

Nhunggabarra Law and Three Ethical Dilemmas

How would the Nhunggabarra Law approach some of the industrialised world's ethical dilemmas? Let us look at three generic ethical dilemmas that are as relevant today as they were for the pre-industrial society: Common good vs. self interest, sustain vs. exploit, maintain vs. change.

Common Good vs. Self-Interest

Many ethical dilemmas in today's societies can be reduced to the conflict between serving one-self versus serving others or the common good.

How would Nhunggabarra Law address this ethical dilemma? It would probably start with the notion that respect for the integrity of the individual is absolute. By giving respect to other individuals' integrity I gain integrity. Nhunggabarra Law would therefore suggest that an individual's pursuit of self-interest with free choice must be balanced through **respect of other people's integrity**.

The Common Good vs. Self-Interest ethical dilemma tends to be forced by competition. Competition between corporations and individuals pursuing their self-interest in the market place has arguably been the most powerful force in the industrial revolution.

The Nhunggabarra Law would aim at minimising the downside of competitive behaviour, both between people and between communities through collaborative means such as **community building** and **cross-cultural education**.

The Nhunggabarra Law would address conflicting world views through teaching an **attitude to knowledge**: that all views and all religions are equally true. Both spiritual and scientific explanations of the creation are equally true. Would extreme fundamentalistic views also be acceptable? Yes, as long as such views respect the integrity of other people.

Sustain vs. Exploit

We must exploit the Natural Capital of this planet to survive. But by exploiting the Natural Capital we exhaust the resources.

The Nhunggabarra Law might resolve this dilemma by suggesting an amendment to the constitution of each nation that one of the goals of society should be to **sustain the Natural Capital** under its jurisdiction.

Maintain vs. Develop

We must innovate, develop and change and we must also maintain the existing, be it a factory's machinery, the roads and bridges of a society, our bodies or our knowledge.

The Nhunggabarra Law would emphasise that with implementation of a change comes a **responsibility** towards the people affected by the change. In terms of innovation, the preference would be for incremental rather than disruptive technologies. The resolution is to avoid recklessness and to be conserving – not conservative.

Open vs. Closed society

Today's Western open societies foster people, who feel free to pursue any direction and any career and there remains little in terms of morals or the conventions about what one should do or not do as a woman, as a man, as a worker, as an aristocrat, etc that once governed our choices. For the first time in history there is a large group of people in the Western world, who can fully pursue their self-interest.

The relevance for today of the Nhunggabarra Law is at least partly determined by the fact that the industrialised Western world is more of *open societies* than the Nhunggabarra's. It was the philosopher Karl Popper, who popularized the idea in the aftermath of the totalitarian regimes that were responsible for World War II. He claimed that an 'open society' is characterized by a free dialogue, which allows proposals for solutions to a society's problems to be raised and discussed rationally; by allowing public debate without consideration to class, party or established institutions; by allowing reforms based on the debate; and by testing the results of the reforms. The open society is a rationalist's ideal and classic Athens was the first step towards an open society according to Popper.

Popper's *closed societies* on the other hand tend to be governed by their taboos, traditions and obligations, which exempt people from moral problems: there is never any doubt about how to act. The closed society changes only slowly and then only as response to a spiritual shift.

The open society forces its members to accept a burden that did not exist in the closed society: individual choice and responsibility for oneself. One may certainly question how 'open' today's Western societies really are. Still, there is little doubt that the Nhunggabarra's society was more 'closed'.

Sources: Vår tids filosofi (Encyclopaedia of Philosophy) 1987 Bokförlaget Forum, Stockholm and an email conversation with Dr. Andreas Suchanek, Professor in Sustainability and Global Ethics at Wittenberg Center for Global Ethics in Germany.