Ethics of Environment – A Mini Review

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Abstract:- Environmental ethics is the part of environmental philosophy which considers extending the traditional boundaries of ethics from solely including humans to including the non-human world. It exerts influence on a large range of disciplines including environmental law, environmental sociology, ecotheology, ecological economics, ecology and environmental geography.

There are many ethical decisions that human beings make with respect to the environment. For example:

• Should humans continue to clear cut forests for the sake of human consumption?

• Why should humans continue to propagate its species, and life itself? [1]

• Should humans continue to make gasoline-powered vehicles?

• What environmental obligations do humans need to keep for future generations?[2][3]

• Is it right for humans to knowingly cause the extinction of a species for the convenience of humanity?

• How should humans best use and conserve the space environment to secure and expand life?[

Introduction

The study of ethics belongs primarily within the discipline of philosophy, in the subdiscipline of „moral philosophy‟, and so our account begins there. Philosophical study concerns the systematic and rational consideration of human systems of belief. The process of asking and answering questions about belief systems is therefore fundamental to philosophical study – it is not sufficient merely to „learn‟ the answers that have been proposed by other philosophers! The branch of philosophy called „ethics‟ is concerned with questions concerning how human beings ought to live their lives, and about what is „right‟ or „wrong‟. In this section we look at how philosophers attempt to answer such questions in a systematic and rational way. This section also introduces the fields of environmental and development ethics, and consider how these two fields of study are interrelated.(1,2)

The branch of philosophical study that focuses on „ethics‟ is concerned with studying and/or building up a coherent set of „rules‟ or principles by which people ought to live. The theoretical study of ethics is not normally something that many people would regard as being necessary in order for them to conduct their everyday activities. In place of systematically examined ethical frameworks, most people instead carry around a useful set of day-to-day „rules of thumb‟ that influence and govern their behaviour; commonly, these include rules such as „it is wrong to steal‟, „it is right to help people in need‟, and so on. But sometimes the vicissitudes and complexities of life mean that these simple rules are sometimes put to the test. Consider the idea that it is wrong to kill. Does this mean that capital punishment is wrong? Is it wrong to kill animals? Is killing in selfdefence wrong? Is the termination of pregnancy wrong? Is euthanasia wrong? If we try to apply our everyday notions of right and wrong to these questions, straightforward answers are not always forthcoming. We need to examine these questions in more detail; and we need theoretical frameworks that can help us to analyse complex problems and to find rational, coherent solutions to those problems. Whilst some people attempt to do this work individually, for themselves,

philosophers attempt to find general answers that can be used by everyone in society.

Discussion

There are three broad areas of ethical study:

Meta-ethics, which focuses on the meaning of ethical terms themselves (for instance, „what is goodness?), and on questions of how ethical knowledge is obtained (for instance, „how can I distinguish what is good from what is bad?), rather than on the more applied question of „what should I do in a particular situation? . Meta-ethics is therefore concerned with the nature of ethical properties, statements, attitudes and judgments. Meta-ethics examines such themes as what moral questions mean, and on what basis people can know what is „true or „false . (3,4)

Normative ethics, in contrast, is the study of ethical acts. It therefore focuses explicitly on questions of „what is the right thing to do? in general. Normative ethics is concerned with questions of what people ought to do, and on how people can decide what the „correct moral actions to take are.

Applied ethics, which is concerned with how people can achieve moral outcomes in specific situations. Therefore, it is concerned with the philosophical examination of particular – and often complex – issues that involve moral judgments. Areas such as bioethics, environmental ethics, development ethics and business/corporate ethics may be regarded as areas of applied ethics. (The distinction between normative and applied ethics, however, is becoming increasingly blurred.)

Studying ethics, then, involves attempting to find valid reasons for the moral arguments that we make. Most people already have general ideas – or what philosophers call „intuitions or „presumptions – about what they think is „right or „wrong . But a philosophical approach to ethics requires people to think critically about the moral ideas that they hold, to support or refute those ideas with convincing arguments, and to be able to articulate and explain the reasons and assumptions on which those arguments are based. As Traer (2013) explains, in moral philosophy, an argument is not simply about our beliefs or opinions; instead, it is about the reasons underlying those beliefs or opinions. This means that the real value of discussing and debating ethical questions is not to „win the argument or to „score points against the other person! It is more important to provide carefully considered arguments to support our ideas, and to allow for rational – and deeper – understanding of the reasons underlying our beliefs, ideas and attitudes. Crucially, this requires careful listening to, analysis of and learning from the arguments that others make.(5,6)

Two such areas of applied ethics are of direct concern to us. The first, development ethics, emerged as a field of study in the second half of the 20th century. It questions and looks at the ethical implications of ideas such as „progress and at the implications of various types of social change. It considers the costs and gains from major socioeconomic changes, and whether those in wealthier countries have a duty to help those in poorer parts of the world. As with most areas of applied ethics, it has a purpose: to „help in identifying, considering and making ethical choices about societal "development", and in identifying and assessing the explicit and implicit ethical theories (Gasper 2004 p. xi). In other words, it aims to give clearer understanding of the key issues surrounding socioeconomic development, and to unpick the many hidden assumptions about what is the „right or „good thing to do. Key issues include social and human rights, poverty reduction, the gap between rich and poor, and planned international intervention by some nations in the development of others.

A second area of applied ethics is environmental ethics. Environmental ethics emerged as a separate area

of philosophical study during the 1970s. The approaches of environmental philosophers are varied, but most take as their starting point the belief that we are facing a critical point in our relationship with the non-human world, and that in order to avert (or reverse) an ecological crisis, we need to reassess the ways in which we value the non-human world. While not all environmental philosophers suggest that we need a new approach to the ethical values we assign to nature, many varied suggestions have been made as to which alternative frameworks we should use for valuing nature. (7,8)

Conclusion

These two important areas of applied ethics are central to understanding many important contemporary issues, such as those related to sustainable development, climate change, and environmental management. Issues are also raised by environmental and development ethicists in relation to another important area of applied ethics: corporate ethics (although some would regard business/corporate ethics as a further area of applied ethics in its own right).(9,10)

Another branch of the teleological strand of ethics is that of „being good". The most well-known of these ethical theories is virtue ethics. Virtue ethics shifts the analytical emphasis away from rule-based decision-making (of deontological ethics) or of the consequences of an action (eg in utilitarianism) towards the ethics of individuals and the ethics of human character. So, for example, where a utilitarian would argue that giving to a charity maximizes well-being in society, and a deontologist would argue that we have a duty to help others, a virtue ethicist would point to the fact that helping others displays desirable virtues such as being charitable or benevolent. Other desirable virtues include honesty, courage, friendship, mercy, loyalty, modesty, patience, and so on. The opposite of virtues are vices.

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