

Issues in Environmental Ethics

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Generally Morality refers to the concept of human ethics which pertains to matters of good and evil, often referred to as “right or wrong”, used in three contexts – individual conscience, systems of principles, and judgements; these three collectively called moral values. Morality is a collection of beliefs as to what constitutes a good life. Morals reflect a cultural predominant feeling on ethical issues. Most of the cultures have reverence for life and hold that all individuals have a right to live. Morals differ from ethics because morals reflect the predominant feeling of culture. Moral codes are often complex definitions of right and wrong that are based upon well-defined value systems and dictate proper personal conduct. The systematic study of morality is a branch of philosophy called “ethics”. Environmental Ethics deal with issues related to the rights of individuals that are fundamental to life and well-being. They are concerned about not only the needs of each person, but also those who will come after us. It also deals with the rights of other living creatures that inhabit the Earth.

Ethics (the ancient Greek word “ethikos” meaning arising from habit) is the study of value or quality, and it is a major branch of philosophy. Ethics is concerned with what is right and what is wrong, irrespective of the culture and society. For example, it is ethical to have reverence for all forms of life and any killing is unethical. It seeks to address the questions such as how a moral outcome can be achieved in a specific situation (applied ethics), how moral values should be determined (normative ethics), which morals people hold to (descriptive ethics), and so on. It has been applied to analyze human use of Earth’s limited resources. This has led to the study of environmental ethics and social ecology.

Moral principles that try to define one’s responsibility towards the environment are called “environmental ethics” or ‘environmental philosophy’ which considers the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural environment. In the 1970s, philosophers began to formulate a new field called ‘Environmental Ethics’. It asks about the moral relationship between humans and the world (around us); in contrast to traditional ethics, which concerns with relationship among the people only.

The need of Environmental Ethics has arisen as a due to result of the following three factors:

1. New Effects on Nature:

The modern technological civilization has been affecting the nature greatly; therefore, it has to be analyzed the ethical consequences of human actions.

2. New Knowledge about Nature:

Until a few decades back, only a small section of people realized that human's activities could be changing (or altering) the global environment. Now, the modern science demonstrates how humans have changed and are changing the global environment in ways not previously understood.

For example, it has now been proved that burning of fossil fuels and deforestation have increased the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere, and that this may lead to irreversible changes in global climate; Thus, new knowledge and better understanding of nature is raising new ethical issues.

3. Expanding Moral Concerns:

Perhaps the most important question in environmental ethics is whether moral extensions encompasses non-humans. Does nature have rights? Do other species have rights as well? Are they (other species) moral agents or at least moral subjects? Do we have a moral obligation to leave the environment in good conditioner our descendants, or are we at liberty to use environmental resources to the point of depletion within our life time? These expanded concerns lead to a need of environmental ethics.

Environmental ethics try to define the moral basis of environmental responsibility. Environmental issues require a consideration of ethics and morals. For example, because there is currently enough food in the world to feed everyone adequately, it is unethical to allow some people to starve while others have more than enough. However, the predominant mood of those in the developed world is one of indifference. They don't feel morally bound to share what they have with others.

This indifference says that it is permissible to allow people to starve. This moral stand is not consistent with the purely ethical one. As we can see ethics and morals are not always the same, thus it is often difficult to clearly define what is right and what is wrong. Some individuals view the world's energy situation as serious and reduce their consumption. Others do not believe there is a problem and so do not modify their energy use. They will use energy if it is available.

The earth is remarkable and valuable for both the nature and culture that occur on it. Evolutionary history has been going on for billions of years, while cultural history is only about a hundred thousand years old. But, certainly from here onwards, culture increasingly determines what natural history shall continue.

The debate about ethics as applied to nature asks whether the primary values about which we should be concerned are cultural, that is anthropocentric, or whether there is an also intrinsic natural value independent of human.

Although all deliberate human behaviour differs from the processes of spontaneous nature, some are healthy for humans because they agree with the natural systems with which their cultural decisions interact. The environmental ethics from this century will increasingly have to ask whether and why cultures should preserve any natural values at all and what kind of balance ought to be reached?

The Earth is now in a post-evolutionary phase. Culture is the principal determinant of earth's future, more now than nature; we are into a century when this will be increasingly obvious. Indeed, some say that the principal novelty of the new millennium earth will be a managed planet. Meanwhile the techno-sphere remains in the biosphere; we are not in a post-ecological phase. The management of the planet must conserve environmental values.

Ethical issues dealing with the environment are different from other kinds of ethical problems. Depending on our perspective, an environmental ethic could encompass differing principles and beliefs. All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parents.

The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soil, water, plants and animals or collectively the land. A land ethic changes the role of man from conqueror of land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members and also respect for the community. Some environmental ethics are founded on the awareness that humanity is part of nature and that nature's parts are interdependent.

In any natural community, the well-being of the individual and of each species is tied to the wellbeing of the whole. In a world increasingly without environmental borders, nations like individuals should have a fundamental ethical responsibility to respect nature and to care for the earth, protecting its life-supporting systems, biodiversity, and beauty and caring for the needs of other countries and future generations.

The inspiration for environmental ethics was the first Earth Day in 1970 when environmentalists started urging philosophers who were involved with environmental groups to do something about environmental ethics. A growing trend has been to combine the study of both ecology and economics to help provide a basis for sustainable decisions on environmental use

Ethical Guidelines to Work with Earth:

Various ethicists and philosophers proposed the following ethical guidelines to work with the earth (Miller 1996).

Ecosphere and Ecosystems:

1. We should not deplete or degrade the earth's physical, chemical or biological capital, which supports all life and all human economic activities.
2. We should try to understand and cooperate with rest of the nature.
3. We should work with rest of the nature to sustain the ecological integrity, biodiversity and adaptability of the earth's life support systems.
4. When we must alter nature to meet our needs or wants, we should choose methods that do the least possible harm to us and other living things.
5. Before we alter nature, we should carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment to evaluate proposed actions and discover how to inflict the minimum short – and long-term environmental harm.

Species and Cultures:

1. Every species has a right to live or at least struggle to live. Simply because it exists.
2. We should work to preserve as much of the earth's genetic variety as possible because it is the raw material for all future evolution.
3. We have the right to defend ourselves against individuals of species that do us harm and to use individuals of species to meet our vital needs but we should strive not to cause premature extinction of any wild species.
4. The best way to protect species and individuals of species is to protect the ecosystem in which they live and to help restore those we have degraded.
5. No human culture should become extinct because of our actions.

Individual Responsibility:

1. We should not inflict unnecessary suffering or pain on any animal we raise or hunt for food or use for scientific or other purposes.

2. We should use no more of the earth's resources than we need and not waste such resources.
3. We should leave the earth as good as—or better—than we found it.
4. We should work with the earth to help heal ecological wounds we have inflicted.

Environmental Ethics: Two World Views on Environmental Ethics!

(a) Anthropocentric Worldview:

This view is guiding most industrial societies. It puts human beings in the center giving them the highest status.

Man is most capable for managing the planet earth.

The guiding principles of this view are:

1. Man is the planet's most important species and is in the in-charge of the rest of the nature.
2. Earth has an unlimited supply of resources and it all belongs to us.
3. Economic growth is very good and more the growth, the better it is, because it raises our quality of life and the potential for economic growth is unlimited.
4. A healthy environment depends upon a healthy economy.
5. The success of mankind depends upon how good managers we are for deriving benefits for us from nature.

(b) Eco-centric Worldview:

This is based on earth-wisdom.

The basic beliefs are as follows:

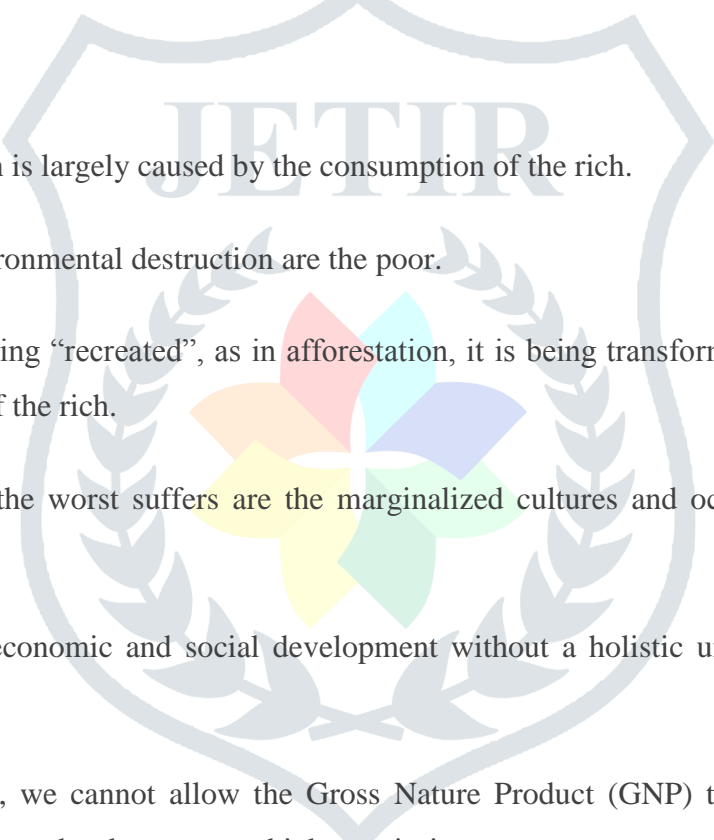
1. Nature exists not for human beings alone, but for all the species.
2. The earth resources are limited, and they do not belong only to human beings.
3. Economic growth is good till it encourages earth-sustaining development and discourages earth-degrading development.
4. A healthy economy depends upon a healthy environment.

5. The success of mankind depends upon how best we can cooperate with the rest of the nature while trying to use the resources of nature for our benefit.

In 1985, Anil Agarwal published the first report on the Status of India's Environment. It emphasized that India's environmental problems were caused by the excessive consumption patterns of the rich that left the poor poorer. It was appreciated for the first time that tribal, especially women and other marginalized sectors of our society, were being left out of economic development.

There are multiple stake holders in Indian society who are dependent on different natural resources which cater directly or indirectly to their survival needs. Anil Agarwal brought forth a set of 8 propositions which are of great relevance to the ethical issues that are related to environmental concern.

This includes:

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- (i) Environmental destruction is largely caused by the consumption of the rich.
- (ii) The worst sufferers of environmental destruction are the poor.
- (iii) Even where nature is being "recreated", as in afforestation, it is being transformed away from the needs of the poor and towards those of the rich.
- (iv) Even among the poor, the worst sufferers are the marginalized cultures and occupations and, most of all, women.
- (v) There cannot be proper economic and social development without a holistic understanding of society and nature.
- (vi) If we care for the poor, we cannot allow the Gross Nature Product (GNP) to be destroyed any further. Conserving and recreating nature has become our highest priority.
- (vii) The Gross Nature Product will be enhanced only if we can arrest and reverse the growing alienation between the people and the common property resources. In this we will have to learn a lot from our traditional cultures.
- (viii) It is totally inadequate to talk only of sustainable rural development, as the world conservation strategy does. We cannot save the rural environment or rural people dependent on it, unless we can bring about sustainable urban development.

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: ISSUES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Environmental ethics deals with issues related to the rights of individuals that are fundamental to life and well-being. This concerns not only the needs of each person today, but also those who will come after us. It also deals with the rights of other living creatures that inhabit our earth.

Resource consumption patterns and the need for their equitable utilization:

Environmental ethics deals with issues that are related to how we utilize and distribute resources. Can individuals justifiably use resources so differently that one individual uses resources many times more lavishly than other individuals who have barely enough to survive? In a just world, there must be more equitable sharing of resources than we encounter at present. The just distribution of resources has global, national and local concerns that we need to address. There are rich and poor nations. There are rich and poor communities in every country. And there are rich and poor families. In this era of modern economic development, the disparity between the haves and have-nots is widening. Our human environments in the urban, rural and wilderness sectors, use natural resources that shift from the wilderness (forests, grasslands, wetlands, etc.) to the rural sector, and from there to the urban sector. Wealth also shifts in the same direction. This unequal distribution of wealth and access to land and its resources is a serious environmental concern. An equitable sharing of resources forms the basis of between the people and the common property resources. In this we will have to learn a lot from our traditional cultures.

8. It is totally inadequate to talk only of sustainable rural development, as the World Conservation Strategy does. We cannot save the rural environment or rural people dependent on it, unless we can bring about sustainable urban development.

Who pays for the cost of environmental degradation? Most sections of society do not feel the effects of degradation of the environment till it is too late. Those who suffer most are the poor, especially rural women, and tribal people who are dependent on forests. Traditional fishermen who are dependent on streams and rivers, and coastal people who fish and catch crustacea, are seriously affected by the degradation of aquatic ecosystems. Fuelwood gatherers from different types of forests, and pastoralists who are dependent on common grazing lands suffer when their resources are depleted. Several marginalized sectors of society are most affected by deforestation, or the loss of grassland tracts, or the deterioration of perennial water sources. All these effects can be linked to unsustainable increasing pressures on land and natural resources. The well-to-do educated urban dweller consumes much larger quantities of resources and energy, than the traditional rural individual. Urban dwellers who are far removed from the source of natural resources that sustain their lives thus require exposure to a well-designed environmental education program to appreciate these issues. While the rural people have a deep insight on the need for sustainable use of natural resources and know about methods of conservation, there are however several newer environmental concerns that are frequently outside their sphere of

life experiences. Their traditional knowledge of environmental concerns cannot be expected to bring about an understanding of issues such as global warming, or problems created by pollution, pesticides, etc. These people thus require a different pattern of environmental education that is related to their gaps in information. With the rapidly changing rural scenario the development that is thrust on unsuspecting rural communities needs to be addressed through locale specific environmental awareness programs designed specifically for rural school children and adults. This must also use their local traditional knowledge systems as a base on which modern concepts can be built, rather than by fostering concepts that are completely alien to their own knowledge systems. Common property resources in India once included vast stretches of forests, grazing lands and aquatic ecosystems. When the British found that they were unable to get enough wood for ship building and other uses they converted forest areas into Government 'Reserved Forests' for their own use to grow timber trees. This alienated local people from having a stake in preserving these resources. This in turn led to large-scale losses in forest cover and the creation of wasteland. In the past, in traditional villages that were managed by local panchayats, there were well defined rules about managing grazing lands, collecting forest resources, protecting sacred groves, etc. that supported conservation. There was equitable distribution that was controlled by traditional mechanisms to prevent misuse of common property resources. Any infringement was quickly dealt with by the panchayat and the offender was punished. Common property resources were thus locally protected by communities. As land-use patterns changed, these mechanisms were lost, and unsustainable practices evolved, frequently as a result of an inadequately planned development strategy. Environmental ethics are concerned with, who owns resources and how they are distributed. This can be looked upon at different levels. At the global level it deals with the great North-South divide between the rich industrialized nations of North America and Europe, as against the needs of developing countries of the South such as in South and Southeast Asia and South America. People living in the economically advanced nations use greater amounts of resources and energy per individual and waste more resources. This is at the cost of poor people who are resource dependent and live in developing nations. The economically advanced West has exploited their own natural resources to such an extent that they have exhausted them nearly everywhere. They now buy their resources from resource rich but poor nations at a low cost. This depletes the developing nations of natural resources on which their poor depend for their livelihood. Changing this unfair economic practice to a more just and fair way in managing trade would require a new thinking on the part of people who live in the super rich countries.

The common property of rural communities has increasingly been used to supply the needs of the urban sector. Land itself that was once held as a common property resource of villages is being taken over by the urban and industrial sectors as it expands. The rural sector not only supplies food, but also a part of the energy needs (mainly fuel wood) to most towns and cities in India, at a pittance. As a result, the commons of the rural sector are being depleted of their resources. Thus, while the cities get richer, the rural sector, especially the landless, get poorer. The urban rich must appreciate where their resources are derived from and be willing to pay a fair price for using them.