

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE THEORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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Abstract

Environmental issues have become problematic over the years, ranging from the conflicting theories of environmental ethics to the appropriate ethics suitable in addressing environmental problems. The constant abuse of the environment, the destruction of biodiversity and its correspondent threat to posterity are the foundational and fundamental insight that motivated this research work. It becomes necessary to pinpoint the appropriate environmental ethics to address the pressing environmental needs of the ecosystem. In an attempt to proffer solutions to the environmental challenges, numerous environmental ethics were developed to express the relation between human beings and the environment. However, this paper focuses on the assessment of the two broad divisions of environmental ethics: Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism. This paper employs the philosophical method of analysis to examine the two environmental ethical theories in line with the appropriateness in ameliorating the pressing environmental challenges. This paper discovered that ecocentric environmental ethics is an inclusive ethics that accommodates all the members of the ecosystem and places intrinsic value on human beings and nonhuman beings. It becomes paramount if such environmental ethical approach should be adopted by individuals, government, corporate bodies, organizations, et cetera to manage the rising environmental issues. Inasmuch as technology, civilization, industrialization, technologies are necessary for human existence, this paper calls for moderation in exploration of the environment for human's benefit.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Intrinsic value

1. Introduction

Some environmental ethical philosophers have attacked the traditional Western deontological and teleological ethical theories on the ground that they exclude the moral consideration of non-human species; this exclusion, they argued is the basic cause of environmental degradation. Callicott stated categorically that environmental ethics begins with the assumption that traditional metaphysics and moral theories are the root of environmental problems than tools for their solution. The traditional ethical theories impose limitations only on interpersonal freedom of action and on personal freedom in relation to society as a whole, neglecting the place of environment in man's relationship. A historical excursion to western ethical theory will reveal that nothing or little was said about man's relation to nature, the major consideration was on how man relates with himself, others and the society. Callicott sees this as a great negligence or vacuum in the ethical history of the west, and proposed that an environmental ethic would define the

extent of human freedom of action in relationship to non-human natural entities and to nature as a whole. In reference to Leopold maxim, “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (262), he envisaged a holistic non-anthropocentric environmental ethic. A holistic non-anthropocentric ethic regards non-human species as possessing intrinsic value because they are members of the ecosystem, and their continued existence depends on the health of the ecosystem. Furthermore, he enumerated what Po-Keung stated as the basic problem of environmental ethics;

I take it that the major task of environmental ethics is the construction of a system of normative guidelines governing man’s attitudes, behavior, and action towards his natural environment. The central question to be asked is how ought to man, either as an individual or as a group, to behave or to act towards nature? By nature, I mean the non-human environment man finds himself in.... Any viable environmental ethics, it seems to me, should provide adequate answers to three questions (1) What is the nature of nature? (2) What is the nature of man? (3) How should man relate...to nature? (116)

Callicott once said, “to begin adequately to address environmental problems and eventually ameliorate the environmental crises, (1) metaphysical foundations must be brought into alignment with ecology—the principal basic science of environment—and (2) ethical theory must be enlarged so as to include within its purview both nonhuman natural entities...” (177). In concordance with his assertion, Callicott writes on Lynn white’s position “what we do about ecology [that is, natural environment] depends on our ideas of man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one” (120).

2. Environmental Ethics

Environmental Ethics as a concept is derived from two words: environment and ethics. Environment derived from the French word, “*enviromer*” meaning to “encircle or surround”, thus, it can be defined as (1) the circumstances or conditions that surround an organism or group of organisms... (Cunningham et al.16). It can be referred to as the natural compositions of an organism which includes, water, soil, air, land, etc. On the other hand, ethics is defined as the branch of philosophy that deals with the standard of right or wrong, good or bad, justice, fairness. Ekwutosi citing Consalves conception of ethics writes, “ethics grows out of life-situation in which we are confronted with some sort of perplexity or doubt about what is the right thing to do or the best course to follow...” (1). Thus, environmental ethics deals with the application of ethical principles in man’s

relation with the environment. It is concerned with the moral attitudes that guide man's relationship with the environment. Baird Callicott, a philosopher of environmental ethics opines that "environmental ethics has emerged as a new sub-discipline of moral philosophy.... Environmental ethics may be understood to be but one among several new of applied philosophies" (116). On his clarification and distinction of environmental ethics from other new applied philosophies, Rolston avers that;

Environmental ethics is more radical in applying ethics outside the sector of human interests. Contemporary ethics has been concerned to be inclusive: the poor as well as the rich, women as well as man, future generations as well as the present. Environment ethics is even more inclusive: whales slaughtered, wolves extirpated, whooping cranes and their habitats disrupted, ancient forest cut, Earth threatened by global warming. These are ethical questions intrinsically, owing to values destroyed in nature, as well as instrumentally, owing to human resources jeopardized. Humans need to include nature in their ethics, humans need to include themselves in nature (518).

Rolston's argument is that environmental ethics is often regarded as an applied ethics, but there seems to be a sort of difference between the two. In applied ethics, the traditional and metaphysical ethical theories are applied say, to medicine, business, work, genetic engineering and professional ethics. On the contrary, Rolston argues that "environmental ethics begins with the assumption that traditional metaphysics and moral theory are more at the root of environmental problems than the tools for their solution" (115). Thereby stating that environmental ethics is a kind of anti-applied ethics, in the sense that, it refutes the principles of traditional ethics in addressing the environmental abuses. Environmental ethics transcend the common application of ethical principles; it is an exploration of alternative ethical principles that can adequately address the environmental issues.

Richard Sylvan arguing in line with Rolston posits that, "it is increasingly said that civilization, Western Civilization at least, stands in need of a new ethic... setting out people's relations to the natural environment" (12). The western conception of ethics has been human centered, it only dictates human to human relation, the human person is both the subject and object of the western ethics. Subsequently, giving the new development or using Charles Darwin terminology, evolution, human being has discovered the need to extend moral relation to other nonhuman species, hence the beginning of environmental ethics. Nnamani in his explication on environmental ethics opines that, "environmental ethics begins with two basic

assumptions: firstly, that human behavior towards the natural world should be governed by moral norms, and secondly, that we are charged with some responsibilities towards nature” (393). Rolston points out that “environmental ethics starts with human concern for a quality environment, and some think this shapes the ethic from start to finish.” (517). Thus, environmental ethic arises from human’s concern to conserve and preserve the environment from the imminent environmental crisis that is gaining ground in the world. Human beings must ensure a sustainable environment for a healthy living.

Environmental ethics is a branch of environmental philosophy that deals with moral relation of human species to nonhuman species. It is an extension of ethical cum moral consideration to animals, plants, soils, rocks, etc. Jardins puts this rightly, environmental issues are not primarily political matters, but ethical affairs, they raise fundamental questions about ethics and philosophy” (4), Nnamani in addition to what Jardins has said, avers that “environmental ethics raises questions about the place of human beings among other living organisms and about their relationship to nature and environment” (393).

Nnamani in his essay “Environmental Ethics,” set forth to provide a philosophical ground of environmental ethics, he argues that environmental ethics can be a type of descriptive, normative and philosophical ethics. As a descriptive ethics, environmental ethics describes and summarizes ethical belief that helps us to understand the complexity of environmental challenges; as a normative ethics, environmental ethics makes ethical judgment and evaluations of environmental issues, and appeals to some standard or norm of ethical behavior; as a philosophical ethics, environmental ethics examines values in conflict and the competing reasons that underlie the conflict, in order to be able to evaluate normative judgment and ensure suitable environmental decisions and policies (394).

However, environmental ethics is of recent origin, though many ancient philosophers have said something about the environment or nature, but it was from the humanistic point of view. Richard Sylvan was right at stating that:- “it is not of course that old and prevailing ethics do not deal with nature; they do, and on the prevailing view man is free to deal with nature as he pleases, i.e, his relations with nature, insofar at least as they do not affect others, are not subject to moral censure” (12). Serious academic inquiries into environmental ethics started in the 1970s. During this period a fervent awareness grew among scholars on the need to rethink human’s relationship with the environment. On the first World Earth Day in 1970, environmentalists started urging philosophers, who were involved in the environmental discussion to proffer a solution to the imminent environmental crisis by formulating an environmental ethics. There were three papers that really inspired the desire for an environmental ethics; An essay in Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, ‘The Land Ethic’ (1949), where Leopold explicitly avers that the root of environmental crisis is philosophical. The second paper is Lynn

White's 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis (1967) and thirdly, Garrett Hardin's 'The Tragedy of the Commons' (1968). These papers were influential in the environmental discussion of the 1970s. Subsequently, many philosophers took interest in the enquiry to save the planet from environmental crisis and possible extinction. Callicott writing on the existence and establishment of environmental ethic within the philosophical circle, states explicitly;

In 1973, with the publication of three seminal papers, environmental ethics made its formal debut on the staid and conservative stage of professional philosophy. That Spring, the young Australian Philosopher Peter Singer published "Animal Liberation" in the New York Review of Books. That summer, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long Range Ecology Movement: A Summary" by distinguished Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer Arne Naess appeared in the international philosophy journal, *Inquiry*. That fall, another young Australian philosopher, Richard Sylvan (then Routley), addressed his colleagues at the Fifteenth World Congress of philosophy in Varna, Bulgaria, with a question: "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic" ("Environmental Philosophy, from Animal Rights to Radical Ecology" 3)

3. Theories of Environmental Ethics

In the bid to formulate an environmental ethics that can suitably address the environmental challenges, Nnamani observes;

The true nature of these norms and responsibility gave rise to two conflicting theories of environmental ethics: philosophers who hold that we owe responsibilities directly to other human beings and merely indirectly to the non-human part of the natural environment. In other words, nonhuman parts of the natural environment deserve man's moral consideration only insofar as they serve humanity interest. The second camp is the philosophers that hold that we owe direct responsibility to the whole universe- plants, animals, species, and ecosystem. In this case, every natural object and the ecosystem have moral standing in their own right (393).

Consequently, the first camp is the anthropocentric philosophers that advocate for the human centered ethics, while the second camp is the non anthropocentric philosophers that clamour for the intrinsic value of the whole ecosystem. The non anthropocentric philosophers are further divided into two: the biocentric

philosophers, the ecocentric philosophers. But due to the scope of this study, we shall only examine anthropocentric environmental ethics and ecocentric environmental ethics.

4. Anthropocentric Environmental Ethics

Anthropocentric environmental ethics is the branch of environmental ethics that is human centered. The word, anthropocentric, is derived from the Greek words, ‘anthropos’ –human- and ‘kentron’ –centered- thus, it is the idea that human beings are the most significant species on the ecosystem in the sense that they are considered to have a moral status or value higher than that of other animals. Anthropocentrism emphasizes on the superiority of human beings over nonhuman species, and these nonhuman species are valued through the lens or perspective of human. In other words, human beings are assigned higher intrinsic value while nonhuman species are accorded instrumental value.

Anthropocentrism evaluates the behavior of human towards nature on the sole basis of how it affects human beings. Human interests become the determinant factor in the conservation of the environment. The only reason for conserving the environment is that not doing so can harm the human beings, otherwise humans have no reason to conserve the environment. In order to comprehend this better, reference would be made to the scenario painted by Richard Routley, which he called the last man example, “the last man (or person) surviving the collapse of the world system lays about him, eliminating, as far as he can, every living thing, animal or plant...what he does is permissible according to basic chauvinism” (16). Routley’s argument is that the last man behaves in an anthropocentric mannerism, he was eliminating every living thing, animal or plant because they do not have value, apart from serving the interest of man. Though Routley was not in support of such environmental value, “one does not have to be committed to esoteric values to regard Mr. last Man as behaving badly” (16).

The proponents of anthropocentrism posit that, every instance of value originates in a contribution to human values and that all elements of nature can, at most have value instrumental to the satisfaction of human interests. This point is made clear in the assertion, “anthropocentrism views humans as the centre of ethical concern, while the environment is often seen as a usable resource, there for our personal exploitation,” (nuigalway.ie) underlying this position is the argument that values cannot exist without a valuer. The nonhuman species cannot be valued by and for itself because in the absent of man, they seem to possess no worth at all. It can be argued that the proponents of this view got their inspiration from classical philosophers. Thus, anthropocentric view of environment can be traced down to the ancient philosophers. Spinoza writing on the early conception of man notes;

...they look on all things of Nature as means to their own advantage...they could not believe them to be self-created, but on

the analogy of the means which they are accustomed to produce for themselves, they were bound to conclude that there were some governor or governors of nature, endowed with human freedom, who have attended to all their needs and made everything for their use....Thus it was that this misconception developed into superstition and became deep-rooted in the minds of men (qtd in Spinoza 164).

Man has always see nature as an instrument of manipulation and use, nature has no function except to satisfy the human race. Aristotle once affirmed, “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man.” (Bk 1, Ch 8) This anthropocentric view of Aristotle was followed by his medieval student Thomas Aquinas, who following the line of his master argues that nonhuman animals are ordered to man’s use. Thomas Aquinas contributing to the anthropocentric conception puts it, “hereby is refuted the error of those who said it is sinful for Man to kill dumb animals: for by divine providence they are intended for man’s use in the natural order” (112). In other words, human beings have right to subjugate other beings below on the hierarchy, because these beings are meant for human’s consumption and usage.

Another radical philosopher who vehemently espoused anthropocentrism is Francis Bacon. Carol Merchant, a professor of environmental history, philosophy and ethics in the University of California, writing on Bacon’s contribution to the death of Nature, describes in Bacon words;

[T]he new man of science must not think that the “inquisition of nature is in any part interdicted or forbidden.” Nature must be “bound into service” and made a “slave” put “in constraint” and “molded” by the mechanical arts. The “searchers and spies of nature” are to discover her plots and secrets” (qtd in Merchant 272).

Bacon from his statement is advocating for the exploitation and control of nature for human benefits. He went further to claim that knowledge is the ability to command nature, to penetrate into the inner and further recesses of nature, in order to discover the secrets of nature, “there is therefore much ground for hoping that there are still laid up in the womb of nature many secrets of excellent use having no affinity or parallelism with anything that is now known... (qtd in Merchant 273). Bacon raised a call to dominate nature and exploit the natural environment for the good of the entire human race. Though Bacon is not an environmental philosopher, but his view greatly influenced man’s conception of nature, Merchant puts this succinctly, “human dominion over nature, an integral element of the Baconian program, was to be achieved through the experimental “disclosure of nature’s secrets.” Seventeenth-century scientists, reinforcing aggressive attitudes toward nature, spoke out in favor of “mastering” and “managing” the earth (Merchant 275). Thus, it can be argued that human anthropocentric conception of

nature stemmed from Baconian program of dominating nature, such that man sees nature as a commodity to be used.

Paul Taylor writing on the distinction between anthropocentric environmental theory and the life centered theory, observers critically the nature of anthropocentric values;

According to the latter, human actions affecting the natural environment and its nonhuman inhabitants are right (or wrong) by either two criteria: they have consequences which are favourable (or unfavourable) to human well-being, or they are consistent (or inconsistent) with the system of norms that protect and implement human rights. From this human centered standpoint it is human and only humans that all duties are ultimately owned. We may have responsibilities with regard to the natural ecosystems and biotic communities of our planet, but these responsibilities are in every case based on the contingent fact that our treatment of those ecosystems and communities of life can further the realization of human values and/or human rights. We have no obligation to promote or protect the good of nonhuman living things, independently of this contingent fact (198).

5. Ecocentric Environmental Ethical Theory

Ecocentric environmental ethic deals with the argument for the intrinsic value of the whole ecosystem, it employs the insights derived from ecological studies to advocate for value within ecological entities, processes and relationships. The tenet of ecocentrism is that we cannot adequately understand the value of an individual organism, unless we discover the value in the interconnected relationships that exist within the ecosystem. "The world is an intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations in which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and non-living, the animate and the inanimate, or human and the nonhuman" (Eckersely 49). Thus, the seeming disparity between human and nonhuman stemmed from the traditional anthropocentric conception of nature. It is on this view that the ecocentrism rejects traditional ethical theories, arguing that they are insufficient and inadequate in addressing the environmental challenges.

The major argument advanced by the proponents of ecocentrism is that value lies in the processes as well as in products;

To value individuals among the fauna and flora and not the evolutionary and ecological processes is like valuing the eggs that the golden goose produces more than the goose able to produce them. It will be a mistake to value the goose only instrumentally. A

goose that lays golden eggs is systemically valuable. How much is an ecosystem that generates myriads of species or even, as we soon see, an Earth that produces billions of species, ourselves included (Rolston III 524).

The position of ecocentrism was first advocated by Aldo Leopold in his highly influential essay "The Land Ethic", Leopold begins his essay explicating the moral evolution over the millennia. According to him, the earliest notions of morality regulated conduct between individuals, as reflected in the Ten Commandments. Later notions regulated conduct between an individual and society, as reflected in the Golden Rule. Leopold argues that we are on the verge of a new advancement in morality which regulates conduct between humans and the environment, which he calls the land ethic. For all three of these phases in the evolution of ethics, the main premise of morality is that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. For Leopold, "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (262). This involves a radical paradigm shift in how humans perceive themselves in relation to the environment. Originally we saw ourselves as conquerors of the land. Now we need to see ourselves as members of a community which also includes the land. The role of conqueror is self-defeating, for it assumes that the conqueror knows all. Yet, clearly, we do not know all of the inner complexities of the environment. Leopold illustrates this by noting how human history has been altered by specific changes we have imposed on the environment.

According to Stan Rowe, writing on the significant nature of the ecosystem, and its integrated nature, which demand respect for it, writes,

[T]he ecocentric argument is grounded in the belief that compared to the undoubted importance of the human part, the whole ecosphere is even more significant and consequential: more inclusive, more complex, more integrated, more creative, more beautiful, more mysterious, and order than time. The environment that anthropocentrism misperceives as materials designed to be used exclusively by humans, to serve the needs of humanity, is in profoundest sense humanity's source and support:.... ecocentrism goes beyond biocentrism with its fixation on organisms, for in the ecocentric view, people are inseparable from the organic/inorganic nature that encapsulates them. They are particles and waves, body and spirit in the context of earth's ambient energy (106-107).

J. Baird Callicot in his criticism of the western ethics and its inadequacies for protecting the environment envisions a new ethic that will incorporate the intrinsic value of the environment. This new ethic advocates for the intrinsic value of the environment which he refer to as ecocentrism. The environment is understood in terms of a complicated web of relations, where different organisms interact and

depends on the health of the ecosystem for their survival. Thus, it becomes paramount that man should adopt an ethic that will respect the place of other nonhuman species, because just like humans, they are part of the ecosystem. “ethics is to be reformed by moving away from a strict concentration on humans and their relations to include the nonhuman” (McDonald 13). In order to set out the foundation of this new ethic, Callicott made recourse to the land ethic of Aldo Leopold, he argues that;

the land ethic, founded upon an ecological model of nature emphasizing the contributing roles played by various species in the economy of nature, abandons the “higher/lower” ontological and axiological schema in favour of a functional system of value. The land ethic... is inclined to establish value distinctions not on the basis of higher and lower orders of being, but on the basis of the importance of organisms, minerals, and so on to the biotic community (qtd in McDonald 16).

Similar to the earlier postulation at the beginning of this section, ecocentrism was championed by Aldo Leopold, but Callicott established the philosophical foundation for the acceptance of the land ethic in the philosophical circle. The land ethic is grounded on the intrinsic value of the ecosystem, the respect for nonhuman species. This ethic was necessitated by the human degradation of the environment, the exploitation of mineral resources, which to a great extent poses threat to human life and whole ecosystem as well. Thus, the need arose as to the formulation of an ethic that can adequately address the human relation to the environment. In response to this, Callicott point out that, “an adequate value theory for non-anthropocentric environmental ethics must provide for the intrinsic value of both individual organisms and a hierarchy of super-organismic entities- populations, species, biocoenoses, biomes, and the biosphere” (qtd in McDonald 17).

The assumption that the ecosystem poses intrinsic value implies that the whole species within the ecosystem also possesses intrinsic value and therefore equal. Paul Taylor argues to the contrary, that there is difference between human and nonhuman species, in his words, he writes: “we do not deny the differences between ourselves and other species, but we keep in the forefront of our consciousness the fact that in relation to our planet’s natural ecosystems we are but one species population among many (207). Thus, human has higher degree of sentience than the nonhuman species but we must realized that we are part of an interdependent system, and must coexist with other species, “this is the fact that the well-being of humans is dependent upon the ecological soundness and health of many plants and animal communities, while their soundness and health does not in the least depend upon the human well-being” (Taylor 208).

6. Conclusion

The moral consideration of nonhuman species cannot be neglected at this age because studies have proven that the ecosystem is interrelated and abuse of one member of the ecosystem invariably results to the dysfunction of the entire ecosystem. The discussion on the primacy of the human species on other nonhuman species has provided justification on the constant abuse of the environment. However, this study is a call to change the perception of human relation with the environment. Nature has inherent value besides its benefit to human. Thus, in exploration of nature, human beings should respect the intrinsic value of other members of the ecosystem. Development, technology, industrialization and civilization are necessary element of human species but ecocentric environmental ethics argues for a moderation of these activities in order to curb extreme extinction of some of these nonhuman species. It must be noted the upholding the intrinsic value of the environmental is indirectly beneficial to human beings; if the other nonhuman species would go into extinction, then, human would have little or no resources to explore.

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