

SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATION ON ANTHROPOCENTRISM*

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Environmental ethics is a kind of ethics in which the moral or ethical dignity of all biotic community, animate as well as inanimate, can be restored. According to Robin Attfield environmental ethics is not only concerned with the issues which finds independent value of sentient creatures, it is also equally concerned about the natural living creatures as well. The central question of environmental ethics is to locate independent value irrespective of valuers. Environmental ethics addresses the interests of future generations and of nonhumans. Environmental ethics, in fact, is not an isolated issue, rather it stands as an ‘umbrella term’ which incorporates many debatable issues interlinked with ethical traditions from Plato, Aristotle, Mill, Moore to Leopold and Peter Singer.

The objective of environmental ethics is contrary to the traditional or humanistic ethics. Environmental ethics in a sense is relatively a new slogan against the so-called traditional ethics where the domination of human beings over non-human beings has widely been recognized. Traditional ethics is predominantly man-centered. The relevance of anthropocentrism can further be strengthened with the influence of materialism in which, only instrumental values are considered to be moral values. This, in turn, paves the way for technological development in which only instrumental values are being desired. Environmental ethics just opposes traditional ethical approaches and thereby denies materialism, individualism, consumerism, and moral subjectivism which invite anthropocentrism. Instead of anthropocentrism, modern environmental ethics rather pleads for non-anthropocentrism in which the moral dignity of all species of whole biotic community can be restored.

Traditionally there are two basic theories prevalent in environmental ethics, such as anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism means human centeredness. In environmental ethics the term describes the

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attitude, values, and practices which focuses only on human interest or position rather than the position and interest of other non-human species in the natural world. It places human being at the center of the universe, and looks upon him as a measurers of all things because only human have a soul, rationality and capacity for analyzing and expressing language. Human species have every right to use and manipulate nature according to their own needs and deeds. From a moral point of view it holds an independent value solely and predominately for human interests. Only human species are the sources of intrinsic value and all other non-human species exist to subserve the purpose of humans. Thus, anthropocentrism is concerned only with human interests, excluding the desire, goal and value of non-human species and interprets everything in the world in terms of human values.

Philosophical Arguments for Anthropocentrism:

Anthropocentric attitude towards nature was found in a prolonged philosophical and religious background as articulated by early stage of Western philosophy. In the mainstream of the Western cultural tradition, only human beings have been treated morally. John Passmore and Kristin Shrader-Frechette were among the first to advocate a strictly anthropocentric approach in to environmental ethics. Shrader-Frechette finds it “difficult to think of an action which would do irreparable harm to the environment or ecosystem, but which would not also threaten human well-being”¹. Augustine himself claims that humans alone have a rational soul, the image of God and thus of the trinity. An extreme trend of anthropocentrism is also reflected in Descartes’ famous dictum: mind-body dualism. The Cartesian Cogito-ergo-sum suggests, at the end, that the individual alone constitutes himself or herself and that all senses of relation and context remain accidental and external. For Descartes, non-human creatures lack not only rationality, but also even consciousness. Descartes conceived that since non-human animals do not use language, they are no longer conscious or sentient. The famous Protagorean view that “Man

¹ Shrader-Frechette, K. *Environmental Ethics*. Pacific Grove, CA: Boxwood Press, 1981, P.17.

is the measure of all things” captures the idea that only human can know what reality is for him. Calvin’s statement that “God created all things for human’s sake”² supports anthropocentric attitude. For Kant, Natural objects are incapable of planning, reasoning, analyzing and organizing, using or creating language. For Bacon the aim of science is to master over nature by following the dictates of the truly natural.³

Human in any sense rules over nature for which Passmore inevitably presumes that nature is not itself divine. We also witness an extreme form of anthropocentricity in Hegel’s writings in which he conceives man as God like. This trend reaches its extreme peak with the hand of Nietzsche who inclines to say that man has become the measure of all things. For him nothing is transcendental, eternal, beyond man’s purview. The world, therefore, is a storehouse of raw materials for the enhancement of man’s power. Passmore says, “.....for Hegelnature in itself is ‘negativity’. This does not mean, of course, that it does not exist. But it exists simply in order to be overcome, to be humanized. Man offers it liberty, frees it from its fetters, only by making it human. Nature is made less ‘strange’, by being converted into a tool, a language, a secret ally, an aspirant after humanity.”⁴

In his major work *The Summa Theologica* Aquinas followed the passage from Aristotle and made classification of sins. In the gradation of sins he has room only for sins against god, our neighbors and us. There is no possibility of sinning against nonhuman animals or the natural world.⁵ In the religious tradition like the Judaic-Christian tradition a kind of dualistic view is found where it is said that God is a supernatural and spiritual being who shares his spirituality only with human beings. In Roman Catholic, it has been said that ‘man is the only creature on earth that God willed for itself.’ Man is the

² Schwetchke, A. and Bruhn, M. *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the Old Testament* Calvin Translation Society: Edinburgh 1843-48, 1:96.

³ Keller, Evelyn F. *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Yale University Press, 1995. P.36-37.

⁴ Passmore, J. *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995.

⁵ Schwetchke, A. and Bruhn, M. *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the Old Testament* Calvin Translation Society: Edinburgh 1843-48, 1:96.

only creature that is end in itself rather than a means for others. All these remarks stated above run with the conviction that human beings have the legitimate moral right to dictate nature as well as others non-human beings.

Some Observations on Anthropocentrism:

It is often considered that anthropocentrism is a dominant and utilitarian approach towards nature. We can say that if utilitarian consideration dominates human thinking, then proper respect for other creature will not arise. And so long as human's relationship towards nature is valued by considering nature to be our utilitarian source, there will be no place for ethical consideration of the natural ecosystem. According to Mary Midgley, 'we may read the history of Western ethical theory, from Plato and Aristotle to Singer and Leopold, not as a series of formulations of and justifications for competing master principles of action, but as a series of illuminating insights into human ethical experience that can deepen our moral reflection and help us to make wise practical choices'.⁶

Despite the force and support of arguments justifying anthropocentrism, it is not without problems. It is a basic presupposition that human domination over nature is the product of just one sort of cosmology. But there are religions in the world which have a humbler estimate of human place within nature and greater solicitude for other living beings. Say for example, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. According to Jainism, the world is full of life, in which humans, animals, plants, and elements (earth, air, water, and fire) are all considered to be alive.

The rationality and humanity of a human actually differentiates a human from other classes. However, from this it does not follow that human is the architect of whole nature. It is absolutely ignorant or *avidyā* or *māyā* on the part of humans to think that everything in the biosphere should run according to their dictation or will. Nature has its own order. Humans are

⁶ Midgley, M. , 'Beasts versus the biosphere' *Environmental Values* 1(2): 1992, p. 113-121.

violating it for mitigating their greedy needs. It is quite ridiculous to claim that human beings are superior to other non-humans simply for the fact that unlike other non-humans, human beings can take moral decisions, can give moral verdict, can decide what is good and what is ought to be done by virtue of possessing rationality. If it is claimed that human beings by virtue of possessing rationality, a distinctive trait, are supposed to be superior to other living or non-living beings, then, at times, in other context non-human beings can also suppose to be more superior to humans for their distinctive traits absent in human beings. There is no question of doubt that human beings lack the homing ability of pigeons, they also lack the speed of cheetah, the ruminative ability of sheep and cattle. If distinctive traits are supposed to be the only criterion of determining the superiority of one species over another, then it can equally be claimed that there underlies no point of departure in claiming that other beings may be superior to humans at times. Thus, there is no logical ground in claiming that distinctive traits are the criteria of determining one's superiority over other species. What can be said is that the distinctive traits of humans are valuable to humans and the distinctive traits of other non-humans are valuable to themselves as the distinctive traits of each animal is the outcome of biological necessity and it can be acquired genetically. So any attempt to acquire the distinctive trait of one species by other species would not be possible, as it requires a genetic transformation, which could alter the original species. Sterba holds that it would have been possible only in fairy tales and in the world of Disney. Thus, from a non-question-begging perspective, it would be prudent to claim that the members of all species are equal as each of them contributes substantially for the better environment.

Human being as the possessor of rationality ought to realize that we are citizens of nature, logically bound up together through mutual understanding, love, care and respect. If this is to be the case, of course, we think, it ought to be the case, then why should only humans be morally considerable? Can

human beings survive by forfeiting eco-systems? Certainly, they could not. Therefore, it has been justified by saying that like human beings every citizen of the whole ecosystem possesses equal moral worth. Any attempt to degrade nature would change the environmental related systematic process, which eventually leads to human disaster. Environmental related systems, such as, oxygen, carbon dioxide cycle, are more valuable than the so-called instrumental value as desired by classical ethics. Thus, any environmental related systematic process is vital on nature and what is vital on nature should count morally.

Modern science also challenges anthropocentric attitude, which gives less importance of human being within nature. The idea of great chain of being was already revealed to be inadequate in the taxonomy of species put forward by Linnaeus in the 18th century. The evolutionary picture of inter species relation is not only more complex but also it is in principle different from the teleological view usually implied by the great chain of being. Darwin provides an argument in *The Origin of Species* that ‘natural selection cannot possibly produce any modification in a species exclusively for the good of another species’.

The capacity of reason, language and social relation are not entirely absent in the non-human world. It no longer a matter of serious scientific controversy that some animals like great apes have social relation and are capable of thinking, even manipulating symbols. Also having the capacity of *moral agency* is not a necessary condition for being morally considerable as a moral “patient”. There is today a growing tendency to believe that moral consistency requires us to avoid harmful treatment of non-human beings wherever the harm is similar to a harm that would be wrong if it is inflicted on a human being. As scientific evidence of common characteristics undermines the radical differences between human and non human, so the reasons for ethically privileging humans are also undermined. There is no longer any unavailable reason to assume that only what befall human are matters morally.

Everything in the universe is a part of the natural process. And, this natural process is something that is beyond the control of any species. This assumption provides a cosmic vision that promotes the thinking that human species are not the controlling authority of natural happenings and will give different picture of nature-human relationship. Once the thinking process is elevated to this broad vision that humans are just a part of the nature, a strong foundation for environmental ethics will be established. Because once we accept that we are part of an integral whole, we will also be able to develop a sense of sharing with others. Deep ecology by Arne Naess in fact looks for a foundation, which is based on this type of thinking. Biocentrism maintains that all life forms are ‘moral patients’ entities to which we should accord moral consideration. We therefore have a duty towards all forms of life. Albert Schweitzer opines:

The essence of goodness is to maintain and cherish life, and the essence of evil is to destroy and damage life. All living beings have the will to live, and all living beings with the will to live are sacred, interrelated and of equal value. It is, therefore, an ethical imperative for us to respect and help all life forms.⁷

L. W. Sumner argued that environmental ethics must take into account the rights of non-human animals in order to develop a genuine environmental consciousness⁸. Tom Regan goes beyond Sumner’s idea of an environmental consciousness and the rights of animals, and argues for inherent value, which requires that the value associated with another-than-human beings must derive from within it, not imposed upon it⁹. Regan and Sumner’s principles of environmental consciousness and intrinsic value are articulated through deep ecology, which claims that - all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live, blossom, and to reach their own individual form of unfolding and self-

⁷ Schweitzer, A. *Civilization and Ethics*. J. Naish trans. London, A & C Black, 1923.

⁸ Sumner, L. S. A Matter of Life and Death|| *Nous* 1976, 10: 145-71.

⁹ ²⁹Regan, T. The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic, *Environmental Ethics*, 1981, 3.1: 19-34.

realization¹⁰, Deep Ecology has always asserted that wilderness must be defended for its own sake, not for human gain. Deep ecology argues that a being's value leads to the ideal of biocentric egalitarianism, in other words, the ideal that all beings have inherent value and right to life which results in equality between all beings, where no being is superior or inferior to another. As a result, deep ecology has broadened the domain of discourse between human interaction with non-human nature¹¹, allowing nature to take on value for itself which requires respect and protection from human harm.

We can think an understanding of nature is the key of non-anthropocentrism and in this regard the concept of eco-spirituality is mostly desired for understanding and protecting nature. In Western tradition, we can call upon Spinoza, who in his *Intellectual love of God* equates God with Nature and thereby gives a metaphysical or spiritual interpretation of environmental ethics.

The Indian philosophical tradition and civilization provides a solid foundation for adequate concern and deep respect for nature, thus nonanthropocentric in nature. Philosophical thinking in Indian culture has always been associated with spiritual practice. The philosophical speculations that were developed in the Indian tradition were deeply concerned with life in general. The intention was not just to understand nature and intellectual curiosity, but a kind of theoretical speculative thinking was associated with a strong insight that was guiding the ethical, theological aspect of human life.

Eco-spirituality therefore, means that the entire universe is an extended family. It is a means through which one can realize that all living beings in the universe are only citizens of the household. This concept is known as *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. It refers to all species on earth as the members of the same extended family of *Devi Vasundharā*. Thus, only by realizing the

¹⁰ Devall, B & George, S. *Deep Ecology In Thinking Through the Environment: A Reader*, ed. Mark J. Smith. London: Routledge.1999.

¹¹ McLaughlin, Andrew. The Critique of Humanity and Nature: Three Recent Philosophical Reflections| *Trumpeter*. 1987, 4.4: 1-7.

entire universe as one extended family, we can develop the necessary maturity and thereby respect for all other beings. Being the members of the extended family, humans do not willfully engender the lives and livelihood of others, instead they first think in terms of caring for others before taking an action. The welfare and caring, love and respect of all would be realized through spiritual understanding and cooperation at the global level. We think that the Hindu heritage of eco-spirituality would certainly control our base characteristics, such as, greed, exploitation, abuse, mistreatment, and defilement of nature. What is mostly required is to culture our inner thoughts and perhaps it is where the religious exhortations and sanctions may come into play for environmental stewardship. Eco-spirituality oriented environmental stewardship can be the mechanism that strengthens our respect for nature, gives rise to new ways of valuing and caring, promotes sustainable development. Eco-spirituality enables us to provide the values necessary for an environmental caring world by forfeiting a blind belief towards materialism, consumerism, individual and corporate greed, instrumental value at all cost. Thus we can achieve and justify the ethical relevance of nonanthropocentric approach on environmental ethics by love, care and respect and above all introspection.

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