

ECOLOGICAL ETHICS : ETHICS OF SUSTENANCE

REKHA NAVNEET

I. Introduction of Ethics

The Vocabulary of everyday talk on values include terms like worth, utility, important, significance, regard etc. These terms indicate the fact that possession of values is a pervasive phenomenon. However, making an analysis of this ubiquitous entity is a human endeavour. As rational and sentient beings humans have all along tried to choose between alternatives, deliberated upon these to plan their actions and at the same time to pass judgements about the motives and actions of others. Making value judgements / evaluation of conduct of oneself and others is a part of everyday experience. This analysis often entails an inquiry into (i) how one 'actually' conducts in relationship with others and (ii) how one 'ought' to conduct in 'an interpersonal' relationship. In, the former case we describe behaviour and in the latter we 'evaluate' actions and motives as right or wrong, good or bad. This distinction between 'actual' and 'normative' points to a segregation of everyday morals from ethics. Ethics is an axiological or valuational theory, which implies a reflective analysis of value preferences, behavioural norms and codes of conduct in a specific spatio-temporal context. Accordingly, ethics is normative, it deals with norms, codes, standards of human conduct and not merely with actual behaviour of men and women. However, it is the application and imbibing of standard/s which poses the main ethical problem because there are varieties of standards in actual use, the ethics is a normative study of human conduct in a particular society over period of time. The relationship between such an ethic to the structure and functioning of a society is, therefore, quite often problematic, it

may be religious ethic or professional or *ecological ethics*.

II. *Environment, Ecology and Sustenance*

Environment signifies an all pervasive whole wherein subsist all natural beings. In other words, environment signifies a generic name for both biotic and abiotic species. By ecology is implied an interrelationship of all these species and their environment. Sustenance means managing, conserving and preserving natural resources and all living beings. All these connotations imply that ecological sustenance means an everlasting fellowship between humans and non-humans.

III. *Application of ethical theories on environment and ecology*

Environmentalists and theorists on ecology and ethics have pointed out to the dichotomy existing in ethical theories regarding man-nature relationship. The reasons one can fathom are that environmental degradation in terms of exhaustion of natural resources may have started ages ago, the recognition of this degeneration and, therefore, a response to it started only about three decades back. Environment as an academic discipline is an enterprise, which has just been undertaken by a selected few and, is of very recent origin. All along, theorists on social constructs and didactics have segregated 'matters of facts' from 'matters of value'.¹ The natural resources etc. formed the basis for an understanding of things existing or existential facts which were either considered irrational by Plato² or as 'unconscious machines' later by Descartes³ or as 'contingencies' or immoral even later by Immanuel Kant⁴ Taking a cue from early Greek thinkers, for instance, Plato, the thinkers in the West till as late as 19th century demeaned any credence to things natural and as a result society and interpersonal conduct became a value different from a factual or social analysis of nature. So we have had 'man-centric' or 'nature-centric' ethical theories. The philosophy about social contract theory clearly exemplified this man-nature duality. Hobbes called man in the state of nature as being brutal and selfish.⁵ Locke called him peaceful but indiscreet⁶ and Rousseau called him a noble savage⁷ before he entered into a social contract. Robinson Crusoe had no rights until he met Man Friday. Kepler, Galileo and Newton also explained all physical phenomena in terms of physical laws particularly the laws of mechanics. These scientific theories accentuated the already existing hiatus between value and natural behaviour. The trend continued till almost the end of

20th century. The tendency of Western ethical theories has been to eulogise humans as special bearers of value as opposed to the bearers of facts. Facts being physical have been kept outside the purview of ethics.

While making an evaluation, ethicists have always tried to do it in two ways. (i) by an appraisal and (ii) by bestowal. These two types of evaluations have been formulated and articulated by different thinkers in different periods of time as two major trends in history of ethical thoughts. these are (i) consequentialist or teleological theories and (ii) De-ontological or intrinsic-worth theories.

According to the teleological tradition (telos in Greek means purpose) the worth of an action depends upon its consequences; an action is right if it leads to good consequences; wrong, if it leads to bad effects. Accordingly, then, an action is evaluated as right or wrong if it serves any purpose and purpose is termed as good or bad depending on benefits or quality of consequences that it brings about. Teleological theories have either propagated promotion of self interest or have advocated universalistic theory wherein each person's good counts equally and one is obliged to promote the greatest good of the whole⁸ Good, accordingly, may be one that causes pleasure as was argued by 'hedonists' for instance, Epicureus, or it may lead to happiness or 'self-realisation' as Aristotle argues in his book *Nicomachean Ethics*⁹. However, over the period of time, the teleological position has changed from merely counting the 'quantity of consequences' to 'evaluating the quality of consequences'. Hence in recent times, it has taken the shape of 'Ideal Utilitarianism'. The Utilitarianism has often been associated with teleological theories, since the purpose is often weighed in terms of benefit or utility. Nevertheless, the 'rule' or 'ideal utilitarians' like G.E. Moore have asserted that the values cannot be defined in terms of interest nor can it be equated with pleasure. "A right action is one that brings into existence the maximum amount of intrinsic value of quality taking all the consequences into consideration"¹⁰.

De-ontological theories, on the other hand, hold that rightness and wrongness are intrinsic properties of some actions or types of actions. Actions are immediately right or wrong regardless of their consequential merits. These theorist stressed our obligations to do our duty without weighing its long run consequences. The three staunch supporters of this kind of ethical trend have

been Joseph Butler, W.D. Ross and Immanuel Kant. According to Butler in specific situations we can immediately discern where our duty lies and accordingly the basic principles of morality are veracity, justice and regard for the common good. According to Ross, we immediately know that certain types of action are always right or wrong, e.g. 'we ought not injure others' is directly known to be morally binding. Immanuel Kant sought to establish a 'supreme law' of duty¹¹. According to Kant, 'we are acting in a morally right way only if we are able to will that everyone else should act in the same way. This would give us an objective, of our desires and accidental circumstances or contingencies.

The early and mid 20th century thinkers reasserted human-centric ethics by stating a case for ethical relativism as opposed to universalistic ethics. Taking a cue from anthropological evidence, it has been argued by cultural relativists that there is an indefinite variety of moral standards. So there is no universal more or ethos since both these are products of certain historical context and certain specified custom. There have also been other approaches to ethical theory which questioned the very rationality or reasonable justifications of standardized behaviour. But the end of twentieth century has definitely seen a shift in the tendency, certain areas have been recognized where a relativistic or partial ethics needs to be reviewed. This brings us back to the analysis of application of standard ethical theories on man - nature relationship.

IV. Application of standard ethical theories on man-nature relationship

The 'man-centric' theory translated into environmental ethical context would imply that ecology should be preserved because it is beneficial to humans. The a-biotic entities like rivers, forests, mountains, hills etc. are subservient to the cause of men besides being providers of basic needs and vital breath. Therefore, forests be preserved because they provide us with fodder, medicine, fuel etc. Also, we should protect snow-capped mountains rugged hills etc. from being harnessed and eventually saved and preserved because these provide us with an aesthetic delight. The natural bounties both living and a-biotic have virtually reached out living rooms courtesy 'The National Geographic' and Discovery 'T.V. Channels. However, the basic question remains, has all this exposure made us really sensitized about ecology and environment? Is NBA (Narmada Bachao Andolan) only a

catch word to be discussed only in seminars and socials? We can definitely sense the commercial benefits that have accrued to all those involved with making these movements and channels available to the masses. However, have we really been committed to the underlying problems and threats faced by nature and by humans eventually? The reason for this error lies in mistaken segregation of man from nature. As Arundhati Roy has put it very rightly in her book *The Greater Common Good* that nature needs to be saved from the humans for the humans¹². The one sided approach of seeking only human interest has backfired on man himself. While harnessing remains a subtle way of using nature for our benefits, men have been crude enough to exploit other beings rudely; for instance, the experiments conducted on animals for the medicinal and cosmetic benefits of humans clearly point out to the arrogance of men. Just because humans are considered to be empowered owing to rational endowments they consider themselves not only different from non-humans but superior to the latter. It is as though there is a logical entitlement to humans to treat other beings with disrespect and as being grossly unequal to them. In other words nature becomes a resource and man the consumer.

The other extreme, i.e. 'nature centric ethics' would take a position that nature or everything other than humans is to be respected because it is our duty to do so. De-ontological theories have always made duty or commitment the basis of conduct because the moral object i.e. the issue in question is inherently moral. So translated in de-ontological ethics, this position would demand friendliness and fellowship with nature because it is by itself worthy and therefore, it is the duty of human beings to protect and preserve nature. Life in general is seen as having a value, which ought to be respected. Aldo Leopold whose works can definitely be referred to as environmental treatises, once stated his "land ethic" principle as "a thing is right when it tends to promote the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends to be otherwise"¹³. Hence, as we can clearly see the human beings are not at the center stages of ethics, they are merely plain members amongst other of the biotic community, different from other members but certainly not unequal. This position, clearly makes the whole eco-system 'morally considerable. Nevertheless, this has its own fallouts. For instance, do we like Maneka Gandhi accept that the life of butterfly is

as important as human life and therefore butterfly should not be tested on in man-made laboratories. The issues of egalitarianism (equality) as opposed to hierarchical one are too complex to handle, especially so for this essay. So one needs to find an amicable solution to sort out the man-nature divide. What we need to posit as new norm is an 'eco-ethics' where there is a fellowship or mutual alliance between two different entities, and are yet equally entitled to moral appraisals.

V. *The New Ethics*

The new ethics or 'eco-ethics' needs to be futuristic in its approach since this friendship between man and nature needs to be everlasting and should remain so for the posterity.

The clear-cut difficulty to plan ethics for the future comes from our humility about the knowledge of the coming times and forthcoming centuries. How are we to foresee the technological developments of the future generations? Accordingly, then may be our present plans and actions would become redundant in times to come. However, the basic need of fresh air, water and food would remain and this is what entitles nature the commitment from humans to preserve it and sustain it. To generate inter-generational friendliness between men and nature it is important to realize that this can be done only through the right set of value and ethics. This would include dispositions and conducts of natural respect and amicability. It can only be passed on through prudence and love which would mean including practical expressions of solidarity and friendliness.

'Eco-ethics' therefore requires an inclusion of wider range of creatures sentient, rational, non-sentient (trees, for instance) in its purview. Further it needs to be extended to being 'universalistic' since relativistic ethics or parochial one, has already led to partial and incomplete set of norms. 'Eco-ethics' demands a global network since environment is all pervasive and needs to be cognized as such. We are not evaluating governments and societies in a parochial context while trying to form eco-ethics. Newer ethics would nonetheless take cognizance of differences that are there in between all the species of the all encompassing environment but there would be an endeavour to maintain an equality of considerations. This equality may be in accordance with Rawlsian "difference principle", according to which advantage to one being should not cause

disproportionate disadvantage to other¹⁴. Thus alliances between man and nature ought to be based on the inclusion of wide range of interest; present and future, human and non-human. If we try to formulate this theory and translate it into practice we are already on our way to a commitment to nature, to our present and future generations and to a sustainable man-nature fellowship.

Indian Ethics

Indian dharma : while the Western world is realizing the importance of sustainable amity between man and nature, this relationship between two species was always seen as an essential one by the vedic seers, the early Buddhists and the classical Jaina theorists. The Vedic seers realized long back that the theory of conservation had to be holistic and not fragmented. *Dharma* accordingly implied that which sustains the *rta* or the rule. Accordingly, the sustenance of ecological balance was regarded as the first and the last duty of man and it was only through this that the moral order or *rta* could be maintained¹⁵. Jaina thinkers¹⁶ and early Buddhism which formed the heterodox systems strongly supported friendliness with other beings. Their philosophies grew as a strong opposition to certain practices in vedic thought. Sacrificial injunctions for instance, were disparaged as being ignoble acts to conduct. Both Buddha and Mahavir accepted the life of renunciated men as distinct from the householder priests of Brahmanical vedic order¹⁸. Their philosophies highlighted a shift from greedy desires of gains and the chief duty of man became associated with establishing a concord between all beings even if it meant self abnegation¹⁹. Both the householders and the priests were to follow the conduct oriented philosophy. The *yamas* and *niyams* of Jaina philosophy elaborated on the *daya* (loosely translated as friendship and piety) for all beings including the microbes²⁰. The Buddhist concept of *Karuna* and *maitri* (again may be translated as piety and amity) with all natural beings and between all the species was based on the idea that nobility in conduct implies friendship with all in thought, action and deed²¹. The details of classical Indian ethical thought would require an altogether different analysis and that lies beyond the purview of this paper.

NOTES

1. Frank Thilly, *History of Western Philosophy* (revised by Ledger Wood), Central Book Depot. Allahabad, 1965, "David Hume", p. 367.
2. *Plato : The Republic*, Translated with an introduction by Desmond Lee, reprinted edition, 1981, Penguin books, pp. 299-303.
3. Descartes : *Philosophical Writing*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith, reprinted in 1961 by MacMillan and Co.Ltd. The references on 1st & 2nd Meditations highlight the differences between "mind and matter"
4. Immanuel Kant, "Two essays on rights" in E.S.Phelps(ed), *Economic Justice*, Penguin edition, 1973, p.156.
5. For details on Thomas Hobbes, John Locke & Jean. J. Rousscau, S.I.Benn s & R.S. Potors books *Social principles and the democratic state* and G.H, Sabine's *History of Political Theory* IBH Publications are relevant.
6. *ibid*; p. 91.
7. *ibid*; p. 288.

Also, for detailed references on man and nature vis-a-vis Social contact; *ibid*; ch. 1&2 are important.
8. For, references on Bentham, G.H.Sabine's *op. cit*, p.188.
9. Aristotle, *Nicomacheam Ethics*, translated by Sir David Ross, Oxford University Press, 1966, Bk. Eighth.
10. G.E.Moore *Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 1971 (re).pp. 65-67 in the chapter "The objectivity of moral judgement."
11. Immanuel Kant, in E.S.,Phelp's, *op.cit*, pp.173-80.
12. Arundhati Roy, *The Greater Common Good*, essay published by NBA Trust, Indian Book Distribution 1999, p.12.

13. Aldo Leopold's, "Land-Ethics " in Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey's edited, *Philosophy and Natural Environment*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
14. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford University Press. 1973,p. 60.
Cf Rawlsian "difference principle" in *Economic Justice op. cit.*, p.209.
15. The Teachings of Vedas: v-x. 7.42.4, edited by Maurice Philip's. Seema Publications. reprinted in 1976, (crux of many pages).
16. Herbert Warren, *Jainism* Divine knowledge society, 1966, pp.53-54.
17. S.Taclubana, *The Ethics of Buddhism*, London, Cirzon Press, New York, Barne's and Noble's Books, 1960, chs. 11&12.
18. S.N.Dasgupta. *History of Indian Philosophy*, Kitab Mahal, 1968, Vol -I. pp.13.14.
19. *Ibid*;
20. Jainism, *op.cit.*, & Buddhism, *op.cit...*

INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY PUBLICATIONS

Daya Krishna and A. M. Ghose (eds) **Contemporary Philosophical Problems : Some Classical Indian Perspectives**, Rs. 10/-

S. V. Bokil (Tran) **Elements of Metaphysics Within the Reach of Everyone**. Rs. 25/-

A. P. Rao, **Three Lectures on John Rawls**, Rs. 10/-

Ramchandra Gandhi (cd) **Language, Tradition and Modern Civilization**, Rs. 50/-

S. S. Barlingay, **Beliefs, Reasons and Reflection**, Rs. 70/-

Daya Krishna, A. M. Ghose and P. K. Srivastav (eds) **The Philosophy of Kalidas Bhattacharyya**, Rs. 60/-

M. P. Marathe, Meena A. Kelkar and P. P. Gokhale (eds) **Studies in Jainism**, Rs. 50/-

R. Sundara Rajan, **Innovative Competence and Social Change**, Rs. 25/-

S. S. Barlingay (ed), **A Critical Survey of Completed Research Work in Philosophy in Indian University (upto 1980), Part I**, Rs. 50/-

R. K. Gupta, **Exercises in Conceptual Understanding**, Rs. 25/-

Vidyut Aklujkar, **Primacy of Linguistic Units**. Rs. 30/-

Rajendra Prasad, **Regularity, Normativity & Rules of Language**
Rs. 100/-

Contact : The Editor,
Indian Philosophical quarterly,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Poona,
Pune 411 007.