

Rationale of Environmental Ethics

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Abstract

Environmental philosophy is concerned with how one individual, or society or community looks at the environment and the justification for it to look in that particular way. In this paper, an attempt is made to trace out two of the prominent views in relation to environment and how an altered perspective shall be helpful in preserving and maintaining the environment and bio-diversity. As it is the philosophy that is the undercurrent for all policies and actions, a deeper understanding of it becomes all the more essential. This is a descriptive, qualitative, expository paper. In this paper the author tries to expose the importance of nature in human life and it is the responsibility of humans to take care of nature. Humans should take this as our duty because of its humanistic value.

Key Words: Ethics, Environment, Ecology, Bio-diversity

Introduction:

Environment' is a broad term, which has different denotations and often referred under various domains of knowledge. In this paper, let me confine the word 'environment' to mean that natural habitat in which we human beings live. This suggests that it shall exclude the social environment, built environment and like. The universe of discourse is limited to human beings vis-a-vis nature.

The relationship of human beings with respect to nature has been broadly understood in two different ways. First Anthropocentrism and secondly all other ways other than anthropocentrism. This may include biocentrism, ecocentrism, etc., etc. In this paper, the claims for being anthropocentric and other views are highlighted to show that these two alternate views are not against each other, but rather they are complementing one another.

Environmental ethics has become a matter of deep concern for us. It is quite hard to sustain either natural or man-made environmental degradation and destruction over a longer period of time without encountering greater dreadful consequences for us humans and other members of the ecosystem. All living beings by virtue of being a living being are characterized by a tendency to preserve and maintain themselves in the face of environmental challenge. Aristotle regarded such self-preservation as an 'end' or telos at which living things aim. The tendency to preserve oneself is inevitably in relation to environment. There is an inclination to support the natural habitat, as it is that which is going to make our living possible. This account accepts the inevitability of, and necessity for, human intervention in nature. Hence, there is a growing need to study and understand environmental ethics in all its manifestations.

Environmental ethics involves a basic understanding of the foundations of value theory, how the humans value the environment. This in turn raises another question, which is fundamental to the earlier question, that is, how the humans value themselves in relation to environment. The history of mankind has come out with two major ideas of the relationship of human beings with the environment. One is termed as anthropocentric, which suggests that human beings are the center of this creation and all other things are at the periphery, whereas the other idea is that of seeing humans as similar to other beings. This maybe called as biocentric, if we refer to living beings as center of the environment or ecocentric, where we go beyond the living beings and take the entire ecosystem as a whole. In both the cases, humans are not at the center. Let us try to understand the underlying reasons for these two approaches.

In the eastern traditions, the idea of nature as being higher than humans is a constant notion prevailing in the minds of humans from time immemorial. The early human beings in contact with the nature have found out that the influence of nature to their living is indispensable. Often they viewed that it is through the nature's benevolence they can exist. This view is more expressed in the ancient Vedic religion. "In this religion the various powers of nature like fire (agni), wind (vayu) and the sun (surya), amidst which man lives and to whose influence he is constantly subject, are personified, the personification implying a belief that the order which is observable in the world, such as the regular succession of seasons or of day and night, is due to the agency of

these powers. They are accordingly looked upon as higher beings or gods, whom it is man's duty to obey and to propitiate." (Hiriyanna p. 10). This idea of worshipping nature is prevalent in the Indian tradition. "Incidentally, Buddhism (and to a large degree Taoism and Hinduism) are much less in a bind with regard to environmental problems. The essential unity with all living beings is an underlying assumption of these doctrines."

("Dancing Shiva in the Ecological Age" p. 64). This idea got carried over through successive generations and still now it has a strong support in our present life, for there is an undeniable truth in it.

In the western tradition, the relationship between knowledge and value had four different conceptions. Historically we can distinguish four basic positions regarding the relation of values to knowledge in western tradition. Knowledge and values are fused together; Knowledge and values are combined together but values are primary; Knowledge and value are independent without any supremacy; and knowledge and values are independent, but knowledge (factual) is primary. These four positions could be seen in western tradition in the philosophies of Plato, Medieval period, Kant, Empiricism and logical positivism respectively. ("Living Philosophy" pp.63-64). The present crisis in environment is taken to be the outcome of the prevailing empiricist position of the relationship between knowledge and value, where knowledge is superior over value and worse, the value of value is itself questioned.

In the western tradition, the humans are treated as species, which can dictate its terms upon the nature. "Christianity and Marxism are identical in elevating the human species above all other species and in disregarding the subtle mesh of unity and solidarity that prevails among all creatures. For this reason both Christianity and Marxism have been taken by surprise by the magnitude of the ecological crisis. None of them as yet has found an adequate response, on a deep conceptual and moral level." ("Dancing Shiva in the Ecological Age" p. 64)

Hence, in the recent years there is a shift from anthropocentrism of the modern ages to the biocentrism and to ecocentrism. And those who support biocentric or ecocentric view often take recourse to the wisdom of the east. The need is to put the value back in its place. In order to do

that, the knowledge part is in a sense sidelined by treating humans as no different from other species. The epistemic superiority of humans is not taken into consideration. These include the idea that humans are part of nature and members of a larger and more inclusive 'biotic community' to which they have obligations or duties. This community includes both human and non-human animals, and the conditions conducive to their survival and flourishing. An environmental perspective places the natural environment at the centre of attention and concern. It sees human beings as one of many species, and views all as interdependent.

All those who subscribe for ecocentric views are often referred as green thinkers and environmentalists. An environmental or green philosophy questions a number of conventional philosophical views. It is especially critical of the anthropocentric or 'humanist' bias of much of Western philosophy that puts human beings at the apex of creation. The view that humans are superior to other species may have justifications from any domain, say, a theological domain where we see that humans are created in the image of God or a scientific domain or even a philosophical domain. In the conventional view, nature and non-human animals are means to human ends and endeavours. In such type of conception humans are held superior to 'lesser' creatures and the natural environment is conceived as source of humans' use and enjoyment.

Much of modern green philosophizing takes the form of a critique of conventional ways of thinking about nature. Some things have intrinsic value; that is, they are valuable in and of themselves, quite apart from any human estimate of their worth or any value they might have as means to some other end. It started with the view that all living things have the same claim to live and flourish. A key point of deep ecology is that all living things are members of larger biotic or ecological communities. Since the 1970s, acceptance that living things, and possibly all natural things, have value in their own right has been one of the distinguishing features of green philosophy. They, generally reject the anthropocentric view that human needs and wants supply the only standard of value or worth. They opt instead the biocentric view, well-being of the entire biotic community. This amounts to a conception of value that is both naturalistic and holistic; that is, it takes nature - and not one of its

creatures, namely man - as the source and measure of value; and it views all creatures as part of a larger whole. This way of thinking requires a shift in perspectives from humans at the apex, to an interdependent web in which humans are but one species amongst many. Not all green thinkers agree to the above view. Some thinkers like Murray Bookchin (1990) are critical of any attempt to make Homo sapiens merely one species among many. Such a view would, they contend, diminish the value of human beings. I will argue for this view by considering humans as being epistemic agent as well as moral agent.

In all these type of conceptions, we could see that ultimately it is the concern for human's existence that dominates the environmental ethics. In simple terms, humans need to protect the environment, if not, the environment disasters is too hard to sustain, subsequently leading to human extinction. Preservation of environment with this philosophy is good, but one has to transcend that to the other realm of preserving the nature and environment for its intrinsic value. Again, this intrinsic value is also nothing but a conception of humans. There is no harm in being anthropocentric. We have to redefine anthropocentric because anthropocentric always comes to us with a negative connotation. Anthropocentrism just means the humans being at the center. By its reference it doesn't carry any value. If by being anthropocentric, humans have manipulated with nature, it is the same anthropocentrism that talks of biocentrism or ecocentrism. If we value anthropocentrism in the positive mode, then we can appreciate that the same anthropocentrism shall look and revere upon the nature and environment not out of fear, not for survival, but for the beauty of it, but for the intrinsic value of it. Whether one inclines to anthropocentrism, biocentrism or ecocentrism, all these are done by humans and no other living beings do, as of now. Philosophers since the ancient times were trying to develop this idea. Moral respect for animals has been discussed since the time of the pre-Socratic philosophers, while the significance to our well-being of the natural environment has been pondered since the time of Kant and Rousseau. It was also in the eighteenth century that the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau urged extending our moral concern beyond animals to include care for plants and all living things.

In that case, we have to admit that humans are the ones who are superior to other beings. Humans are at the center by the virtue of their capability to have knowledge. At the same time, humans alone have the capacity to be moral agent too. Either one propitiate nature, revere it, dominate it, succumb to it, whatever one wants to do, the ultimate fact is that those are done by humans. Is it not the anthropocentric view? So, the aim is to channelise the knowledge and to streamline the reason. “This is what, among other things, eco-philosophy endeavours to offer: a form of rationality that does not offend reason, but, on the contrary, celebrates and eulogizes it in much more magnificent a manner than the mechanistic paradigm would ever allow.” (“Living philosophy” p.2)

There are two claims related to that. Claim one is that all natural things and systems are of value in their own right and worthy of moral respect. And claim two is that human beings are not something special, but are equal to any other living beings. Claim one is genuine as far as the concern is concerned, but claim two to support claim one, the idea seems to be lofty, more of an imaginative fantasy than an observed reality. There is no harm in being ecocentric, but this one has to come knowing very well that we, as humans are intellectually superior to other beings. The superiority does not lie in the intellectual sphere alone; it is also there in moral sphere. We are not only epistemic agents, but also moral agents. To protect one, we cannot lose the other. The conventional anthropocentric views maybe because of overemphasis of the ‘epistemic human’ not taking into account the ‘moral human’. Whereas the conventional ecocentric/biocentric view is a strong reaction against the ‘epistemic human’ of anthropocentrism, consequently resulting in undermining the epistemic advantage humans have and treating human race on par with any other race.

The other possibility, which I am arguing for is the refined anthropocentric view that has the realization of both the domains, that of human beings being an epistemic and moral agent. Anthropocentrism is the factor that helped human beings to have an epistemic advantage. The same anthropocentric view shall help it to have a moral advantage. Just because, over a period of time, humans exploited the nature, only to realize that they themselves are in danger, it doesn’t

mean that they are like any other beings in this universe. This is to look down human achievements and accomplishments. Just as humans we are superior epistemically, so we are superior morally also. This superiority in our morality shall make us to view the environment and nature to be our own and we have to guard it. This approach shall help us to preserve the environment and biodiversity more authentically than demeaning ourselves and our human race as equal to any other race and protect the nature and environment in order to protect ourselves.

Conclusion:

The idea of biocentrism also emanated from humans only. We can respect the nature but this could not come out of our ignorance and fear and apprehension. This could come out of our responsibility after gaining knowledge. Responsibility of human beings towards nature should come not as a survival strategy, not out of fear of nature's malevolent actions, but through the humanistic account, because nature by nature is neutral. To be human is to appreciate nature. This notion shall be a strong base in supporting environment and biodiversity.

References:

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