

# The ethics of life itself

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Should bioethics care about the environment, address issues related to environmental ethics? If yes, which ones and how? This question weaves through the history of our field. One of the origins of bioethics in the 1920s started with concerns for environmental issues, with Fritz Jahr's "bioethical imperative" to "Respect every living being on principle as an end in itself and treat it, if possible, as such" [1]. Until the rediscovery of his work, bioethics was traced back to a dual origin in the 1970s, with the near simultaneous coining of the term by Van Rensselaer Potter, who included long-range environmental concerns, and Hellegers, who focused on concrete medical dilemmas [2]. Despite the contrast usually made between these two origins, both integrated global issues of population ethics, questions which combine medical and environmental aspects [2]. Should bioethics, then, care about the environment? There are several reasons why the answer should be yes.

First, *environmental impacts* are among the relevant consequences of human interventions which bioethics examines. Biotechnologies, medical interventions, and health systems can all impact the environment [3].

Second, *environmental frameworks* are clearly relevant. Animal experimentation, medically assisted reproduction, research with human beings, public health: all these topics integrate aspects that could be fruitfully approached from views developed within environmental ethics.

Third, *environmental effects on human health* can be affected by our actions on the environment [4, 5]. Thinking about public health, and public health ethics, as separate from environmental issues is problematic [6].

Fourth, *biotechnologies aimed at protecting the environment* can raise ethical issues similar to those raised by biotechnologies aimed at any other goal. Genetically engineering humans to limit their impact on climate change may currently be a thought experiment [7], but it is an illustrative one. "Doing" bioethics or environmental ethics without the other fails to do justice to the tensions which arise between the environmental and the human elements of such possibilities, and ultimately between biocentric and anthropocentric views of ethics itself.

Fifth, how far does *a view of human good focused on health* take us in exploring environmental questions? Prioritizing different views of the good without clear

consensus on their value is one of the vexing questions in environmental ethics. Human health, however, is a goal with growing consensus behind it, including international documents requiring collaboration in securing a right to health in certain circumstances [8]. It may be sufficiently consensual to ground at least some decisions [5]. How far can this take us? This seems a worthy question.

Finally, there is simply the observation that the question is not going away. *Should* bioethics address issues related to the environment? The answer might depend on the issues it examines, and how it does so. Finding this out will require having the discussion, be it only to see where we are capable of taking it.

In this issue, Bioethica Forum launches a new section on Bioethics and the environment with an inaugural theme issue on human enhancement and climate change. We hope there will be more. We invite you to contribute to this section. How rich and interesting it becomes is, ultimately, up to you.

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