

Two broad Ethical Approaches to Environment: Deontology and Consequentialism

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Abstract

Ethical theories, from the point of view of meta-ethics or second-order ethics, which are commonly known to us as theory regarding moral standard are generally said to have been laid down from either of two points of view. One is usually known as the teleological point of view or the point of view of consequentialism and the other is known as deontological theories. As for example, any version of utilitarianism is regarded as a consequentialist or teleological theory. On the other hand, Kant's view on ethical standard is said to be a deontological view. The dichotomy of consequentialism or teleology and deontology may as well be described as the dichotomy of means and end. A consequentialist theory or a teleological theory would regard some action to be good as a means. Thus, hedonism regards an action to be good if it produces pleasure. Thus, the action is said to be good as a means to pleasure. A deontological theory, on the other hand, regards an action to be good not as a means but as an end. That is, the action is good in itself. Thus, the dichotomy of teleology and deontology may be called as well a dichotomy of means and end. The most popular example of consequentialism or teleological theory in ethics is utilitarianism, while the most conspicuous example of deontological theory is Kantian theory of moral standard. Deontologists believe that morality is a matter of duty. We have moral duties to do things which it is right to do and moral duties not to do things which it is wrong to do. Whether something is right or wrong doesn't depend on its consequences, rather an action is right or wrong in itself.

KEYWORDS: Deontology, Consequentialism, Deep ecology, Shallow ecology, Means and end, Utilitarianism, Ecocentric, Anthropocentric

Contemporary writers on ethical approaches to environment have admitted a contrast between two ethical approaches to environment. These two approaches have been referred to as approaches from the point of view of deep ecology and approaches from the point of view of shallow ecology. It is generally admitted that the ethical point of view of deep ecology corresponds to the point of view of deontological ethics and the point of view of shallow ecology corresponds to that of consequentialism. However, an eminent writer on ethics, William K. Frankena has dealt with the dichotomy of deontology and consequentialism as that between deontology and utilitarianism. It may be that William K. Frankena thinks that utilitarianism represents the whole view of consequentialism. It appears so from his treatment of utilitarianism in the third chapter of his book *Ethics* (Frankena 1995: 34-60). Exponents of deontological view regard moral excellence or moral value as an intrinsic value. Advocates of consequentialism, on the other hand, regard moral value as an extrinsic value. Thus, the dichotomy of deontology and consequentialism may as well be described as the dichotomy of moral goodness as an end and moral goodness as a means. This significance is quite clear in the dichotomy of

deep ecology and shallow ecology. In this article, first I have discussed two ethical approaches, namely, deontological approach and consequentialist approach, and then I have tried to show how the ethical point of view of deep ecology corresponds to the point of view of deontological ethics and the point of view of shallow ecology corresponds to that of consequentialism.

The dichotomy of deontology and consequentialism may as well be presented as a dichotomy between absolutism and relativism in ethics. Ethical absolutism will hold that whenever we assign moral value to any appropriate context, we assume that the value in question is absolute value. Ethical relativism, on the other hand, will hold that the value in question is relative. It will not be wrong altogether to say that so far as we admit that deep ecology has its root in deontology, deep ecology subscribes to ethical absolutism. By contrast, we shall have to say that shallow ecology subscribes to ethical relativism. Thus, we find that the point of view of deep ecology and that of shallow ecology may be described in several ways.

Ecology in general has been defined as the comprehensive science of the relationship of the organism with the environment. A central principle of ecology is that each living organism has an ongoing and continual relationship with every other element that makes up its environment. The basic moral principle of ecology is a moral principle that may be formulated in accordance with the distinction between deep ecology and shallow ecology. The most important distinction in the environmental movement is between what the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1973) termed 'shallow ecology' and 'deep ecology'. Perhaps deep ecology is most easily understood when considered in opposition to its 'shallow' counterpart. According to deep ecologists, shallow ecology is anthropocentric and concerned with pollution and resource depletion. Thus, shallow ecology might be regarded as very much the mainstream wing of environmentalism. In contrast, deep ecology rejects anthropocentrism and takes a 'total-field' perspective. In other words, deep ecologists are not aiming to formulate moral principles concerning the environment to supplement our existing ethical framework. Rather, they demand an entirely new world view and philosophical perspective. Deep ecology is a movement which promotes an awareness of the oneness and interconnection of all life and its cycles of change and transformation. The core principle of deep ecology, according to Naess, is: like humanity, the living environment as a whole has the same right to live and flourish. It advances the more challenging idea that the purpose of human life is to help sustain nature, not the other way around. For Arne Naess, ecological science, concerned with facts and logic alone, cannot answer ethical questions about how we should live. For this we need ecological wisdom. Deep ecology seeks to develop this by focusing on deep experience, deep questioning and deep commitment. These constitute an interconnected system.

Naess holds that when deep experience occurs, we feel a strong sense of wide identification with what we are seeing. We see that there are no isolated objects, but that objects are modes in a vast web of interconnections. This experience involves a sense of empathy and an expansion of our concern with non-human life. Moreover, we feel how dependent we are on the well-being of nature for our own physical and psychological well-being. As a result there arises a natural inclination to protect non-human life. Naess calls this process self-realization (Naess 1973: 95-100). The philosophy of deep ecology

helped differentiate the modern ecology movement by pointing out the anthropocentric bias of the term: “environment” and rejecting the idea of humans as authoritarian guardians of the environment. Some people criticize the notion that the intrinsic value of ecological systems exists independently of humanity’s recognition of it. For example, one might say that a work of art is only valuable in so far as humans perceive it to be worthwhile. Such people may say that the ecosystem’s value does not reach beyond our appreciation of it. Intrinsic value is a philosophical concept which some do not accept.

There are a few more questions which are not directly related to deontology and consequentialism, but are significantly related to deep ecology and shallow ecology. Ecology may adopt an anthropocentric view or a non- anthropocentric view. How these two approaches are related to deep ecology and shallow ecology – is a very important question. Ecologism provides a radically different vision of nature and the place of human beings within it, one that is ‘ecocentric’ or nature-centred rather than anthropocentric. The main dispute is between those who claim that ethics can have only an anthropocentric basis, and those who claim that not only there can be, but there must be, a non-anthropocentric basis for environmental ethics. Traditional ethical theories are characterized as anthropocentric because they regard only humans or human experience or reason as having intrinsic ethical worth whereas the value of non-human things in nature is merely instrumental. However, it is often said to be morally wrong for human beings to pollute and destroy parts of the natural environment and to consume a huge proportion of the planet’s natural resources. If that is wrong, is it simply because a sustainable environment is essential to human well-being? Or is such behaviour also wrong because the natural environment and its various contents have certain values in their own right so that these values ought to be respected and protected in any case? These questions are investigated by environmental ethics.

Anthropocentrism literally means “human-centeredness”. In this sense, all ethics must be considered anthropocentric. We know that, only human beings can reason about and reflect upon ethical matters. Within environmental ethics, however, anthropocentrism usually means something more than this. It refers to an ethical frame work that grants “moral standing” only to human beings. Thus an anthropocentric ethics claims that only human beings are morally considerable in their own right.

However, many environmental ethicists have claimed that ethics must be extended beyond humanity, and that moral standing should be granted to the non-human natural world. Some have claimed that this extension should be accorded to sentient animals, others to individual living organisms, and some others have claimed that this moral standing should run to holistic entities such as rivers, species and ecosystems. According to this view, we have obligations in respect of the environment because we actually owe things to the creatures or entities within the environment themselves.

The distinction between deep ecology and shallow ecology has been worked out as the distinction between two different ethical points of view. One is the point of view of deontological ethics and the other is the point of view of consequentialist ethics. Deep ecology may be said to be based on the premises constituted by deontological ethics, while shallow ecology has the principles of consequentialism as its premises. Thus, we

find that the dichotomy of deontology and consequentialism may be said to be at the root of the dichotomy of deep ecology and shallow ecology.

We may start with a somewhat elucidation of the terms ‘deontology’ and ‘consequentialism’. We may do this with sufficient precision with the help of the following quotation from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* edited by Paul Edwards: “The term “deontology” derives from the Greek words *deon*(duty) and *logos* (science). Etymologically it means the science of duty. In current usage, however, its meaning is more specific: a deontological theory of ethics is one which holds that at least some acts are morally obligatory regardless of their consequences for human weal or woe. The popular motto “Let justice be done though the heavens fall” conveys the spirit that most often underlies deontological theories”(Olson in Edwards 1972:343a).The term “consequentialism” as replacing “teleological theory” or theory of “means” has been introduced for the first time possibly by G.E.M. Anscombe. MsAnscombe introduced the term in an article “Modern Moral Philosophy” published in 1958. The significance of the term “consequentialism” may be stated as follows: “It primarily refers to moral views or theories which base their evaluations of acts solely on consequences. In contemporary philosophical usage, the term is most often used to refer to “act-consequentialism”, which is the view that the rightness (or obligatoriness) of an act depends on whether its consequences are at least as good as (or better than) those of any alternative act available to the agent.”(Freeman in Becker & Becker 2001:304).It is admitted that our moral awareness is essentially connected with the collective body of human agents. However, we may somewhat extend the scope of the observation and may say that the collective body is not just a body of spiritual entities. The said collective body must have a tangible locus which is a Universe at large or the Nature as a whole or the environment wherein we are. If we understand in this way we may say that our moral awareness arises only in the environment where we live. The moral awareness arises because man is a thinking being but just to be a thinking being does not make man a moral agent if he is not aware of other thinking beings and the environment in which we live. Thus, moral awareness is inseparable from our awareness about environment.

Plato may be said to be the first of the Western philosophers of the ancient period who advocated deontological view in ethics. Plato’s deontological view on ethics may be said to be contained mostly in the *Republic*. Copleston observes in this respect: “Plato’s doctrine concerning the Idea of the Good, the Idea that occupies a peculiar position of pre-eminence in the *Republic*” (Copleston 1962:201).Copleston further observes: “The Good is there compared to the sun, the light of which makes the objects of nature visible to all and so is, in a sense, the source of their worth and value and beauty” (Copleston 1962:201). It follows from what Copleston contends is that so far as we regard Good as the “Idea” or “Form”, it is to be regarded as out and out intrinsic and not extrinsic. It is in no way a means to obtain something. It is out and out an end in itself.

The first of the great philosophers of the modern period of Western philosophy, emphatically to enunciate the deontological principle was Immanuel Kant. “According to Kant objectively right behavior may be inspired by prudence, by benevolence, by respect for the moral law, or by still other motives, but the highest and the only unqualifiedly moral motive is respect for the moral law. If, therefore, considerations based on concern for one’s own well-being or the well-being of others indicate a course of action at odds with that dictated by respect for the moral law, respect for the moral law should prevail.

Kant went so far as to argue that it is wrong to tell a lie even to save another man's life. Moral rules, he claimed, are universally valid and admit of no exceptions" (Olson in Edwards:343a).

Kant has been regarded as the most important exponent of deontological ethics. Deontological theories may be divided into several types. Some kinds of deontological theories advocate act-deontology, where as others advocate rule-deontology. There are again several types of rule-deontology. However, Kant has often been recognized as the chief protagonist of rule-deontology. Rule-deontology holds that whether an action is morally good or not, depends not on any specific consequence of the action but because of some intrinsic character of the action independent of any result of the action. Whether an action is morally good depends on some specific rule which is good in itself and to which the action conforms. It is in this sense that Kant may be said to be an advocate of rule-deontology. If we consider Kant's deontology in the context of the distinction between deep ecology and shallow ecology, we are to hold that rule-deontology or deontology as such, will subscribe to deep ecology and not to shallow ecology. As such, one may hold that Kant is likely to support deep ecology. This observation, however, requires a rather detailed examination.

According to Kant, to say that an action is morally good is to mean that the action is good in any and every circumstance and it is an absolute good and unconditionally good; it is good in itself and it is good independently of its relation to any other thing. Kant then holds that good will alone is good in this sense. Kant distinguishes between pure part of ethics and empirical part of ethics. In the empirical part of ethics we are to take into account the practical situations under which an action is done. Empirical ethics is otherwise called by Kant "Practical Anthropology". The other part of ethics is called *a priori* part of ethics or "Metaphysic of Morals". "Metaphysic of Morals" does not take ecological issues under its jurisdiction. "Metaphysic of Morals" may be said to be quite unrelated to moral issues involved in ecology. "Practical Anthropology", however, may be said to be related to ecology and may not be supporter of deep ecology in an unqualified sense.

With this thing in our mind we may understand Kantian ethics as follows: According to Kant, an action's moral worth is not found in what it tries to accomplish but in the agent's intention and the summoning of one's energies to carry out that intention. Results, purposes and consequences are excluded from Kant's moral philosophy, and this is obviously indirect contrast to consequentialism and teleological approaches to ethics. The moral person must perform actions for the sake of duty regardless of the consequences, but what is the duty of the rational moral agent? According to Kant, one's moral duty is simple and singular: to follow the moral law that is expressed in the categorical imperative—always act according to a maxim that is at the same time valid as a universal moral law. In other words, can the action in question (such as breaking a promise) pass the test of universalization? If not, the action is immoral and one has a duty to avoid it.

However, deontological ethics did also play an important role in ancient Greek philosophy. Plato's conception of "The Good" admits clearly a deontological principle. There have been other important exponents of the principle of deontological

ethics. According to Plato “The Good” is the ultimate end or the end in itself and is in no way means to any other end. However, it will be an oversimplification to regard Plato as an exponent of deontological ethics in an unqualified way. It is true that the concept of “The Good” or the Idea of “The Good” can find its place only in accordance with the principle of deontological ethics. But, it does not bring out the whole of Platonic ethics. Plato’s view on what is “Good” is presented from two levels. The first may be described as follows: “...the good life must include all knowledge of the truer type, the exact knowledge of timeless object” (Copleston 1962:243). From another level Plato appears to have admitted the notion of “Good” as means as has been put down by Copleston — “...the man who has acquainted only with the exact and perfect curves and lines of geometry, and had no knowledge at all of the rough approximations to them which we meet with in daily life, would not even know how to find his way home. So second-class knowledge, and not only the first-class variety, must be admitted into the mixture...”(Copleston 1962:243). Thus, we find the notion of “Good” may be understood as referring to something which is good-in-itself or good as an end. It does also refer to what is good as a means. Bearing in this mind Copleston has said: “Plato’s ethic is eudaemonistic” (Copleston 1962:242). Plato’s account shows that his system of ethics cannot be regarded as an example of deontological ethics in an unqualified way.

Other advocates of deontological ethics include intuitionists like Samuel Butler and G.E.Moore. What goodness is, is apprehended only by intuition. Butler’s saying has been quoted by Moore in his title page of *Principia Ethica*- “Good is what it is” (Moore 1956: Title page). Good, according to this view, is indefinable, is an end in itself, is indescribable and unanalyzable. It is a unique intrinsic value. In the very first chapter of *Principia Ethica*, Moore observes: “If I am asked ‘What is good?’ my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked ‘How is good to be defined?’ my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it” (Moore 1956:6). Thus, according to Moore, something is judged to be good in the ethical context. It does not depend on any external ground. It cannot be said that x is good because x has

Another distinguished twentieth-century exponent of deontological ethics is W.D.Ross. Ross does not contend the universal validity of moral rules. According to him, the fact that an act violates a moral rule is a prima-facie reason for not performing the act. However, it can and does happen that one moral rule conflicts with another. In these situations, we are obliged to choose between them, and our behavior will necessarily constitute an exception to the rule that we deem less applicable in the concrete situation. Ross, like Kant, refuses either to derive moral rules from considerations based on prudence and sympathy or to allow such factors to determine their relative ranking in cases of conflict. Ross holds that any statement relating either to moral rules or to our concrete duty in a specific case must be justified by an act of intellectual intuition. Deontological ethics may as well be called ethics of the end. According to this point of view, some action or agent is regarded as morally good because it is regarded as an end in itself. Deontological ethics does also regard ethics as a system of rules.

Deontology as an ethical concept is usually contrasted with consequentialism or we may say “deontology” is commonly used in moral philosophy to refer to

nonconsequentialist moral conceptions. The most distinctive feature of deontological moral conceptions is that they define fundamental principles of right and justice in terms other than taking the most effective means to promote maximum good. (Freeman in Becker & Becker 2001:391b)

A second essential feature of deontological view that distinguishes sharply itself from consequentialism may be stated as follows: “characteristic of consequentialism is an optimization thesis: value (the good) is maximizable, and total good is to be optimized. On this account, (1) goodness is a property of states of affairs that is scalar, admitting of quantitative judgments (or at least judgments of more or less); (2) what is ultimately good ought to be promoted as the end of all actions; and (3) to promote value is to maximize its total”(Freeman in Becker & Becker 2001:393a).

Deontology, on the other, upholds the thesis that “the thesis that the fundamental values proving reasons for morality are not maximizable ...” (Freeman in Becker & Becker 2001:393a). This thesis is implicit in Kant’s second formulation of his Categorical Imperative - “Always act in such a way that you never treat humanity merely as a means, but always as an end-in-itself”(Kant 1948: k429).

From the two above features of deontological conceptions follows a third one. This third essential feature of the deontological view describes the relationship between principles of right and the pursuit of (nonmoral) goods.(Freeman in Becker & Becker 2001:393b-394a).

A fourth distinctive feature of deontology has been expressed in the principle that has been called by Kant and some other moral Philosophers as the principle of “the moralization of value.” A Good Will, according to Kant, is “a steadfast proclivity to act on and for the sake of the Moral Law. Since moral principles for Kant are not empirically given, but are implicit in our (pure) practical reasoning, to act from a Good Will is to act from a law we “give to ourselves” out of our reason, and this is to be autonomous” (Freeman in Becker & Becker 2001:395b).

The dichotomy of consequentialism or teleology and deontology may as well be described as the dichotomy of means and end. A consequentialist theory or a teleological theory would regard some action to be good as a means. Thus, hedonism regards an action to be good if it produces pleasure. Thus, the action is said to be good as a means to pleasure. A deontological theory, on the other hand, regards an action to be good not as a means but as an end. That is, the action is good in itself. Thus, the dichotomy of teleology and deontology may be called as well a dichotomy of means and end.

Apparently when we take into account Aristotle’s concept of *eudaimonia* as it has been introduced in his most important work on ethics, namely, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1925:1224a25-17), we may say that Aristotle is advocating a kind of act-utilitarianism. The word *eudaimonia* is generally translated in English as meaning happiness or well-being. An action, according to Aristotle, is good so far as it aims at an end. The final aim or end, according to Aristotle, is *eudaimonia* or happiness or well-being. However, this may not mean that Aristotle clearly is an advocate of consequentialism. For, according to him, *eudaimonia* or well-being is the final end and as

such it is good in itself or intrinsically good. Whether such a position may be regarded as that of consequentialism may be debated.

Frankena prefers to use the earlier nomenclature and accordingly he refers to consequentialism as teleological theory. His definition of a teleological theory is as follows: “A teleological theory says that the basic or ultimate criterion or standard of what is morally right, wrong, obligatory, etc., is the nonmoral value that is brought into being. The final appeal, directly or indirectly, must be to the comparative amount of good produced, or rather to the comparative balance of good over evil produced” (Frankena 1995:14).

Peter Singer in his *Practical Ethics* has observed that “there is a long-standing approach to ethics that is quite untouched by the complexities that make simple rules difficult to apply. This is the consequentialist view. Consequentialists start not with moral rules but with goals. They assess actions by the extent to which they further these goals” (Singer 1993:3). There are two very common forms of act-consequentialism, namely, act-utilitarianism and consequentialism that does not subscribe to utilitarianism. The act-utilitarian is an act-consequentialist who holds that happiness, well-being, pleasure, utility, or some combination of these are the only factors that automatically make for the goodness of consequences. Act-consequentialism may have other forms as well. Some form of act-consequentialism may hold that something other than happiness or pleasure is the consequence that is to be looked for as the result of a morally good action. Eudemonism or what is commonly known as perfectionism may be regarded as a form of act-consequentialism other than act-utilitarianism. However, it should be regarded as another form of consequentialism in general not merely act-consequentialism.

The main thesis of the teleological theory may be led down in a general way as follows: “A teleological theory says that the basic or ultimate criterion or standard of what is morally right, wrong, obligatory etc., is the nonmoral value that is brought into being. The final appeal, directly or indirectly, must be to the comparative amount of good produced, or rather to the comparative balance of good over evil produced. Thus, an act is *right* if and only if it or the rule under which it falls produces, will probably produce, or is intended to produce *at least a great a balance of good over evil* as any available alternative; an act is *wrong* if and only if it does not do so. An act *ought to be done* if and only if it or the rule under which it falls produces, will probably produce, or is intended to produce *a greater balance of good over evil* than any available alternative” (Frankena 1995:14).

Consequentialism which is advocated by any teleological theory may as well be defined as a theory that “says that the basic or ultimate criterion or standard of what is morally right, wrong, obligatory, etc., is the nonmoral value that is brought into being. The final appeal, directly or indirectly, must be to the comparative amount of good produced, or rather to the comparative balance of good over evil produced” (Frankena 1995:14).

When we speak of moral awareness about environment or ecology we may do so from either of the two points of view referred to above, namely, the point of view of teleological theories or consequentialism and from the point of view of deontology. In a

general way it may be said that if we take the consequentialist point of view we shall be led to what has already been referred to previously as shallow ecology. On the other hand, a deontological approach will lead a point of view of deep ecology. In the first case, we admit that ecological balance is covetable for it is conducive to the welfare of the mankind at large. On the other hand, in the second case, we would say that environmental balance or equilibrium is to be maintained for its own sake.

Distinction and contrast between deontology and consequentialism is a pointer to two broadly distinct ethical approaches to environment. When one admits deontology this approach to environment or ecology will lead to deep ecology. On the other hand, if this approach is based on consequentialism it will lead to shallow ecology. This observation involves a few important relevant questions. They may be summarily put as follows: (1) Does deep ecology necessarily lead to deontological ethics? Or, if we admit deontological point of view only then we can support deep ecology? (2) Is deep ecology compatible with the point of view of consequentialism? (3) Is consequentialism compatible with deep ecology? That is, if we subscribe to consequentialism or any of the consequentialist ethical theories, can we advocate for deep ecology?(4) Is consequentialist point of view compatible with shallow ecology? Or, if we subscribe to consequentialism; i.e., any of the consequentialist theories, can we do away with shallow ecology?

When we take into account the main thesis admitted in the deontological point of view and that which is admitted in deep ecology we notice that deep ecology necessarily presupposes deontological view. Deontological view holds that if anything is morally good then it must be intrinsically good. Some action is good because it is good in itself or is accepted as end in itself ethically. It is regarded as covetable not because it serves our purpose which is in turn covetable. To borrow Kant's phrase some action is regarded as a moral duty not because it is a means to some other end; it is an end in itself. From this point of view if we regard any part of environment then it will mean that part of environment has some intrinsic value. Hence, environment is valuable to us or environment should be maintained in its unadulterated state for its own sake and not for any utilitarian value. In this way we arrive at deep ecology.

It is an undeniable fact that so long we subscribe to deontological ethics we must subscribe to deep ecology. Now can we say that if we subscribe to deep ecology must we subscribe to deontology as well? The question must be answered in an affirmative way. To subscribe to deep ecology means to admit intrinsic value of environment as a whole or ecology as a whole. Now if we do not admit moral value as an intrinsic value in general we cannot perhaps say that some particular area of human life has intrinsic value. Thus, we find that deontology necessarily leads to deep ecology as deep ecology necessarily presupposes deontology.

That deep ecology necessarily comes out of deontological view means that deep ecology cannot accommodate itself with consequentialism. Any ethical theory that subscribes to consequentialism will hold that we regard something as morally good because of the specific kind of result it produces. This point of view can in no way be accommodated with deep ecology. Deep ecology holds that our moral regard for environment or ecology does in no way depend on any result that may be brought about

by our care for ecology. Thus, we find that deep ecology leaves no room for admitting consequentialism and deontological point of view leaves no room for shallow ecology. This shows that we are to admit a negative answer to our third question. Thus, we may say that if deep ecology presupposes deontology in some way or other, shallow ecology presupposes teleology or consequentialism in some way or other.

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