

Ethical issues analysis: rights and responsibilities



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The environment is the natural world, and all surroundings, including those already affected by human activity. To preserve the natural environment unaffected by human activity, not only would all human activity need to cease, but time would need to be reversed. Although, many questions whether we should be actively working to maintain the integrity of our environment for future generations by minimising the negative effects currently inflicted.

The questioning of rights and responsibility, in this case when referring to the environment, is directly linked to what is right and wrong and is intrinsically associated to ethics, as one of the six main branches of philosophy. As a result, there are a variety of positions, including Ethical Egoism, Utilitarianism and The Natural Law, that argue both for and against our moral obligation to maintain the environment for future generations.

The environment is our only source of resources and it plays an enormous role in the well-being of the current population. Because of this, it is important to question whether it is morally right to continue to use it to our benefit, and the impact this may have on future generations.

Ethical Egoism puts forward the view that we should only be obligated to act in the best interest of ourselves and thus should utilise the environment in the way that best impacts each of us individually irrespective of the effect it may have on others currently and in the future. This position focuses on the current human population and prioritises our happiness, regardless of any alternate negative effects it may bring to other species, along with the

environment. The use of the environment shows clear benefits, with economic growth and technological progression. There may be special cases where it is better for the individual to preserve the environment, such as the preservation of land for farmers, although ultimately the consensus would be that the disregard of preservation would benefit the most people individually. Therefore, if the use of the environment has a proven positive effect on our well-being, we are not morally obliged to preserve it for future generations.

Moore believes that 'the reason to pursue my good is the goodness of the thing I obtain' (Hurka, T, 2015), referring to the personal gain in all day-to-day actions. Following this, an Ethical Egoist would believe that the environment brings about the greater good individually with its current use, we should not feel morally obliged to preserve it for future generations.

Moore believed that any positive impact that comes to an individual, such as the range of technological advancements, such as the use of cars, would only be hindered by trying to preserve the environment. Accordingly, we should not focus on the future of the environment, but rather the positive impact it has on us today. Hence, we are not morally obliged to preserve the environment for future generations as it does not allow for progression and limits positive effects on the current population.

The Utilitarian belief that we must follow a moral system that 'maximises happiness and minimises pain for both the individual and the sum of individuals in a community' (Jones, G, Cardinal, D & Hayward, J 2006) would argue that we are morally obliged to preserve the environment for future generations. The environment currently regulates the climate, pollinates crops, and serves as a source of all organic materials that increase our

wellbeing immensely. To maximise the happiness of all current and future sentient beings we must ensure that they have access to the same recourses through preserving the environment for future generations.

Bentham held the belief that all pains and pleasures should be taken with the same importance, independent of the nature of the individual, ' thus any animals, human or non-human, that can feel pain or pleasure should be included in our measurements of the consequences' (Jones, G, Cardinal, D & Hayward, J 2006). With this in mind, when questioning the importance of preserving the environment for future generations, we must refer to the best interest of all sentient beings. As all beings rely heavily on natural resources, we must be morally obliged to preserve the environment. Bentham believes that we should not hold our happiness over anyone else, and to do so for future generations we must sustain the environment that we have been provided with.

If we alter the state of our environment, we inherently decrease the opportunity and happiness for future generations. Consequently, following Bentham's view of utilitarianism, we must work to preserve the environment.

The Natural Law theory is based on the concept that law and morality are connected, and thus all human laws are determined by morality. The use of the environment presently increases the chances of morality today, although we do not know the needs of people in the future and cannot assume that their needs will be the same. Although it is said that we should follow any ' intuitive desire' (Critchley, P 2013) to use recourses in order to the largest benefit currently, we must also follow a ' system whereby life is sustained'

(Critchley, P 2013) which would be threatened if we put all our focus into sustaining our world for future generations without knowing their needs, disregarding our intuitive desire to progress and look out for the well-being of each other.

Aquinas argues that ' God created the world according to natural laws - predictable, goal-driven systems whereby life is sustained, and everything functions smoothly' (Green, H 2016) which is the reasoning behind Him ensuring there are appropriate recourses for all species, such as sunlight and water for plants to satisfy all basic needs. Consequently, following The Natural Law, we have an intuitive desire to do what is right, which will be the morally right action in all cases. Therefore, rather than having the ' intuitive desire' (Critchley, P 2013) to preserve the environment for future generations, we should follow our intuitive desire to further progression of today's society, without any moral obligation to preserve it.

Ultimately, I believe that we are not morally obliged to preserve the environment for future generations, as a result of the points raised through the position following The Natural Law. Ultimately, our instincts allow us to make decisions based on personal wellbeing, whilst also accounting for effects decisions may have on others. As preserving the environment for future generations ultimately harms society today, it cannot be ethically justified.

The Natural Law raises a large possibility that the Utilitarian position which does not yet address. The needs for future generations may change, which presents the opportunity for flaws in the belief that what currently brings

about the greatest happiness will align with the needs of future generations. Subsequently, there is no use in aiming to benefit people that aren't currently present, when it has the potential to harm the present generation. Because of this, the happiness brought about to future generations, with the pain that would be caused within today's generations cannot be effectively measured or compared.

Whilst agree with Ethical Egoism through the belief that we are not morally obliged to preserve the environment for the future generation, there are flaws within the argument that decrease its strength. Even in the case that we claim to do something purely for the benefit of others, it has an inherent benefit us. Whether it be through the gratitude that comes from acting selflessly or the ultimate benefits that it may produce in the long run, it is impossible to act only in a way that benefits ourselves. Ethical Egoism would ultimately end in conflict, as their view concerns the morality of each individual, rather than as a society. Personal ethical beliefs are bound to conflict, in which case there is no suggested solution.

As both Ethical Egoism and Utilitarianism have proven flaws in their argument, I believe that following The Natural Law is the strongest position. Ultimately, we do not know the needs of future generations, so we cannot risk the well-being of our current society as a hope to benefit people in the future. Consequently, I do not believe that we are obliged to preserve the environment for future generations.

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