

# THE VALUE GAP: DISCREPANCY BETWEEN NORMATIVE IDEALS AND INDIVIDUAL PRIORITIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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## Abstract

Environmental ethics, as an academic and philosophical discipline, strives to articulate the values, principles, and responsibilities that should govern human interaction with the natural world. A key focus within this field is the formulation of normative ideals—standards or aspirations that direct how individuals and societies ought to treat their environment. Notably, these ideals commonly emphasize sustainability, stewardship, respect for non-human life, and the minimization of harm to natural systems. However, the translation of these widely acknowledged or even legally encoded values into personal motivations, decisions, and behaviors is complex and often incomplete. This incongruence between collective, normative environmental ideals and the everyday priorities guiding individual conduct is often described as the “value gap.”

**Keywords:** Value gap, normative ideals, individual priorities, environmental ethics, ethical discrepancy, sustainability, moral psychology, behavioral inconsistency, collective responsibility, personal motivation.

## Introduction

The value gap is a multi-faceted phenomenon, rooted in the fundamentals of moral psychology, cultural traditions, socio-economic constraints, and political frameworks. Even as environmental protection emerges as a consensus ideal in policy documents, international agreements, and public discourse, individuals continue to act in ways that run counter to these ideals. Consumption patterns remain unsustainable, waste continues to grow, biodiversity is eroded, and the extraction of natural resources often outpaces their renewal. This persistent contradiction provokes urgent questions: Why do normative ideals, once accepted as valid or even celebrated, fail to become effective priorities in the rhythms of daily life? What mechanisms underlie the persistence of this discrepancy, and how might it be addressed or transformed to foster more ethically coherent environmental action? To understand the value gap, it is necessary to begin with the distinction between shared ideals and individual priorities. Normative ideals typically emerge from philosophical reasoning, scientific understanding, and collective discourse; they are negotiated through participation, expertise, and, at times, moral



imagination. These ideals are reflected in declarations of intent, ethical codes, institutional guidelines, and increasingly, in the legal frameworks that anchor environmental governance. Yet, the abstraction and generality of ideals—however compelling—often contrast with the particulars of lived experience. Individuals, in their day-to-day existence, navigate a landscape shaped by immediate desires, competing obligations, and material limitations. Individual priorities thus become localized, shaped by circumstance and context, rather than strictly aligned with universal ideals [1].

Compounding this, environmental ethics remains, for many people, an external or abstract concern—one that exists outside the sphere of intimate, pressing daily choices. The immediacy of personal and familial needs often overshadows concerns about long-term collective goods or distant environmental consequences. Socio-economic pressures, such as the need for employment, housing, or healthcare, may take precedence over considerations of ecological integrity, especially where environmental benefits and costs are distributed unequally. In this way, structural factors generate and perpetuate the value gap, reinforcing the dominance of local, short-term priorities over shared, long-term ideals. Psychological mechanisms also play a powerful role in shaping the value gap. The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance—a psychological tension arising from holding conflicting values and behaviors—can result in the downplaying or rationalization of the ethical demands of environmental protection. People may come to believe that their individual actions “do not matter” within the vast scale of global environmental problems, or may invoke the necessity of incremental versus radical change as a way of postponing more substantive lifestyle adjustments. Over time, this can solidify into a set of normalized justifications that buffer the self from the discomfort of not measuring up to espoused ideals. Culture, in its broadest sense, is another influential determinant of the value gap. The culture of modern consumer societies, with its emphasis on convenience, competitiveness, and consumption, frequently conflicts with the restraint and responsibility called for by environmental ethics. Consumption-based identities are cultivated through advertising, social media, and the symbolic value attached to goods and services. In such contexts, environmental ideals—even when widely admired—struggle to take root in concrete practices. Cultural norms may, in addition, privilege the “exceptionalism” of the human species, reinforcing attitudes and practices that place human interests above those of other living beings or the integrity of ecosystems [2].

The legal and political structures that mediate environmental ethics are themselves implicated in the value gap. While laws and policies can refine and reinforce normative ideals, they are often diluted through compromise, ambiguity, or inadequate enforcement. The persistent tension between economic growth and environmental preservation is reflected in policy frameworks, leading to inconsistent and sometimes contradictory guidance for citizens. The notion of “shared responsibility” for environmental action, while resonant, often translates into a sense of diluted responsibility, where individuals regard significant action as the duty of governments, corporations, or future generations, rather than as a present obligation [3].

Education and communication are widely regarded as means of bridging the value gap, yet the challenge remains formidable. Increased knowledge about environmental degradation and the articulation of ethical arguments for protection may influence attitudes, but observable behavior



change is often minimal. This can be attributed to a combination of the abstract nature of environmental risks and benefits, the invisibility of many environmental harms, and the slow tempo of positive feedback for pro-environmental action. Overcoming apathy thus requires not only information dissemination but the cultivation of virtues such as empathy, foresight, and civic engagement—capacities that are neither instantaneous nor easily achieved in societies preoccupied with short-term concerns. The persistence of the value gap is not merely an ethical problem; it is also a practical one, with wide-reaching consequences for environmental sustainability. The failure to internalize normative ideals at the level of individual priorities undermines collective efforts, weakens the legitimacy of environmental policies, and erodes social trust. Addressing this gap calls for an integrative approach that recognizes both the depth of the problem and the multiplicity of factors sustaining it. Institutional interventions—such as incentives, regulations, and infrastructure investment—must be combined with cultural and psychological strategies aimed at transforming what people value and how they act. This might entail public engagement initiatives that facilitate dialogue and shared learning, the modeling of pro-environmental behavior by leaders, and the reframing of environmental ethics to emphasize immediacy, relevance, and fairness. At the same time, deeper philosophical inquiry into the meaning and role of ethical ideals is needed. Normative ideals, by their very nature, are aspirational—they point beyond the present reality to what could or should be. They serve as beacons, challenging accepted norms and provoking self-examination. However, for these ideals to exert genuine influence, they must resonate with the inner priorities of individuals. This suggests a need for ongoing ethical education, not only in schools and universities but also within families, workplaces, and communities—a process through which ideals can be translated into habits, dispositions, and practices [4].

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, the value gap between normative environmental ideals and individual priorities represents one of the most profound ethical challenges of our time. It is sustained by structural, psychological, cultural, and political factors that limit the translation of widely held values into coherent action. Addressing this gap calls for an integrated effort that blends institutional reform with cultural revitalization and personal development. Only with such a comprehensive approach can societies hope to realize the full promise of environmental ethics and secure a sustainable future for present and future generations. The journey toward bridging the value gap is ongoing, demanding vigilance, creativity, and unwavering ethical resolve. Only by embracing this challenge, both collectively and individually, can humanity move toward a more just and sustainable relationship with the natural world.

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