

Cosmocentrism: A Paradigm of Environmental Ethics

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Abstract

The main objective of Environmental ethics is to develop a non-anthropocentric view instead of anthropocentrism by way of changing human attitudes towards nature and natural beings. This attitude is to ensure equal justice to all biotic as well as abiotic communities of the environment by way of paying intrinsic value to all. The concept of the inherent worth of the natural system is fundamental for the Cosmo-centric paradigm of environmental ethics, which finds absolute value in nature instead of the value of nature. This is the paradigm shift of values from man-centricity to Cosmo-centricity. Man as a part of nature, depends on nature for his or her existence. So, he is in nature and is in harmony with nature just as a part is within the whole. It urges man to look at everything as an essential part of the whole and calls for a protective mind-set towards the objects of nature. Upanishadic metaphysics construes the whole universe of the manifold diversities as varied expressions of one primordial consciousness, Brahman. Hence, everything is to be treated as Potentially Divine. This paper focusses upon the possibilities of Cosmo-centric ethics as the ethics for all beings.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Man-Nature Relationship, Intrinsic Value, Cosmocentrism

Introduction

The environmental crisis is now a worldwide issue. Environmental problems are invariably bound up with human attitudes, values, beliefs, desires, and behaviour. They are intimately related to human problems. Environmental problems result in various threats to the survival of living species. The dilemma faced by modern man is the ever-increasing degradation of the natural environment. It is due to the various un-planned projects to development and on the other hand, the need for development is a major instrument of progress of modern civilization. The social values are distorted by this trend and it makes a state of total alienation between man and nature. The progressive march towards more and more material comforts gives rise to the environmental crisis in the present day.

The main reason for this alarming situation is to a large extent man's greed towards nature and the destructive tendency in human nature. Succumbed to the greedy nature, we have forgotten the essential harmony between the environment and man. Only environmental consciousness is not sufficient to overcome the problem of the present crisis. The roots of the crisis actually lie in artificially generated needs pandered by greed. The philosophy of consumerism has already overwhelmed us.

The changing of consumption patterns is the greatest challenge in the quest for environmentally sound and sustained development. Technologically advanced man has forgotten the fact that man, as a part of nature, depends on nature for his or her existence. Instead of believing that Mother Nature is the platform for the sustenance of all living beings, modern man has attempted to conquer Her. As a result, we are confronting every kind of damage, degradation, and depletion of the global environment. Now the time has come to check our relationship with Mother Nature, and to pray for Her blessings. It becomes crystal clear that no matter how to advance technology is, but man can never rise above nature, and cannot alienate himself from nature.

A look back into the history of human civilization shows three distinct perspectives on the relationship of nature. In the beginning, when man was reverential at the forces of Nature, he began to worship Nature, used to make offerings to nature in form of various rites and rituals in order to propitiate Nature. The anthropomorphic conception of Nature led to the worship of natural deities like water-God, fire-God, air-God, and even God of dawn. Man became critical and began to rethink the old beliefs and practices. Instead of adoring nature man tried to control nature, subjugate nature and use nature for his own convenience and profit. As the civilization was uplifting, people were more and more engaged in the modification of the environment. In the early settlement of human life, when private property began to emerge, people were separated from nature and began to dominate it fully. This led to the fundamental shift in man's attitude towards nature. Nature was no more considered as having intrinsic value as holy or divine but as a mere means to the end of fulfilment of the interest of the human species. Nature was considered to have only instrumental value.

This led to the reckless use of nonhuman resources by man. As a result, the man in the last part of the 20th century began to think as to whether and to what extent man's perception of reality and his relationship with the rest of the creation is conscientious. The illicit consequences of man's subjugation lead to the exploitation of nature. These gave rise to serious disequilibrium in the state of Nature, which is felt in form of abnormality in the state of nature. On account of pollution of air, pollution of water, erosion of soil, warming of the

globe, holes in the ozone layer, lowering of the underground water level, it became imperative for man to revisit the paradigms that have regulated various developmental strategies.

There have been three different paradigms that explain the relationship between ‘man’ and ‘nature’ namely, Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism, and Cosmo-centrism.

The anthropocentric theory considers man as the centre point of the universe. A special preference has been given to man because of his rationality. On the basis of rationality, the distinction between man and nature has been made. Unaware of the real relationship between Man and Nature, for centuries down the time, it was thought that Man being the most evolved creature, remains as the purpose of creation. Everything else has been created by God for man, Man is given the explicit authority to rule over non-humans. By following this view, man will be the only conscious being and the environment become an object. So naturally, the environment is exploited by man for the benefit of his living. Anthropocentrism draws its rationale from the Semitic religions.

Anthropocentrism as an environmental paradigm was replaced by ‘Biocentrism’ which considers ‘life’ as sacrosanct. Healthy and optimal expression of human potential are possible only when man lives in harmony with other biotic species. This view recognizes the interest of other members of the biotic community. The human community is a part of a greater biotic community where each species interacts with the others. This interconnectedness contributes to the harmony of the whole system. Besides, the ecosystem constitutes a complex web of interdependent relationships among things and beings. Hence, there is no validation to accord a superior status to human beings even though human beings are superior to others on account of possessing a developed mind. This view indicates man’s obligations to the whole biotic community.

The main goal of this theory is to disburse our obligations from humans to all living beings. This is our moral responsibility to protect and promote endangered species. Paul Taylor advocates bio-centric environmental ethics. So humanity entails nurturing and respect for the life of others. According to Schweitzer morality means extended responsibility towards all living beings.

‘Eco-centrism’ is a step forward of the ‘biocentrism’ as it is based on the observation that the Biotic community survives with the support of the forces of nature like land, water, air, the ecosystem as a whole. For life to sustain itself and for species to multiply, it is necessary that the natural environment must be protected. The Land Ethic of Leopold draws our attention to the holistic nature of the cosmos where each thing or entity, both living and

non-living, are the rightful members of the totality. Its goal is to include all biotic and abiotic things and beings including soil, water, plants, and animals, or collectively the land into the moral consideration.

The deep ecology of Arne Naess holds a strong sense of respect for nature in its own right. The earth's biotic community (human and non-human) has an intrinsic value. Here self-interests of humans are integrated with nature. Man himself is an integral part of the ecosystem. Man and his environment are complements to each other. It forms a complete whole. In Gandhi's philosophy, there is an interpersonal relationship between human beings and nature. For him, the world is one single framework. That is why one of Gandhi's close associates R.R. Diwakar termed his thought as one of ecological humanism.

There is a major paradigm shift where each thing and being is accorded value in the cosmic system. These formulations find their maturation in 'Cosmo-centrism' where the cosmos is taken as a whole. It places the Cosmos as the central fact of any system or establishes the universe as the priority in a value system. Cosmo-centric perspective maintains that reality is not as it looks, things are not what they seem. There is a world out there that really exists and that is independent of our attempts to observe it and in fact independent of our very being. It is claimed that everything, tiny or big, moving or non-moving, is pervaded by one supreme entity (Brahman).

In another expression, it is said that the uniformities in the state of nature, moral spheres are only different expressions of the underlying order, Ṛta. Ṛta is the primordial creative force that regulates the cosmic phenomena both in its micro-level and macrocosmic dimensions. Ṛta, Satya, and Dharma are interchangeably used in different levels. Ṛta is formless, it is non-spatial and non-temporal. It is the binding principle that holds everything together. Even Gods and Goddesses are subject to the rule of Ṛta.

Hence in regard to the metaphysical harmony between all beings, man's concern should be to follow the rule of ṛta at the global level and this conduct should transform itself into 'reverence for nature. A man should have moral consideration towards the non-human world because the human existence and the existence of rest are rooted on the same axis.

Similar to the Vedic conception of Ṛta, other schools of Indian Philosophy have the viewpoint of the cosmic order. This order is conceived as Adṛṣṭa in Vaishesika and Apurva in Mimamsa philosophy. The diversities are nothing but varied expressions of one primordial entity which is the nature of truth, consciousness, bliss (Sachhidānanda). Therefore, every particular beginning from a tiny atom to a mega Galaxy is potentially divine and conscious. In this framework, everyone is to be construed as one's kindred and having value in them. It

refers to man's attitude towards nature. It is the 'world view' which lends rationale to the value systems. That constitutes the foundation of Cosmocentric ethics.

The concept of Lokasaṅgraha of Bhagavad Gitā pleads for Cosmocentric ethics. The notion of Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam does not plead only in favour of the human family but also one cosmic family. It looks upon 'environment' not in isolation in so far as it construes the whole reality, with the diverse creations, animate and inanimate, mobile and immobile, as integral parts of one family. The difference among things and beings is not one of kind but of degree. Things and beings differ in respect of names and forms. But they share an identical essence at the core. It provides a secure foundation for holistic ethics where each creation is accorded intrinsic value.

It is followed from the philosophy of different systems that, there is an underlying unity behind all differences of the surface level, in respect of which we are all identical. The greater our comprehension of essential identity and togetherness, the greater is the validation behind our reverence for the whole creation. The external world is nothing but the extension of the self within. Isopanished lays down the fundamental tenet of ethics, where it claims that true fulfilment and happiness consist in renunciation i.e. living for others.

Fact remains that just as in a symphony every tiny note contributes to the aesthetic relish of the melody; in the state of Nature, even a blade of grass has its participatory role in ensuring harmony of the totality. The myths and parables down the centuries are meant to infuse a sense of love, compassion, and empathy in us for the rest of the creation. Everything is holy and has its rightful place in the cosmos which is an organic whole. Therefore, there remains no room for one to live at the cost of others.

Conclusion

The main objective of environmental ethics is to develop a non-anthropocentric view instead of anthropocentrism by way of changing human's attitudes towards nature and natural beings. This attitude is to ensure equal justice to all biotic as well as abiotic communities of the environment by way of paying intrinsic value to all. The concept of the inherent worth of the natural system is fundamental for the cosmo-centric paradigm of environmental ethics, which finds absolute value in nature instead of the value of nature.

This is a paradigm shift of values from man-centricity to cosmo-centricity. Man as a part of nature, depends on nature for his or her existence. So, he is in nature and is in harmony with nature just as a part is within the whole. It urges man to look at everything as an essential part of the whole and calls for a protective mindset towards the objects of nature.

Everything is to be treated as Potentially Divine. Therefore, Cosmocentrism is the ethics for all beings.

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