

DP IB Environmental Systems & Societies (ESS): HL

11.2 Ethical Frameworks

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Ethical Frameworks

Ethical Frameworks

- Ethical frameworks are structures of thought that help people make **moral decisions**
 - In other words, they are a bit like guidelines for making decisions about what is right or wrong
- There are different ethical frameworks relating to the **environment** because there are different fundamental beliefs about the **relationship between humans and nature**

Ecocentrism

- If an individual or a society believes that the human species is not significantly different to the rest of nature, this may lead to a more ecocentric position
- The **central belief of ecocentrism** is that humans are **not** fundamentally different from nature
 - We are a **part** of nature—we are not above it
- Ecocentrists believe that all components of nature have intrinsic and equal rights
- They believe that ethical judgements should be made based on this equality
- For example, the environmental movement advocates for the complete protection of ecosystems and wildlife habitats, such as rainforests or coral reefs
 - E.g. prioritising the establishment of national parks and reserves to protect biodiversity

Stewardship

- The **central belief of environmental stewardship** is that humans are **part** of nature **but** have a special **responsibility** to care for it
- This ethical framework influences ethical judgements in favour of a compassionate, respectful treatment of nature as well as **responsible management**
 - We need to be good stewards
- For example, Indigenous communities that preserve natural resources through sustainable practices demonstrate environmental stewardship
- Another example might be recycling and conservation efforts by communities to reduce their environmental impact

Anthropocentrism and technocentrism

- If an individual or a society believes that nature is **separate** from the human species and is there to serve human needs, this may lead to a more extreme anthropocentric or technocentric worldview
- The **central belief of anthropocentrism** is that nature exists to serve human needs
 - We are above nature
 - We should aim to maximise human development and well-being
- The **central belief of technocentrism** is that technology and human innovation should be the primary drivers of progress and decision-making
 - We should prioritise technological solutions to environmental and societal challenges over other considerations (such as ecological preservation or ethical concerns about human-nature relationships)
- These worldviews focus on maximising benefits for humans **without considering other species**
- For example, large-scale deforestation for agricultural expansion prioritises human economic gains over biodiverse ecosystems and the ecological balance they provide to the planet
 - These industrial-scale agriculture practices then lead to soil degradation and further loss of biodiversity

Instrumental & Intrinsic Value

Instrumental & Intrinsic Value

Instrumental value

- Instrumental value refers to the usefulness of something (i.e. an 'entity') **for humans**
- Examples include:
 - **Goods:**
 - Food and water provide essential sustenance for human survival
 - The value of agricultural crops such as wheat and rice lies in their role as staple foods, sustaining human populations worldwide
 - **Services:**
 - Decomposers play a crucial role in breaking down waste and dead organisms, aiding in nutrient recycling
 - Bees provide the vital service of pollination, supporting the growth of various crops essential for human food production
 - **Opportunities for human development**, such as:
 - Something may provide knowledge and creative inspiration, which can then contribute to human development and progress
 - Access to education offers individuals the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that allow them to contribute to the advancement of society

Intrinsic value

- Intrinsic value is the value we attach to something for its inherent nature, regardless of its usefulness to humans
- Examples include:
 - **Non-living objects:**
 - Landscapes may hold intrinsic value due to their wildness, cultural significance, or aesthetic beauty
 - E.g. the Grand Canyon holds intrinsic value due to its stunning natural beauty and geological significance, attracting millions of visitors annually

- **Living organisms:**
 - Living things possess intrinsic value because they share fundamental characteristics with humans—they have parts, processes and behaviours that are highly organised to help them survive and reproduce, so we should respect their ongoing existence and well-being
 - Endangered species like the giant panda are valued not only for their role in maintaining ecosystem balance but also for their unique biological characteristics, raising human interest and concern for conservation efforts
- If something has intrinsic value, this can also mean it is still worth something, even if it doesn't have any obvious **economic value** (monetary value)
 - This can sometimes be difficult to understand as in today's society, we tend to view everything from a **financial perspective**—we see almost everything, including our homes, food, water, heating, electricity, recreational activities and holidays, in terms of **money**
- Different people and different groups, with different environmental value systems, will have **different parts or aspects of the environment** that hold intrinsic value to them. For example:
 - Many places or ecosystems are important to a country's **national identity**, such as Mount Fuji in Japan or Uluru (Ayers Rock) in Australia, which is of great spiritual importance to Aboriginal people
 - Someone who lives in a densely populated city where there is little wildlife may value the abundance of insect and plant life present if they visit the countryside on a summer's day, as this is something they **don't normally experience**
 - A gardener, who is always interacting with insects and plants, may value these things for slightly different reasons; for example, they may value the **services** that the insects provide (e.g. their ability to recycle the dead leaves and pollinate the flowers in their garden)

Moral Standing

- **Morals** are principles or beliefs about what is **right** or **wrong**, guiding individuals in their behaviour and decision-making, often influenced by cultural, religious, or personal values
- **Moral standing** refers to whether an entity should be considered **moral** in our actions towards it
 - For example, if we ask whether animals have moral standing, we are questioning whether their **well-being** should matter in our decisions regarding how we treat them

Ecocentric perspectives

- Ecocentrists argue that all living things have moral standing due to their **intrinsic value**
 - For example, trees, animals and even whole ecosystems like forests are seen as having moral standing or **moral significance**
- Some ecocentrists go further and extend moral standing to **non-living aspects of the environment**, such as rivers, rocks and landscapes

- For example, it could be argued that the debate over the construction of dams on rivers should involve considering the moral standing of the river itself as well as the potential harm caused to ecosystems and biotic communities downstream

Aldo Leopold: a pioneer in environmental ethics

- Aldo Leopold (1887–1948) was an American writer, philosopher, naturalist, scientist, ecologist, forester, conservationist and environmentalist
- Leopold's experiences in the early 20th century, including witnessing the degradation of natural landscapes and the systematic shooting of top predators, shaped his views on conservation and ethics
- His influential essay, "**The Land Ethic**", published as a chapter in his book "A Sand County Almanack" (1949), outlined a **moral framework** for human interactions with the land where they live
- He argued that ethical behaviour should extend beyond human-to-human relationships to include respect and consideration for the land and its non-human inhabitants
- Leopold proposed that the health and integrity of the biotic community—made up of all living organisms and their habitats—should be **central to ethical decision-making**
- According to Leopold, actions that promote the stability and beauty of ecosystems are morally right, while those that degrade them are morally wrong

Consideration for future generations

- Considering the moral standing of **future generations** raises questions about our responsibilities and moral obligations towards them
 - For example, do we have a duty towards future human individuals and societies, even if it doesn't directly benefit us today?
 - If we consider future generations to have moral standing, we do have a duty to consider them in the actions we take today
- Increasingly, environmental policies addressing climate change and sustainable development aim to ensure that future generations will inherit a **habitable planet**
 - This demonstrates moral considerations **beyond present human interests**