3. Using Ethical Principles in Moral Reasoning about the Environment

There are many different principles on which to draw in making specific decisions in environmental ethics. We'd like to review three basic ones - justice, sufficiency, and solidarity, but then demonstrate how environmental concerns challenge us to extend these principles to include the well-being of the natural world and our human duties to it. These three ethical principles can be traced back to many different sources: Greek philosophy, religious teachings, and reflection on human experience. In the face of any decision involving environmental ethics, we should ask how each of these ethical principles – also known as ethical norms – can be applied to the situation at hand.

Ethical principles are standards or benchmarks against which we can evaluate our actions. They are also signposts to orient us toward the difference between right and wrong, especially in conditions where there are multiple problems, and the interests of more than one party. Ethical principles are different from scientific principles. They are generally not as hard and fast. They are less likely to give us one correct answer. Ethical principles are best understood to indicate the right questions to ask. They can be used to evaluate conflicting claims, a decision making process, or the outcome of a decision.

**Justice:** The classic formal principle of justice is that equals should be treated equally unless there is a sufficient reason to treat anyone (or anything) unequally. It is clearly relevant in the field of ethics called environmental justice, but this principle cuts across many issues. Environmental justice is concerned with the inequitable access to environmental resources (clean food, air and water) and the injustice of greater pollution that often characterize lower-income communities - not wealthy suburbs. The notion of justice underlies concern about animal welfare. On the basis of what values are animals considered unequal to humans and thus subject to consumption by humans? Recent advances in biology have shown that the differences between humans and other animals are much less than many of us might think. Does the equality of humans and animals as living creatures require far more humane treatment of animals? Or even the total non-use of animals? To apply justice to an environmental decision, we should ask:

- Are all human beings involved in this situation being treated equally and, if not, why not?
- Are all living creatures involved in this situation being treated equally and, if not, why not?

**Sustainability:** *extending justice into the future.* Sustainability can be defined as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs. We are consuming or degrading many resources (such as fossil fuel energy, topsoil and water) today faster than they can be naturally replenished, which means they will not be available to people in the future. The ethical principle of justice is at play because it underpins the need to equitably balance the needs of those alive today (the rich and poor) with future generations. Thus, environmental ethics takes the notion of fundamental fairness and stretches it to include those yet to be born. To apply the principle of sustainability to an environmental decision, we should ask:

- What are the immediate and long-term effects of the problem before us?
• Who - humans and otherwise - is affected today by the problem before us and who will likely be affected by this problem in the future?

**Sufficiency:** The principle of sufficiency mandates that all forms of life are entitled to enough goods to live on and flourish. The principle also means no one should waste or hoard resources intended for the sufficiency of all. Upholding the norm of sufficiency makes demands upon individuals – to share, to live more simply – and on human communities: to ensure that everyone has access to the goods that they need to live a life of dignity. The ethical norm of sufficiency is closely tied to the notion of moral significance, which means that something is worthy of our ethical concern. This means that we include the needs of others in our consideration of what is important, or worthy of our concern. When we consider the needs others, such poor individuals in our society or poor countries in the world, we are asserting the moral principle of sufficiency. This principle helps us think about who else we need to consider, to whom we have moral duties. It underlies the practice of empathy. This principle can conflict, at least in some people’s minds, with the notion that the Earth does not have sufficient goods to meet everyone’s needs. To apply the principle of sufficiency to an environmental decision, we should ask:

• Will the decision permit all those involved, especially the poor, to have enough resources on which to live and flourish?
• Is there any aspect of the decision that indicates the presence of waste or excess?

**Compassion: extending sufficiency to the Earth.** Environmental ethics asserts that other animals, plants, and the elements (such as water, soil or air) are morally significant, and that humans have responsibilities to act so that their needs are met too. Some environmental ethicists, such as Deep Ecologists, assert that non-human forms of life have moral significance equivalent to humans. Most people, however, believe that other forms of life have some moral worth, but that humans are of greater moral significance. Even if you think animals are far more worthy of your concern than plants or elements, do recognize that all animals depend, either directly or indirectly on plants for food, and that no creatures can live without sufficient clean water. To assert that any wild animal is worthy of our moral concern begins the process of learning about the interdependence of all creatures on the habitat and food resources provided by other creatures in an ecosystem. It is simply impossible to consider the well-being of one other creature in isolation from their environment. Ultimately, the future of humans is tied to the well-being of all other creatures. To apply the principle of compassion to an environmental decision, we should ask:

• What duties do we have to the other creatures likely to be affected by our actions?
• What does sufficiency mean for other creatures, especially those threatened with extinction?
• What would it mean to extend the principle of compassion to non-human creatures?

**Solidarity:** The principle of solidarity invites us to consider the how we relate to each other in community. It assumes that we recognize that we are a part of at least one family – our biological family, our local community, or our national community – but then challenges us to consider the full range of relationships with others. In a globalizing economy, we participate in a vast, international economic community, one in which goods and services are provided for us by those
on the other side of the world. Solidarity requires us to consider this kind of extended community, and to act in such a way that reflects concern for the well-being of others. To apply the principle of solidarity to an environmental decision, we should ask:

- Who are all the human stakeholders involved in this situation?
- Who are all the natural stakeholders?
- Is there a community of life (ecosystem) involved?
- Are there any stakeholders - human and non-human - who are especially vulnerable?

**Participation: extending solidarity to make it practical:** The demands of solidarity point us to the principle of participation, so that those affected by an environmental decision can shape how it is made. Many, many environmental problems stem from decisions being made by private individuals or companies that have wide-ranging implications. In some cases, in this country and others, governments make environmental decisions without fully securing the consent of the public. Often, those most affected are unaware of the decisions or the long-term effects on their health and the well-being of their environment. The ethical principle of participation requires us to recognize all of the parties - human and non-human – likely to be affected by a decision, and to recognize that all parties should have a say in how the decision is made. Genuine participation requires transparency, meaning that each individual has access to the same information that everyone else has. To apply the principle of participation to an environmental decision, we should ask:

- Do all stakeholders in this decision actually have a say in how the decision is going to be made?
- Are there any stakeholders who cannot represent themselves? Or who have little power? How will their interests be represented in the decision-making process?