ENVIRONMENTAL MORAL DILEMMAS: UNDERSTANDING AND LIVING WITH MORAL UNCERTAINTY ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE AND BEYOND

Ben Hauge, @benhauge, Program on the Environment, Department of Philosophy, University of Washington

Session B, Breakout Room #9

Site Supervisor: Stephan Classen, Cascadia College; Kristen Attebery, University of Washington – Bothell

Faculty Advisor: Stephen Gardiner, Department of Philosophy, University of Washington

Moral uncertainty is defined as being unsure of what the morally correct choice is under given circumstances. With regards to environmentalism, moral uncertainty can manifest itself in multiple ways. One way is through ethical dilemmas: is it permissible to keep animals in zoos if they experience good welfare? Another way is uncertainty of the extent that personal sacrifices must be made, such as if one should buy an electric car. At a personal level, moral uncertainty may cause people to experience guilt from feeling as though they are not acting adequately. At a societal level, it can lead to “action paralysis”, i.e., inaction. The purpose of my research was to gather insights about how one ought to behave under environmental moral uncertainty to both alleviate feelings of guilt for individuals and prevent “action paralysis.” To accomplish this, I analyzed literature about moral uncertainty itself and used a case study in the ethics of humanely raised meat to learn how moral uncertainty manifests itself in real environmental issues. I also interviewed three UW faculty members in the philosophy department. My findings show some common themes: that there are some issues within environmental ethics in which moral uncertainty exists; that people should not worry about being “morally perfect” but should aim for being “morally good”; and that people should keep an open mind when hearing debates within environmental ethics. The pervasiveness and gravity of moral uncertainty within environmental ethics warrants a closer look, to benefit both individuals and society.