

Geoethics – reflections in a historical context

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Ethics is the study of right and wrong. The roots cannot easily be found, probably ethical considerations have been part of the human mind since they found out that cooperation was a necessity for life. From the ancient greeks ethics developed into a distinct discipline. Ethics followed the way of seeing life and life matters. For Aristotle nature was seen as a hierarchy, in which the function of the less rational and hence less perfect beings was to serve the more rational and more perfect. In this setting even slaves were not part of the ethical space. The Christians maintained this hierachial position, where for instance plants and animals exist for the sake of man. In modern days, however, the development in ethical considerations is related to the question: How "inclusive" should we be in our circle of moral consideration?

This has been a central part of the evolution of environmental ethics. Environmental ethics can be tracked back to the early 1970'es. Man is no longer the only stakeholder; animals, vegetation, whole ecosystems are also included. Environmental ethics is concerned with the moral relations that shape the linkage between humans and the natural world. The ethical principles governing those relations determine our duties, obligations, and responsibilities with regard to the Earth's natural environment. With environmental ethics, the whole space of ethical discussion changed. Having in mind the effects man and it's technology can bring, not only in space but also in time, a new way of ethics was proposed. Ethics does not longer only relate to here and now, but also for environments far away and for future generations.

The new concept of geoethics can easily be defined as a subdivision of environmental ethics. The Cape Town declaration states that "(g)eoethics consists of research and reflection on the values which underpin appropriate behaviors and practices, wherever human activities interact with the Earth system", thus not longer only the relationships man to man or man to God, but also between man and nature. A major difference between the practice of environmental ethics and geoethics, however, is that the discussion among the former is mainly between professional philosophers while the discussion among the latter takes place in the geoscientific community. The environmental ethicists debate about intrinsic value, valuing wholes and/or individuals, monism and pluralism and issues such as the concept of wilderness and the value of nature restoration. Geoethics is mostly related to the movement within environmental ethics called environmental pragmatism. The starting point for environmental pragmatism is that debates in environmental ethics have had little impact on environmental policy-making. Environmental pragmatism is concerned with developing strategies by which environmental ethics can contribute to the resolution of practical environmental problems.

Geoethics is as mentioned a new discipline, and holds a relatively small literature. Generally, the discussion is kept in a pragmatic way; how can we as a scientific group support a sustainable future? The question is, is this the future of geoethics, or should we also include more philosophical discussions?