

ADDENDUM D:

CLASSIC VALUE THEORIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Environmental issues have a way of evoking deep emotional responses from people. The reason for this is that they inadvertently strike at the core of what we fundamentally value. How we value the environment will determine how we see our role and function on earth and also how we choose to share these resources with others. It will even to a large extent determine the language we use to describe this interaction between ourselves and the environment, between ourselves and others regarding the environment. Depending on what your value orientation is, your language could be offensive to people who do not share the same deep-seated life orientations as you.

Those with an anthropocentric viewpoint in the opinion survey tended to value the environment in so far as it had a use for human beings. This “use-value” may take many forms, we might value the environment because of its aesthetic or recreation appeal or because it provides us with food and water. Developers, for example, generally make very pertinent anthropocentric arguments regarding the value of the environment. The land could be prized for its ability to produce sustainable profit for a development company. Moreover, on a more subtle level they may justify the impact of their development on the environment by claiming it will provide a boost to the ailing local economy. This could be a convincing argument in an area where unemployment is high.

The second kind of value orientation that also emerged in the survey was an intrinsic value orientation. This approach is often adopted by environmental preservationists, botanists or other scientific specialists who feel passionately about a piece of land, a specific species or a wild spot that holds special value to them. Intrinsic value theorists may argue that the same development mentioned above may be located in a geographically unique wetland where there are several plant species on the verge of extinction. It is their argument that, regardless of whether these plants or species have any use to human beings, they should be preserved because they have worth in and of themselves. Dedicated intrinsic value theorists will fight for the preservation of a specie or plant or animal for its own sake – regardless of the use that humans can make of it.

The third broad category of value orientations found in the survey are your social ecologists. Some environmental activists share this conviction. They prefer not to see

human beings as separate from the ecosystems they inhabit but instead as co-inhabitants. It is for them not a matter of valuing nature as a resource or finding intrinsic value in species but rather about seeing human life as part of the natural world. They seek to re-establish a “relationship” with the natural world by neither falling into domination of it nor deifying it but by seeing human beings within the context of the larger bio-region. For people of this persuasion, the language of developers can appear extremely offensive because of their emphasis on the instrumental value of nature. It would not be uncommon for people of this persuasion to believe that environmental decision-making processes, because of their anthropocentric language, are as stated earlier “managed and shaped to produce conforming results.”

While we have simplistically categorised these orientations as the developer, the preservationist and the environmental activist to illustrate a point, it could be true that one person could hold both intrinsic, anthropocentric and social ecology value theories in different spheres of their life. A developer, for example, could at work argue for the use value of environmental resources, and at home in their neighbourhood oppose the development of a shopping centre because it would destroy the habitat of a prized butterfly, and at their holiday home insist that no running sewerage be laid to keep the area a wilderness zone. In any contentious environmental decision it is likely that all three of these different value orientations are being used by different parties at once to justify their various arguments for or against a development.