
UNIT 3 ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

One of the main objectives of studying the Environmental Ethics is to know in depth that our existence is impossible if the nature does not exist. There is a flow of energy that seeps out from us to the environment and vice versa. This energy form a connecting link between us and the nature which is indispensable. Study of the environment and all its components is nothing but the relationship that we humans share with the nature. So I would say that by studying Environmental Ethics we establish a link, a relationship with the nature and our concern for the environment becomes stronger. Thus we are urged to do something that would stop the exploitation of the environment.

Environmental ethics has been described as having a conscience or moral that reflects one's commitment and responsibility toward the environment as well as present and future generations of people. In essence it refers to human societies living in harmony with the natural world on which they depend for survival and well being. Human beings are a part of the society and so are the other living beings. When we talk about the philosophical principle that guides our life, we often ignore the fact that even plants and animals are a part of our lives. They are an integral part of the environment and hence have a right to be considered a part of the human life.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Adjusting the relationship between humans and nature is one of the most fundamental issues we face and must deal with today. With the increasing deterioration of ecological systems on which human beings rely and the aggravation of the environmental crisis, human beings have realized that we cannot rely on economic and judicial methods alone to solve the problems of environmental pollution and ecological imbalances; we must also appeal to human

beings' limitless internal ethical resources. Only after we have adopted an appropriate attitude towards nature and have established a new ethical relationship between human beings and nature will we be able to love and respect nature automatically as well as conscientiously; and only with the guidance of such love and respect can we successfully deal with the issues of environmental pollution and ecological imbalances.

3.2 ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: MEANING

Environmental ethics is a new sub-discipline of philosophy that deals with the ethical problems surrounding environmental protection. It aims to provide ethical justification and moral motivation for the cause of global environmental protection. There are several distinctive features of environmental ethics that deserve our attention.

First, environmental ethics is extended. Traditional ethics mainly concerns intra-human duties, especially duties among contemporaries. Environmental ethics extends the scope of ethical concerns beyond one's community and nation to include not only all people everywhere, but also animals and the whole of nature – the biosphere – both now and beyond the imminent future to include future generations. Second, environmental ethics is interdisciplinary. There are many overlapping concerns and areas of consensus among environmental ethics, environmental politics, environmental economics, environmental sciences and environmental literature, for example. The distinctive perspectives and methodologies of these disciplines provide important inspiration for environmental ethics, and environmental ethics offers value foundations for these disciplines. They reinforce, influence and support each other.

Third, environmental ethics is plural. From the moment it was born, environmental ethics has been an area in which different ideas and perspectives compete with each other. Anthropocentrism, animal liberation/rights theory, biocentrism and ecocentrism all provide unique and, in some sense, reasonable ethical justifications for environmental protection. Their approaches are different, but their goals are by and large the same, and they have reached this consensus: it is everyone's duty to protect the environment. The basic ideas of environmental ethics also find support from, and are embodied in, various well-established cultural traditions. The pluralism of theories and multicultural perspectives is critical for environmental ethics to retain its vitality. Fourth, environmental ethics is global. Ecological crisis is a global issue. Environmental pollution does not respect national boundaries. No country can deal with this issue alone. To cope with the global environmental crisis, human beings must reach some value consensus and cooperate with each other at the personal, national, regional, multinational and global levels. Global environmental protection depends on global governance. An environmental ethic is, therefore, typically a global ethic with a global perspective.

Fifth, environmental ethics is revolutionary. At the level of ideas, environmental ethics challenges the dominant and deep-rooted anthropocentrism of modern mainstream ethics and extends the object of our duty to future generations and non-human beings. At the practical level, environmental ethics forcefully critiques the materialism, hedonism and consumerism accompanying modern capitalism, and calls instead for a 'green lifestyle' that is harmonious with nature. It searches

for an economic arrangement that is sensitive to Earth's limits and to concerns for quality of life. In the political arena, it advocates a more equitable international economic and political order that is based on the principles of democracy, global justice and universal human rights. It argues for pacifism and against an arms race. In short, as the theoretical representation of a newly emerging moral idea and value orientation, environmental ethics is the fullest extension of human ethics. It calls on us to think and act locally as well as globally. It calls for a new, deeper moral consciousness.

3.3 THE MODERN CONSTRUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

We are cutting down forests for making our homes. We are continuing with an excessive consumption of natural resources. Their excessive use is resulting in their depletion, risking the life of our future generations. Is this ethical? This is the issue that environmental ethics takes up. Scientists like Rachel Carson and the environmentalists who led philosophers to consider the philosophical aspect of environmental problems, pioneered in the development of environmental ethics as a branch of environmental philosophy.

The Earth Day celebration of 1970 was also one of the factors, which led to the development of environmental ethics as a separate field of study. Today, environmental ethics is one of the major concerns of mankind. When industrial processes lead to destruction of resources, is it not the industry's responsibility to restore the depleted resources? Moreover, can a restored environment make up for the originally natural one? Mining processes hamper the ecology of certain areas; they may result in the disruption of plant and animal life in those areas. Slash and burn techniques are used for clearing the land for agriculture.

Most of the human activities lead to environmental pollution. The overly increasing human population is increasing the human demand for resources like food and shelter. As the population is exceeding the carrying capacity of our planet, natural environments are being used for human inhabitation. Thus human beings are disturbing the balance in the nature. The harm we, as human beings, are causing to the nature, is coming back to us by resulting in a polluted environment. The depletion of natural resources is endangering our future generations. The imbalance in nature that we have caused is going to disrupt our life as well. But environmental ethics brings about the fact that all the life forms on Earth have a right to live. By destroying the nature, we are depriving these life forms of their right to live. We are going against the true ethical and moral values by disturbing the balance in nature. We are being unethical in treating the plant and animal life forms, which co-exist in society.

Human beings have certain duties towards their fellow beings. On similar lines, we have a set of duties towards our environment. Environmental ethics says that we should base our behavior on a set of ethical values that guide our approach towards the other living beings in nature. Environmental ethics is about including the rights of non-human animals in our ethical and moral values. Even if the human race is considered the primary concern of society, animals and plants are in no way less important. They have a right to get their fair share of existence. We, the human beings, along with the other forms of life make up our society.

We all are a part of the food chain and thus closely associated with each other. We, together form our environment. The environment is not the property of the humans alone. Humans exist because of all other non- living elements of the environment. Therefore conservation of natural resources is not only the need of the day or time but also our prime duty.

Does the Earth exist for the benefit of humanity alone? Do humans have any ethical obligations with respect to the natural world? Have we the right to take all the Earth's resources for our own use? Do we have a responsibility to be good stewards over the Earth? Do other species have an intrinsic right to exist? Do trees have legal standing? What do various religions have to say about humanity's relationship to the rest of the living world? These are some of the questions addressed in the study of environmental ethics.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is Environmental Ethics?

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2) What are the distinctive features of environmental ethics?

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3) What is green life style?

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3.4 ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Although there is disagreement over the meaning of sustainable development, most countries have accepted sustainable development as their basic policy. The overlapping areas of consensus between sustainable development and

environmental ethics are obvious: the need for environmental justice among the present generation (especially to eliminate absolute poverty), the need to care for future generations and the need to live harmoniously with nature. Only once human society gets on track with regard to achieving sustainable development can we deal successfully with the challenges of global warming, diminishing biodiversity and world hunger.

3.5 ENVIRONMENTALISM AND PACIFISM

The last thing human beings should do is expend huge amounts of resources on studying and making weapons of mass destruction. Environmental security, does not come from hegemonic militant power, but from a just and peaceful international order. As war is a massive violation of humans' right to life, and causes massive destruction of the environment, avoidance of war should be the primary concern of environmental ethics. Democratic countries should apply their domestic political principles to relations with other countries and allow themselves to be subject to the authority of the UN. The policy that might is right, which prevailed in colonial times, must be condemned and abandoned. The UN and its Member States must aim to construct and strengthen the international legal and judicial system and to arbitrate any disputes among its Member States through this system to avoid military conflict. Only a peaceful international order can foster co-operation among countries in dealing with the global environmental crisis. The close connection between environmental protection and peace must be recognized. All countries have a responsibility to spend more money on environmental programmes rather than on military programmes.

3.6 ECOSYSTEMS: THE LAND ETHIC

Aldo Leopold, a forester-ecologist, wildlife manager, professor, conservationist, author, and prophet of environmental ethics, claimed, famously: *A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.* 'That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics' (Leopold 1969: 224-5, viii-ix). In a holistic ethic, this ecosystemic level in which all organisms are embedded also counts morally-in some respects more than any of the component organisms, because the systemic processes have generated, continue to support, and integrate tens of thousands of member organisms. The appropriate unit for moral concern is the fundamental unit of development and survival. That, we were just saying, is species lines. But a species is what it is where it is, encircled by an ecology.

A land ethic might seem a naturalistic ethic, but people are living on this land, and so nature and culture soon mix. Trying to map the human environments, we are valuing three main territories: the urban, the rural and the wild - all three of which are necessary if we are to be three-dimensional persons. Nature is much present in the hybrid habitats of rural landscapes; we need an ethic for agro-ecosystems. Wildlife can extensively remain on landscapes put to multiple use; and so we need an ethic of wildlife management. We need an ethic for forests and farmlands, for the countryside. Nature is present in, and a support of, our cities as well. A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of

the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such". Nature means everything in our environment - the soil, the climate, and all living things.

Is Christianity to blame for the destruction of the natural environment? How do different religions approach our relationship with the natural world? The world was not created solely for man's use, but exists apart from humans, complete in its own right. "A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves".

Environmental ethics is also concerned with the issue of responsible personal conduct with respect to natural landscapes, resources, species, and non-human organisms. Conduct with respect to persons is, of course, the direct concern of moral philosophy as such. "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 person, we say that this response has "moral significance. We know that we can cause massive and permanent damage to natural landscapes, resources and ecosystems. Not only do we know that we can cause these insults, we also know how we can cause them, and how we can prevent or remedy them. Knowing all this exacts a moral obligation to act with care, foresight and, at times, with forbearance and constraint. In our dealings with the natural 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 persons and as a culture — in a word, to respond morally. One of the most serious problems with the environmental movement today is that its moral position is badly articulated and defended — it is more "felt" than thought through.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is sustainable development?

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2) How do we foster pacifism?

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3) Explain Land ethics.
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3.7 ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: DESCRIPTIVE, NORMATIVE AND CRITICAL

Moral philosophers have found it useful to distinguish three “levels” of study in their discipline. The first “level,” “descriptive ethics,” consists of accounts of what people and/or their cultures do, in fact, value. Imagine, for example, a hypothetical public opinion survey reporting that 55% of Californians favor extraordinary and costly measures to protect and preserve their northern forests, that 30% oppose such measures, and that 15% are undecided. Since the survey reports the moral opinions of the sample population without offering a moral judgment of these beliefs, the poll is an exercise in descriptive ethics. Similarly, an anthropological report that such and such a tribe values head hunting describes the values of that tribe. Descriptive ethics, then, can be regarded as a specialized type of social science.

The second level, normative ethics (also called “prescriptive ethics”) deals with moral issues in the conventional sense of that term — that is, with questions of right or wrong, duties and rights, justice and injustice, virtue and wickedness, and so forth. On this level of ethical discourse, judgments are made and defended concerning the moral value of acts, motives and policies, or of the persons or communities responsible for these acts, motives or policies. Also, in particular cases, recommendations are made as to the morally “best” course of action or conduct. Thus a normative response to the hypothetical poll on the Northland forests might be “how dreadful that our fellow citizens should care so little about their biotic legacy.” Or, on the other hand, “I am glad to see that our citizens are at last coming to their moral senses and recognizing that human beings are more important than a bunch of trees.” Similarly, one might normatively condemn the practice of head hunting accurately described by the anthropologist.

The philosopher, accustomed as he is to “ask the next question,” is not content simply to hear a normative opinion. He insists upon a clear and precise statement of the meanings of the concepts employed in the opinion. When the philosopher seeks to clarify the meaning of normative terms or to examine the structure, grounds and justification of normative arguments, he is engaging in the activity of critical ethics, or “metaethics.” He is thus, in a sense, an intellectual spectator of the normative judgment. It is the task of the critical moral philosopher to take account of the logic, language and methodology of normative discourse and argument. Thus, if a moralist condemns capital punishment as “unjust” or head hunting as “barbaric,” the meta-ethical philosopher will ask the meaning of “justice” and “barbarism” in these contexts. He will also inquire as to the nature and soundness of the arguments offered in defense of these normative (i.e, moral) claims.

A failure to discriminate among these levels of ethical inquiry can lead to considerable confusion and error. For instance, a failure to distinguish between descriptive and normative ethics can draw one into a naive cultural relativism or even a subjective relativism. Failure to distinguish normative ethics from critical ethics can lead to hasty moral conclusions. For example, if we affirm (metaethically) that future generations can meaningfully be said to “have rights,” it does not follow that they (normatively) have a right to share the company of snail darters or to find the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in a natural state. Furthermore, if someone (normatively) argues that dumping nuclear wastes in the ocean is “inherently unjust,” we should neither accept nor reject his claim until we have (metaethically) determined what he means by “inherently unjust” and have examined the structure of his argument and the premises and point of view from which it is argued.

Let us now apply these three levels of ethical inquiry to environmental ethics. First, descriptive environmental ethics is not a significant problem in environmental ethics for the simple reason that, strictly speaking, “descriptive ethics” isn’t really a part of moral philosophy at all. Rather, because it is “descriptive,” it is really a type of social science. If we ask “what do ‘the American people’ think of their national parks? Do they believe the parks to be ‘valuable’? Worth the cost of their preservation?” If we judge the environmental values of most Americans to be “deplorable” (a normative judgment) and thus feel moved to “do something about it,” we might attempt to change these attitudes. And so we would enter the fields of environmental education and moral education. And what teaching methods most effectively produce the attitude we approve of?

Normative ethics deals directly with the “nerve” of morality; namely, the question “what should we do?” or example, such issues as: What is the optimum use of this canyon, or forest, or desert? How should we treat this natural area? Use it up? Protect it? Preserve it intact? What “good” is a “useless” endangered species? How much effort and cost should we devote to protecting it? What damage to the environment and what risk to future generations is acceptable in return for the development of synthetic fuels and nuclear power?

Critical ethics (“metaethics”) is concerned with the meanings of ethical concepts and with the justification of normative claims. Thus environmental metaethics brings to policy and legislative debate such questions as these: Upon what unstated moral assumptions are these contending positions based (e.g., the positions of the “developer” and the “preservationist”)? We are now prepared to clarify a crucial distinction: “Environmental Ethics” is to be identified in this Introduction, as a metaethical term designating any ethical position that expresses a viewpoint concerning man’s responsibility to nature. “Ecological morality,” on the other hand, identifies the particular normative environmental ethics of such writers as Aldo Leopold, who view man as a part of the natural community with duties of respect and forbearance toward that community.

3.8 ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: WHY AND WHY NOW?

Why? Because we can’t sit this one out. “Not to decide” about issues of environmental ethics is “to decide” — in favor of the status quo, and in favor of

“business as usual.” But our poor, battered, plundered and polluted planet can not long endure a continuation of “business as usual.” We have, in the past couple of centuries, achieved a cleverness that has far overshoot our wisdom. The explosive growth of scientific knowledge, followed shortly by a parallel growth in technical ingenuity, has created an “explosive growth” in moral problems — some unprecedented in human history.

Ethics is a very ancient human preoccupation (older, perhaps, than philosophy itself). And yet, environmental ethics is very new. In view of the recent dramatic growth in knowledge and technology, it is not difficult to see why this is so. Ethics deals with the realm of imaginable human conduct that falls between the impossible and the inevitable — that is, within the area of human capacity and choice. And now, even within our own lifetime (and ever more so with each year), we have acquired capabilities and thus face choices that have never been faced before in the course of human history — indeed, we now face many capabilities and choices never contemplated or even imagined before. These include choices of birth, life, and death for our species and others; choices that are rapidly changing the living landscape forever.

When the ecosystem was not understood, or even recognized or appreciated as a system; when the earth and its wilderness were believed to be too vast to be damaged by voluntary human choice; at such a time, there was no environmental ethics. But in our own time we have revalidated the myth of Genesis, for in our own time, with knowledge has come power, and with both knowledge and power, we have lost our innocence. This knowledge and this power are due, of course, to the scientific revolution. And therein resides a puzzle and a paradox: The scientists, steadfastly and correctly, claim that their content and methodology are “value neutral.” In the narrow sense, they are right. As methodology, science is properly value-free and should be value-free (an evaluative reflection, you will notice). But this “properly value-free” methodology has opened up a bewildering array of capacities and choices to us evaluating creatures. And we are not equipped with the ethical insights and the moral restraints that are necessary to deal wisely and appropriately with these choices. Yet the choices are before us and we can not evade them. “Not to decide is to decide.”

The issues of environmental ethics are momentous, live and forced (to borrow William James’ terms); that is to say, these issues involve moral choices of enormous importance that we can make and, even more, that we must make. Our moral responsibility to nature and to the future is of unprecedented significance and urgency, and it is a responsibility that we can not escape. In our heretofore careless and capricious hands lies the fate of our natural environment, our brother species, and the generations that will succeed us. Therein lies our inalienable, dreadful challenge — and our awesome responsibility.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

1) Distinguish three “levels of environmental ethics.

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ethics of stewardship, or human virtues in caring, or a sense of place -all these tend to be humanistic and to recognize that nature and culture have entwined destinies.

3.10 KEY WORDS

Environmental Ethics : New sub-discipline of philosophy that deals with the ethical problems surrounding environmental protection. It aims to provide ethical justification and moral motivation for the cause of global environmental protection.

Pacifism : Peaceful international order to foster cooperation among countries in dealing with the global environmental crisis.

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