



Redefining Environmental Ethics in Perspective of Non-Anthropocentrism

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Abstract:

Whatever approach we take or from whichever angle we look at it, it is hard to purely look at the environment from what is called the 'non-anthropocentric' view. Human beings, directly or indirectly will always become the center of every discussion pertaining environment and nature. As being the rational and intellectually superior species among all others, Man has the upper hand in making rules and taking decisions. To put it simply, there are no representative from the other side to put forward their views. So, when we say maintaining 'balance' and 'harmony' in nature, how we should do it without human interference? Is maintaining balance all about maintaining equality? Who gives this equality and on what basis? We will focusing on these questions, trying to articulate the possibilities of having a non-anthropocentric world. And if at all, there is a necessity for all components of the nature to be equal.

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Introduction:

The relation between Man and Nature is a huge debate among philosophers and thinkers as well as a big question in front of us - the humans. To understand the relation between Man and Nature, we first have to figure out what is the value of Man in nature and what role do we play in the ecosystem. Broadly, there are two ways to look at it: the anthropocentric view and the non-anthropocentric view. The anthropocentric approach explicitly states that Man is the master and conqueror of nature. What the anthropocentric view does is, it gives the highest amount of moral consideration to the human beings and strips off the other non-human species and entities of any moral grounds or rights. Non-anthropocentrism, on the other hand, has various approaches of tackling the anthropocentric norms by widely claiming that Man is a part of nature rather than its master. First, it claims that non-human species should also be given ethical consideration and moral rights. Now, rights can only be given to someone who has a sense of justice. This judgment of right and wrong is possible through reason and

intellect. Undeniably, humans are rational beings and hence, deontologists like Kant, claim that only humans have the higher moral ground. When the non-human species do not have the sense of justice, they are just "resources".

But the reasoning that non-human species lack reason and that's why can be used however we wish, isn't reason enough. How? We will explore further.

Intrinsic Value: What Does it Mean?

The talk of intrinsic value and instrumental value is important when it comes to environment. An object having intrinsic value means that the object is an end in itself. Of course, this is applicable to human beings as we can voice out our opinions against injustice but what about the animals? Does this mean the animals actually do not have any voice? Or is it we humans who are ignorant towards their behavior and are only judging them by our own standards? On one side where deontologists claim that animals are inferior to humans as they cannot reason, utilitarians bring the parameters down to the ability to feel pain.

Thinkers like Bentham and Singer state that this speciesist approach that we are taking, must be stopped. It doesn't matter whether animals can talk or reason, what matters is if they can feel pain. All species of animals have their own special skills to detect and avoid potential danger. It clearly indicates they want to protect themselves from predators and more importantly, they have mechanisms to avoid harm. In a race for survival, they too are escaping from death in any way possible. It's not as if they do not have a voice, it is just that they can't communicate by human language. So, it's futile to say that animals don't have intrinsic value. Every living being has a basic interest of being able to live – the right to life. And this interest is confirmed by the ability to feel pain and pleasure. To put it in Singer's words, "The capacity of suffering and enjoying things is prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in any meaningful way."² We cannot decide on any basis that one species has more

intrinsic value than the other, nor do we have the right to.

Now, environment contains both living and non-living things that's called the biotic and abiotic components. Utilitarians approach doesn't concern itself with the abiotic components of the environment. Now the question arises, if the abiotic components of the environment like air, mountains and rivers possess any intrinsic value or not. These abiotic components that we are talking about are termed as 'resources' in economical terms. Economical structure doesn't concern itself with ethics, it is concerned with profit. So the talk of sustainability is problematic in itself. Why so? Because, when we talk about 'saving the environment' by sustaining the natural 'resources', we are again taking the anthropocentric approach. Because we are concerned with economical benefits and how it can keep the natural resources from exhausting completely so that humans can continue to live. Here, technically we are indeed talking about saving the environment, but not just for the sake

² See Singer (1993), especially chapter two, for an insightful analysis of this issue.

of it; rather, because our luxuries depend on it. So, again, do mountains and rivers and forests have their own self-worth? Here, the parameters of pain and pleasure cannot be applied to these non-living entities because, (a) they are not alive, and, (b) there is no method or way by which we can know if they have any worth in themselves. We may argue that apart from humans, all other living beings are dependent on these natural entities for their food and habitat. Marine life is dependent on water bodies like rivers; so, polluting the water bodies will be a violation of the rights of the marine life because they, being living beings, have some value. But where does this argument leaves the river itself? Sure, for once, humans are not included in this particular argument but again, this argument doesn't engulf the entire environmental spectrum by leaving out the rivers. Because when we talk about environment protection, we cannot just include the living beings and discard the non-living ones.

Equality and Harmony:

The above discussions about who has intrinsic value and who doesn't, raises

a very key concept - equality. When we say that a dolphin has less worth than a human being and the ocean has even less worth than the dolphin, we are actually questioning the equality between these three agents. Now it is indeed true that animals and natural entities are different from human beings in various aspects. But then, so is the case among human beings. Each human being is different. Some are intellectually a step ahead than the others and some are mentally disabled. But we still fall in the category of Homo sapiens and that is reason enough to say that all humans are equal irrespective of caste, race, gender, or color. Because we have this one characteristic in common- humanity. Similarly, despite of being different from animals or air, we all fall under the spectrum of the ecosystem and that should be reason enough consider them as our equals.

The 'harmonious' balance in the ecosystem we talk of can only be achieved when we see each and every component of the environment as our equal. Equality here doesn't mean that we all have to have rationality or even the ability to feel pain and pleasure. Just by being there, just by existing in

the nature, every element of it automatically possess their own value which must not be violated by anyone. Every natural entity, be it rivers, mountains, trees or animals, exist for a reason. It is also an undeniable truth that each and every component is dependent on each other for survival. So, we can't really think about protecting the environment without first thinking about ourselves. But there is a fine line between protecting the ecosystem for our greed and protecting the ecosystem for our need. Aldo Leopold's "The Land Ethic" describes this fine line as "love". He says "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."³ Land here means soil, water, forests and the entire ecosystem. Earlier, in the introduction section I mentioned that only those beings can have moral consideration, who have a sense of right and wrong. Leopold reverses this notion saying, "We can only be ethical in relation to something we can see, understand, feel, love, or otherwise have faith in." It

doesn't matter whether the other non-human beings have a sense of right or wrong, what matters is, we human do, and that's why it is more important for us to be ethical towards them. This concept of love and faith that Leopold raises can be traced back to the ancient Indian civilization. The concept of respect or *śraddhā* is deeply rooted in Indian traditions. We cannot commit an offense against someone or something that we respect. Respect here can be articulated as a form of gratitude, a self-surrendering of our ego to those whose favors cannot be repaid ever. How is this approach different from sustainability? Respect and love cannot lead to exploitation. That is why earth is portrayed as a Mother figure. It is not that the status of the mother figure is reduced to that of land, rather, the status of nature and everything it comprises of, living and non-living is uplifted to that of a mother's.

Indian philosophical schools believe that the physical body of every living being is comprised of the five

³ See Leopold (1949), his essay "The Land Ethic", for more information and in-depth analysis of the relationship between humans and environment.

elements: *prthvī* (earth), *apa* (water), *agni* (fire), *vāyu* (air), and *ākāśa* (ether). The physical body has inherent heat, it is 70% water, and it decomposes and becomes one with the soil. This shows how intrinsically the living beings are connected with the non-living entities because not only our survival but also the functioning of our physical body depends on these. These aspects sparks respect for the environment. Leopold points out exactly this that the relation between Man and Nature can be strengthened simply by caring about the land. These are not a set of rules that needs to be lawfully implemented in the society. These are fundamental virtues that must be nurtured from generations to generations to take full effect. There are differences and there will be differences. Point to ponder upon is, do we respect those differences enough?

Conclusion:

Non-anthropocentrism's sole purpose is removing human beings from the 'center' of the ecosystem. Yes, we are intellectually superior to all other beings and we are the ones formulating the laws for them but that is only

because it is our responsibility to look after them. What nature *doesn't* need is not our existence, but our interference. As a part of the ecosystem it is just natural that we will compete with other beings for survival. It is only natural to worry about our safety because we are sentient beings. What is not natural is when we start interfering with the natural laws to the point where there are consequences of irreversible climate change. When we interfere too much in order to satisfy our luxurious desires, we ignore the fact that other beings are also competing here for survival, just like us. This ignorance alters the natural cycles and we basically become a hindrance for nature. Now the question arises that to which extent should we interfere? Because human development is heavily dependent of these interferences. This is a whole new debate to work on as its fundamental question would be "What is meant by development?" But the core of all answers will be this: We ought to respect nature and the natural entities purely just because they exist.