

# “Can Environmental Ethicist ‘Solve’ Environmental Problems and Save the Nature?”

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**Abstract**—To talk of an Environmental crisis signifies that we are at a turning point, a period requiring insightful/intuitive thinking, creative/innovative solutions, and a transformation not only of actions, but also of spiritual, perceptual, and moral ethos. The Science and Environmental policies are the most commonly accepted options for dealing with this crisis. However, we must remember that each of these also has their respective limitations. It would be imprudent to assume that on their own they could effectively address and solve the current Environmental crisis. The Environmental crisis is primarily a consequence of human actions. Value systems inform actions. Therefore, we need to question our most fundamental values. We know that we all act in the way that contributes to the crisis, and thus we all are responsible for what happens to the world around us. Therefore the objective of my paper is to highlight that Environmental Ethics and human values have a vital role to play in sustainable development of the environment. Further it describes how they affect our ability to deal with environmental crisis that world faces in the present scenario along with science and legislation. The discussion is organized as follows: At the outset, I will enumerate some preliminary concepts, definitions and distinctions within Environmental ethics. Secondly, I will highlight the concept of Anthropocentrism in its weak and strong senses. Then in next two sections, primarily I will discuss Traditional main Ethical theories with their pros and cons with the help of examples followed by Virtue ethics as the best approach for Environmental crisis. And then finally sum up, by pointing out some measures of resolving Environmental crisis we are facing today. It is hoped that present study will help to outline a scheme of obligations for individuals rather than for states/countries, and go for a bottom-up solutions to these problems.

**Design/methodology/approach** -The paper will be analytical in nature and the data for this study has been collected from the secondary sources, which includes books, magazines, journals, periodicals and different websites.

**Findings-** In this paper I will try to address that instead of talking about “Sustainable development VS Environment”, we must talk about having “Sustainable development AND Environment”.

**Research limitations/implications-** Theoretical research.

**Practical implications-** To think of the possibility of celebrating each day as an “Environment day” and “Earth day”.

**Originality/value-** To abolish “Wait and Watch” attitude.

**Keywords:** Environmental Ethics, Anthropocentrism, Instrumental Value, Intrinsic Value, Utilitarianism, Deontological Ethics, Virtue Ethics.

**Paper type** - Research paper.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Environment is the surrounding, where we all meet, live, grow up, develop, interact.....one thing which we all share in common then why human mankind, who has been endowed with the rational mind, with the power to create, so that he can add to what he's been given. Till now he hasn't been a creator, but only a destroyer. Forests keep disappearing, rivers drying up, wild life's becoming extinct, the climate is ruining and the land is growing poorer and uglier each and every day. Environment is there to fulfill your needs and not your greed's !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

- Does it ethically acceptable for poor farmers in undeveloped countries to cut down forest for cultivation, even if this action harms the environment?
- Does it ethical for humans to continue to burn fossil fuels knowing that this action leads to air pollution and global warming?
- Does it ethically permissible for man to build dams knowing that this will disrupt the aquatic life leading to their extinction?
- Does a mining company have a moral responsibility to restore the natural environment destroyed by their mining techniques?
- Should we continue to cut down forests for the sake of human consumption?
- Should we deliberately/knowingly cause the extinction of other species?
- What are our moral/ethical environmental responsibilities to future generations?
- Should humans be enforced to live a simpler lifestyle in order to protect and preserve the environment?
- Whether we are merely saving the environment to save ourselves for a better future or saving it because it is the ‘right/ethical/moral’ thing to do?

These are among the questions investigated by environmental ethicists some of them are specific faced by individuals in particular circumstances, while others are general faced by groups and communities. Yet some others are concerning the value and moral standing of the natural environment and its non-human components.

In this paper, three main ethical theories are discussed and then it is left to the reader to decide which approach would be the best for environmental issues.

Before venturing to delineate the pros and cons of the aforesaid views, it is essential to put the discipline of "Environmental Ethics" in the proper perspective.

## 2. DEFINITION OF ENVIRONMENT AND ETHICS

In order that the discipline of Environmental Ethics can be properly dealt with, it is first necessary to define the terms Environment and Ethics used with in it. The word "Environment" may be defined as the 'collective term for the conditions/surroundings in which an organism lives, both biotic and abiotic. And "Ethics" is a branch of philosophy in which we look upon right/wrong, good/bad, and moral/immoral.

## 3. WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS?

Although philosophy has a long history of theorizing about the position of humans in the natural world, Environmental ethics as a branch of philosophy didn't really get its start until the early 1970s.

Environmental ethics is the philosophical discipline that studies the moral and ethical relationship of human beings to the environment and also the value and moral status of the environment and its non-human contents. Environmental ethics helps to identify man's moral and ethical obligations toward the environment. But Environmental problems are the result of human behaviour, and human behaviour is the result of human values, so human values become a factor when looking at environmental ethics. Human values are important to individuals, which they use to evaluate their actions or events. In other words, humans allocate value to certain things and then use this assigned value to make decisions about whether something is right or wrong. Human values are exclusive to each individual because not everyone places the same importance to each and every element of life. For example, a person living in poverty in an undeveloped country may find it morally acceptable to clean the forest for growing crops for his family. However, a person in a developed country may find this action morally intolerable as it increases carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere, which leads to global warming. Value systems inform actions. Therefore, we need to question our most fundamental values.

## 4. SIGNIFICANCE AND TYPE OF VALUES /MORAL STANDING

In Environmental ethics the distinction between *Instrumental value* and *Inherent/Intrinsic value* ("non-instrumental value") has been of substantial importance. The former is the value of things as "means", whereas the latter is the value of things as "ends in themselves" regardless of whether they are also useful as means to other ends. For instance, certain vegetables have *instrumental value* for pests that feed on them, since feeding on the vegetables is a means to survival for the pests. However, it is not widely agreed that vegetables have value as ends in themselves. Similarly, a person when teaches others acts as a means for those who want to acquire knowledge i.e. having instrumental value. Yet, in addition to this a person, as a person, has *intrinsic value*, i.e., value in his or her own right. Thus questioning our values is an invitation to consider the following two basic moral questions:

- (1) What kinds of thing are intrinsically valuable, good or bad?
- (2) What makes an action right or wrong?

We shall now have a closer look on Environmental ethical theories to answer the fundamental questions said above i.e. how humans ought to behave towards nature?

## 5. ANTHROPOCENTRISM (HUMAN-CENTERED)

*Anthropocentrism* is the position that holds that only humans possess *intrinsic value* and direct moral standing and everything other than humans have only *instrumental value* and that also for human's well being. Moreover, according to Anthropocentrism, environmental ethics and policies are motivated and justified exclusively on the basis of their effect on humans, without considering the non-human world. Further, they believe that it is either meaningless or pointless to extend direct moral standing to the nonhuman world.

## 6. TYPES OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM

There are two forms of *Anthropocentrism*: **Strong Anthropocentrism** which explains value in terms of satisfaction of subjective preferences, and **Weak Anthropocentrism**, which explains value in terms of objective preferences. Strong anthropocentrism gives importance to the satisfaction of immediate human needs and desires, no matter how trivial. Weak anthropocentrism on the other hand, maintain that not all human needs and desires are rational and thus recognizes the need to deliberate regarding established value-systems. The major drawback of anthropocentric theories is their focus on humans only. Being human-centered, these ethical theories are strictly limiting: thus, their moral criteria are unjustifiable.

## 7. TRADITIONAL ETHICAL THEORIES

Although there are many traditional ethical theories but my focus would be only on two main approaches: (i) *Consequentialism* (under which I am taking up *Utilitarianism*). (ii) *Deontological ethical theory* (under which I am focusing on Kant).

### 7.1 Consequentialism

Consequentialist ethical theories (utility principle) uphold intrinsic value/disvalue or goodness/ badness to be more fundamental moral notions than rightness/wrongness, and maintain that an action is right/wrong will depend upon whether its consequences are good/bad. From this standpoint, answers to question (2) are well versed by answers to question (1). For instance, *utilitarianism*, a paradigm case of *consequentialism*, provides an account of the ethical good as that, which produces the greatest good for the greatest number. According to this account an act is ethically acceptable if its consequences are good for the greatest number of individuals, and bad if they are not i.e. they are only interested in the outcome, the consequence, of an action. But it leads to a significant question: Does where actions are right or wrong depending on the outcome, solve the issues surrounding the Environmental ethics?

Moreover, utilitarian regards pleasure/the satisfaction of interest, desire/preference as the only *intrinsic value* in the world, whereas pain/ frustration of desire, interest/preference is the only *intrinsic disvalue*, and maintains that right actions are those that would produce the greatest balance of pleasure over pain. Non-sentient objects in the environment such as plant species, rivers, mountains, valleys and landscapes are of no *intrinsic value* but at most *instrumental value* to the satisfaction of sentient beings. Furthermore, because right actions, for the utilitarian, are those that maximize the overall balance of interest satisfaction over frustration. Does this system of maximizing pleasure over pain can be considered valuable when applying to Environmental ethics, because the action is considering the wide scope of people?

This question can be answered with the help of an example; Suppose if the government decided to plant trees to tackle the issue of global warming. Under the principle of Utility, they would be considering the maximum pleasure for maximum number of people i.e. majority, as opposed to themselves. The utilitarian would ponder up the long-term effects over the short term ones. On the other hand there can be an issue with the money. Some people would consider the cost of planting the trees very expensive to the economy they are in as the government has spent 4crores for this. Now, Is it more important for one government to save money over plantation or vice versa? Therefore it could be argued that although Utilitarian considers the maximum number of people while making the right action, but people can get affected on a wider scale that cannot always be guaranteed. Instead it makes sense

to opt for an ethical theory that is more practical/sensible in its method of dealing with the environmental crisis.

### 7.2 Deontological Ethical Theory

According to *Immanuel Kant's Deontological ethical theory*, ethics consist of a set of rules that one can never ought to break. Moreover they maintain that whether an action is right or wrong is independent of whether its consequences are good or bad.

According to Kant's Categorical imperative: “the moral worth of an action is not the result of the action, but whether the action has been taken for the sake of duty; that duty is respect for those moral laws that can function universally for all rational beings; and that the source of these laws is the unconditional worth of rational beings existing as ends in themselves” i.e. treat everyone as end in itself and never as a means. Kant's fundamental concern lies with the clarity and necessity of moral laws. Moreover, according to him the only intrinsic good is a good will, a will that is knowledgeable in its respect for universal and necessary laws.

Both, *Consequentialism* and *Deontological ethical theories* consider concepts such as “goodness” and “rightness” as essential to morality while giving importance and preference of one over the other. Their theoretical focus is so much on what kinds of things are good/bad, or what makes an action right/wrong. Furthermore, their focus is mainly on the metaphysic of value system by assigning *intrinsic value* to human beings (end in itself) and *instrumental* to species other than human being in the environment (means for human ends) i.e. anthropocentric approach. But for the sustainable development we need an ethical growth and development for which an agent is required who must be virtuous. But now again the pertinent question arises: What do you mean by virtuous agent? In order to answer this question there is a development of a recent trend in environmental ethics namely: *Virtue ethics*.

## 8. VIRTUE ETHICS

*Environmental virtue theory* began to appear in the early part of the twenty-first century as an alternative to anthropocentric approach. Environmental virtue ethicists suggest that we should concentrate our energies on the creation of virtuous people, or people of appropriate character/traits, instead of working on to determine which action is right or wrong and which is good and bad. If an agent is virtuous then the actions performed by him would automatically be ethical and moral. Traits such as kindness, honesty, sincerity, justice, respect, modesty, caring, and politeness are often advanced as the key virtues.

Virtue ethicist gave more clear-cut explanation of what is wrong with environmental destruction and what is good about environmental preservation. Although this theory is still in its early stages, its proponents hope that *virtue ethics* will be able

to show why people ought to act in a way that is environmentally accountable by pointing out the virtues manifested in environmental protection.

Environmental ethics seeks to examine human relationships within the natural world. As we have seen, in the past the emphasis has been on anthropocentric theories based more on duty and consequences, which has led to environmental ethics being somewhat unbalanced. *Environmental Virtue ethics* is a new approach, which attempts to meet the challenge of a non-anthropocentric theory of values, which assign the *intrinsic value* in every part of the environment, from the oceans to bacteria i.e. looks at our relationship with the natural world more objectively.

*Environmental Virtue ethics* does not ask why environmental preservation is important for humanity, but what characterizes an environmentally good person. It shifts the emphasis from duty and consequences to who we are and how we are to live in the natural world. *Environmental Virtue ethics* sees a virtuous life in nature as a necessary condition of human flourishing, *eudaimonia*. Extremes of behaviour are unhelpful both for the society and the environment.

## 9. MEASURES

- We should treat everyone on Earth as an “end in itself” and never as a means to someone else ends.
- We have no rights to reduce the serenity and diversity of nature, except to satisfy our vital basic needs and not our greed’s.
- Today’s human interference with the nonhuman world is unjustified, and the situation is rapidly worsening, so it should be decreased.
- We should value *life quality*, rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living.
- We should have alertness of the difference between the terms “Big” and “Great”.
- We should talk about Sustainable Development **AND** Environment instead of Sustainable Development **VS** Environment.
- We should abolish the attitude of “**Wait and watch**”.
- We should celebrate each day as an “**Environment day**” and “**Earth day**”.
- Science, Legislation, and Ethics needs to combine in order to address the crisis at hand.

I hope it is clear that our environmental problems will not be solved, and our world will not be saved, unless we understand that a sustainable, respectful relationship with the environment is a part of our good life and for which the need for a coherent, comprehensive, rationally persuasive environmental ethics is imperative.

In a way of conclusion it can be said that we believe that we are practical people. We also believe that to live a practical

life without an ethical vision to guide us is to live a life of moral impoverishment. Therefore the change or growth must be internal and self-motivated for long-term goals instead of short term.

After all, what we are doing to the environment is a mere reflection of what we are doing to ourselves and to one another and the environment is not something one can remove oneself from. In light of this, I conclude that environmental ethics can, and must, play an essential role in saving the world.

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