

Environmental Ethics: Between Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism

Introduction

Environmental ethics is defined as the moral relationship between humans and the natural environment (Buzzle 2011). It is an area of environmental philosophy that faces a lot of conflict due to the various subdivisions in terms of ethical perceptions. For traditional and religious views, some people believe that they were given dominion over nature's plants and animals to serve their needs. The idea of a human-centered nature, or anthropocentrism, explicitly states that humans are the sole bearers of intrinsic value and all other living things are there to sustain humanity's existence (MacKinnon 2007, p. 331). The 'ecological footprint' (Gaston 2005, p. 239) that resulted from humans' greediness has led over the decades to massive alteration in nature's balance, as well as to many recognizable environmental crises the world is facing today. By contrast, ecocentrism recognizes a nature-centered system of values, and extends the inherent worth to all living things regardless of their usefulness to humans (MacKinnon 2007, p. 336). It is believed that the human race has the responsibility to all biological life on Earth because, aside from being the most consuming species of all, they are capable of thinking and perceiving Earth as a whole. Humans' ill-treatment towards the environment is not only drastically altering the ecosystem, but also threatening humans' survival; researchers and scientists are aware that the end of the world is present some point in the future, and the only thing people can control is the rate of facing humanity's extinction. This essay will demonstrate different approaches to environmental ethics, and focus on the effects yielded on the environment as a result of humans' selfishness. In addition, it will deepen further to the fundamentals of how the human-nature relationship should flow in order to prevent possible exploitation.

Opposing environmental perceptions

Ecocentrism and anthropocentrism are recognized as one of the common ecological moral dilemmas (Korten Kampn & Moore 2001). People who hold an anthropocentric view acknowledge themselves as being the only most significant entities in the universe while disregarding animals and plants unless they provide life necessities such as nutrition, clothing, shelter and medical benefits (MacKinnon 2007, p. 331); consequently, human exploitation and abuse of the natural environment has been observed on a global scale. On the other hand, ecocentrism, the term conceived by Aldo Leopold (Leopold 1949), recognizes intrinsic value in all living things on earth regardless of their usefulness to humans. It also encourages people to respect and care for animals and plants for their own sake. Questions arise for why people fail to respect nonhuman species and mistreat nature just to enhance their living standards luxuriously. As cited in Wapner and Matthew (2009, p. 205), answers for such questions were proposed by various scholars who tend to blame Judeo-Christian tradition, modernity, capitalism and patriarchy (men's domination of women (Keller & Golley 2000, p. 6)) for orienting people to value nature for what it supplies to humanity which results in the heavy consumption of natural resources. The relationship between anthropocentrism and patriarchy, as proposed by Keller & Golley (2000, p. 6), is that they are both 'validated by the same conceptual logic', i.e. anthropocentrism and patriarchy encourage dominion over women and nature where they are disregarded in some decisions and negatively affected.

Anthropocentric practice: effects

The anthropocentric perception is widespread and is considered to be responsible for severe environmental crisis ranging from global warming, ozone depletion and water scarcity to the loss of biological diversity. Deforestation, for example, contributes to global warming where the trees-logging means less absorption of carbon dioxide, thus leading 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 (Wilson 2003). As taken from an anthropocentric view, people cut down trees to build houses, or provide jobs for low-income class; trees' innate value in this situation is ignored, therefore, destructive global outcomes emerge.

Deep ecology: Human-nature harmony

According to the inelastic principles of both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, the ability to make environmental decisions to satisfy both positions is difficult. Quite candidly, nature and humanity are devastated when anthropocentrism is practiced; and the conversion to ecocentrism overnight is impossible especially in the developed societies because of their heavy reliance on resources and generation of waste (Wapner & Matthew 2009, p. 212). Deep ecologists' platform claims that justification is made upon people only when their intervention in the natural wildlife is vital to human needs, i.e. for survival not for luxury (MacKinnon 2007, p. 339). According to George Sessions and Arne Naess's (coiner of the term Deep Ecology in Naess 1973) basic principles of deep ecology, they encircle anthropocentrism and ecocentrism by acknowledging intrinsic value in all nature's beings and allowing consuming species to benefit from what the environment offers to fulfill vital needs. For instance, interfering with the environment to build a golf course or a house patio is unethical because they are hardly essential for survival, not to mention the alteration caused to Earth and vegetation (MacKinnon 2007, p. 339).

As mentioned earlier, ethical decisions related to environment can be very paradoxical. In order to make the decision that would benefit humans and do no or reparable harm to nature, people must weigh up the possible consequences and determine which one is ought to take precedence (MacKinnon 2007). For example, extracting oil to produce energy is harmful to the ecosphere yet beneficial to humans for various applications like producing fuels and pesticides aside from economical gain. Setting forth the possible damages, it is conspicuous that choosing to use oil excessively as an energy resource is not an environmental-friendly action; therefore, striving to find an alternative energy resource is more of a deep-ecological mentality. After researches and efforts for a solution, scientists in this field were able to recycle restaurants' waste vegetable-oil to produce biodiesel to power automobiles (MacKinnon 2007, p.341). Applying the recycling process, we reduce natural resources consumption, and therefore regard the inherent value of nature. Some might complain that alternative energy resources, such as solar power, are expensive to obtain; however, using nanotechnology, flexible sheets of solar cells were invented with a much reduced cost than photovoltaic cells used today (Carlstrom 2005). Looking at the industrious development humanity has arrived to, it is agreeable to conclude that people are smart enough to find solutions for many challenges, yet sacrificing the effort is the step to take; unfortunately, it is not always possible because at times political and economical factors alter our inner decent choice. As globally recognized, people fail to take care of one another, and that is observed evidently through wars, where many lives are regarded worthless, and through the remarkable difference between social classes. Unless people

recognize the inherent value in every human being and transform this respect towards the environment, Earth will remain under threat (Wapner & Matthew 2009, p. 204).

Conclusion

In conclusion, if humanity is born with greediness, it is intelligent enough to see that it is only facing a dark future. Failing to take action towards the betterment of the environment will witness our irresponsibility over nature's species leading to ultimate extinction. Abandoning anthropocentrism is impossible instantly; however we can distinguish our nature-consumption outcomes and intervene when the need is vital to our survival, and not because it is a desire or interest. 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 ecocentric world and a better planet.

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