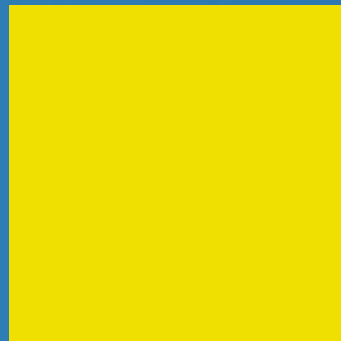


3



ENCOUNTER WITH THE
ENVIRONMENT: SOCIAL AND
ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

MODULE THREE

SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Our natural environment is endangered. The United Nations reported in 2019 that around “1 million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction, many within decades, more than ever before in human history” (UN 2019).




Figure 3.1
Saving our environment
Source: @markus spiske /
Pexels.com


In this module, you will get to know some of the basic ethical approaches to protecting the natural environment and our attitude towards it. A special emphasis will be given to our relationships with animals and the ethical status of our treatment of them. At first, you will revisit the scenario of the animation.

Questions about the animated video


Here are the questions that you were asked in the animated video. You can rethink the answers you chose and, in particular, why you chose them. The questions are also relevant to the contents and assignments below.

 Q1: What do you think Pieter-Jan and his friend should do?
(multiple answers possible)

- Leave the bird alone because they should not interfere with nature.
- Leave the bird alone since they do not know if it needs or wants their help.
- Leave the bird alone since it might be dangerous for them.
- Help or get some help for the bird since it appears hurt and in pain.
- Help the bird since birds are important for the ecosystem.

 Q2: Do you think having (or lacking) compassion for animals is related to compassion for human beings? How? (multiple answers possible)

- Having compassion for animals means also having compassion for people.
- Having compassion for people means also having compassion for animals.
- One can feel compassion for people but have no compassion for animals.
- One can feel compassion for animals but have no compassion for people.
- I do not know or don't want to answer.

 Q3: Do you think it is ethical to use animals for food and other products that we use? (multiple answers possible)

- Yes, since there is nothing wrong with this if they feel no pain?
- Yes, since we are dependent on eating meat.
- Yes, since people have always eaten animals and use them in other ways?
- No, since this causes animals needless suffering and pain?
- No, since we can live without eating meat.

? Q4: Is having animals as pets ethically acceptable? (multiple answers possible)

- Yes, since we take care of them, and they have comfortable lives.
- Yes, since this benefits these animal species, e.g., we create new breeds of dogs.
- Yes, since they keep us company.
- No, because pets do not live freely.
- No, because it is unethical to own a living being.

? Q5: Why are animals important or valuable? (multiple answers possible)

- Because we are dependent on them.
- Because they are in an important sense like us, e.g., they feel pain and are vulnerable.
- Because they are our companions.
- Because they are an essential part of the whole ecosystem.
- Animals are not particularly valuable or important

? Q6: Why is the preservation of the natural environment important? (multiple answers possible)

- The natural environment has value on its own.
- The natural environment is beautiful, and we can enjoy its beauty.
- Our own existence is depended on the natural environment, and it makes our lives better.
- The natural environment is something we must preserve for future generations.
- The natural environment is not particularly valuable or important.

3.2 WHAT ARE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND ANIMAL ETHICS

3.2.1 ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Environmental ethics deals with questions about

- the value of the environment (or ecosystem),
- our relationship with it (primarily with the questions of our duties towards an ecosystem),
- and how to think about practical problems concerning the environment and formulate solutions to preserve it.

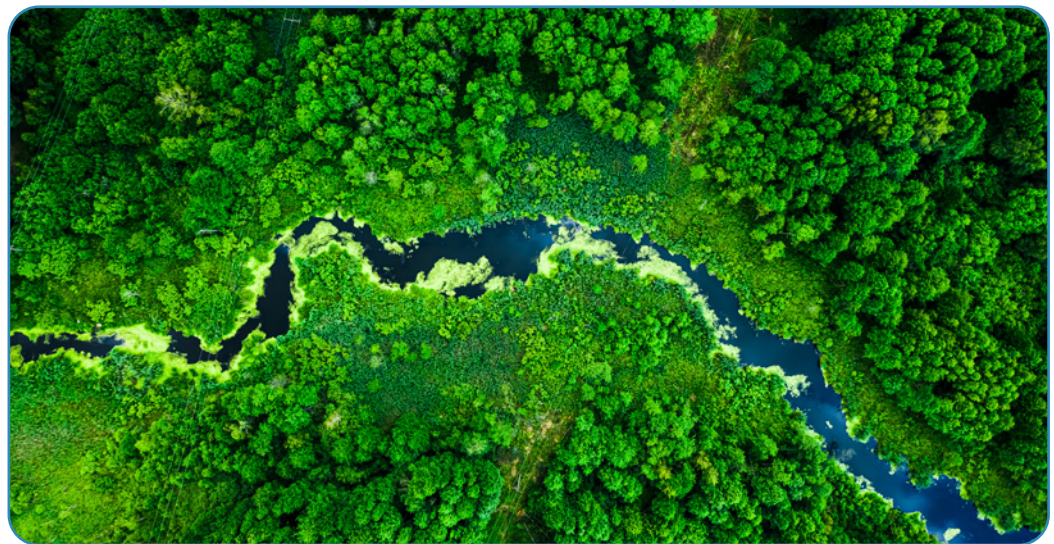


Figure 3.2
River
Source: © shaiith /
Adobe Stock

Environmental ethics is also connected with **ecology** (a field in biology that investigates the relationships between organisms and their environment) and environmental law that investigates ways of protecting the natural environment through legislation.

Ecosystems provide us with many of our basic needs, such as clean air, food and water, pest control, etc. In recent decades there have been numerous calls for more concrete, extensive, and organized efforts to limit the **pollution** and other types of harm that humans are causing and to protect the environment. One (if not the most) well-known figure in these efforts to promote the protection of the environment is Greta Thunberg from Sweden as an originator of the Friday environmental protection and climate change protests that emphasize our responsibility towards future generations of the planet.



Figure 3.3
Protest
Source: © Nicola /
Adobe Stock

3.2.1 ANIMAL ETHICS

Animal ethics deals with questions about:

- the moral status of animals, meaning the questions about how we should **regard** them,
- the moral permissibility or impermissibility of our practices that include animals, meaning the questions about how we should **treat** them,
- the relationship between other animals and us, meaning the questions about **similarities** and differences between them and us, and about our interdependence.

Several approaches address these questions, and you will get to know some of them in what follows. Questions in animal ethics (and the same goes for environmental ethics) can and often are hotly contested and can be a source of disputes, polarization, and violence.

Environmental ethics deals with questions about

- the value of the environment (or ecosystem),
- our relationship with it (primarily with the questions of our duties towards an ecosystem),
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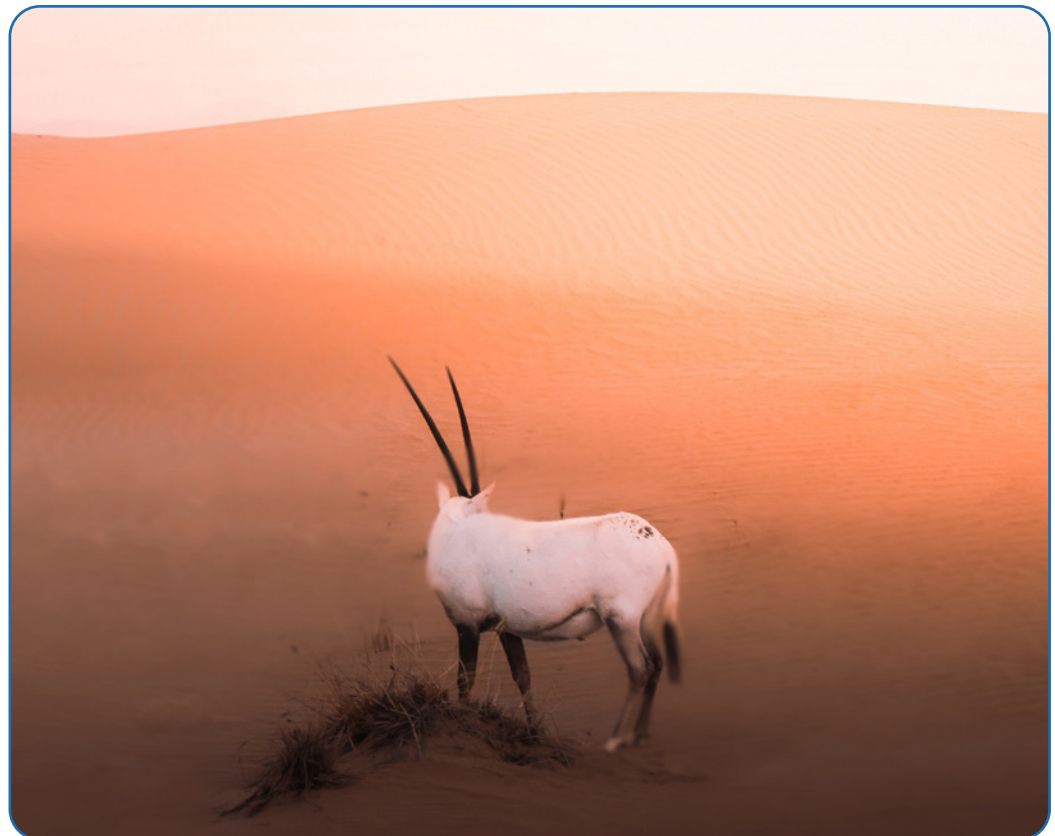


Figure 3.4
White antelope in the
desert
Source: © Pat Whelen /
Pexels.com

Assignment 1

There are several problems that we and the natural environment are facing on a global scale. Write down whether they fall under environmental ethics (EE) or animal ethics (AE); some can fall under both. In the last column, write down at least one and up to three possible solutions or changes in our behavior that you can think of that would circumvent the problem in question.



Problem	Environmental ethics and/or animal ethics	Solutions
Soil degradation is the loss of soil fertility, soil biodiversity, and ultimately the loss of soil itself. Almost 40% of the soil on our planet is already degraded.		
Animal experimentation and testing: over 100 million animals are used every year in experiments and product testing (a large majority of them are rodents like mice and rats, but the figure above includes fish, birds, reptiles, rabbits, monkeys, swine, sheep, etc.).		
Water scarcity is caused by an increased need for water and diminishing water resources. Global water demand is expected to increase greatly in the future. It has been estimated that over two thirds of the world's population will live in water-deprived zones ten years from now.		
Three-quarters of the land-based environment and about 66% of the marine environment have been significantly altered by human actions (deforestation, intensive monoculture farming, urbanization, pollution, etc.). This is one of the causes of biodiversity loss, including the extinction of species.		

3.3 ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ENVIRONMENT

Environmental ethics is concerned with the value of nature, the ecosystem, the environment, and our relationship to them. One way of thinking about these issues is through the question of what is or what should be included within the circle of our ethical or moral concern.

- Should our moral concern include animals?
- Should our moral concern include being and things that are not sentient, which means that they cannot feel or experience enjoyment and pain?

There are several possible answers to these questions, as presented in the table of views below.

View	Who/what is included in the circle of moral concern?
Rationalism	All and only rational or autonomous beings.
Anthropocentrism	All and only humans.
Sentientism	All and only sentient beings.
Biocentrism	All and only living beings.
Ecocentrism & Ecoholism	All natural entities, living or non-living.

The ecocentrism or ecoholism view is part of the so-called deep ecology movement. Ecoholism also holds that the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves, and this value is independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.

Usually, one can articulate three reasons to protect and preserve natural environments. They can be stated in the following way:

- A. Preserving natural environments is in our own economic self-interest.
- B. Preserving natural environments is in the long-term interests of humanity, even though it may not benefit you personally.
- C. Nature is intrinsically valuable, independent of its effect on humans.

We will add to these views the view (D) that claims that the natural environment (including animals) has no value and should not be part of our moral concerns.

Assignment 2

After seeing the animated video for this module or reading the scenario that is included in this book, try to categorize the claims and views of Pieter-Jan, Lindsay, Sarah, David and others in the three categories of view above. Write down the answers (A, B, C, or D) in the right column.



Lindsay: This is just a wild bird. Let's leave it alone.	
Sarah: Let's pick up the bird gently and take it to the vet so that it will no longer feel pain. They can help this poor fellow, and then if somebody is willing to adopt it and take it to their home, this would solve the situation.	
Pieter-Jan: I want to help this bird. We must do something.	
David: Yeah, but it's just a bird. It is not like you could benefit from it.	
Sarah: It is lovely here in the middle of all these trees. They are also a home of a sort. Just look around. We are almost in the middle of the city, and there are so many animals and plants here.	
David: These trees are like air conditioning, just free.	
Sarah: These trees are beautiful. I hope it stays that way, and no one will build something here. The trees are living beings just like us, even though they do not think or feel.	

Deep ecology stresses the importance of the third reason (C). One of its pioneers was Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), a conservationist, forester, and philosopher (image below).



Figure 3.5
Aldo Leopold bow
hunting, Chihuahua,
Mexico, January 1938,
Courtesy of the Aldo
Leopold Foundation and
University of Wisconsin-
Madison Archives.

The motto of his land-ethic was:

“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” (Leopold 1987, 224)



Figure 3.6
Land ethics
Source: © rick /
Adobe Stock

3.4 . ANIMAL ETHICS AND OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH ANIMALS

Animal ethics is a domain of ethics that deals with the moral status of humans, animals and the ethics of our practices that include them. It includes many topics as well as approaches. Some of the main approaches are briefly presented below (see A, B, C and D below).

3.4.1 SUFFERING OR THE ABILITY TO SUFFER

One of the most common approaches in animal ethics focuses on the disposition of (sentient) animals **to feel pain and suffering**. In this, they are similar to human beings. We must acknowledge the needless suffering that animals undergo due to many of our practices and try to change them. This idea has been most clearly expressed by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), when he said that concerning animals.

“The [relevant] question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk?, but Can they suffer?”.

A writer and a social reformer, Henry S. Salt (1851-1939) added to this a very simple line of thought that:

“[P]ain is pain ... whether be inflicted on man or on beast; and the creature that suffers it, whether man or beast, being sensible of the misery of it while it lasts, suffers evil.”

The characteristics that animals share with humans, particularly sentience (the capacity to feel, perceive or experience), followed by the fact that humans can refrain from many practices that cause animals unnecessary suffering, leading to the demand that we much change or even abandon these practices. It is hard to find sensible reasons for the exclusion of animal suffering and pain from our consideration of welfare. A view called ethical humanism or anthropocentrism that all and only all human beings deserve moral consideration claims that animals lack moral standing.



Figure 3.7
Pigs in a stable
Source: © Matthias Zomer
/ Pexels.com

The prevalence of ethical humanism throughout most of history results in the state we are facing today, where over 80 billion nonhuman animals are killed annually, predominantly for food and as part of various testing and experimenting methods, having to endure a miserable, painful, and frustrating existence before their end. As far as the suffering of animals is concerned, we should substantially change our practices (meat production, intensive animal breeding, experiments on animals, uses of animals in zoos, etc.) that involve the latter.

What is the difference?

The crucial point in the rejection of ethical humanism is related to the search for distinguishing characteristics between humans and nonhuman animals. Such a characteristic would then supposedly define the (proper) set of beings that share equal minimal moral status.





Figure 3.8
A cat companion
Source: ©Pixabay /
Pexels.com

What could be offered as an explanation for why we should treat animals differently from human beings? Perhaps because they lack language and/or speech, rationality, reason, ability to agree to social and moral rules, they do not have a soul, they themselves do not have moral obligations?

Assignment 3

Us and Them

 Think about and find three differences between human beings and animals (these could be very general or specific, for example, some animals have feathers while humans do not have them). Write down your answers.

 Think about how these differences are important (for animals and for us). Pose to yourself questions like “Would birds still be birds (or animals) if they lost all their feathers?” Would somebody cease to be a human if he/she grew feathers? etc.) In doing this, try finding commonalities between humans and animals. Write down at least three commonalities that you share with animals and that are very important to you.

3.4.2 RIGHTS

Another approach to the question of animals includes an appeal to the **rights** of animals. At least some animals have negative rights of non-interference, such as the right not to be killed, not to be harmed or not to be tortured. Most of our existing practices involving nonhuman animals involve some kind of violations of such rights and are in this regard considered morally wrong and unacceptable. A rights approach is based on the ascription of intrinsic (inherent) value to all sentient beings. The rights-based approach sees the attribution of protective rights to them as the best way to implement this general aim of **securing the well-being of animals**.



Figure 3.9
What are you looking at?
Source: © Josiah Farrow /
Pexels.com

3.4.3 ABOLITION

The abolition approach in animal ethics advocates the **abolition of the use** of animals. The main issue is that they merely focus on how we should treat nonhuman animals and not on a more pressing issue that *we should not treat and use them at all*. In a consumer society, we often focus on “animal-friendly” products, such as “free-range meat”, “cage-free eggs”, “happy meat”, and alike. Abolitionism takes a more radical stance of seeing any use of animals as morally unacceptable and claims that any “humane treatment” or “humane consumption” is merely an illusion.



Figure 3.10
Dinner
Source: © Kirsten Bühne
(left), © Lukas (right) /
Pexels.com

Assignment 4

Animal Room

(First, choose a room in which you will do this assignment. It can be your room or any other room in your home).

Do you know of any product made from animals, substances derived from animals or their labor (e.g., leather shoes or bags)? Many other things are also made in a way that uses animals or their products (e.g., toothpaste, chewing gum, crayons) are often made from substances derived from animals; almost all plastic bags include substances from animals. Also, things colored in red, orange juice, varnish, sugar, fabric softener that we use for washing our clothes have a high chance of including at least some animal substance. Do some research on your own using the internet. What else might be on the list? Now use post-it notes or removable stickers and mark and stick them to the things that are on the list. Try to mark as many as possible. Now sit down where you feel the most comfortable in the room. Take at least 30 seconds to just observe what the room with all the stickers looks like.



Now write down the thoughts that came to you immediately after this activity

3.4.4 CARE AND COMPANIONSHIP

The approach of care ethics and similar approaches focus on seeing animals as our **companions**. They advocate a change in our attitudes towards them and for the elimination of **barriers** that our culture has put between humans and animals.

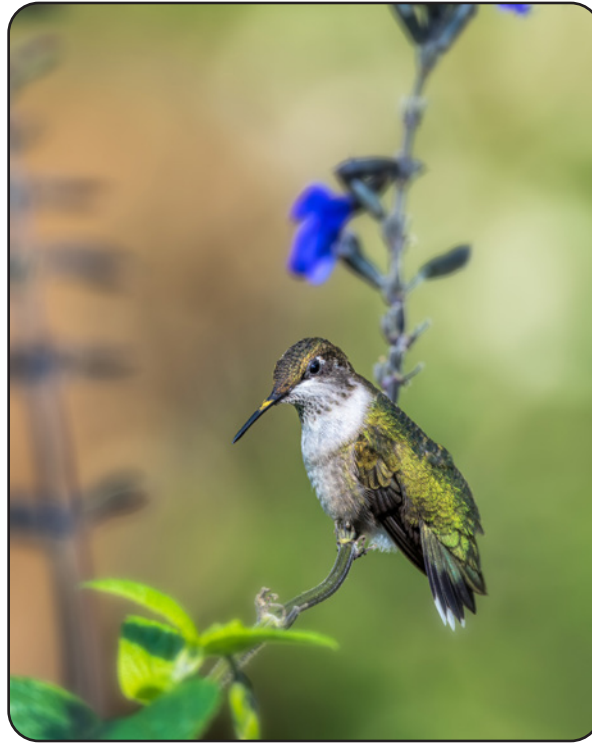


Figure 3.11
A flying companion
Source: © Skyler Ewing /
Pexels.com

Animal liberation (liberation from pain and suffering) and the animal rights movement can be successful only in combating some of our current treatment of animals, but they cannot, on the whole, represent a new basis for establishing an inclusive model of an **ethical community** of animals and us. The way to achieve this is to develop an enhanced concern for human animals based on our common evolution and ways of **living together**. We are all part of a mutually dependent and interconnected ecosystem.



Figure 3.12
Be kind
Source: © Brett Sayles /
Pexels.com

Our relationship with nonhuman animals can also be framed as a relationship of our fellow creatures or companions, which may be sought as company.



Figure 3.13
Let's share a snack
Source: © Luca Nardone /
Pexels.com

3.5 TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

Characters featured: students David, Sarah, Pieter-Jan, and Lindsay, one older male student, pet shop owner.

I.EXT School playground. We see four kids walking home from school. Suddenly alongside the fence, Pieter-Jan spots a black rook (bird). It appears injured and scared.

Pieter-Jan: Look at this bird, guys! It seems that it needs help. There is something wrong with one of its wings and part of its foot is missing.

Sarah: We could take it back to school and the biology teacher can look at it.

David: The teacher's parking lot is already empty.

Lindsay: It is just a wild bird. Let's leave it alone.

Pieter-Jan (reaching for the bird): I will try to pick it up. C'mon, little birdie.

Lindsay: No!!! Just leave it. We should not intervene in nature. What if the bird is just lost?

Pieter-Jan: I can't just leave it and pretend that I did not see it. If you don't want to be a part of this, just go on.

Lindsay: Birds can carry bird-flu and my mother always tells us not to get near them. Leave it here.

Pieter-Jan reaches down to pick up the bird again, Lindsay is very uncomfortable with this. Pieter-Jan says to Lindsay: That is not very kind of you. Those who have no respect for animals will end up having no respect for people.

Lindsay (very angry and upset): That's it. I won't hang out with you anymore. I am going home. You and your stupid animals. You are stupid, just like this bird. You always find something and you are always in trouble. Here is some logic for you. There were dictators who loved animals but were very kind towards the animals. (Lindsay leaves the group. Pieter-Jan looks sad because she left.)

David (after a moment of silence, he doesn't really know what to say): These big black birds live in the countryside, in large fields. They have no place in the city. Perhaps this is why the bird is sick.

Sarah: Well, once this area was an open field. And then the city expanded. The pollution also. This is just as well the home for birds as it is for us. Remember, last month we were talking at our Environment class about Aldo Leopold. He said that we have destroyed the wilderness and the land without asking it.

David: Well, it is perhaps because you cannot have a good conversation with the land. Believe me, I have tried last time when I fell on a pile of dirt with my mountain bike. And the same with animals. They cannot speak and that is the difference between them and us human beings.

Pieter-Jan: Us or them, it doesn't matter. We must do something.

Sarah: Let's pick up the bird gently and take it to the vet. They can help this poor fellow and then if somebody is willing to adopt it and take it to their home, that would solve it.

Pieter-Jan (reaches to pick up the bird): OK. I will gently pick it up and carry it in my sweater. There is a pet store down this street. Maybe they can help us.

II. EXT City streets. Kids are walking together with Pieter-Jan holding the bird in front of him. The conversation continues.

An older kid, passing the group (ridiculing them): Hey! Where are you going with the bird, Pieter-Jan? Will have it as a pet? Or will you eat it? I heard that your mother is a vegetarian. Are you too? Some day you will turn into monkeys. Or sheep... they only eat grass.

Pieter-Jan gets furious and wants to rush to the other boy. Sarah stops him by grabbing his shoulder.

Sarah: Ignore him Pieter-Jan. Be better. Let's just go on.

(They continue walking for a bit.)

David: But... perhaps there is a point. There are wild animals and there are pets. And wild birds are not pets and we are not obliged to take care of them. We do not intervene when a lion wants to eat a gazelle. They are on their own.

Pieter-Jan: I just want to help this bird and not all other animals.

David: Yeah, but it's just a bird. It not like you could benefit from it. A dog could at least bring you your slippers in the morning and bark at the intruders. And a cat... well, cats really don't do anything. But at least they can be cute.

Sarah: My great-grandfather often tells me this story. During the war he had to hide from the Nazis and he lived in a really tiny room in the attic of a large apartment building. It was more like a closet than a proper room. His friends brought him food whenever they could, but days passed not seeing anybody. The room had no windows and the only light he could see was from the hallway if the doors were slightly open.

But this could be dangerous. One night my great-grandfather heard a tiny noise above his head. First a little screech, followed by an even quieter sound of flapping. At first, he had no idea what the sound is, but after a few evenings, he figured it out. It must have been a small bat, retuning back to its hiding spot underneath the roof. He or she must have entered through a small gap between in the roofing and then use its wings to continue along the wooden beam to the spot above his head. Once he paid enough attention, he could hear the bat coming and going, several times a night. He told me that the bat companion, even though he never saw it, was making his days more bearable. And that he waited every late evening to wish good luck to the bat in hunting insects. Animals are our companions.

David: Having a companion can really is important. I enjoy nothing more than hanging out with you guys.

Pieter-Jan: Me too, David. We are almost there. And the bird is much calmer now.

III. EXT Children arrive in front of a pet store. They aim to go inside.

Pet store keeper (holding his hand in front of him): No, no, no. Don't bring this inside. It might infect our animals. And we do not have permission to take in wild animals from the wilderness.

David: Aren't all animals wild?

Pet store keeper: Don't be smart now.

Pieter-Jan: But surely you must know somebody who can help the bird. It is injured and needs a bit of care.

Pet store keeper: OK, OK. I will call the vet that works with us and see what she can do. Just stay outside and try to keep the bird in a shade.

Sarah: Thank you. You are very kind.

(The kids move in a nearby park, under the shade of trees.)

David: It is getting late guys. I will have to go home soon.

Sarah: I guess it won't take much longer. It is lovely here in the middle of all these trees. They are also a home of a sort. Just look around. We are almost in the middle of the city, and there are so many animals and plants here. I heard that in Sri Lanka there is a giant fig tree that was planted 300 years BC, which means that it is now 2300 years old. Imagine feeding and cooling generation after generation of children.

David: Well, I have to admit that I like the cool air of the shade of these trees. It's like air conditioning, just free.

Pieter-Jan: I hope that the birdie will be OK and that it will be able to fly among these trees. And I wish Lindsay was here.

Sarah: You can call or message her!

Pieter-Jan: I can try... (Reaches in his pockets for a smartphone and starts typing.)

Sarah: Well, what did you write?

Pieter-Jan: I told her that we are sharing the planet anyway... so why not sharing this park bench too.

Lindsay approaches: Sorry, guys. I really didn't want to react as I did. And I checked ... black rooks... yes, this little guy is called a black rook ... don't carry bird-flu.

Sarah: These trees are beautiful. I hope it stays that way and no one will build something here. The trees are living beings just like us, even though they do not think or feel.

David (looking at the bird in Pieter-Jan's hands): Hi, birdie. You are looking around as well, just like we do. You like it here, don't you!?

(In the distance the pet shop owner approaches.)

3.6 GLOSSARY

Abolitionism: a view that argues for the complete abolition of the use of animals by humans.

Animal ethics: a field of ethics that investigates the moral status of animals, their values and the ethical status of our practices that include them

Anthropocentrism: the belief (and associated practices) that only human beings should be included in the circle of our moral concerns (values, duties, etc.) (also ethical humanism)

Biocentrism: the belief (and associated practices) that all living beings should be included in the circle of our moral concerns (values, duties, etc.)

Care ethics/ethics of care: a moral theory that takes care, that is caring about individuals as the central ethical consideration

Deep ecology: a view that the natural environment or nature as a whole has a special, intrinsic or inherent value and that we should change our relationship to nature

Ecocentrism/ecoholism: the belief (and associated practices) that all nature, all natural entities, living and non-living should be included in the circle of our moral concerns (values, duties, etc.)

Environmental ethics: the field of ethics concerned with the value of environment (or ecosystem), our relationship with it (primarily our duties towards it) and the application of ethical norms to practical problems concerning the environment.



Figure 3.14
Source: © Pok Rie /
Pexels.com

Land ethic(s): a holistic and eco-centered approach in environmental ethics first developed by Aldo Leopold, which argues for a change in the relationship between humans and nature so that the human being ceases to be a conqueror of nature or land, but only part of it. It argues for respect for the whole ecosystem (animals, plants, soil, water, the land itself, etc.).

Rationalism: the belief (and associated practices) that only rational beings should be included in the circle of our moral concerns (values, duties, etc.).

Sentientism: the belief (and associated practices) that only sentient beings, meaning beings that can feel pleasure and/or pain, should be included in the circle of our moral concerns (values, duties, etc.).

Utilitarianism: a moral theory that claims that the morally right action (or our duty) is the action that brings about the most utility/value (usually understood in terms of net surplus of pleasures over pain, happiness, or well-being of individuals).

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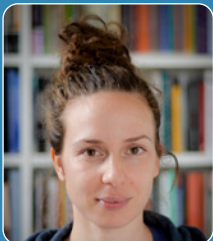
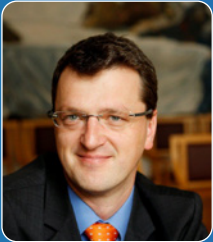
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Vojko Strahovnik (Slovenj Gradec, Slovenia, 1978) is an associate professor of philosophy at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and senior research fellow at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. In his research, he focuses on the areas of moral theory, practical ethics, and epistemology. The impact of his work ranges from new and important theoretical insights into the nature of normativity (the role of moral principles in the formation of moral judgments, the authority of the normative domain, epistemic virtuousness) to considerations related to practical dimensions of our lives (e.g. the role of guilt and moral shame in reconciliation processes, the importance of intellectual and ethical virtues in dialogue and education, global justice, animal ethics).

Roman Globokar (Novo mesto, Slovenia, 1971) holds the Chair of the Department of Moral Theology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana. He was a teacher of Religious Education in secondary school and for 12 years director of the largest Catholic School in Slovenia. He is a member of the National Medical Ethics Committee and participates in the National Experts Council for general education. He holds courses in the field of theological ethics, bioethics and social ethics. He is also responsible for international exchange at his faculty. He is co-author of the textbooks for Religious Education in Slovenian Catholic Schools and has written a monograph on Educational Challenges in the Digital Age.



Mateja Centa (Ljubljana, Slovenia, 1983) is a researcher at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana, where she primarily deals with philosophy and theories of emotions, gestalt pedagogy, and experiential and holistic learning. In 2021 she will start her research a two-year postdoctoral project titled Outlining an extended cognitive theory of emotions in the context of a theology of emotions: Bodily sensations, cognition, and morality She also works on international projects in the field of ethics, research integrity, education, and prevention of youth radicalization.

Matej Purger (Ljubljana, Slovenia, 1983) researcher at the Faculty of Theology, Univeristy of Ljubljana is a Catholic theologian with special interests in psychology and applied ethics. His professional career has led him from theoretical studies of ethics to work in content review and knowledge transfer to young entrepreneurs in a business accelerator. When faced with a theoretical approach, he always looks at ways to implement it and when observing practices, he discerns theories behind them.



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This book was funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund – Police.

