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The man–nature relationship and environmental ethics

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Abstract

Our behaviour and policies with regard to nature and the environment should be guided by a code of ethics, which is to be derived from basic principles and from a pragmatic consideration of the issues at stake. The man–nature relationship has always been ambiguous, nature being seen as both a provider and an enemy. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, man is set apart from nature and called to dominate it, although this attitude has been revised to become one of stewardship. Oriental religions, on the other hand, have a more holistic view and consider humans as an integral part of nature. Modern philosophers have views ranging from anthropocentrism to biocentrism and egocentrism. It is suggested to take a pragmatic approach by which primary human needs are met first and foremost whereas the needs of other living organisms and ecosystems are allowed to prevail over secondary human needs. A plea is made to support the Earth Charter, which embodies in its principles and prescriptions a balanced respect for nature and future human generations.

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1. Introduction

Nature can be seen as beautiful and harmonious but it also inspires fear in man who has had to fight it in order to survive. Now, nature is threatened by man who has become detached from it. Technology has endowed humans with the power of a major geological agency, which may act on a continental or even planetary scale (e.g. acid rain, photochemical smog, radioactive contamination, stratospheric ozone depletion, climate change).

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These man-made environmental problems cannot all be solved by technology alone. Changes in human behaviour are necessary, hence the need for codes of conduct based on the ethics of the environment. The relationship between man and nature must be reconsidered.

What is nature, what is the environment? Nature is the whole of the physical world; it is also what exists outside of any human action. Man is in nature but he acts upon it, thereby emancipating himself of it. He is part and apart of nature. The human–nature relationship is the object, in western societies at least, of contradictory representations. There is, on the one hand, a nostalgia for the lost paradise and on the other a primitive fear of natural forces but also the urge to dominate nature, which originated with the Renaissance.

The environment has been defined in many different ways, from Einstein's definition ('everything that is not us') to that of the European Union: 'The whole set of elements which form the frameworks, the surroundings and the living conditions of man and society, as they are or as they are perceived'. In fact the notion of environment includes always nature and culture. The environment may be viewed as an emerging property of the man–nature relation, a field of reciprocal transformation of the human by the natural; and of the natural by the human (Ost, 1995).

2. A very brief review of attitudes toward nature and the environment

For the classical Greek philosophers the rational structure of the world was considered as simple and therefore they had no insight into the complexities of ecological systems. They were in fact the originators of the reductionist attitude that is still prevalent in many fields of science. It has been argued that it is from Plato's ideas ('The natural world is an illusion') that the medieval attitude that 'Love of nature detracts from love of God' was derived.

Exceptions were Aristotle and Theophrastus. For the first, everything in nature had a purpose (teleology). The world was a gigantic mass of matter undergoing continuous change generated by the 'Prime Mover', and it existed for the benefit of man. Theophrastus understood the interactions between living organisms and their habitats and could thus be considered as the first ecologist.

The emperor and stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, on the other hand, stated that the universe was a single living being, possessed of a single substance and a single soul, and that what was good and right in itself was to live in harmony with nature.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Genesis says that, (I–11), on the second day, God created the herbs and the trees that bear seed and fruit, on the fourth (I–20), the creeping creatures and the fowl, on the fifth (I–24–25), the beasts of the earth according to their kinds, cattle and creeping things.

Then God said (I–26) 'Let us make man to our image and likeness; and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature...'

And God created man to his own image..... Male and female he created them (I–27).

And God blessed them (I–28) saying: ‘Increase and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it and rule over the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air and all living creatures that move upon the earth’.

Later on, after the deluge, God blessed Noah (Genesis 9) and his sons and said:

Increase and multiply and fill the earth and let the fear and dread of you be upon... the beasts, the fowls, the creeping things and all the fishes of the sea, they are delivered into your hand and every thing that moves and lives will be meat for you..... I will establish my covenant with you and with your seed, after you.

Thus God created the other living beings for man and man for God.

For Francis Bacon we must subdue nature, penetrate its secrets and chain it to satisfy our desires. Man is the center of the world and the object of science is to dominate nature. The same idea was taken up by Descartes who stated that we should use science to make us ‘masters and possessors of nature’.

This has been often quoted to express the alleged Christian view of the relationship between man and nature. Descartes, who considered animals as non-sentient mechanical beings, clearly proclaimed the duality of body and soul, a view rejected by Leibnitz who stressed the interconnections between the living and non-living parts of the world.

Spinoza, on the other hand, had a pantheistic vision in which every being and object was a temporary manifestation of a common substance created by God.

Thus nature would be reduced, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, to the single dimension of an object that can be appropriated. This may have been a reaction against the pagan veneration of nature (springs, rivers, mountains). One remarkable exception was St Francis of Assisi. His *Canticle of All Creatures* celebrates brother Sun, sister Moon, brothers Wind and Air, sister Water, brother Fire and sister Earth and her flowers, herbs and fruits.

Lynn White, in an oft-quoted paper of 1967 (White, 1967), which had much impact in the English-speaking world, accused Christianity of being the most anthropocentric of the religions, thus allowing uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources and widespread pollution of the environment.

In fact, contemporary exponents of Christianity and Judaism have pointed out that the word ‘dominion’ should be understood as meaning really ‘custody’ or ‘stewardship’. In his 1990 encyclical ‘*Gaudium and Spes*’, Pope John-Paul II stated that it was a moral duty for Christians to take care of the earth in order that it produced fruit and became the worthy home of the universal human family. Elsewhere, he said that it was urgent to develop the awareness of the respect of natural resources. The protestant churches have voiced similar positions through their World Council of Churches.

The idea of stewardship of nature is found also in the Koran. In sutra 33:72 it is said that this responsibility was first offered to the heaven, to the earth and the mountains but these refused this charge and man had to shoulder it.

According to the Talmud, if God created the world starting from chaos, he left some parts incomplete and entrusted them to man, who has a co-creator role and is the guardian of the capacity of the earth to renew itself ('Till the earth and keep it').

Contrary to the religions of the Book, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto do not consider that mankind, nature and the divine are distinct. They take a position which is intermediate between monism and dualism and are more concerned with harmony, union, interconnections. Buddhism, for instance, affirms the interdependency of all beings and advocates moderation and respect of all forms of life.

Since Descartes, Leibnitz and Spinoza, philosophers and other thinkers have adopted ethical positions with regard to nature which range from absolute anthropocentrism to biocentrism and the most radical ecocentrism.

Anthropocentrism, which can be more or less enlightened, aims at protecting the environment in view only of the direct and indirect interests of mankind. This may cover not only material needs for survival and well-being but also amenities and aesthetic satisfaction, and may justify changes in basic rights, such as property rights. An additional element in this respect, introduced by the concept of sustainable development, is concern about future generations (see below).

Biocentrism recognizes the intrinsic value of life and living beings, regardless of their instrumental value for mankind, while ecocentrism advocates that environmental ethics should give due consideration to ecosystems, including their non-living natural objects. Forests, lakes, wetlands etc. are valuable in their own right and deserve moral consideration.

The 19th century Wilderness movement in the USA, represented by Emerson, Wordsworth and Thoreau, and which led to the creation of the Sierra Club and much later to that of Friends of the Earth, sought communication with God through nature. Its object was to promote a world oriented toward a bioethics, in which mankind would live in harmony with nature, which provides subsistence and survival.

The German philosopher, Hans Jonas, affirmed in 1984 that we must be guardians of nature and of future generations, whose interests are closely confounded inasmuch as they are weakened to the point where their persistence is no longer assured. We are responsible for the future since we are capable of compromising it. He added that there was an obligation to be prudent (hence the development of the precautionary principle) as well as an obligation to know (through scientific research) in order to assess the consequences of our actions.

A debate on the future generations has been started among ethicists, with possible implications for such issues as climate change and the disposal of long-lived radioactive waste. How many of these generations should be taken into account? Do they have moral standing even though they do not yet exist? Can someone represent their interests? Is there an implicit social contract between past, present and

future generation? Answers to these questions are difficult. A prudent view is that we should leave as many options as possible to the future generations.

As far as ecocentrism is concerned, the most extreme view is that of the so-called ‘deep ecology’ movement. Propounded by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Ness, starting in 1973 (Shrader-Frechette, 1991), it holds that the value of non-human living beings is independent of their utility to man. Biological diversity, for example, has an intrinsic value (a view which is, somewhat surprisingly, recognized in the International Convention for the Protection of Biological Diversity of 1992) and man has no right to reduce this richness except to satisfy his vital needs. Some adepts of deep ecology go even further, stating that the welfare of ecosystems, may require a reduction of human population because its interference has become excessive. According to Ness, the solution of the environmental problems requires a fundamental behaviour change. We must recognize that we are part of nature, that we are constituted by our relationship to the other elements of the environment (metaphysical holism), that there is no ontological separation in the realm of existence. We are nothing but dissipative structures existing only through matter and energy flows, as a vortex in a flowing fluid (as in Buddhism).

It is suggested, as proposed by K. Shrader-Frechette (Yamin and Farhana, 1997), to adopt a position somewhere between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Ethical priorities should be as follows:

- obligation to recognizing primary, or strong, human rights: survival, health, welfare;
- obligation not to harm the environment;
- recognition of secondary (weak) human needs: property, some forms of transport, leisure (e.g. the off-road use of 4×4 vehicles), gastronomy, etc.

Criticism of the acknowledged weakness of the theoretical foundations of environmental ethics can be addressed by pointing out that currently well-established moral schools have evolved and been improved over many years, while we are at the beginning of a moral framework, which is essential because, in the absence of a world government, international cooperation can be based only on a high sense of a shared morality.

3. An ethics (or philosophy) of the environment

Ethics is concerned with the way we should behave. Meta-ethics defines the concepts of good and bad, duties and obligations, moral responsibility; normative ethics, what is good or bad, the actions that are correct or not. There is also a branch of ethics which is concerned with policies and institutions, the principles and rules which govern the allocation of goods and resources.

Environmental ethics is that part of applied ethics which examines the moral basis of our responsibility toward the environment. The fundamental questions are the following (Naess, 1973):

- what are the obligations of the whole of mankind toward the natural world?
- how to allocate the benefits and charges deriving from the respect of these obligations?
- what policies and institutional structures should be established to implement them?

To the first question, the answer may be that we have obligations toward the natural world which impose quantitative and qualitative limits to our exploitation of nature.

To the second question, the argument is that of international justice and equity; may we say that the developing countries are entitled to compensation for the exploitation by industrialized countries of their natural resources, in terms both of products and waste disposal? Other points are the distribution of future charges (burden-sharing), for instance with regard to reduction in greenhouse gases emissions, the property of genetic resources and of the benefits of biotechnology.

As to the third question: beyond existing arrangements (national and EU policies, international conventions), is there a need for a world-wide body, a World Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) to counterbalance the World Trade Organization?

4. Conclusion

Whether environmental norms are human constructs or find their origin in the divine, in reason or mere empiricism, they prescribe restrictions in freedom of action, which are self-imposed by the recognition that the human individual is part of a community of interdependent parts (human generations and ecosystems). To define these norms, it behoves to distinguish between the fundamental and the secondary needs of humans and not to sacrifice to the latter the interests of non-human living organisms.

The sustainability paradigm must be raised to the level of a global ethics which recognizes and promotes the mutualism of social and ecological values. In concrete terms, this ethics must lead to the control of production and consumption patterns so as to preserve the regenerative capacity of natural resources as well as the natural cycles and balances. Moderation must prevail, as well as prudence or precaution.

The *Earth Charter Document* (2001), which has been prepared by a private group led by Maurice Strong, the great humanitarian who organized the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment and the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development, embodies the principles and rules of conduct which should guide the behaviour of individuals, business and nations. It should be strongly supported because, as stated more than 1800 years ago by Marcus Aurelius, what is good and just for man is to live in harmony with nature.

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