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Environmental ethics

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This article outlines the seven essential types of argument that can be put forward for protecting natural phenomena or natural resources. This is done against the background of certain ontological assumptions about nature and wilderness, about the concept of protection itself and with reference to different theoretical approaches ("paradigms") in environmental ethics. The seven forms of argumentation outlined here involve different perspectives on the value of nature: dependence on natural resources, forms of experience of the good life, future responsibility in respect of nature, the intrinsic moral value of certain natural phenomena, virtuous attitudes, so-called ecosophical world views and religious approaches. In the medium of these arguments, a relationship to nature based one-sidedly on control and usage can be broadened and corrected. This reconstruction of arguments enables all persons interested in environmental ethics to independently develop a justifiable and well-grounded conception of environmental ethics.

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1. Introduction

Environmental or natural ethics is an established field of interdisciplinary-oriented practical philosophy which reconstructs the essential types of argumentation that can be made for protecting natural entities and the sustainable use of natural resources (Krebs 1999; Brenner 2008; Ott 2010). The term "environmental ethics" has become established, although "ethics of nature" is more factually precise. The term "bioethics" should be reserved for the moral topics of the medical life sciences, although there are some overlaps between bioethics and the ethics of nature (e.g. in the field of environmental health). The term "ecological ethics", which is sometimes used, has the disadvantage of implying that ethics could be established on the basis of scientific ecology (Eser/Potthast 1999). This is ruled out, however, by the so-called naturalistic fallacy (Potthast/Ott 2016), which states that normative statements cannot be derived from factual claims or laws of nature. Biology and ecology are natural sciences that cannot, for example, justify why species should be protected. Thus in the following the established term "environmental ethics" will be retained.

Field of study

Protection is a value-concept. Protection is to be given to what is worthy of protection because of its value or because, due to specific circumstances, it requires protection (Rolston 1988). Protection can be institutionalised in a normative way (e.g. by designating conservation areas). In its argumentation, environmental ethics makes an ontological assumption that natural entities ("natural beings") exist in reality and that the talk of naturalness remains meaningful (Lie 2016), although in today's world many natural beings are mediated with human forms of practice, i.e. are increasingly humanly shaped. The subject area of environmental ethics concerns those entities whose origin, existence and life processes are not exclusively or primarily owed to human action. We call these entities "natural beings". For this reason, animal ethics, whose subject area includes both domesticated and wild animals, especially vertebrates, is an essential part of environmental ethics. If living creatures are heavily modified biotechnologically (e.g. laboratory mice), one can speak of "biofacts" (Karafyllis 2003). The boundaries between natural beings and biofacts are fluid. The term

"environment", in turn, refers, strictly speaking, to those environments in which humans or non-human creatures factually exist. Many people live in artificial environments (libraries, offices, factories, sports halls, underground car parks, etc.). The design of such environments does not fall within the core area of environmental ethics.

"Nature"

"Nature" is the conceptual title for all natural beings, whether living or inanimate. Nature is not the same as wilderness. Thus talk of an "end of nature" (in the sense of McKibben 1989), which rests on an elision of nature and wilderness, is wrong. The planet still contains many natural beings. In this respect, nature is a scaled concept that ranges between the poles of "wilderness" and "artefact". Within the concept of wilderness we need to differentiate between the ideal pole of an absolute wilderness without any human influence and a relative wilderness in which human influence is demonstrable but irrelevant to natural events. Absolute wilderness may (perhaps) still exist in Antarctica and the deep sea. Furthermore, primary wilderness can be distinguished from secondary wilderness, the former being historically original, while the latter applies to areas that have historically been used but where human use has ceased (such as the protected zones of national parks). Relative and secondary wildernesses as well as modified natural formations (such as the Lüneburg Heath in Germany) may also be worthy of protection. In the field of conservation, frequently used criteria for worthiness of protection are closeness to nature, rarity, relevance of location and vulnerability. The classificatory concepts of conservation (Usher/Erz 1994; Romahn 2003) presuppose the arguments of environmental ethics, to which they are linked in terms of justification. Kirchhoff et al. (2017) provide discussion of the natural-philosophical foundations of environmental ethics.

Views on value (axiology)

One can assign the various views concerning the value of natural beings to seven categories or patterns of argumentation: 1) arguments from dependence and instrumental values, 2) cultural and eudaimonistic values, 3) responsibility for the future and sustainability, 4) (existential) virtues, 5) intrinsic moral values of certain natural beings, 6) new "ecosophical" world views and 7) religious traditions. These categories are not mutually exclusive and can therefore appear in different variations. It follows that there can be more than one, but not an infinite number of justifiable variations and concepts of environmental ethics. As a reflexive discipline, environmental ethics intends not to prescribe a specific and binding morality, but rather to enable persons to adopt these categories critically and discursively, i.e. in exchange with other persons. An ultimately binding environmental ethics is impossible, if only for reasons of justification and argumentation, since central problems such as that of inclusion have so far been fundamentally disputed and different types of theory of environmental ethics exist alongside one another.

Types of environmental ethics

One can distinguish three types of theory. The "classical" theory type focuses on the problem of inclusion and thus on the question of intrinsic moral values of natural beings, defends a certain solution (see below) and derives from this a concept of nature conservation that includes principles, virtues and rules of precedence. A prime example of this type of theory is Paul Taylor's *Respect for Nature* (1986). A second type of theory is environmental pragmatism, which takes as its starting point human practices in dealing with nature (agriculture and forestry, fishing, hunting, sailing, hiking, gardening, care and maintenance, etc.) and explicates and orders the values involved. This includes the practice of nature conservation with its various guidelines as well as renaturation (Ott 2015b). A prime example of environmental pragmatism is Bryan Norton's *Sustainability* (2005). A third type of theory is represented by the so-called postmodern environmental ethics, which eludes (or tries to elude) simple characterization. In these approaches, narratives, literature, pictorial representations, alternative media approaches to nature and a playful treatment of the possibilities of staging human-environmental relations all have an important role. Prime examples of postmodern environmental ethics are Donna Haraway's *Staying With The Trouble* (2016) and Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology* (2016). Suggested readings from these various theories can be found at the end of this article.

2. Arguments from reliance and dependence

Arguments from dependence claim that human beings, as bodily and precarious beings, are dependent on a continuous metabolism with an external nature, the maintenance of which entails a careful use of natural resources and environmental media. Due to the value of physical health, this metabolism should take place with as few pollutants as possible, which is why the input of toxins and harmful substances should be minimized (Schäfer 1993). This gives rise to ideas for environmentally compatible and low-pollution economies. In the field of pollutants, environmental policy depends on the setting of limits, which are based on normative assumptions such as precaution and the protection of people who have suffered damage. Strict precautionary limits (such as for fine particulates) then compete with well-established practices (such as private transport). The presupposed value of human health then also leads to the question whether and to what extent visits to certain natural settings (forests, coasts, mountains) are beneficial to physical health. The healing effects of forests and coasts and the health-promoting activities of hiking and bathing are no longer questioned, even from a medical point of view. Health-related and cultural causes intertwine in social movements as in earlier times, for example in the lifestyle reform movement or the German "Wandervogel" movement (Wolschke-Buhlman 1990; Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017).

3. Eudaimonistic values

Arguments from cultural or eudaimonistic values ("*eudaimonia*" = good life) claim that experiences of nature are an essential part of a rich, successful and meaningful life (Ott 2016). These values are divided into different ways of enjoying nature, such as experiences of natural aesthetics (Seel 1991), a sense of home in the midst of familiar landscapes (Scruton 2012) and recuperation in nature. These values are conveyed via nature-based practices such as gardening, hiking, sailing, diving, etc. The phenomenology of nature offers a philosophical method to articulate the ways and means of experiencing and enjoying nature (Böhme/Schiemann 1997). Eudaimonistic values explain why many people are unwilling to forego contact with nature in their lives. These values are subdivided into the value of recuperation in nature, the experience of natural beauty, the familiarity of native landscapes, and the value of unifying experiences. Bryan Norton (1987) has argued that experiences of nature never leave people unchanged but rather have a transformative effect on their attitudes and behaviour ("transformative values"). These transformative values point to the questions of an environmental virtue ethics (see below). The same applies to the view that nature is an indispensable "sphere of resonance" for human experiences (Rosa 2014).

4. Responsibility for the future and sustainability

The values of the first two categories (dependence/health, enjoyment of nature/transformation values) can be translated into an intergenerational perspective. It is then a matter of the art of thinking long-term in terms of nature (Klauer et al. 2013) and of the question of what natural resources future generations might have legitimate claims on (*responsibility for the future*). This question leads to theories and concepts of *sustainability* (see Ott/Döring 2011) and thus also to the issues of climate change, agriculture and forestry, renaturation ecology and also marine protection, including fisheries. In one fundamental concept of sustainability that attaches great importance to the protection and promotion of natural capital (so-called "strong" sustainability), nature conservation represents an essential dimension of sustainability policy (Ott 2015b). Survey articles on specialist areas such as climate protection, restoration, moorland protection, oceans and fisheries can be found in Ott et al. 2016.

5. Environmental virtue ethics

The values and commitments of these first three categories (dependence, eudaimonistic values, sustainability) lead almost inevitably to the question of what kind of person one wants to be in the era of the Anthropocene, when one now understands oneself to be a transient member of a series of generations bound to nature. This question concerns different attitudes towards nature, including one's own biological-embodied nature. Such a line of questioning leads us to the realm of *Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Sandler/Cafaro 2005).

Preservation and care, protection, consideration, moderation, but also joyful devotion, affirmation of life and gratitude are some of the relevant attitudes. Every virtue ethic has a pedagogical dimension; environmental virtue ethics is conveyed through the practices of environmental and nature education. Of course, environmental virtue ethics explores not only virtues but also vices, which brings with it the danger of hectoring today's lifestyles as "immoral". Thus, in environmental virtue ethics, there is sometimes a peculiar craze for ever more extremes of renunciation and for emulating those who have renounced the most. On the contrary, environmental virtue ethics should also take into account human shortcomings, habits, misguided incentive systems, sophistry and weakness of will, and should not try to force the environmental-ethical perfectionism of humankind with a crowbar, as it were. Ascetics are themselves the lived paradox of a deterrent role model.

6. Anthropocentrism: protected resources and biophilia

The categories discussed so far are anthropocentric, i.e. although they are based on a wide-ranging practical-rational interest in establishing harmonious relationships with nature, they only recognize human dignity and rights. In the anthropocentric view, natural beings are stocks of natural capital that are to be managed sustainably, or natural assets that are to be protected because of their beauty, rarity, recreational value, etc. An understanding of these categories reveals that humans need not be imagined as beings greedily and short-sightedly plundering nature. Insofar as they appropriate nature in various cultural and historical contexts according to the values mentioned above, humans *ipso facto* become nature-bound personalities. As a legacy of co-evolution, human beings may possibly even possess a biophilic inclination structure (Wilson 1984), which in modernity has been suppressed or ridiculed (as "romanticism"). It can be a fascinating experiment with one's own corporeality and sensuality to uncover biophilic tendencies in oneself within a phenomenological setting, for example in the reconstruction of archaic embodied experiences (in the sense of Rappe 1995). Concepts are also available that combine (strong) biophilia with (weak) biocentrism to form an existential attitude of protecting and promoting living structures (Wetlesen 1999). Thus, there can be different authentic "environmental virtues" which are based on religious traditions such as shamanism, Buddhism, Daoism and paganism.

7. Physiocentrism

The category of intrinsic moral values leads beyond anthropocentrism, if and in so far as it leads to the protection of certain natural beings for their own sake (so-called physiocentrism). Natural beings are to be protected for their own sake precisely when they are accorded a morally relevant quality. Probably the surest morally relevant characteristic is the ability to orient one's own actions to moral standards. In this spirit, for Immanuel Kant, only beings that are able to test their maxims for universalizability by means of the Categorical Imperative have dignity (Kant 1785). These beings are always to be respected for their own sake. Dignity means being able to orientate oneself with reasons towards rational grounds. It is also possible to ascribe dignity to people who either do not yet or no longer possess this human-specific ability, as a derivative of generic solidarity among human beings. In principle it is ethically wrong to detach Kant's formula of humans as ends in themselves from its context of justification and simply extend it to all living beings or anything that exists. The category of dignity cannot be applied to natural beings, although this terminology is often used, for example when talking about "plant dignity".

Now there can be more than just one morally relevant property and status category, including those that belong to natural beings. Certain characteristics lead not to the status "dignity" but to the status of direct consideration, i.e. they function as a criterion for granting or withdrawing intrinsic moral value (→ problem of inclusion) (Ott 2008; Warren 2000). In physiocentrism, different criteria of direct moral consideration are discussed. For example, sentience (sentientism), perceptive awareness (zoocentrism), being alive (biocentrism), biocenotic self-organisation (ecocentrism) or existence (holism) are claimed as morally relevant characteristics or criteria.

The concept of interest is also used as a criterion, whereby a distinction is made between weak and strong interests. A strong interest exists when a natural being takes an interest in something or "has" this interest. A weak interest exists when something is "in" the interest of a natural being. A lion has an interest, while water is in the interest of a potted plant.

An appropriate solution to the inclusion problem could be to combine the characteristics of sentience and the ability to communicate into a gradable concept of openness to a species-specific world (*Weltoffenheit*) (Ott 2015a), followed by a complex casuistry that ranges from chimpanzees and whales to dragonflies and spiders, for some even to plants. The decisive factor in this characteristic of world-openness is that a natural being, due to its organic endowment (brain, nerve cells), perceives something of its environment, feels its own joy and pain and can communicate with others through sounds or physical signals (such as bees through their "dances"). This solution excludes everything inorganic, genes, viruses and – depending on empirical findings – also large groups of organisms (phyto- and zooplankton, bacteria, fungi and plants) from the moral community. However, within the newer plant physiology and ecology it is controversial which terms should be used to describe the complex behaviour of plants (for example biochemical information transfer is sometimes viewed as "communication"). On plant ethics see Kallhoff (2002).

8. Ecological world views

Finally, in ecological world views such as Arne Næss' deep ecology (Næss 1989), environmental ethics is not axiologically or morally, but ontologically founded (Hendlin 2016). Among these approaches is Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich's metaphysical holism, which is based on the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa (Meyer-Abich 1997). It is usually assumed that nature ("physis") can reveal itself to different people in different places in different ways. What Heidegger (1976) terms "clearing" (*lichten*) and the modern interpretations of nature as value-free objectivity (physicalism) and usable resources (economics) are only two of many possible interpretations. Deep ecology thus denies the monopoly of interpretation of the modern scientific world view in a way that does not directly contradict this world view. To physics, nature shows itself to be objective under laws. To a technical world view (Heidegger 1962: "framing" (*Gestell*)) it shows itself as a resource. Nature is thus "determined" physically and technologically. In this way other approaches to nature are blocked off. Deep ecology wants to remove these blockages. In deep ecology, religious, spiritual and "ecosophical" interpretations and approaches to nature are regarded as conditions for finding ways out of the environmental crisis of modernity. Ethically, deep ecology, as Næss understood it, is closest to virtue ethics. Since Næss (due to his philosophical education in the empirico-logically oriented "Viennese Circle") believed that moral demands and imperatives are ultimately commands, he developed his environmental ethics by setting a limit to the Kantian doctrine of duty, namely the "beautiful soul" which does what duty demands of it out of inclination. Followers of deep ecology need duties and imperatives only as provisional guidelines; they act "correctly" out of joy and generosity. Nothing is "more beautiful" for them than to live in harmony with nature and to identify themselves with natural beings (Næss: "widening identification"). In deep ecology, the problem of inclusion is solved by means of physiocentrism, without the need for rational justification, so it is believed. The intrinsic value of nature is self-evident for deep ecologists, and requires no rational justification.

9. Religious traditions

The religions are also traditions that deal with nature and have been questioned as to their positions on secular environmental ethics (see contributions in Jenkins et al. 2017). As far as the Judeo-Christian tradition is concerned (see Link 1991; Neumann-Gorsolke 2004), the allegedly "hard" mandate of subjugation in the clerical creation story has been contrasted with the allegedly "soft" mandate to "cultivate and take care of" the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:15). However, this reading misinterprets both creation narratives. A re-reading of the six-day creation, which culminates in the Sabbath, provides a condensed reminder that the human being, in receiving God's blessing to procreate, is given a symbolic mandate

to act *responsibly* "coram Deo" ("living in the presence of God") in the midst of a magnificent creation (see Hardmeier/Ott 2015). A climax of this creation narrative is the exclamatory "hinne": "Yes, just look", with which the eyes of the mandated are directed to the splendour of nature (as creation). In the context of a post-secular translation, as Jürgen Habermas (2005) has proposed, religious persons can explain to their secular and agnostic fellow citizens why it makes good sense for them to live "coram Deo" "etsi Deus non daretur" ("even/as if God did not exist"). These explanations cannot, of course, serve as rational proofs.

10. Conclusion

All in all, thanks to its various strands of argumentation, environmental ethics is able to correct or expand an understanding of nature that is primarily interested in mastering and exploiting. An in-depth understanding of the various arguments makes it possible for any reasonable person to acquire his or her own conception of environmental ethics by orienting himself or herself with reasons towards rational grounds. These conceptions can then be classified into overarching philosophical currents and theories. Through this classification, a content-related conception gets a philosophical profile. A conception strongly oriented towards the practice of argumentation is assigned to a discourse theory of practical reason ("discourse ethics"). Environmental pragmatism (Norton 2005) exists within the wider tradition of pragmatism (cf. Schneider 1963, Chapters VIII and IX), in so far as it takes its starting point in human forms of practice in dealing with nature and aims, in a reforming way, to make these forms of practice more compatible with nature. A coalition of discourse ethics and pragmatism could prove to be a philosophically robust and sustainable basis for environmental ethics.

Environmental ethics is not bound to a specific historical epoch, since the question of successful and good human-nature relationships is at least as old as philosophy itself. A comprehensive overview can be found in Clarence J. Glacken (1967). Nevertheless, it is not surprising that environmental ethics as an academic discipline has emerged in an epoch in which the diagnoses of a global crisis of nature can no longer be ignored. As a diagnostic title for our epoch, the geo-logical expression "Anthropocene" is apt (cf. Ehlers/Krafft 2006). Many people, including the younger generation, experience the present time as the intertwining of life- and world-time, in which much is at stake. Will humanity be able to rapidly halt or at least limit climate change, the loss of biodiversity, the loss of fertile soil and the clearing of primary forests, the acidification and littering of the oceans, the expansion of urban structures and also the growth of the human population? Will concepts of sustainability gain acceptance, or will authoritarian or free-market political styles, for which environmental issues are secondary, prevail?

In this light it is not decisive whether the Anthropocene has its origins in 1950, 1750, 1550 or already in the Neolithic (according to Scott 2017). What is decisive is whether environmental ethics can take the key step from mere morality (Kant) to actual ethical life (Hegel) in the fully-fledged Anthropocene. Ethical life encompasses culture, law, economy and politics, so that environmental ethics cannot take this step alone. By itself, it is condemned to remain in the medium of reflection and analysis of the lines of argumentation and categories presented. It has no power except the unforced force of good reasons. Although environmental ethics has the transcendental will to become the shape of objective spirit (in Hegel's sense) in the Anthropocene, this transcendental will must become socio-political reality. In this sense the future of environmental ethics does not lie with it alone.

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