

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN ETHICS AND MORAL THEORY

Consequentialism and Environmental Ethics

Edited by
Avram Hiller, Ramona Ilea,
and Leonard Kahn



Consequentialism and Environmental Ethics

This volume works to connect issues in environmental ethics with the best work in contemporary normative theory. Environmental issues challenge contemporary ethical theorists to account for topics that traditional ethical theories do not address to any significant extent. This book articulates and evaluates consequentialist responses to that challenge. Contributors provide a thorough and well-rounded analysis of the benefits and limitations of the consequentialist perspective in addressing environmental issues.

In particular, the contributors use consequentialist theory to address central questions in environmental ethics, such as questions about what kinds of things have value; about decision-making in light of the long-term, inter-generational nature of environmental issues; and about the role that a state's being natural should play in ethical deliberation.

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**To all students, educators, activists, and others who
are working for the betterment of the environment**

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Introduction

Consequentialism and Environmental Ethics

Avram Hiller and Leonard Kahn

1. ETHICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

One of the defining features of our era will be the way in which humanity deals with environmental challenges. We are faced with the threat that due to human activities, there will be climatological changes that will affect the entire planet, causing harm to millions if not billions of people and leading to massive species extinction. But anthropogenic climate change is only one among many interrelated environmental problems. Every day there is news of the environmental impacts of natural resource extraction, or of the treatment of animals in industrial farms, or of species extinction, or of genetically modified organisms, or of limitations in the supply of clean water, to give just a few examples. In more general terms, the challenge to be sustainable is one of the core ethical issues of our time. The environmental movement in the West is not a new movement, but humanity faces a critical moment in confronting the challenges we face.

These issues are making the headlines, but behind the scenes, philosophers are working on questions both directly within environmental ethics as well as on more general questions in ethical theory that can apply to these issues. Environmental ethics has been and continues to be an exciting area of growth within philosophy. The last decade has seen a steady increase in the number of journals, books, and classes devoted to the subject. For all that, environmental ethics remains a young subdiscipline, and for various reasons, it has been to a significant degree marginalized as a subdiscipline within philosophical ethics. However, not only are issues of environmental ethics of the highest import in today's world, there is room for much fruitful work in connecting issues in environmental ethics with the best work in contemporary normative theory. Both environmental ethics and ethical theory have much to gain from increased interaction, and this book is an effort to promote such dialogue.

Richard (Sylvan) Routley's (1973) article "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" is heralded as beginning a new era for environmental thinking within Western philosophy. Sylvan argues against the anthropocentrism long dominant among ethical theorists. In his famous "Last People"

example, Sylvan asks the reader to consider a science-fiction scenario in which people know that they will be unable to reproduce and that the human species will go extinct. If they were to also destroy all the forests and ecosystems and to kill all the wild animals just for fun, they would have behaved wrongly, according to Sylvan. Sylvan concludes that what is needed is a new, non-anthropocentric environmental ethic to explain the wrongness of such behavior.

How should one react to Sylvan's argument? There are three classes of response:

- (A) *Reject the intuition that the last people are acting wrongly.* However, this response to Sylvan is legitimate only insofar as it can be justified based on considerations independent of anthropocentric ethical theories. For Sylvan's intention is to call these theories into question, and thus to use an anthropocentric theory to reject the intuition would simply be to beg the question.
- (B) *In accord with Sylvan's exhortation, generate an entirely new ethical theory.* This is what happened with Deep Ecology, a radical view according to which ethical behavior requires what Arne Naess (1989) calls "Self-realization," which (in effect) is to realize that one is not independent of the rest of the world. True self-realization, according to Naess, is to realize that we are one with other species, and thus harming other species would be harming one's Self. Although we will not try to defend or reject Deep Ecology here, it is based on highly disputable metaphysical and ethical assumptions and thus does not have many supporters among philosophical ethicists.
- (C) *Adapt a traditional form of ethical theory to account for ethical concern for the non-human world.* For instance, Tom Regan (1983) has argued on Kantian grounds that we owe respect to other individual advanced sentient animals, and Paul Taylor (1986) argues more generally that we owe respect to all living things. Thomas Hill, Jr., (1983) has argued that virtue ethics is the proper framework through which to apply environmental ethics, and others such as Ronald Sandler (2007) have developed a more complete environmental virtue ethic. Bryan Norton (2005) has developed an approach to environmental issues based upon the writings of the American pragmatists. And consequentialist views from Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic" (1980: 262) to Peter Singer's (1975) argument for the ethical treatment of non-human sentient animals have become well known.

We maintain that it is imperative that there be a more intensive focus on consequentialist environmental ethics. We believe that the consequentialist framework is the correct one in normative theory, and although there has been considerable work in applying consequentialist theory to environmental issues, it has been fragmented. Although this book does not have as

its goal the development of a complete consequentialist environmental ethic (or even an unqualified endorsement of consequentialist environmental ethics), it is our hope that it encompasses in a systematic way a discussion of at least most of the facets of a well-developed consequentialist environmental ethic.

2. WHAT IS CONSEQUENTIALISM?

“Consequentialism,” Amartya Sen once quipped, is “not a prepossessing term” (1999: 58). Indeed, it is not, though the term has become indispensable in contemporary ethical theory, and it is central to the approaches to environmental ethics taken in this volume. So it is natural to ask, “What, if anything, is unique about the consequentialist point of view?” Our answer is ecumenical and aims to be as comprehensive as possible. As we see it, the term *consequentialist* refers to anyone who holds that the rightness or wrongness of an agent’s action depends solely on the value of the consequences of this action, compared to the value of the consequences of any other actions that the agent could have undertaken (Kagan 1998: 60–61; Hurka 2003: 4; Shaw 2006: 5). That’s a mouthful, but we will spend some time unpacking that idea in the rest of this section.

Consequentialists often disagree with one another about the details of the relationship between the rightness or wrongness of an action and the goodness or badness of its consequences. That said, many of these details are not central to this book, and, for this reason, we shall be highly selective in our discussion of them in this introduction. We do not, of course, resolve any of these disagreements here, but we highlight ways in which they are especially salient to those interested in environmental ethics.¹

One area of disagreement among consequentialists concerns whether we should evaluate the consequences of actions directly or indirectly. Those who believe that we should evaluate the consequences of actions *directly* are usually called “act consequentialists.”

Act Consequentialism: It is morally right for agent A to do action F if and only if the value of the consequences of A’s doing F is greater than the value of the consequences of A’s doing any other action available to her.²

Pigeonholing those who believe that we should evaluate the consequences of actions *indirectly* is a somewhat more complicated affair. Perhaps the most widely held version of indirect consequentialism is called “rule consequentialism.” Here is one statement of the view:

Rule Consequentialism: It is morally right for A to do F if and only if the value of the consequences of accepting a set of rules which permits doing F is greater than the value of the consequences of A’s society accepting any other set of rules.