *Whose* benefit and harm should we consider, and why? What is a fair distribution of the cost of our actions among rich and poor nations and people? How can we be obligated to future generations, especially when our choices about population control and other matters will cause different future people to exist? Do we have obligations to nonhuman creatures, and perhaps even to species and ecosystems? Suppose we do; how do we weigh their benefits and costs against those of our contemporaries, and why? Are such beings and such entities valuable in their own right, as some of our authors argue, or should they be valued only for other reasons, for example, for what they contribute to human life?

Clearly, if the current world population, future human generations, and other living things are all at the table, we will have to do some hard new thinking about what counts as fairness. The same may be said about which principles, values, duties, and obligations should guide us in deciding what to do about biodiversity loss. What norms bind us here, and why? These questions demand answers. How we answer them will depend on our moral theories and basic beliefs. As we will see, a utilitarian like John Stuart Mill or Peter Singer will approach them in a different way from someone who believes in ultimate moral laws.

#### Biodiversity Loss: Questions from the Third Perspective

Finally, what does our question about biodiversity loss look like from our third point of view? Let us think first about motives and character. What would motivate us to care about future generations? About other life-forms? About species, ecosystems, and the like? And what kinds of motives would we find praiseworthy or blameworthy? Lilly-Marlene Russow argues (in chapter 12) that our reasons for caring about species are aesthetic, deriving from our aesthetic appreciation of beautiful individual creatures. Tom Regan (chapter 13) and Paul Taylor (chapter 3) urge us to cultivate a moral respect for other living things. Stephen Gardiner (chapter 8) reflects on the temptation to moral corruption produced by the complex, slow development of environmental problems of this kind, including self-deception about our motives while we garner benefits for ourselves and shift costs around the world and into the future. Norman Care, in *Decent People* (2000), raises a number of questions about what kinds of motives are actually available to us in regard to future people. He suggests that the motives that usually work for us will not do so in this case. We cannot be moved by love or care for people that we cannot even possibly meet. Our “relationship” with them is “one-way”. So while morality demands that we take them into account, it is unclear what could motivate us to do so.

Care notes that Aldo Leopold, in his famous essay “The Land Ethic,” suggests a motive that might move us to protect biodiversity. Throughout the history of ethics, says Leopold, the notion of community has expanded, from tribe to nation to global human community. What is the next step? Why not the community of life? If we see ourselves as part of the whole of life, might that not motivate us to care and to act to protect the overall flourishing of the whole living community?

### The Three Perspectives and Biodiversity Loss: Summary Remarks

Using the three perspectives has helped us to raise a very large number of questions about the ethics of biodiversity loss, and we have just scratched the surface. No doubt you can think of many more. Our purpose here has not been to answer these questions, but to show how our three perspectives may be used to raise questions that will aid ethical thinking. Once you have an array of such questions, and have thought about your own most basic values, you should be able to start working your way toward some answers.