

Groundwater contamination



**ASSIGN
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For this paper, I have chosen to tackle the anthropocentric approach to the issue of groundwater contamination in the area of environmental ethics.

Contrasting Kant's approach to morality and what constitutes what people 'ought' to do, and Mill's focus on pleasure (that of higher and lower pleasures) since I believe it targets both the moral aspects of having a safe water supply as well as the pleasurable aspects of a safe water supply.

Groundwater contamination is an environmental debate that is a hot topic since it covers larger areas of responsibility beyond political boundaries and voting legislations. It's a fluid topic. Like water, the issue of groundwater contamination cannot be pinpointed to the exact location it began, unless one has testing equipment set up to trace the source of pollution, the typical way that a community finds out that their water is contaminated is when it begins to affect the people or crops who use the water for their daily necessities. Many aquifers cross county boundaries and the way people legislate the safety of the water sources is by regulating discharge of waste, both household and commercial. Regulated activities such as pollution discharge and waste disposal laws state that it should be conducted in a manner that preserves present and future uses of groundwater. Impacted groundwater should be restored, if feasible. Groundwater contamination occurs when man-made products such as gasoline, oil, road salts and chemicals get into the groundwater and cause it to become unsafe and unfit for human use. Some of the major sources of these products, called contaminants, are storage tanks, septic systems, hazardous waste sites, landfills, and the widespread use of road salts, fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals. Storage tanks may contain gasoline, oil, chemicals, or other

types of liquids and they can either be above or below ground. There are estimated to be over 10 million storage tanks buried in the United States and over time the tanks can corrode, crack and develop leaks. If the contaminants leak out and get into the groundwater, serious contamination can occur.

Septic systems can be another serious contamination source. Septic systems are used by homes, offices or other buildings that are not connected to a city sewer system. Septic systems are designed to slowly drain away human waste underground at a slow, harmless rate. An improperly designed, located, constructed, or maintained septic system can leak bacteria, viruses, household chemicals, and other contaminants into the groundwater causing serious problems. We have to remember that since groundwater is part of the hydrologic cycle, contaminants in other parts of the cycle, such as the atmosphere or bodies of surface water, can eventually be transferred into our groundwater supplies. (groundwater. org)

These descriptions of the many causes of groundwater contamination show that there is a multiplicity of factors that contribute to the pollution level in a particular place. The difficulty lies in the fact that many of these sources are underground (landfills, holding tanks for acid and other corrosive substances, septic tanks, etc). How many people do we know schedule regular annual septic tank inspections for their home, to see if there are any cracks in the holding container? Not too many I think, and this is where we begin to look at the issue of groundwater contamination.

The Kantian approach to morality is that people should do what is 'ought', without any regard to the reward or merit that may follow from that action. Universality of peoples' actions are also promulgated by Kant. I understood this to mean that when someone takes action, he or she cannot cite personal preferences like 'I just think saving whales is a good idea' but must speak to a larger goal that is grounded in a universal acceptance of all reasoning human beings. For groundwater contamination, a Kantian rationale to petitioning for more stringent landfill standards would look like 'I am for this legislation because landfills are everyone's concern since we have all contributed to the production of waste in society'. It appears to me that the reasoning for any action taken should be morally universal and all-inclusive. One comment that I can give to this is that taking this perspective allows for greater agreement, since the approach has to be universal. It cuts out the allowances and sensitivities to culture that while useful at times, can also be a block to the enactment of the reform that is being sought. An example I can give'supposing the government of Canada began authorizing the dumping of toxic chemicals (lead, arsenic, battery juice) into Niagara Falls. This action would then affect the United States. If one didn't use Kantian reasoning, you could say that Canadian culture is such that it allows for the pollution of water resources within their borders and if the United States is to respond, we can only complain but not argue for change to how they dispose of waste. A Kantian argument though would come from the point of view that clean water is a moral, universal ought and that Canada has the moral obligation to clean up their water sources without any thought that the United States will also reap benefits (tourism, safer drinking water, etc) to their actions. This thinking can be thought of as being unselfish, since

motivations for reward are not acceptable as a means to the performance of an action. Universality and correctness of the action when placed against a set of reasoning and deductive rules are what dictates the moves to clean up groundwater contamination, as well as prevent it from occurring. It saves a lot of time pointing fingers too. In our society we can see evidence of this. In the movie Erin Brockovich, as soon as they blew the whistle on the contamination of the town's water supply the actions that result from this environmental disaster show that the restoration of the water supply's cleanliness is paramount, as legal investigations take place. They push to clean up the water supply is a moral ought, and is independent of the ongoing investigation to find if PG&E is indeed accountable or not.

Mill's approach to groundwater contamination can also be taken against his backdrop of the concept of higher and lower pleasures. There is a tinge of anthropomorphism in his definition of higher and lower pleasures, as he categorizes the pleasures of animals below that of man's, and that of wise people as being above the pleasures of a fool. I can see this playing out in the idea of groundwater contamination since us as human beings have a tendency to pay attention to this aspect of our environment only when something goes wrong. To go back to an assertion I made previously, I don't think too many Americans have the awareness to regularly inspect their septic tanks to make sure that they aren't leaking any household waste into the local water supply. Household waste is not high on the ranks of pleasurable activities. To quote Mill, the 'the absence of any distinct recognition of an ultimate standard' is one observation that drove him to conclude that there cannot be one standard from which to base the

correctness of human behavior. One can only make a broad generalization on the pleasures that people are in constant pursuit of. The highest pleasure can always be relied on to motivate the behaviors of human beings. In the context of groundwater contamination, I can see this approach being used to generate support for the cleaning up and emphasizing why people should care about groundwater contamination. Using a moral ought as in Kant's philosophy won't cut it with people who care about highest pleasures. So the way to appeal to them would be to reframe the context in the highest pleasures that they can conceive. I believe a lot of marketing and public relations in environmental issues reflect this. Scaring people with pictures of esophageal cancer from contaminated water on a poster will not work from Mill's point of view. But putting pictures of people enjoying water sports on clean lakes would. The appeal to the higher or highest pleasures also works in my opinion.