

Environmental Ethics: Nurturing Sustainable Development and Global Well-being

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Abstract

This article delves into the core principles of environmental ethics and various ethical frameworks, such as biocentrism and ecocentrism. It examines the complex interplay among intrinsic worth, inherent value, instrumental value, and moral considerations within environmental ethics. Furthermore, it delves into the philosophical underpinnings of these concepts to elucidate their impact on our understanding of the environment and our ethical responsibilities toward it. Additionally, it addresses the challenges posed by speciesist anthropocentric attitudes and proposes strategies to overcome these biases. The article underscores the necessity of embracing environmental ethics to achieve sustainable development. It stresses the significance of holistic approaches that prioritize the well-being of ecosystems and non-human organisms alongside human interests. Moreover, it underscores the pivotal role of environmental ethics in guiding ethical decision-making and fostering harmonious relationships between humans and the natural world, grounded in thorough analysis.

Keyword: Environmental Ethics, Biocentrism, Ecocentrism, Sustainable Development, Intrinsic Value.

Introduction:

Environmental ethics integrates philosophy, ecology, and ethics to assess our moral responsibility to nature. As humanity's impact on the environment grows, so does the necessity to comprehend and follow ethical norms while dealing with nature. This article explores the complexities of environmental ethics and its effects on human behaviour and decision-making. Environmental ethics challenges anthropocentric beliefs that put human interests first by valuing nature and its inhabitants. Biocentrism and ecocentrism emphasise the value of individual living things and the interconnectivity and integrity of ecosystems, respectively. By investigating these ethical ideas alongside intrinsic, inherent, and instrumental value, we learn about the many ways we might appreciate nature. Our understanding of environmental ethics

faces obstacles. Speciesist anthropocentricity, the view that humans are superior to other species and entitled to exploit them, hinders ethical harmony with nature. This bias causes ecological degradation, biodiversity loss, and non-human injustices. We must critically evaluate and deconstruct anthropocentric beliefs and attitudes to promote more inclusive and fair ethical frameworks and overcome these prejudices. Environmental ethics is both moral and practical in today's world. As we face climate change, habitat devastation, and pollution, ethical considerations must guide sustainable development and conservation. The concept of 'sustainable development' is well defined in the Brundtland Report as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland 43). development which serves the demands of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generations to maintain the standard of living and prevent environmental degradation. We may improve our interaction with nature by prioritising holistic approaches that balance human needs with ecosystem and non-human needs. Environmental ethics helps us understand the complicated ethical issues surrounding our interaction with the environment. By discussing biocentrism, ecocentrism, and speciesist anthropocentricity, we may increase our respect for nature and promote ethical decision-making that protects ecosystems. Environmental ethics is crucial for sustainable development and a more peaceful and equitable relationship with nature.

Understanding Environmental Ethics

Understanding environmental ethics involves exploring moral responsibilities towards the natural world and navigating intricate theoretical frameworks such as biocentrism and ecocentrism. This journey requires grappling with concepts like intrinsic/inherent value and instrumental value to foster ethical perspectives that prioritize sustainability and ecological integrity. Intrinsic/inherent value signifies the inherent worth of something regardless of its utility to humans, challenging instrumental views that reduce nature to mere means for human ends. Conversely, instrumental value regards nature as valuable primarily for its utility to humans, such as for resource extraction or economic gain. However, proponents of intrinsic value argue for recognizing nature's worth beyond its instrumental benefits, emphasizing its inherent value.

Environmental ethics encompasses a myriad of ethical concepts and theories designed to guide human behavior and decision-making concerning environmental challenges. It acknowledges the interconnectedness and mutual reliance of all living organisms and ecosystems, underscoring the significance of considering long-term environmental impacts and promoting sustainability. By comprehending these moral considerations, individuals can cultivate a deeper appreciation for the intrinsic worth of nature and develop ethical perspectives that prioritize the well-being of ecosystems and non-human entities alongside human interests.

Exploring the realm of environmental ethics literature reveals three primary normative theories: anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism. These theories predominantly govern the moral dynamics between humans and non-humans, shaping perceptions of environmental value and moral status. Each offers a distinct perspective on human interaction with the natural world and assigns moral significance to non-human entities. Anthropocentrism, in particular, posits that all other living beings exist solely to fulfill human needs.

Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism, prevalent since the inception of philosophy, asserts humans as the focal point of the Earth, often prioritizing human interests over those of other beings. In environmental ethics, while the focus is on human interactions with non-human nature, anthropocentric tendencies may persist, placing human concerns above ethical considerations. Etymologically derived from the Greek words "anthropos" meaning 'human being' and "kentron" for 'centre,' anthropocentrism embodies a worldview where all entities are perceived to serve human needs and desires. Frequently invoked in ecological discourse, the term critiques behaviors or attitudes that elevate human interests over the well-being of other living beings or the environment.

Anthropocentrism prioritizes aspects of human experience and assessment, stemming from Biblical teachings where humans are seen as unique creations in God's image. This worldview favors human interests at the expense of non-human animals and the environment. Modern philosopher Bertrand Russell's (1872 –1970) words when he said, "I am unable to believe that, in the world as known, there is anything that I can value outside human beings, and, to a much lesser extent, animals" (Butchvarov 1).

Anthropocentrism stands as a significant contributor to present environmental challenges. However, it's essential to differentiate between anthropocentric environmentalism as a whole and its problematic subset, species anthropocentrism, which promotes human dominance over nature. While perspectival anthropocentric sustainability, forming the foundation of anthropocentric sustainability, is not inherently flawed and supports sustainable development, it cannot operate independently. To truly advance, we must transcend species anthropocentric views and embrace environmental sustainability by extending moral consideration to non-human beings, thereby redefining sustainability. Contemporary ethical theories, such as biocentric and ecocentric sustainability, offer avenues for further exploration in this regard.

Biocentrism

Biocentrism stands out as a significant worldview, surpassing anthropocentric ideals, by extending moral consideration to the entire biotic community. It asserts that all living beings, including animals, possess inherent value and deserve equal moral regard. The term 'Biocentrism' comes from Greek: βίος, bio, means 'life'; and κέντρον, kentron, means 'center'. It refers to the life centric nature view in the environmental world view. This worldview, rooted in evolutionary understanding, posits that every life form, human or non-human, holds equal moral significance. Contrary to anthropocentrism, which prioritises human interests, biocentrism champions the idea that life itself is the focal point of existence. Renowned scientist Robert Lanza affirms that life and biology are fundamental to the fabric of reality, urging respect and moral consideration for all living beings. Proponents of biocentrism argue that safeguarding the environment is morally imperative for the survival of all living beings. They stress the interconnectedness of all elements in nature, highlighting the mutual dependence between humanity and the broader biosphere. The relationship between humans and nature is well described in the book *Justice, Society, and Nature: An Exploration of Political Ecology* as "the survival of the natural world is dependent upon what humanity does. At the same time, humanity remains completely dependent for survival upon non-human nature, that is to say upon our planetary biosphere and all its inhabitants" (Low and Gleeson 155).

Biocentrist, Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) posits that all living beings possess inherent value, necessitating our reverence for their lives. Accordingly, moral judgement should integrate this intrinsic value of life, making respect for life the cornerstone of ethical evaluation. He asserts that our moral duty is to safeguard all living entities endowed with intrinsic worth. Hence, from a moral standpoint, it becomes our responsibility to conserve all life forms on Earth. One's intellectual outlook shapes their attitude towards living organisms; for example, Schweitzer acknowledges that animals and plants may lack consciousness but nonetheless exist. Therefore, we must respect their lives. As Schweitzer says, “A man is really ethical only when he obeys the constraint laid on him to help all life which he is able to succour, and when he goes out of his way to avoid injuring anything living” (Steinbock 3).

Ecocentrism

Ecocentrism takes a broader approach by prioritizing the integrity and interconnectedness of entire ecosystems. This perspective recognizes that ecosystems function as interconnected systems where the well-being of individual organisms is inseparable from the health of the entire ecosystem. By prioritizing ecosystem health, ecocentrism seeks to safeguard biodiversity, ecological resilience, and the long-term sustainability of natural systems.

The ecocentric worldview argues that ethical consideration should extend solely to living beings, whereas ecocentric holism posits that ecological entities such as species, ecosystems, and biomes possess morally relevant attributes warranting ethical acknowledgement. While biocentrism only acknowledges moral obligation towards living beings, and recognises the moral worth of living organisms, it's essential to recognise that the health and survival of individual organisms depend on the abiotic components of the ecosystem. However, life-centered ethics overlooks the moral significance of abiotic communities, leading to a limited perspective on environmental sustainability. In response, a group of environmentalists advocated embracing the moral values of all ecosystem elements, whether biotic or abiotic, known as ecocentrism or ecocentric sustainability. This concept was pioneered by Aldo Leopold's holistic worldview, particularly expressed in his "Land Ethic," in which he holds the view about the human position in the ecosystem saying that “changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (Leopold 204).

Deep ecology, pioneered by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and further developed by Bill Devall and George Sessions, stands as a holistic perspective on environmental sustainability. Naess's deep ecology emerges as a pivotal global viewpoint in modern philosophy concerning environmental ethics, presenting a radical and comprehensive ethical theory. It posits an intrinsic interconnectedness among all entities, encompassing humans, non-humans, and entire biotic organisms. In deep ecology, moral considerations extend to all members of ecosystems, irrespective of their biotic or abiotic nature, while also acknowledging the intrinsic value of non-human species and entire ecosystems. Naess's seminal work, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement," published in *Inquiry* in 1973 and based on a lecture delivered at the Third World Future Research Conference in Bucharest in 1972, provides foundational insights into this philosophical framework.

Deep ecology must be contextualized within several ecocentric principles that shape contemporary environmental sustainability, transitioning from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric perspective. These principles, termed deep ecology principles, encompass the 1) Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favor of a relational, total-field image, 2) emphasizing the intrinsic interdependence and value of all ecosystem members. Biospherical egalitarianism 'in principle' asserts that all members of the biotic community hold equal moral value, recognizing the rights of all beings to exist and flourish, regardless of size or status. 3) The principle of diversity and symbiosis highlights the importance of biodiversity and symbiotic relationships in promoting ecological resilience and balance. 4) An anti-class posture opposes exploitation and dominance over other life forms, advocating for symbiosis and mutual flourishing within the ecosystem. In Naess' words, "The exploiter lives differently from the exploited, but both are adversely affected in their potentialities of self-realization" (Naess, "A Summary" 96). 5) Fighting against pollution and resource depletion underscores the need for ecosystem-based, holistic strategies to preserve environmental health and balance. 6) The principle of complexity, not complication, distinguishes between complexity and complication, emphasising the interconnectedness and integrated actions within the ecosystem. 7) Local autonomy and decentralization promote mutual understanding and adaptability within ecosystems, crucial for maintaining balance and minimizing external interference. The practical aspect of deep ecology is manifested in the deep ecological movement, which advocates for intrinsic value and rights of all beings, biodiversity preservation, population reduction, policy changes, and a shift towards emphasizing life quality over material growth.

Adherents of the movement hold ethical responsibility to work towards these necessary changes.

Promoting Sustainable Development through Environmental Ethics

Ecocentrism within environmental ethics is paramount for fostering sustainable development, acknowledging the intrinsic worth of nature and fostering interconnectedness between human activities and ecosystems. It promotes long-term perspectives on environmental management, enhancing the resilience and adaptation of natural systems while instilling ethical responsibilities towards the environment and non-human entities. By prioritising the preservation of ecosystems for their own sake and considering broader impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem services, ecocentric approaches offer a holistic framework for balancing human needs with the preservation of nature's integrity, ensuring a sustainable legacy for future generations. Promoting sustainable development through environmental ethics is essential for ensuring the well-being of present and future generations while preserving the integrity of the natural world.

Implementing holistic approaches that balance human and non-human interests is essential for sustainable development, as environmental ethics emphasises the interconnectedness of all life forms and ecosystems. By advocating for policies and practices that prioritise the long-term health and resilience of the environment, we can create a more sustainable and equitable future. Integrating ethical considerations into environmental policies, regulations, and development plans is crucial for ensuring that environmental protection is prioritised alongside economic and social goals. By incorporating principles such as conservation, equity, and intergenerational justice into policy formulation and implementation, we can foster a more ethical approach to governance and development, leading to successful and sustainable outcomes.

Conclusion

Environmental ethics serves as a vital tool for understanding and navigating humanity's relationship with the natural world. By integrating philosophy, ecology, and ethics, environmental ethics prompts us to examine our moral responsibilities towards nature, especially as our impact on the environment continues to grow. Through the exploration of complex ethical frameworks like biocentrism and ecocentrism, we gain insights into how to

prioritize sustainability and ecological integrity in our decision-making processes. Biocentrism underscores the intrinsic value of all living beings, while ecocentrism emphasizes the interconnectedness and integrity of entire ecosystems. By challenging anthropocentric beliefs that prioritize human interests above all else, environmental ethics encourages us to adopt more inclusive and fair ethical frameworks that consider the needs of both humans and non-human entities.

Despite the obstacles posed by speciesist anthropocentric attitudes, environmental ethics provides a pathway for overcoming these biases and promoting a more harmonious relationship with nature. By critically evaluating and deconstructing anthropocentric beliefs, we can work towards a future where ethical considerations guide sustainable development and conservation efforts. As we face pressing environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss, integrating ethical principles into policy and decision-making processes becomes increasingly essential. Through holistic approaches that balance human needs with ecosystem and non-human needs, we can strive towards a more sustainable and equitable future for all. Ultimately, environmental ethics is not only a moral imperative but also a practical necessity in our efforts to preserve the integrity of the natural world and ensure the well-being of present and future generations.

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