

Christian Environmental Ethics

Markus Vogt

Christian Environmental Ethics

Foundations and Central Challenges

Translated by

Gary Slater



BRILL | SCHÖNINGH

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Preface

The sheer scale and complexity of the environmental challenges that confront humanity today require that, in our search for solutions, we tap into as many of the intellectual resources at our disposal as we possibly can. This task entails building bridges of several sorts. For starters, our present situation has made it imperative that we find ever better ways to pull together insights from the varied fields of inquiry that make up the environmental sciences and humanities. Likewise, we can no longer afford to stint on efforts at strengthening connections among the different national academies and cultural discourses engaged in ecological analysis and problem-solving around the world. And it remains as essential as ever that we seek ways to integrate scientific knowledge and political action with the earth-wisdom and motivational power afforded by the world's religious traditions, not least among them Christianity. This book, to its great credit, makes important contributions on all of these fronts and beyond.

Christian Environmental Ethics: Foundations and Central Challenges is, first and foremost, a wide-ranging and deeply perceptive presentation of the moral dimensions of modern society's relations to the earth and the problems these relations generate. In it, Markus Vogt seamlessly integrates perspectives from moral theory, sociology, cultural studies, philosophy, theology, and comparative religions in laying out a cohesive synthetic understanding of the interface between ethics and ecology under current conditions. The powerful theory of environmental ethics that results is augmented by the author's assured command of the current state of environmental challenges and policies in areas such as climate change, biodiversity, consumerism, water scarcity, and pollution. The book's critical apparatus provides a fruitful basis for analysis of several of today's most pressing topics of debate, including appropriate conceptions of growth and progress, the merits of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, and the character and implications of the Anthropocene. Overall, it is quite simply to my knowledge the most comprehensive individual study of Christian ecological ethics available at this time.

This book, as a translation of Vogt's magisterial study *Christliche Umweltethik*, stands as a singularly valuable effort to build bridges between the German- and English-language scholarly communities working on environmental ethics. Despite the fact that the environmental movements in Germany and the United States exhibit a number of historical parallels, there has been relatively little intellectual exchange between the two countries' researchers in the environmental humanities. Although Germany, the home of the science of ecology and long a global leader in environmental policy, has given rise to a

large and complex literature on the moral, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions of the human relation to the earth, little of this work has been translated into English. *Christian Environmental Ethics*, with its penetrating analysis of German-language sources and its energetic engagement in European debates, will serve as an extremely helpful introduction to this body of thought. It provides, for instance, an excellent example of the distinctive genre of methodological reflection that characterizes much German scholarship. In its revised and translated form, the book also devotes considerable attention to key participants in English-language discourses related to environmentalism.

Another principal virtue of this book is that it showcases the power and relevance of the Christian theological tradition for addressing environmental problems in modern pluralistic societies marked by ongoing processes of secularization. In that regard, it is an exemplary work of what has come to be known as public theology. It enlists insights from biblical studies in developing the idea of not just a social contract, but a “New Covenant” binding and motivating humanity to “till and keep” the earth. It also models the distinctive capacity of Christian social ethics—especially as this enterprise has developed in Germany—to integrate theological motifs with the latest scientific perspectives of the social sciences and the rational analyses of philosophy and critical theory. In addition, it takes full stock of important ways in which rising ecological consciousness has begun to transform the tradition of Catholic social thought. The volume, which is dedicated to Pope Francis, can be located squarely in the practice of ecological faith-speaking-truth-to-power most fully embodied in the encyclical letter *Laudato si’*. Indeed, as its author notes, it can be understood as an “unfolding interpretation” of Francis’s signal contribution to environmental theology. At the same time, the book is sensitive to the important contributions being made to environmentalism by the other great traditions involved in the global “greening of religion”—a phenomenon that has been recognized, for example, by the UN’s Faith for Earth Initiative.

In the ambitious quest animating this book we could hardly have a better guide than Markus Vogt, holder of the chair for Christian social ethics at the Ludwig Maximilian University and a long-time associate of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich. Professor Vogt has established himself over the past several decades as one of the leading Christian environmental ethicists in Europe. Through work such as his book *Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit* (*The Principle of Sustainability*), which won the Economy and Society International Award of the Vatican’s Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation, he has contributed mightily to establishing “sustainability” as a core principle of Catholic social teaching in Germany and beyond. In virtue of his scholarly labors in the German university system, his long-time advisory

role to the German and European Catholic bishops, and his service to various governmental bodies concerned with environmental policy, he has an unparalleled fluency in the concerns of academy, church, and society when it comes to matters of ecological ethics.

As his most accomplished treatise to date, *Christian Environmental Ethics* delivers a coherent and compelling vision of how Christian commitments might contribute to the construction of an ethic of “eco-social transformation” suitable for today’s post-secular societies. In helping facilitate the book’s translation, the Brill and Herder publishing houses have done a great service to the broad English-speaking academy. Those interested in environmental theology will find in Markus Vogt a worthy conversation partner for influential Christian ethicists such as Larry Rasmussen, Willis Jenkins, Celia Deane-Drummond, and Michael Northcott. Beyond the theological public, philosophers, cultural and political theorists, and other practitioners of the environmental humanities also stand to gain much from an encounter with his rigorously argued case for a comprehensive socio-religious approach to promoting ecological consciousness and action. It is to be hoped that this book will find a wide and receptive audience. For only through efforts like this to bridge disciplines, cultures, and religious orientations can scholarship truly hope to make significant progress in “moving the needle” on environmental change.

William A. Barbieri Jr.
The Catholic University of America

Foreword

The present book is the result of more than ten years of intensive research in Christian environmental ethics. It's a compendium of a multi-layered field of scientific debates, which asks in a radical way about the foundations of ethics and about the competence of Christian theology in the face of climate change and the loss of biodiversity. It understands the environmental change as a shock of the project of modernity which makes it necessary to rethink the conditions of justice, freedom and solidarity in our time. In the perspective of the book, climate change is a "sign of the times" which demands a reshaping of the Christian speaking about hope and the experience of God in nature.

The volume *Christian Environmental Ethics* is the translation of the monograph *Christliche Umweltethik* which was published in 2021 (second edition 2022) by the German publishing house Herder. The English text engages with current discussions in American and English literature. It's also a shortening of the text from about 800 pages to 500 and focusing from 22 to 13 chapters. The reduction of the English version concerns chapters of applied environmental ethics related more to the specific national context in Germany (11–22 with exception of the chapters about sustainability, the Sustainable Development Goals and about consumption ethics). The 13 chapters which are translated are a summary of the European environmental debate in the last decades. The aim of the book is to bring this into a dialogue with the global scientific and public debate and make it accessible for a broader readership. All quotations from German books are my own translations.

The writing of such a compendium of the wide and complex field of Christian environmental ethics would not have been possible without the manifold support I have experienced along the way. First and foremost, I would like to mention and thank my translator, Dr. Gary Slater. Competent himself in environmental ethics and Christian social ethics, he was an encouraging dialogue partner for me during the process of translating, transforming and reshaping the text. Special thanks go to Dr. Ivo Frankenreiter, who proofread the German manuscript with great meticulousness and tireless suggestions for improvement. The stimulating environment of interdisciplinary environmental research at LMU Munich, which came to me primarily through the Rachel Carson Center, broadened my horizons. Another characteristic of the book is the connection to Church education, political consulting and practice, for which I am grateful to all those who encourage and drive me anew through their ecosocial commitment. I particularly learned a lot in this regard in the ecological working group of the German Bishops' Conference, in which I have

been involved for many years. My editor Martina Kayser from the publishing house Brill encouraged the translation. I thank also the publishing house Herder for supporting the English translation.

I would like to dedicate the book to Pope Francis, whom I had the privilege of meeting personally in Rome in 2017 and who, with the encyclical *Laudato si'*, has given the environmental issue—understood as a question of justice and the relationship with God—a globally audible voice. With his advocacy for a social doctrine and a Church that responds to the needs of the time, he inspires not only me, but many, and in a lasting way. To participate in this awakening is the hope of this book.

Munich, May 30, 2023
Markus Vogt

Introduction to the Question

Environmental ethics conflicts with the guiding values and system logics of late modern societies. It therefore necessarily leads to a confrontation. This book adopts a Christian perspective, which is nonetheless committed to an interdisciplinary approach based on reason and openness to plurality. The choice of the title “Christian Environmental Ethics” is justified in distinction to possible alternatives. This introductory chapter builds on this point and offers a concise overview of the book’s structure.

The Call for a New Covenant between Humanity and the Environment

In terms of responding to environmental challenges, societies of the early 21st century seem to be frozen in a peculiar paralysis: for a long time, the dramatic developments and consequences of climate change and biodiversity and soil loss, to name just three examples, have been well known. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports have once again brought the precarious situation home. The future viability of modern civilization depends on finding swift ethical-political answers to the profound changes in living conditions on planet Earth. There is little time left for a change of course with regard to the handling of natural resources.

To deal with the situation requires, as Pope Benedict XVI put it, a “new covenant between man and the environment.”¹ With the encyclical *Laudato si’*, Pope Francis has formulated a theologically and ethically sound program for this covenant, attracting attention far beyond the Church. The grand words have raised expectations that still need to be met by the release of institutional and financial resources for further reflection and implementation. Thus, the weighty formulations seem like a bad check: a promissory note that has not been cashed. This is no different in the Church than in politics and society. The need for a comprehensive change of course to safeguard the chances of future generations and countless people who are already suffering from the ecological side effects of current lifestyles and economies is regularly invoked at international conferences.² The technical possibilities for action are good

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- 1 Thus Pope Benedict in the social encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, nos. 48–52. Encyclicals are cited in this book according to their initial letters with text number (thus, in this case, CV 48–52); cf. the list of abbreviations at the end of this book.
 - 2 See, for example, the urgent reminder by UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the opening speech of the 24th Climate Change Conference in Katowice in December 2018 that climate change is “a matter of life and death” for many people, regions, and entire states; DW Academy 2018.

and are constantly being expanded. However, excuses and evasions dominate again and again in the shadow of successful lobbying by those who fear losing out on ecological change.

Viewed globally and in terms of the future, climate change is a natural catastrophe on a scale unprecedented in human history. Already today and increasingly in the foreseeable future, the livelihoods of several hundred million people and countless animal and plant species are at risk. One could characterize the situation facing humanity as a “planetary emergency” and legally sue for an obligation on the part of governments to protect the climate in accordance with the goals agreed upon in the UN conferences (especially the 2015 Conference in New York).³ Following a successful lawsuit in the Netherlands, in November 2018 environmentalists in Germany also sued the German government for “completely inadequate climate policy” at the Federal Constitutional Court.⁴ This case affirmed that the fundamental rights to life, health and property are at risk from heat waves and natural disasters in Germany and worldwide. Germany must comply with the Paris climate agreement’s limit of 1.5° Celsius on global warming, and it is unconstitutional and negligent to put the physical foundations of human existence at risk by softening the climate targets and thus undermining democracy at the same time. The neglect of climate protection in the face of scientifically proven knowledge violates the human rights guaranteed in the constitution, including responsibility for future generations. Legal actions cannot replace politics. However, they can certainly counteract the weakness of international UN resolutions, namely the lack of sanctioning power.

Across politics and society, climate protection encounters a variety of obstacles that are to be taken seriously. One example is the dilemma between securing jobs in coal mining or the automotive industry, on the one hand, and climate protection, on the other. Ecological challenges demand a profound cultural and structural change that cannot be achieved overnight. In most countries, only a minority of the population is prepared to accept more onerous ecological restrictions. It is a matter of a multi-layered change of values, in which ecological, social and economic requirements have to be weighed against each other, and coherent patterns of action as well as institutional frameworks have to be worked out. Environmental ethics can contribute to this process. Environmental ethics is understood here as a normative reflection of

3 According to Al Gore's film and book, *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*, the English term “planetary emergency” has entered the vernacular of ecological discourse.

4 Klormann 2018.

ecological challenges in their individual and institutional contexts, including complex trade-offs with conflicting socio-economic interests.

The conflict potentials between different guiding values and system logics of late modern societies are still largely underestimated. The same can be said of the necessity of an implementable differentiation of ecosocial goals given upheavals associated with multi-layered dilemmas. It is the task of ethics to analyze such normative conflicts, to work out criteria for how to decide them and to look at implementation possibilities as well as expected forms of resistance under the conditions of action of the various social subsystems. The challenges of environmental ethics are particularly profound in this context since its postulates are partly in fundamental conflict with modern society's normative and systemic logic. The development of environmental ethics is marked by the tension between approaches that propagate environmental ethics as a counter-discourse to modernity and those that see it as a driver of ecological and reflexive modernization.⁵

The book presented here aims to contribute to an exploration of the nascent field of research in environmental ethics. In practical terms, its core concern can be paraphrased as the pursuit of a new covenant between humans and the environment. Many also speak of a new social contract, at the heart of which is a globally and intergenerationally just stewardship of natural resources.⁶

The Christian Perspective

This book focuses on Christian approaches in the broad field of environmental ethics. Following the tradition of Christian social ethics as an academic discipline, this is understood as an approach that is committed to the claim of rational argumentation without any restriction. Theological backgrounds and positions are examined and introduced according to this standard.⁷ Christian social ethics is, therefore, by no means addressed only to Christians within the church. However, it is understood as a contribution to a generally comprehensible environmental ethics in the context of a pluralistic society and science. The Christian faith is brought into play as a horizon of meaning that opens up a profound dimension of environmental ethics. Religious questions are relevant for environmental ethics because fundamental questions of human self-understanding and the concepts of good and meaningful life break open in it.

5 Cf. Beck 1993; Weizsäcker/Wijkman 2018.

6 Cf. WBGU 2011b; on the notion of a social contract used here as a deep unwritten structure of agreement among conflicting interests and groups in society that enables long-term cooperation, cf. Ueberhorst 2012.

7 Cf. especially the methodological reflection in chapter 1: The Role of Morality and Religion in Environmental Discourse.

The expectations for a contribution of the Christian churches, theologies and religious communities as a whole to a transformation of society's interaction with nature are very different. Their competence is assumed to be primarily in the area of morality. This, therefore, is of central importance for ecological change, because there is not so much a lack of scientific knowledge, technical possibilities and political resolutions on ecological responsibility as a lack of will to act responsibly. In particular, the encyclical *Laudato si'* has brought a new momentum to the environmental ethics debate far beyond the Catholic Church. The great strength of the text is not only that it offers well-founded descriptions of the situation and moral appeals, but also that it motivates models of a life in harmony with nature. It is also important that the structures and ways of thinking that stand in the way of their implementation are clearly named. Ethics should not only describe and justify what is desirable, but also deal with the resistance. Christian social ethics, in whose framework the work presented here is to be located, also looks at structural, regulatory contexts.

We are collectively trapped in habits, thought patterns and structures that often prevent us from doing what is ecologically sensible. For ethics, this is not primarily about a deficit of rationale but primarily about challenges to collective will formation and enabling action. It is a matter of mediating the ideas of the good life, as well as the social structures that organize the pursuit of it, with the conditions of nature. The ideas of the good and of life as meaningful are also a question of religion or culture and of worldviews. The ecological challenges are so profound that they cannot be met by formulating a few moral precepts, virtues and duties. Only if these are anchored in a comprehensive cultural change will they develop sufficient force for the necessary transformations. Even if the culturally and religiously anchored change in values is only part of the necessary transformation, its importance should not be underestimated.

The Christian churches do not have sufficient answers to the ecological challenges. They must transform themselves with regard to the relationship with nature not only to be part of the problem, but also to become part of the solution.⁸ Christian habits of thought and ways of life are, in the biblical sense, directed to a radical conversion and renewal. The fascination of the environmental encyclical lies not least in the fact that it states this relentlessly. The Christian faith is not brought into play here as the supposedly ready-made answer to environmental and development problems, but as an existential,

⁸ For example, one cannot understand the dynamics of modern Western notions of progress, which have led to exponentially growing resource consumption, without their Christian roots. Cf. chapter 5: Creation Theology in Ethical Perspective.

moral, anthropological and socio-cultural confrontation with the ecological question. Only in a self-critical examination of its own tradition can Christian environmental ethics lift up and rediscover the often-forgotten treasures of a practically relevant responsibility for creation.

For a long time, Christian environmental ethics was characterized by its defense against the reproach of the so-called anthropocentrism of the biblical mandate to rule.⁹ However, the central question of the (special) position of humans in nature is also decisive for any non-religious environmental ethics in the tradition of the Enlightenment. A core question of environmental ethics is the challenge to think of humanity consistently as a part of nature with fluid transitions of development without improperly leveling its unique responsibility as a moral subject.

On the Concept of Environmental Ethics

Something that makes ethical reflection on environmental issues so difficult are inconsistently used terms. Even in the designation of the subject area, opinions differ fundamentally. Does the term “environment” not already imply a functional perspective related to humans and their interests of use? Should we, therefore, not prefer other terms to classify the subject, such as, for example, natural ethics, bioethics, geoethics, ecological ethics, ecological social ethics or environmental ethics? From a theological point of view, the term “creation ethics” would be obvious. There are strong arguments for each of the alternatives. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the term “Christian environmental ethics” most succinctly illustrates the nature of the perspectives taken as a basis in this book. A look at the possible alternatives can help delineate them and reveal the approach to the topic chosen here. Since language fundamentally shapes perceptions and valuations, such self-reflection is indispensable from an ecolinguistic perspective¹⁰, especially in environmental ethics, where the mental infrastructures associated with language habits are often particularly deeply and unconsciously embedded.

Of the terms in question here, “nature” is the concept most solidly anchored in the history of philosophical and theological ethics since antiquity. From this perspective it is possible to illustrate the connection to this long tradition of thought, especially in the subject of Christian social ethics. At the same time, this tradition can also be a burden. Especially in Catholic social teaching, the concept of natural law continues to have a formative effect. It is associated with its own controversies, which can be obstructive for an open and broad

⁹ Cf. especially chapter 10: Justification in Environmental Ethics: Philosophical Types.

¹⁰ Cf. Hoiß 2019, 114–132.

interdisciplinary approach. Moreover, in the sociopolitical context, the term “nature” is usually related only to nature conservation. It thus does not readily imply, for example, technology assessment, a topic that includes such areas as energy supply or genetic engineering that will be included here. Nevertheless, the clarification of the concept of nature is a central aspect of environmental ethics as oriented towards fundamental reflection. Precisely because of its normative content and its conceptual polarity concerning society—culture or technology being problematic in many ways today—it is necessary to deal with the many facets of the concept.

The term “ecological ethics” refers to the discipline of ecology. Suppose one understands ecology as a sub-discipline of biology, as it is to be classified at least from its genesis. In that case, the problem arises that one chooses an initially natural-scientific-descriptive science as the starting point for a normative discipline. The concept of ecology carries its own ambiguity and the ambiguity of empirical and normative contents, which can lead to an is/ought fallacy in using of the term. However, this approach has, at the same time, a special potential, since ecology is characterized by a systemic and interaction-oriented approach. So ecology here can also be understood as an indication of such a systemic-cybernetic approach, which has fundamental significance for environmental ethics.¹¹ In political ecology, this has quite a venerable tradition, though it does present some problems from the systematic point of view of ethics.¹² The designation “ecological ethics” bears the danger of being understood as a normatively charged sub-discipline of a field science.¹³ In the environmental encyclical *Laudato si'*, the term “ecology” has a key normative function. However, due to its iridescent use in different discourses (e.g., cultural ecology, human ecology, holistic ecology), it remains ambiguous and in need of clarification. This problem is also the subject of reflection in this book. If one reflects on the specific problems of the term “ecology” in a methodologically

11 Cf. Vogt 1996, 25–44.

12 Cf. E.g., Mayer-Tasch 1991, 8: Ecology should reach out into the political and “metapolitical.” The political scientist, characterized by the search for a synthesis between social theory, ecology, and spirituality, later differentiated his position; cf. Mayer-Tasch 1999, 51–58 (methodological reflection on the “normative horizon of political ecology,” in which a link to pantheism is mentioned as a possibility) and *ibid.* 139–160 (a reception and interpretation of spiritual and cultural traditions as a value horizon for political ecology). In his political science analysis of the elements of the prophetic in political ecology, he develops independent categories that leave far behind the suspicion of deduction from ecological conceptualizations that suggests itself from earlier formulations, cf. Mayer-Tasch 2000.

13 Cf. Ostheimer 2012, 322.

transparent way, it is of course entirely possible to choose “ecological ethics” as a guiding term.¹⁴

Environmental ethics is essentially concerned with the phenomenon of life. Therefore, the term “bioethics” suggests itself. This has established itself as a basic category in more extensive lexicons, especially in the English-speaking language area (bioethics). It is concerned with the normative significance of dealing with living things. Bioethics can be understood as a more precise delimitation of nature ethics or environmental ethics. However, the concept of life is no less iridescent and in need of ethical clarification than that of nature. Moreover, from the socio-political perspective that this book focuses on, climate change is of decisive importance, and climate change cannot be subsumed under the term “bioethics” without further ado. The field of medical ethics is often understood as the main component of bioethics, which is not made the subject here, so this term is eliminated as a title. The term “geoethics” has been used since the 1990s in the context of Earth-system research reflecting on the normative obligations arising from the anthropogenic, i.e., human-induced, changes and risks. Geoethics would fit quite well with critical aspects of the approach advocated in this book. However, the term has yet to gain widespread acceptance and, with its geological focus on the Earth system, seems too remote from everyday life.

The term “environment” primarily has a relational focus. The environment is that which is perceived, experienced and treated as such by a living being or a species.¹⁵ In this respect, environmental ethics is suspected of anthropocentric bias, as criticized by a partnership-based co-environmental ethics.¹⁶ The term “common-world” (in German “Mitwelt”) fits very well to express the empathic relationship, especially to higher mammals. However, reflections on topics such as climate change or on the handling of scarce resources such as metals, fossil energies or sand would not be readily assumed under this title. Still, since these aspects are increasingly gaining existential importance for a global strategy for the future of humankind, the sober term “environment” certainly has its advantages: It is broad and seems to imply fewer preliminary decisions about the evaluation of the human-nature relationship. It is also the most internationally recognizable term.

14 The editors of the 8th ed. of the Görresgesellschaft's Staatslexikon have opted for the term “ecological ethics.” The Wissenschaftlich-religionspädagogisches Lexikon also prefixes the term “ecological ethics”; cf. Bederna/Vogt 2018.

15 Cf. Uexküll/Kriszat 1956/1983, 29.

16 Cf. Meyer-Abich 1997.

The main argument in favor of environmental ethics as the term of choice for the book is that it is the politically established term: There are environmental ministries, and we speak of environmental policy, environmental problems, and environmental awareness. From its original specific understanding as a perception of the world characterized by individual segments¹⁷, the term “environment” has long since transcended its origins and is now understood comprehensively. It is suitable, I hope, to address a broad readership that is not shaped by specific preconceptions. The conceptual tradition in other languages also speaks for a preference of the term environmental ethics: In English, the term “environmental ethics” is common, while, for example, ecological ethics is not common and is usually translated as environmental ethics. The root word “environment” is also common in French (*éthique de l'environnement*), as well as in Spanish (*ética ambiental*) and Italian (*etica ambientale*).

All these are pragmatic reasons. In terms of content, I assume that the approaches and perspectives associated with the different terms complement each other. In the end, what is ethically decisive is not which term one chooses, but whether one is aware of the implications often tacitly associated with a given term and is capable of understanding and reflecting on other perspectives. This is particularly relevant for environmental ethics because radically different values and worldviews clash here. In its most profound dimension, environmental ethics is a critical examination of the project of modernity as a whole, which many consider fundamentally questionable for ecological reasons or out of concern for the integrity of nature, as well as the resource base for securing the prosperity and existence of future generations.

For this reason, questions of environmental ethics are often associated with strong value judgments and correspondingly fierce conflicts. This sometimes makes debates in environmental ethics exhausting, but it also makes them exciting. In any case, it is one reason ethical issues are not a peripheral area of environmental science, but are virtually at its heart: Many environmental debates converge on normative questions. Even from supposedly descriptive approaches, it is often not a big step from putatively pure descriptions to far-reaching evaluations. For example, without implicit valuations, hardly anyone describes the increasing plastic in the world's oceans. Quite often, debates about values have shifted to differences in the way seemingly neutral and objective facts are perceived and described. Therefore, environmental ethics needs a scientific-theoretical approach to uncover the perspectivizations and valuations associated with the respective models of analysis used and to make them accessible to discourse.

¹⁷ Cf. Uexküll/Kriszat 1956/1983.

The controversy about the perspective and delimitation of the subject area of environmental ethics is all the more relevant because it has by no means established itself as a coherent field of research or even as a subject discipline or sub-discipline.¹⁸ It is a research field emerging as a cross-sectional discipline. Characteristic is the interdisciplinary approach, which results from the fact that decisive environmental problems of the present, climate change above all, cannot be adequately comprehended by a single discipline. The cross-sectoral character of environmental ethics is reinforced when one does not only consider symptoms, but also strives to explain the causes and complex interactions of ecological degradation. The linking of natural and social science contexts is particularly challenging. Environmental ethics is systematically concerned with the “socialization of natural burdens.”¹⁹ The damage or destruction of natural spaces and the exploitation of natural resources simultaneously produces social exclusions and burdens. Therefore, any environmental ethics today must be ecosocial. Höhn succinctly summarizes this context under the term “ecological social ethics.”²⁰ This approach is also used as a basis here. Höhn makes it clear that this is not an alternative to social ethics, but rather a sub-area or extension of it. It is precisely the interweaving of social—i.e., interpersonal or institutional—with ecological processes that is the unique subject of environmental ethics.

Environmental ethics can undoubtedly be understood as a field ethics—similar to business ethics, media ethics, bioethics, medical ethics or technology ethics. Instead, it is a field ethics of its own kind, which is not merely a field of application of general ethics. Rather, it presents itself as an urgent cross-sectional problem of the entire project of modernity. It refers in a specific way beyond the social. Wilhelm Korff expresses this with the thesis that the environmental reference is a primary structuring factor of ethics.²¹ It is about the discovery of a fundamental dimension of ethics in the sense of the circles of duties, which, in addition to the reference to oneself and to one's neighbor, are always constituted by the reference to the environment or to nature. In such an approach, environmental ethics does not figure as a mere ethics of application, which applies a model previously gained from interpersonal-social fields of interaction with nature and humanity's relationship to it. Rather, it understands the spatial, temporal, and relational structures prefigured by nature

18 Cf. Vogt/Ostheimer/Uekötter 2013, 11–17.

19 Beck 1986, 107; cf. also Vogt 2013c, 347–372.

20 Höhn 2001.

21 Cf. Korff 2016b, 29 and Korff 2016a, 752.

itself as the starting point of its own kind of normative reflection.²² From the scheme of the three circles of duties—individual, social and environmental—corresponding forms of ethics emerge as the three basic types, each with its own categorically distinct type of duties. This is not to be thought a mere juxtaposition, however.

Environmental ethics deals with an existential dimension of being human that permeates the entire field of ethics in its own way. Sigurd Bergmann and Martin Schneider express this through the concept of space and understand environmental ethics as spatial ethics: The reference to space is an essential dimension of being human, which must be considered in every ethics.²³ It has often been neglected, as approaches of contextual ethics especially remind us. If environmental ethics is understood as a normative reflection of the obligations that arise from existence in ecological spaces and relations, it appears as a dimension of being human that must be taken into account in all human actions.

Such an existential dimension is also expressed in the theological term “creation ethics.” It makes clear that it is a matter of setting the fundamental course of one’s relationship with themselves and with the empirically-present world. This is perhaps one reason for the surprisingly high popularity of the terms “creation” and “responsibility for creation” far beyond the church context. Creation stands for the connection of the concept of nature with the qualitative valuation that it is a good order and that this is a gift that obliges us to give thanks and to take responsibility. However, the concept of creation is highly presuppositional. The normative content of creation theology is in need of explanation, especially today in a secular context. Therefore, the more neutral term “environmental ethics” is preferred as a title here.

The title “environmental ethics” is not meant to reject the ethical guiding function of the principle of sustainability. Sustainability has conceptually and politically expanded the discourse context of environmental-ethical questions in a relevant way so that a reflection that needs to take this into account would hardly be connectable. With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, the concept was declared the guiding principle of the United Nations’ highest-ranking policy strategy.²⁴ However, the experience of the last twenty five years clearly shows that under the high pressure of development and social policy, which also have strong ethical grounds

22 A highly stimulating and unexploited source for this depth dimension of environmental ethics to this day is Whitehead’s process philosophy; cf. Whitehead 1929/1984; Muraca 2013.

23 Cf. Schneider 2013 and with aesthetic and theological references: Bergmann 2013; Krebs 2013.

24 Cf. United Nations General Assembly 2015.

behind them—for example, through human rights—long-term ecological aspects often take a back seat.²⁵ The integrative approach to sustainability has tended to mask the harshness of ecological findings and challenges behind lazy compromises. In some ways, it is too late for the targeted concept of balancing ecological, social and economic goals.²⁶ The situation needs to be thought of more consistently from the relentless ecological limits. Against this background, it seemed useful to me to focus on specifically environmental-ethical fields of reflection, i.e., those directly related to the human-nature relationship. However, the interaction between social, economic and ecological factors remains crucial for every sound understanding of sustainable development.

The Structure of the Book

In many aspects, this book follows on from the publication “Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit” (“Principle of Sustainability”)²⁷, which was written ten years prior to this book’s original German edition. Some of its topics have remained the same. Others have been rethought and updated in light of the developments of the decade following its publication. Many aspects have been newly added, especially some systematizing vital concepts such as the Anthropocene. Despite the variety of topics, there is no claim to cover the field of environmental ethics completely. Even with regard to the abundance of new literature, the aim is not to always include the latest material, but rather to present the basic elements of reflection in a clear and comprehensible manner. The guideline for selection has always been that of relevance for basic environmental-ethical reflection, as well as consideration for theological-ethical dimensions. The fields of action for a sustainable society are in the English edition much shorter than it was in the German edition, because several aspects have been more relevant for the German context than for the international debate.

This book is divided into four parts, with a total of thirteen chapters. The first part discusses basic methodological, empirical and social-theoretical questions of how to approach the topic and how to select particular perspectives, questions, and topic areas. It begins with an external view of the environmental discourse as it is conducted in church and society. The aim is to sharpen the view of typical patterns and blind spots in general, but also tasks and competencies of ethics and theological ethics in particular. The diagnosis of the situation is summarized under the term Anthropocene, since this

25 Cf. original German edition (Vogt 2021), 509–534.

26 Cf. Maxton 2018, 19f.; as background, cf. the unsparing situational analysis of the Scottish-born economist who was Secretary General of the Club of Rome from 2014–2018 and, as such, directly collected the reports of the world’s leading environmental scientists, *ibid.* 20–60.

27 Vogt 2013c (1st ed. 2009).

currently most succinctly sums up the fundamental challenge of the changed human-environment relations. The reflections on the discourse and social-theoretical observations of the environmental debate are rounded off by a look at the belief in progress, which shapes the environmental-ethical controversies, especially in the polarized dispute about the growth paradigm. The meaning and limits of the measurability of growth and progress are discussed, as well as the question of whether these can be deciphered as secularized hopes for salvation.

The theological and ecclesiastical approaches to environmental ethics in the second part are developed in four perspectives: Fundamental is first the faith in creation, whose dynamic side is sometimes forgotten today in the horizon of ecoethics aiming at “preservation.” After a look at the belated approach of the Magisterium to the environmental question, the seventh chapter is devoted to the innovation of Catholic social teaching through the encyclical *Laudato si’*. One can also understand the entire book as an unfolding interpretation of this encyclical’s impulses. The decisive point is that the Church is not understood merely as a “moral agency” for ecological imperatives, but that new contexts and forms of the question of God itself come into view. This is also illuminated interreligiously under the term “ecothology.”

For the third part, the ethical-systematic approaches are divided into three subchapters. Under the heading, “Beyond Naturalism,” the basic methodological question of any environmental ethics is discussed: How are the transitions from facts to norms, i.e., from situation descriptions, which can be quite normatively substantial especially in eco-discourse, to moral postulates, to be scientifically verified? This also prepares the ground for examining the types of justification in environmental ethics. This first addresses the “Babylonian confusion of language” caused by heterogeneous concepts of nature. In the dispute about the special position of the human, which has been emphasized in the Christian tradition as well as in Enlightenment ethics for fifty years, the book pleads for the concept of anthroporelationality.

The testing of the environmental ethics toolbox takes place on the basis of selected fields of action in the fourth part. In difference to the German edition, which included quite many field of applied environmental ethics, in the English edition only two fields of practical action are selected: First an analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals, which were adopted in 2015 and represent the decisive reference point in world politics, but for which many questions arise with regard to the coherence of the concept. As second field of exemplary significance for the debate on the practical dimension of environmental ethics consumer ethics, which in the 1960s marked the entry of Catholic social teaching into environmental ethics, is selected.