



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-VI, Issue-IV, April 2018, Page No. 279-279

UGC Approved Journal Serial No. 47694/48666

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Environmental ethics is concerned with the moral relationship of human beings and the natural environment consisting of plants, land and non-human creatures, etc. It is an area of study that deals with our various ethical standpoints about nature and tries to reach the conclusion that which ethical standpoint about nature is more acceptable. There are mainly two ethical standpoints about nature, namely, anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric or eco-centric. Anthropocentrism is completely centered on the interests of human beings. It holds that mankind has supreme authority to control as well as use the nature. Most contemporary thinkers believe that the anthropocentric view about nature is the ideological cause of the environmental crisis. On the other hand, non-anthropocentric ethical standpoint about nature tries to provide a satisfactory basis of human moral obligation to the beings and objects of the nature. The extension of moral consideration to the beings and objects of the universe is said to be non-anthropocentric view or eco-centric view. The aim of this paper is to explain firstly, anthropocentric view regarding nature is responsible for environmental crisis; and secondly, deep ecology as an eco-centric view is an alternative way of ethical standpoint for a better environment.

Keywords: *Environmental Crisis, Anthropocentrism, Non-anthropocentrism, Eco-centrism, Intrinsic Value, Deep Ecology, Ecological Self.*

Introduction and Objective:

Contemporary environmental ethics was emerged as an academic discipline in the last half of 20th century, for we are facing some severe environmental crisis like, global warming, ozone depletion, loss of biodiversity, scarcity of water, etc., due to abuse of the natural environment by human beings. Environmental ethics is concerned with the moral relationship of human beings and the natural environment consisting of plants, land and non-human creatures, etc. It is an area of study that deals with our various ethical standpoints about nature and tries to reach the conclusion that which ethical standpoint about nature is more acceptable. Many thinkers and environmentalists are dissatisfied with

anthropocentric ethical standpoint about nature because it cannot provide a satisfactory basis of human moral obligation to the beings and objects of the nature. On the other hand, non-anthropocentric ethical standpoint about nature tries to provide a satisfactory basis of human moral obligation to the beings and objects of the nature. The extension of moral consideration to the beings and objects of the universe is said to be non-anthropocentric view or eco-centric view. The aim of this paper is to explain firstly, anthropocentric view regarding nature is responsible for environmental crisis; and secondly, deep ecology as an eco-centric view is an alternative way of ethical standpoint for a better environment. In the Section-I of this paper, I have tried to explain critically anthropocentrism as an ethical standpoint about nature or environment and its limitations, and, in the Section-II of this paper, I have tried to explain critically deep ecology as an eco-centric view is an alternative way of ethical standpoint for a better environment.

Section-I

Anthropocentrism is completely centered on the interests of human beings. It holds that mankind has supreme authority to control as well as use the nature. The nature is created for serving the purpose of only human beings. It also holds that, only human beings are the bearers of intrinsic value and all other things in nature are mere instruments for sustaining human beings' existence. According to it, God as the Creator of nature also admits that a human being can dominate over the nature and can use it as a means for his own purpose. For, human beings are the only morally important member of the world. Only they have *intrinsic value* and nature itself has no *intrinsic value*. Thus, it cannot be sinful to destroy the plants and animals, unless this destruction results any harm for human beings. In this context, we may point out the distinction between *intrinsic value* and *instrumental value*. Something has intrinsic value if it is *good or desirable in itself*, i.e., *end in itself* irrespective of whether they are also useful as means to other ends, whereas something has instrumental value if it is *a means* to some other end or purpose. For instance, it is generally said that any human being has intrinsic value; that means, value in his or her own right independently of his or her serving for the ends of others. On the other hand, certain fruits have instrumental value for human beings who feed on them, since feeding on the fruits is *a means* to survival for the human beings. The supporters of anthropocentric view hold that human beings are the only most significant entities in the universe. They disregard animals and plants unless they provide any necessary requirement for human beings, such as nutrition, clothing, shelter and medical benefits. On the basis of this ethical standpoint, human exploitation and abuse of the natural environment has been observed on a global scale.

Anthropocentric view about nature is supported by traditional philosophers like Aristotle, Kant, etc. and Judaic-Christian religious tradition. For example, Aristotle, in his book *Politics*, says that all things of nature are made specifically for mankind¹, and that the

¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. 1, Ch. 8
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value of non-human things in nature is merely *instrumental*. Thus, it is not morally wrong with the maltreatment at non-human animals, unless such treatment may lead to bad consequences for human beings. Moreover, Immanuel Kant, in book *Lectures on Ethics*, opines that cruelty towards a dog might encourage a person to develop a character which leads him not to be cruel towards humans. From this standpoint, cruelty towards non-human animals is merely instrumental, rather than intrinsic. According to Kant, only rational beings deserve moral consideration. He holds that rationality has *intrinsic value*, and hence, worth consists only with rational being. Morally correct behavior for rational beings is to help each other thereby contributing to their common goal of realizing a rational world. Kant believed that only rational beings contribute directly to achieve the intrinsic good of the rational world. Since, non-rational beings have no direct contribution for the rational world; they can be treated by rational beings as instrument for the attainment of the rational world. Therefore, according to Kant, it is ethically justified to use non-rational beings as *a means* to the end of realizing the rational world.²

Moreover, Judeo-Christian tradition encourages human beings to overexploit the nature, because it admits the superiority of human beings over all other forms of life on earth, and all of nature is created for the use of humans. Consequently, they may utilize and consume everything else without any injustice. For example, Bible states,

‘God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

And God blessed them, and God said upon them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over fish of the sea, and over fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.’³

However, the anthropocentric view about nature is considered to be responsible for severe environmental crisis like global warming, ozone depletion and water scarcity to the loss of biological diversity. For example, global warming and less absorption of carbon dioxide are the results of deforestation; less absorption of carbon dioxide leads to more greenhouse gases trapped in the atmosphere. A domino effect of such would lead to severe climate changes resulting in the extinction of various species due to habitat-sabotage. Most contemporary thinkers, thus, believe that the anthropocentric view about nature is the ideological cause of the environmental crisis.

Some moral philosophers, who eco-centric ethical standpoint about nature, provide some arguments against anthropocentrism which are as follows:

- Firstly, the philosophical basis of anthropocentrism is very much weak. For it presupposes comparative distinction between humans and animals. The philosophical basis of this presupposition is the traditional mechanism and Cartesian dualism which

² Cf. Kant, I., ‘Duties to Animals’, Richard G. Botzler and Susan J. Armstrong (eds.) *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*, p. 312

³ *Genesis* 1: 27–8, quoted from Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 266

admit absolute subject-object distinction. But cotemporary philosophers like G. Ryle, P. F. Strawson etc., argue against and reject Cartesian dualism. Moreover, modern scientific discoveries prove that the subject-object distinction is only a partial truth and the unity and interaction between humans and nature are more fundamental. For example, Peter Farb points out that scientists have now admitted that there is no gap between humans and animals.⁴ Some animals have also evolved a rich communication system; others are able to make and use tools, solve problems, educate offspring, and live in complicated social organizations and possessed esthetic consciousness, etc. Therefore, any distinction between humans and nonhumans is only of degree.

- Secondly, anthropocentrism is based on misconception of values. It believes that only humans had values, and living beings and nature do not have values. For, human beings can use the nature as an instrument (as a means) for fulfilling their own purpose or interest. On the contrary, since both human beings and nature live according to *ecological rules*, they have not only values, but also interests. That means that, other living beings and nature like human beings have intrinsic value.

Moreover, anthropocentrism is not ethically acceptable doctrine. For it holds that only humans has goals; therefore, only humans can be the object of moral treatment and enjoy moral rights. Anthropocentrism also holds that so far as human beings possess reason, self-consciousness, self-control, and the ability to communicate through symbols, they can only be treated morally. But critics point out that some humans, such as infants, the retarded, and Alzheimer patients do not have these abilities; whereas, intelligence, use of tools, and self-consciousness are also characteristics of some animals. Therefore, the status of moral object should be expanded to both human beings and the nature.⁵

- Thirdly, anthropocentrism is not practically acceptable doctrine, since mankind is facing severe environmental crises like global warming, ozone depletion, water scarcity and the loss of biological diversity, etc. as the consequences of following this doctrine. It encourages human beings in practice to be possessive utilitarian, selfish; which ultimately leads to uphold consumerism, and individualism. Lastly, this doctrine leads to environmental pollution and resource shortage on a global scale.⁶

Section-II

⁴ P. Farb, *Humankind*, p. 528, Cf. Mouchang Yu & Yi Lei, 'Anthropocentric Ethical Theories: Relations with Nonhuman Beings'

⁵ Cf. Mouchang Yu & Yi Lei, 'Anthropocentric Ethical Theories: Relations with Nonhuman Beings' in *Environment and Development*, vol. II

⁶ Cf. Mouchang Yu & Yi Lei, 'Anthropocentric Ethical Theories: Relations with Nonhuman Beings' in *Environment and Development*, vol. II

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, in his article ‘The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary’⁷ distinguishes between ‘shallow’ and ‘deep’ strands in the ecological movement. According to him, shallow ecological thinking is guided by the traditional moral framework which is concerned with our anxiety regarding to avoid pollution to our water supply so that we could have safe water to drink, and they sought to preserve the wilderness so that people could continue to enjoy walking through it. That means, shallow ecological thinking is concerned with the preservation of our environment so far as it serves the interest of human beings. On the contrary, deep ecologists want to preserve the whole environment for its own sake, irrespective of the possible benefits to human beings. Deep ecologists hold that the objects of intrinsic value are species, ecological systems even the environment as a whole. Thus, deep ecology is regarded as an eco-centric view.⁸

Deep Ecology recognizes the integrity of humans and all of the other numerous species of plants and animals in the ecosystem or universe as well as their interrelationships. This deep ecological awareness is basically spiritual in nature; it recognizes that other forms of life on earth as well as their well-being have *intrinsic value* and inherent worth regardless of their *usefulness* for human beings. It further recognizes that human beings are only one particular strand in the web of life. It calls for a paradigm shift of our ethical world view from anthropocentric to eco-centric. In this connection, we may point out that deep Ecology refers to the ‘*Ecological Self*,’ which is spiritually based on relationships and responsibilities for all living beings and nature rather than *the ego*. The supporters of eco-centric world view argue that both human beings and other non-human entities have value in their own right. In fact, many non-human creatures are sentient, so their interest is also morally relevant. Moreover, such creatures are believed to be capable of physical suffering and want to avoid it, we should not incur any such pain on them. Thus it is immoral to physically torture humans and non-human creatures. They also hold that non-human creatures should be allowed to develop and flourish in the manner of their own kind. To deny them this right, while endorsing it in the case of human beings, would incur discrimination between human beings and non-human creatures.

The deep ecology platform consists of *eight basic principles*, or guidelines (which are considered as the *heart of deep ecology*) for a reformed way of thinking about our environment (not being entirely exclusive to the living plants and animals, or the paradigmatic thought of the word ‘environment’, but basically the world around us, the place where we live). The eight basic principles are as follows:⁹

⁷ Arne Naess, ‘The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary’, *Inquiry*, 16,

⁸ Cf. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 280

⁹ Cf. George Sessions, *Deep Ecology in the Twenty-first Century*, 1995

1. **Inherent Value:** The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth, intrinsic value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
2. **Diversity:** Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are values in themselves.
3. **Vital Need:** Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. **Human Interference:** Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening
5. **Population:** The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
6. **Policy Change:** Policies must therefore be changed. The changes in policies affect basic economic, technological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. **Quality of Life:** The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent worth) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be profound awareness of the difference between big and small.
8. **Obligation of Action:** Those who prescribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.

Conclusion: We may hold that if human beings are controlled by their greediness due to their anthropocentric world view, it is quite natural to expect that mankind will face severe environmental crises like global warming, ozone depletion, water scarcity and the loss of biological diversity, etc. Failing to take action towards the betterment of the environment will witness our irresponsibility over nature's species leading to ultimate extinction. But, we cannot instantly abandon anthropocentrism; however, we can approve our nature-consumption and intervention of the nature depending upon our vital need for survival. Ethical decisions towards nature can be quite conflicting, and the decent choice would yield less harm to the surroundings. Granting a tree, a mountain and a bird intrinsic value is the first step towards an eco-centric world and a better planet. We may conclude with a quote from Arne Naess, 'Man may be the measure of all things in the sense that only a human has a measuring rod, but what he measures he may find to be greater than himself and his survival'.

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