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Sustainable Development of the Arctic: A View from Environmental Ethics

Johan Hattingh
Department of Philosophy
Stellenbosch University
South Africa

Member of COMEST (UNESCO)



Departement of Philosophy
•
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences



Arctic: An intersection of concerns



- The history of environmental ethics
 - With a turn to climate change
- Characteristics of global climate change
- Dominant decision-making model
- Environmental justice issues
- Fault lines in the notion of sustainable development
- Conclusions / Recommendations



Environmental Ethics



- Worry about the survival and flourishing of life (human and non-human) on earth
- Concerns that gave birth to environmental ethics are still with us; they only have intensified
 - Pollution
 - Destruction of, damage to resources
 - Nuclear war / nuclear waste
 - Population growth
 - Loss of biodiversity and ecosystems
 - Unfair distribution of benefits and burdens
 - Exclusion from decision-making processes



Environmental ethics



- Expands our
 - Moral horizon to include non-human life, and its conditions for being
 - Mode of valuing to include more than instrumental value only
 - Notions of self and self-realization
 - Notions of problems and problem-solving
 - Source of problems: systemic
 - Solutions require transformative action



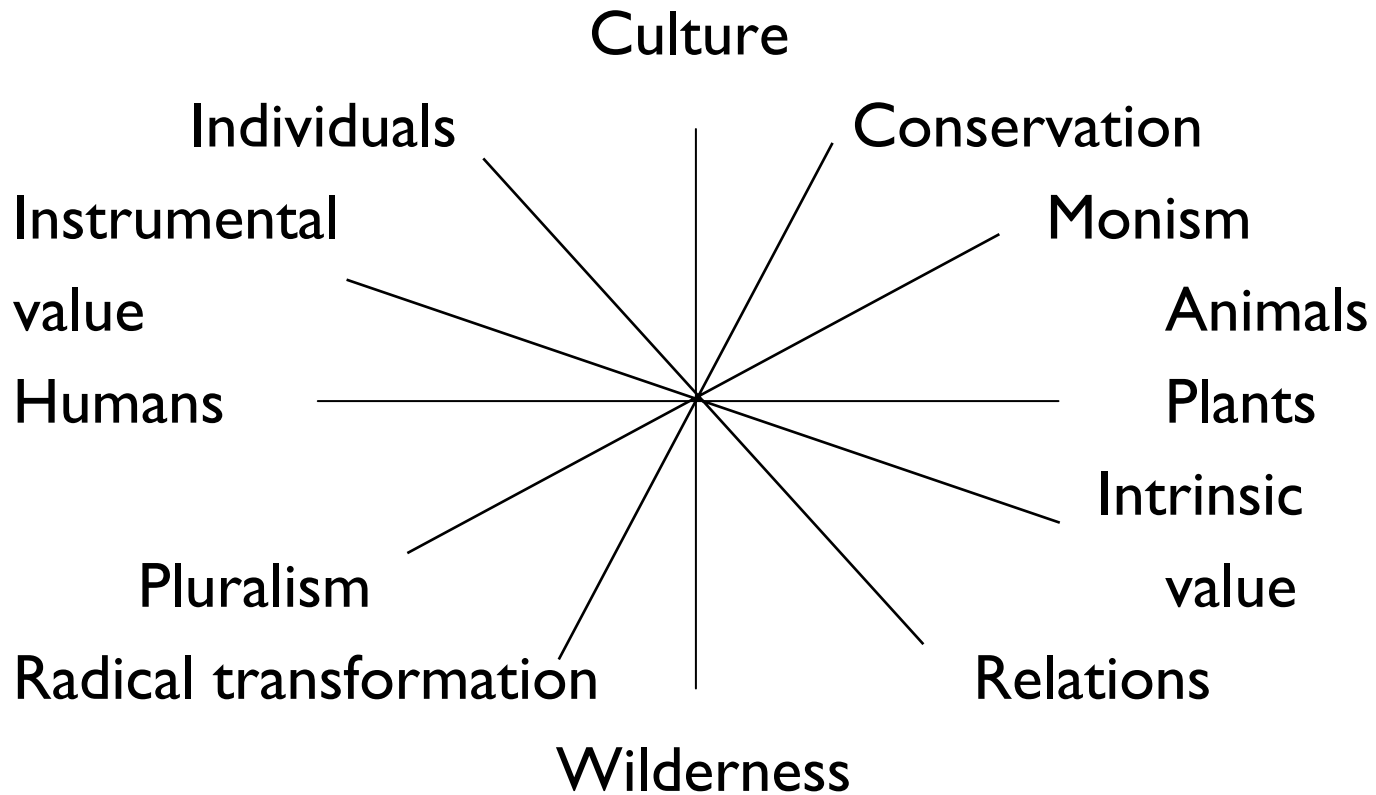
Central values in environmental ethics



- Intrinsic value
- Respect for life
- Beauty, harmony, ecosystem integrity
- Precautionary principle
- Constitutive value of relations and differences
- Environmental justice
- Sustainability



Central tensions in environmental ethics





Character of climate change



- Dispersion of causes and effects
- Fragmentation of agency
- Institutional inadequacy
- Cognitive challenges
- Global and intergenerational arena
- All of the above expose us to threat of inaction and tragic choices, making it difficult to apply the principles of environmental ethics
- Meaning and importance of these principles have to be worked out in a situation where it is not obvious how to allocate and justify obligations



Dominant decision-making model



- Cost-benefit analysis
- Embedded in a utilitarian framework
- Promote in theory the greatest good for the greatest number of people
- Worries in this regard
 - Emphasis on short term utility (instrumental) value
 - Monistic approach – neglect other values
 - In trade-off's utility value always win
 - Unavoidable negative impacts can always be mitigated



Environmental injustice



- The unequal distribution of benefits and burdens of resource use
- Exclusion of those affected by decisions about resource use or conservation from the very decision-making processes that affect them
- The real worry is that this still happens
 - That protest is very difficult
 - That compensation is virtually impossible to get
 - That those affected often have to make tragic choices
- How is this effected – through which mechanisms of exclusion, silencing, cooption, and justification?
- How can this be reversed?



Fault lines in “sustainable development”



- Weak vs strong interpretations
- Non-egalitarian vs egalitarian interpretations
- Top down vs bottom-up interpretations
- Narrow focus on nature conservation vs broad focus on social development

- Conservative vs radical interpretations
- Leaving the world as it is vs changing it fundamentally



Critical questions about sustainability



- What should be sustained indefinitely?
- Why is this something so important?
- For the sake of whom or what should do we sustain it?
- How do we sustain that important something – through which actions and mechanisms of decision-making, using which criteria and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the process of decision-making, making use of which kinds of knowledge?
- How would we know that we have moved closer to, or further away from sustainable development? Which indicators would we use, how would we identify them, and which threshold values would we link to them, how do we monitor these indicators, and how do we use them in decision-making about policies and actions?



Questions for serious consideration



- Is the Arctic not more than
 - Merely a resource; merely capital
 - Merely wilderness
 - Merely habitat of indigenous animals and plants
 - Merely a very special place of human-nature interaction – that acquired a special status due to global climate change
 - Merely the property of some nations
 - Merely the home of indigenous people
 - Merely a common heritage of humankind
- Is it not all of the above, and perhaps more?



If this is true ...



- And if the collective action of humankind contributes to global warming and climate change, putting the Arctic under threat or making it accessible to increased resource extraction and utilization ...
- We need a global ethic to think about the present state and the future of the Arctic
- In which we act as global citizens
- With a cosmopolitan vision
- In which the Arctic, as every other region on earth, is treated and protected as a common heritage of humankind (not just as capital or resource or as property)
- So that everyone could benefit from it
- If this perspective is rubbish, why is it so, and which other perspective(s) would we need to ensure the survival and the flourishing of life in the arctic and on earth in the face of cc?



- Having said this, and taking into account that life in the Arctic, like life in Antarctica, is lived at the margins of its very possibility (Rolston 2009), I conclude that the conventional values emphasized in environmental ethics (such as the inherent value of non-human entities, the beauty of nature, the ruggedness of wilderness, the flourishing of biodiversity, the resilience of ecosystems, respect for the community of life, the constitutive function of relations and differences, the transformation of society, the limitations of our knowledge, and the power of the precautionary principle, to mention a few (see Ten Have 2006)) can acquire radically new meanings and connotations if related to the challenges of sustainable development in the Arctic in the face of global climate change. We could choose to ignore these meanings and leave the world pretty much as it is, but we could also choose to articulate and explore these meanings with a view to acknowledging the scope and limitations of our knowledge, to sharpening our abilities to determine what the morally right things to do are, to determining what we can legitimately hope for, and thus contributing to changing things in the world, changing what we have become in this world, shaping what we could achieve in the future.



Recommendations



- When we deliberate on serious issues like sustainable development in the Arctic in the face of global climate change, we tend to go directly from problem formulation to policy proposals or action, without reflecting on the aims, the extent and the justification of these policies or actions. (Ten Have 2006)
- Fundamental ethical questions should be asked about the manner and language in which we formulate the challenges of sustainable development and global climate change, and link it to a particular region on the earth.
- Some of the questions that need to be asked in such a fundamental questioning are:
 - What does the notion of sustainability and sustainable development mean?
 - What is so important that it should be sustained indefinitely?
 - For the sake of whom or what should we sustain this valuable something?
 - How should we do so? By making use of which kinds of knowledge and which kinds of decision-making procedures?
 - What are the appropriate indicators so that we can know if we move towards sustainable development or further away from it?