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Environmental Sustainability: Ethical Issues

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Abstract: *This article is purported to explore the ethical dimensions of environmental sustainability which has certain philosophical issues. It is argued in the paper that the philosophical import and the ethical grounding for environmental sustainability is based on the conception of nature as an environment rather than that of nature as a mere object for sustenance. Such conception of nature implies the concept of sustainability as a positive value in the society. In the case of nature as environment, nature becomes the natural habitat of man and is always supportive of human existence. The second issue that concerns the present paper pertains to ethical sustainability of environment, which is based on the ethical commitments of average people if adequate environmental protection is to occur. As such, environmental ethics is concerned with the issue of responsible personal conduct with respect to sustainability of natural resources. The ethical issue at present is the recovery of nature or regenerating the nature as an environment rather than as a mere object.*

Keywords: *environment, sustainability, ethics, human, values, natural-resources.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental ethics is a discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to the values and moral status of the environment. Although nature was the focus of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy, contemporary environmental ethics emerged as an academic discipline only in the 1970s. Of course, pollution and the depletion of natural resources have not been the only environmental concerns since that time: dwindling plant and animal biodiversity, the loss of wilderness, the degradation of ecosystems, and climate change were the issues that have implanted themselves into both public consciousness and public policy over subsequent years. Philosophers began to rediscover ideas about nature found in Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Benjamin, and Heidegger; thinkers who regard themselves as belonging to the continental tradition have been at the forefront of this development (Foltz 1995; Foltz and Frodeman 2004). Some have argued for the relevance of phenomenology to environmental consciousness and the understanding of the human condition (Seamon and Mugerauer 1985, Abram 1996, Toadvine and Brown 2002).

A phenomenological approach takes the subject's own awareness and experiences as the starting point for philosophical, aesthetic, and moral reflection. For Heidegger, human beings never just exist, but rather find themselves somewhere: —*dasein* literally means —*being there*. Both human awareness and existence are bound up with being in places and so, it may be argued, what is valuable emerges from the interconnection and interaction of humans in their environment. Some writers have suggested that Heidegger's approach can open the way to an account of intrinsic value in nature (Thomson 2004), and others have explored the idea that there is support for deep ecological insights in his thought (Zimmerman 1994). The recovery, reanimation, and novel application of the work of figures such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger might seem to bring a new depth and interest to work in environmental philosophy, but there are also critics of such an approach, which, because of its emphasis on the emotional and spiritual links between humans and nature (Smith 2001, Casey 1993, 1997, Malpas 1999).

Humans are helped or hurt by the condition of their environment, and that there ought to be some ethics concerning the environment that can be doubted only by those who believe in no ethics at all. An anthropocentric ethics claims that people are both the subject and the object of ethics.

Nature is a means, not an end in itself. Humans deliberately and extensively rebuild the spontaneous natural environment and make the rural and urban environments in which they reside. We care about the quality of life in these hybrids of nature and culture. Ethics arises to protect various goods within our cultures.

2. CULTURE

Culture is expressed in a way a society lives, how its people behave, and in its religious expressions. These will alter according to time and place. In particular, the way in which humanity sees itself in relation to its surroundings is a fundamental reflection of human culture. Sometimes, human culture may not be in unison with the surroundings and it may have a harmful effect on nature. These days' human beings have gone astray and are destroying nature. Whenever nature stands in the way of what they want, she is pushed aside. Such behavior, which is not in harmony with nature, is not really human culture. In Indian perception, *manav* (man) is a human being who perfectly respects the nature and *danav* (demon) is one who misuses nature. It is not wise to go against nature. History has shown that those cultures, which are not respectful to nature, do not last long; they bring about their own downfall. Vedic culture on the other hand, has lasted for many thousands of years and is still visible as self-perpetuating and regenerating (Prime 1994:18-20).

3. HERITAGE

Springing from human culture, comes heritage - the permanent impression left in stone, art and literature - those things by which we pass on our values to the next generation. This is an essential part of human life from which we gain nourishment and support and also learn who we are and how we live. We have received so much from previous generations and civilizations but unfortunately human society acts irresponsibly and neglects its heritage. This means that others in the future will not receive it. Particularly in India, which has a great culture, foreign rulers who imposed their own ideas upon it have largely destroyed the traditional heritage. They assumed that they have surpassed the knowledge of previous societies and had no more use for it. We have an obligation to pass on what we have received to those who comes after us. We must preserve our heritage, learn from it and give it to our children (Prime, 1994: 20).

Therefore, all ethics seek an appropriate respect for life (Holmes 1991: 73). Respect for life does demand an ethic concerned about human welfare, but environmental ethics stands on a frontier, as radical theoretically as it is applied. It alone asks whether there can be non-human objects of duty. It seeks to evaluate nature, both wild nature and the nature that mixes with culture and to judge duty thereby (Holmes 1991: 73-74).

4. CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In spite of the fact that the unities of ecological, economical and social aspects are being outlined, the sustainable use of natural resources is the central issue of a model of sustainable development. Although, the term '*sustainability*' in its original meaning characterizes the management of nature, this nature has already been practically and socially adopted and turned in to culture. It is the nature, which has been transformed in to culture, so there is an interactive relation between nature and culture. From this point of view, the concept of sustainability is concentrating only on ensuring the sustainable use of the natural resources but it does not reach far enough. Instead, the model of sustainable development should be taken in to consideration for sustainable use of both natural and cultural resources. In other words, the objectivity of sustainability is to preserve the natural and cultural resources in its possible way for men. Moreover, it is considered that the concept of sustainability has a different shape today towards forestry as a tradition. The attempt is to bring together the orientations on environmental protection and development, it can be considered as preservation and development of possibilities for the use of natural and cultural resources.

Sustainable development is said to be a pattern of resource use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for future generations. The term sustainability would encompass a number of aspects - for business it would mean sustainability of profits and for environment it would mean sustainability of natural resources which can be used by the future generations or has regenerative value

(Redclift 1989). The most pertinent definition and well accepted across the globe is that given by Bruntland Report “*Sustainable Development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” (World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future 1987: 43).

The notion of Sustainable Development has been there in India since centuries. Great philosophers and leaders like Mahavir, Buddha, Tagore & Gandhi all believed in the concept of maintaining a healthy and close relationship with Nature (Nayak 2008). India strongly believes in the Oriental philosophy of being friendly with nature. India worships nature and firmly believes natural resources are the most valuable wealth of humanity. Planting trees and digging wells have traditionally been the two great acts of charity by which any one could earn merit of universal appreciation. This tradition of valuing trees was passed on into Indian culture and led to a subtle ecological relationship between human communities and the forest community of trees, plants and animals.

The environment is not only flora and fauna: it includes the human species too. The interdependence of human beings and their environment is of utmost importance. Sadly, it is especially human beings who misuse and harm the environment. When we talk of environment, we cannot leave humans out of the picture. If we have to recreate the environment we will have to consider ourselves. When we start re-creating ourselves, we have to look within our hearts and see where we have erred and made mistakes.

The emphasis on sustainability has gained momentum as the country has been brought to crossroads wherein it needs to make a trade off between the urge for development and to protect the environment from irreparable damage. The Indian government has come up with the National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC) in 2008, which outlines the national strategy to enable the country to adapt to climate change and enhances the ecological sustainability of India’s development path (Report by Planning Commission, 2008).

Village is the nucleus of economic development as far as India is concerned. Keeping in view the millions living in the villages and thriving on conventional fuels for cooking and lighting, the Ministry of Environment and Forests who is entrusted with the issues related to Sustainable Development needs to take up the challenge of meeting their objectives in a time bound manner. Basic education which promotes functional literacy, livelihood skills, understanding of the immediate environment and values of responsible citizenship is a precondition for sustainable development. Several traditional practices that are sustainable and environment friendly continue to be a regular part of the lives of people in developing countries. Further the sustainability of the natural resource base can be ensured by recognizing the role of all stakeholders, and by strengthening governance for Sustainable Development at the local and national levels. India further needs to strengthen its health care systems so as to avoid environment related health risks.

The Constitution of India embodies in itself a greater national commitment to preserve and protect the environment. The Constitution mandates the State to endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard forests and wild life of the country (Nayak 2008). The Planning Commission of India who has outlined Human Development Goals in line with the UN Millennium Development Goals is highly ambitious and as such special focus needs to be there to ensure its effective implementation. India has to have successful environment policies to protect the earth’s ecosystem, there has to be more participatory approach for fighting the global menace and each and every individual needs to think green. India’s high rise in energy consumption and unprecedented economic growth has to be sustainable in the sense of catering to both present and future needs of people acknowledging the fact of limited potential of the Earth to regenerate (Report by Planning Commission, 2008).

5. INTEGRATING ENVIRONMENT IN DECISION MAKING

Sustainability requires the enforcement of wider responsibilities for the impacts of decisions. This requires changes in the legal and institutional frameworks that will enforce the common interest. Some necessary changes in the legal framework start from the proposition that an environment adequate for health and well-being is essential for all human beings including future generations. Such a view places the right to use public and private resources in its proper social context and provides a goal for more specific measures.

The law alone cannot enforce the common interest. It principally needs community knowledge and support, which entails greater public participation in the decisions that affect the environment. This is best secured by decentralizing the management of resources upon which local communities depend, and giving these communities an effective say over the use of these resources. It will also require promoting citizens' initiatives, empowering people's organizations, and strengthening local democracy.

6. ETHICAL ISSUES

Moral responsibility normally implies knowledge, capacity, choice, and value significance. That is to say, if a person is morally responsible to do something, then he (a) knows of this requirement, (b) is capable of performing it, (c) can freely choose whether or not to do it, and (d) the performance thereof affects the welfare and/or liberty of other beings. Because one's response to these requirements reflects upon his value as a moral person, a peculiarly distinctive trait of humanity, we say that this response has moral significance.

This analysis of moral responsibility explains why environmental ethics has only recently attracted the attention and concern of environmentalists and the general public. Until quite recently, human effects on the environment were regarded as neutral since we assumed nature was both impersonal and too vast to be injured by our interventions. At the very least, we were quite unable to foresee the harm resulting from our dealings with nature. Now of course we know better. We know that we can cause massive and permanent damage to natural landscape, resources and ecosystems. Knowing this exacts a moral obligation to act with care, foresight and at times, with forbearance and constraint. In our dealings with the environment, we are in short, called upon to reflect, act, or perhaps to refrain from acting in a manner, which testifies to our worth as *moral* persons and as a *moral* culture – in a word respond ethically.

Since many of the concerns we have regarding the environment appear to be concerns precisely because of the way they affect human beings. For example, pollution diminishes our health, resource depletion threatens our standards of living, climate change puts our homes at risk, the reduction of biodiversity results in the loss of potential medicines, and the eradication of wilderness means we lose a source of awe and beauty. The granting of moral standing to future generations has been considered necessary because of the fact that many environmental problems, such as climate change and resource depletion, will affect future humans much more than they affect present ones. Moreover, it is evident that the actions and policies that *we* as contemporary humans undertake will have a great impact on the well-being of future individuals. In light of these facts, some philosophers have founded their environmental ethics on obligations to these future generations (Gewirth, 2001).

6.1. Issues of Environmental Ethics

The issues of environmental ethics are momentous and involve moral choices of enormous importance that we can make and even more, which we must make. Our moral responsibility to nature and to the future is of great significance and urgency, and it is a responsibility that we cannot escape. That is the essence of environmental ethics. However, extending moral standing to animals also leads to the formulation of particular types of environmental obligations. Animal welfare is relevant to environmental ethics because animals exist within the natural environment and thus form part of environmentalists' concerns. Essentially, these ethics claim that when we consider how our actions impact on the environment, we should not just evaluate how these affect humans (present and/or future), but also how they affect the interests and rights of animals (Singer 1993, ch. 10, and Regan 1983/2004, ch. 9). For example, even if clearing an area of forest was proven to be of benefit to humans both in the short and long-term that would not be the end of the matter as far as animal ethics are concerned. The welfare of the animals residing within and around the forest must also be considered.

Many environmental philosophers have been dissatisfied with these kinds of animal-centered environmental ethics. Indeed, some have claimed that animal liberation cannot even be considered a legitimate environmental ethic (Callicott 1980, Sagoff 1984). For these thinkers, all animal-centered ethics suffer from two fundamental and devastating problems: first of all, they are too narrowly individualistic; and secondly, the logic of animal ethics implies unjustifiable interference with natural processes. As for the first point, it is pointed out that our concerns for the

environment extend beyond merely worrying about individual creatures. Rather, for environmentalists, “holistic” entities matter, such as species and ecosystems. Moreover, sometimes the needs of a “whole” clash with the interests of the individuals that comprises it (Callicott 1989b). Indeed, the over-abundance of individuals of a particular species of animal can pose a serious threat to the normal functioning of an ecosystem.

Given the increasing concern for the environment and the impact that our actions have upon it, it is clear that the field of environmental ethics is here to stay. After all, ethicists are making claims about how they think the world ought to be. Given this, the effectiveness of states and governments in “getting there” will affect the types of ethics that emerge. For example, the Kyoto Protocol might be regarded as the first real global attempt to deal with the problem of climate change. However, without the participation of so many large polluters, with the agreed reductions in greenhouse gas emissions so small, and with many countries looking like they may well miss their targets, many commentators already regard it as a failure. Ethicists need to respond not just by castigating those they blame for the failure. Rather they must propose alternative and better means of resolving the problems we face.

It is often said to be morally wrong for human beings to pollute and destroy parts of the natural environment and to consume a huge proportion of the planet’s natural resources. If that is wrong, is it simply because a sustainable environment is essential to (present and future) human well-being? Or is such behaviour also wrong because the natural environment and/or its various contents have certain values in their own right so that these values ought to be respected and protected in any case? These are among the questions investigated by environmental ethics. Some of them are specific questions faced by individuals in particular circumstances, while others are more global questions faced by groups and communities. Yet others are more abstract questions concerning the value and moral standing of the natural environment and its nonhuman components.

7. CONCLUSION

Environmental ethics is concerned with the issue of responsible personal conduct with respect to natural landscapes, resources, species and non-human organisms. Conduct by persons is the direct concern of moral philosophy. Man’s relationship to nature has changed from harmony to hostility to man’s attempt to re-design nature’s formation and order. When man lived in harmony with his environment, everything was regarded as good but when man started manipulating nature, the relationship turned sour. A new ethics that is based on accountability and commitment must be revitalized so that life can be preserved and the beauty of natural environment restored.

The concept of environmental ethics does not just provide opportunity for spirited debate on the value of sustainable development. It has played an important role in influencing the growth of ideas and opinions, representing something new in global governance, that seek to express genuine beliefs and values that should ideally govern decision-making for the benefit of humans and the rest of the living world.

First it presents a holistic worldview driven by such *ethical* concerns as respect for nature, rather than the economics and science driven environment by the ‘numbers approach’ that most businesses and government take toward sustainable development. This holistic approach views, the strengthening of democratic institutions, the transparency and accountability of governing institutions, and participatory decision-making as inseparable from environmental protection and social and economic justice. In its broadest sense, the strategy for sustainability aims to promote harmony among human beings and between humanity and nature.

Sustainable development ties together concern for the carrying capacity of natural systems with the social challenges facing humanity. In our modern times, we have somehow lost the deeper metaphysical dimension of sustainability as we have lost the meaning of sustainable living. Sustainable living is a lifestyle that attempts to reduce an individual’s or society’s use of the Earth’s natural resources and his/her own resources. Proponents of sustainable living aim to conduct their lives in manners that are consistent with sustainability such as in natural balance and respectful of humanity’s symbolic relationship with the Earth’s natural ecology and cycles.

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