

New Ecological Ethics
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Abstract

Different ethics address the relations of humans and the environment; some address the conditions of the environment. At present we are witnessing major ecological crisis evidenced by global climate change².

The crisis of homerian ethics in ancient Greece, which affected the survival of its society, lead to the critical reflection over agonal values and customs, by Socrates and Plato³. The current environmental crisis⁴ call for hard questions of what went wrong or what is going wrong⁵.

This paper briefly looks into the ecological crisis and proposes a hard look and critical reflection. Starting from existing ethics including ecological ethics, it will review the state of play and move towards a new ecological ethics.

I call it new, although important environmental and ecological ethical schools and well known thinkers and ecologists like Lovelock, with his famous Gaia Hypotesis from 1979, have discussed the problem of environmental crisis. The critical conditions we are in, suggests the need of a different approach. Long and Byzantine debates and discussions have resulted in international conventions and protocol. Stabilization is promote, assuming life to be static. The loss of direction and clear objectives has resulted in a North - South confrontation. Definitions of industrialized vs. non industrialized are blurred, such as the case of large industrialising countries. Clichés and simple labels like 2°C continue to mislead people.

The new ecological ethics is a necessary critical reflection about the current ethos that has brought nature to a state of ecological crisis. Current arrangements have failed to address the core problem, the cause of global warming and the necessary measures to stop it from causing more damage. Scientific and political compromises have weakened action. Proposed solutions are shaped to benefit the strongest but weak enough to accommodate all parties.

Methodologically this paper follows the path of realism and applied ethics.

1.0 Back ground

Ethics, ⁶ is a major branch of philosophy. It provides critical reflection of the values and use of concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, and responsibility.

1.1 Taxonomy and placement

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² IPCC reports Feb 2, 2007and April 11, 2007.

³ See Klosko George, 2006, "The development of Plato's political theory", Oxford University Press

⁴ Generally acknowledged with regards o climate change.

⁵ Despite International Convention and Protocol focused on climate change and the use of market mechanisms, ghg emission continue to grow and the negative effects to inflict pain and sufering

⁶ from the Ancient Greek *ēthikos*, the adjective of *ēthos* "custom, habit".

Ethics has a long story; its western tradition starts with the ancient Greeks and continued through Rome. Classical philosophy took for granted the existence of human nature expressed in form of moral law and the direction that man had to follow to reach moral excellence. Later philosophical systems uprooted reason from human nature and laid the foundation for decisions only in reason. Others denied the existence of human nature asserting that man was a mere result of culture. Some others, without denying human nature, defended the impossibility to know it and did not consider anymore the subject of human nature a question of philosophical interest.

Environmental ethics, born some years ago focuses its reflection in nature, as much in environmental nature as in human nature, to proclaim the necessity of becoming aware of the attitude of man towards itself and its environment.

From a Meta-ethics perspective, there are two main strands of thought that attempt to explain what ethical values and claims are actually about. These theories may be derived from theology or naturalism. Methodologically, this paper follows the path of realism. However, it recognizes that reality is important in shaping the human choice of ethics directly through people assessing and debating the likely consequences of their actions.

This paper will not dwell or attempt to explain what ethical values and claims are about.

We are dealing with ethics, because it is a critical reflection of the current ethos- which we consider inadequate. Our daily human actions, customs and habits in procuring energy, transport, air travel, industrial production like steel, cement etc. emit greenhouse gases, while there are cleaner and better alternatives for energy (renewable energy and maybe fusion) and processes, including energy efficiency.

The current crisis, according to the general scientific opinion, is manifested by irreversible climate change of anthropogenic origin which has direct negative effects on the environment and in particular the climatic system. The last few years have witnessed the denial of the CO₂ causality of global warming and thus climate change. We believe that a new ecological ethics will help restore the direction lost by generalized rejection of basic physical and chemical laws that show the CO₂ causal link to global warming.

The 21st century sees a new epoch and perhaps our last opportunity to redirect our business as usual mores.

2. The problem

Ecological crisis leads to destruction and deterioration of nature. Causality has been useful in re-directing and correcting actions. The evident is difficult to deny but it can be rationalized. An ecological ethics will help uncover causality beyond the narrow political or economic interests.

The environmental crisis we are experimenting now is the result of the accumulation of green house gases emitted primarily from burning fossil fuels. During the past 100 years the use of fossil fuels proved beneficial for progress and civilization but the price, as it turned out is high. The effects of the green house gases emitted have been known⁷ for some time. Its cumulative effects are now causing irreversible damage. Although alternative sources of energy are available and new ones can be developed, the relative low cost of fossils have prevailed in the preference of society. The current ecological crisis calls for mandatory cleaner and sustainable sources of energy.

Suitable solutions come with changes and opportunities, always have, with generally positive outcomes. Carts and carriages were replaced by automobiles, typing machines by computers and lots of labour by machines. New opportunities from retooling and retraining... the same will happen now. Replacing CO₂ emitting sources by clean renewable energy sources fusion (perhaps), solar hydrogen, geothermal, tidal power, bio fuels... among many available solutions is the rational way to go but there is always resistance to change, fear of the new ..??. new industries, new enterprises... old ones need to adapt... for the common good.

Even with existing ethical frames and ethical references, society has continued to pollute. This has progressed unrelenting despite legal frameworks and activist action. The main drivers have been the large private interests and human greed, in a context of economic and scientific uncertainty.

Fear of change coexists with attitudes that take for granted that nature will recover given time. For many doom will not occur in their lifetime. We are all connected. There is universal interconnectedness so the damaging effects are truly global. Its effects are felt specially by those countries and communities that pollute the least.

We are in a quagmire, the large and industrialized countries and business have a different perspective of the urgency for change. There are entrenched vested interests with reactionary stances. Medium size countries have expressed their intent to achieve development and industrialization asserting their right to do so, while the small and least developed countries scramble for funds to adapt. Adaptation to the negative effects of Climate Change is needed. But, Who will pay?, to Whom?, Which are the sources of funds?

Rawls under his distributive justice considers that poverty and the diminished capacity to adapt it is the consequence of corruption. We are indeed in a sad quandary.

⁷ In 1824 Jean Baptiste Fourier describes natural atmospheric green house effect; Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius in 1896 alerted that anthropogenic CO₂ emissions could cause global warming. American physicist Roger Revelle in 1957 alerts about continual increases of CO₂ concentration in Earth's atmosphere.

3. Environmental / ecological ethics

Aldo Leopold in "The Land Ethic"(1949) explicitly claimed that the roots of the ecological crisis were philosophical.

Ethics has helped to analyze human use of Earth's limited resources. This view should be extended to the use or misuse of the large common global spaces like the seas or the atmosphere. A growing trend has been to combine the study of both ecology and economics to help provide a basis for sustainable decisions on environmental use, such as ecological footprint and bioregional autonomy with possible integration into Gaia philosophy⁸.

Environmental ethics as part of environmental philosophy considers the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Its influence is felt on many and diverse disciplines including law, sociology, theology, economics, ecology and geography. Society is permanently confronted with many ethical decisions with respect to the environment. Such as:

- a) To what degree we can or should use natural resources, forests, fisheries or minerals for the sake of human consumption?
- b) Should we continue to use fossil fuels that emits green house gases, while there are zero-emission technologies?
- c) What environmental obligations do we need to keep for future generations?

The academic field of environmental ethics grew up⁹ in response to the work of scientists such as Rachel Carson and events such as the first Earth Day in 1970, when environmentalists started urging philosophers to consider the philosophical aspects of environmental problems.¹⁰

In the Journal of Applied Philosophy (1993) Alan Marshall writes of a natural ecological balance between the living entities and the inanimate that existed for centuries. Marshall considers that the rapid industrialization, since the Industrial Revolution, has led to major imbalance.

The growing concerns about global warming underline the general acceptance that current mores, business as usual, needs major revision as a matter of vital importance. However, it is the grounds upon which one justifies the argument for or against reformulating and rephrasing sustainable development as the subject of ethical debate, and this invariably includes a personal stance about the true nature of the environment and the rights of all living beings. The environment per-se constitutes the minimal and necessary conditions that sustain life and makes possible attain quality of life.

⁸ Lovelock, James, 1979, "Gaia".

⁹ Two papers published in Science had a crucial impact: Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" (March 1967) and Garrett Hardin's "The Tragedy of the Commons" (December 1968).

¹⁰ an essay in Aldo Leopold's A Sand County Almanac, "The Land Ethic," in which Leopold explicitly claimed that the roots of the ecological crisis were philosophical (1949)

Ecological ethics is an ethics based on the conviction that man is part of nature and that nature should be regarded as a value for its own sake, in its own right.

The past decade has seen an explosive interest in topics such as: ethics of the environment, moral dimensions of nature, dignity of nature. This trend is also expressed within the Philosophy of Law (civil Romanist tradition). However, there still remains the traditional dichotomy between an anthropocentric view vs. and eco/biocentric stance.

There have been many attempts to categorize and justify the importance of the preservation of the environment.¹¹ Schumacher, E F. 1977, recognized that; “humanity cannot live without science and technology, but also man cannot live against nature...” John Passmore 1978, expressed his concerns about human responsibility towards nature. He was weary about leaving the solutions of the ecological crisis only to science. For Edward O. Wilson, “humanity is destroying nature. It is necessary a change of attitude.”

Despite differing views, from diverse ethical schools, all are in agreement that humanity is not only the result product of history and culture

4. **On equity**

The term equity as fairness (UK) and justice according to natural law or right; specifically freedom from bias or favoritism (US), is used broadly. In the context of the climate change debate, it includes historical responsibility and the right to development.

The fundamental form of human association is the face to face community in which ongoing commitments are the rule and in which aspects of every individual’s experience are conditioned by the continuing membership. To effectively pursue ecological ethical action, we must recognize that human association, under the contractualist view is not only the “social contract”, but a “natural contract” into which persons enter as parties for the purpose of obtaining symmetrical gains and common ends.

The discussion initiated puts into motion a preliminary phase in the consideration of what constitutes ethical issues associated with the protection of the environment as a set of conditions needed to sustain life.

Rawls considers that a criterion of global justice must be sensitive to international and economic inequalities. An adequate response to the historical CO2 emissions by industrialized countries should be based on the global difference principle. The right question concerns the political values served by the international bodies on behalf of nation-states which in turn represent their own people.

All humans should have equal chances for survival and welfare, security, life.

¹¹ Alan Marshall and Michael Smith are two recent examples of this, as cited by Peter Vardy in "The Puzzle of Ethics".

Rawls neo contractualism, defends the view that poverty is caused by the incompetence corruption and tyranny of the underdeveloped. Pogge counters that current global order produces a stable pattern of poverty and uncompensated exclusions. For Pogge, every human being has global stature as an ultimate unit of moral concern. Climate change is the largest source of inequality.

4.1 The equality principle.

Causality offers a level platform to base the equality principle. The equality principle applied to anthropogenic global warming stipulate that “all molecules of CO₂ released to the atmosphere contribute to global warming. Therefore, all and every molecule should be accounted for.”

4.2 Common responsibilities

We propose, based on Pogge`s Global Resource Tax, that every emitted CO₂ molecule create an economic liability that will be offset by payment to a universal fund, administered by the UN. To account for different rates of industrialization or development payment can be deferred but the liability is recognized and kept.

The so called historical emissions will also be accounted for.

6. New ecological ethics

New ecological ethics is applied ethics, part and parcel of environmental ethics. It aspires to find answers to vital questions.

In 1974 John Passmore posed the question whether the ecological crisis need a moral or metaphysical revolution. Our answer is yes!

Following Leopold with his “Land ethics”, we concur with the need of constructing new relationships between society and the environment. There is a need to re-interpret existing tenets and its means of explication.

New ecological ethics proposes a new paradigm vs. direct and concrete measures. Its tenets are close to the deep ecology (Arne Naess).

Boockhin, 1982, asserted that: “the actions against nature originate on the deep domination of men over men”. To protect employment, workers join with business to oppose conservationist measures. The physical world is somehow dependent on the summation of behaviors. Wrong behaviors are leading us to destruction and pollution of nature.

New ecological ethics values nature and the environment not only from an anthropocentric point of view, because it may be indispensable, useful or enjoyable to humanity, but for its own sake, its own right. Its protection is for its intrinsic value as a set of conditions that allows life in all its forms.

It is not a conscious attempt to critically appraise and counteract the adverse by-products of the scientific enterprise but to question and reformulate the attitudes of good natured benevolence and decorum directed towards an unstable natural environment. Marcuse acknowledged as truth that, “...technology by itself is not sufficient.”

New ecological ethics is based on science and philosophy. It is an ethic that recognizes the ultimate value of nature. New ecological ethics recognizes people’s rights and obligations to nature, as we all receive indispensable goods and services from nature.

If we are to consider a moral imperative to counteract environmental destruction, then the use of fossil fuels in a way that emit greenhouse gases should be discontinued. Here, its depletion is not under scrutiny but its mere use vs. zero-emission alternatives.

As greenhouse gases have accumulated in the terrestrial atmosphere until now, an ideal sudden cessation of anthropogenic CO₂ emissions would not correct the on going damages, due to natural inertia. However, the natural homeostasis processes would start to operate, if we act now.

For new ecological ethics, human nature is an integral part of nature. J. Dewey asserted: “we need to link morality with human nature and both with the environment to address and confront the deep and complex problems of life.”

7. Conclusions

- 1) Environment per-se constitutes a set of conditions to sustain life now and in the future.
- 2) For new ecological ethics, human nature is an integral part of nature and equal to other forms of life.
- 3) New ecological ethics values nature and the environment not only from an anthropocentric point of view, because it may be indispensable, useful or enjoyable to humanity, but for its own sake, its own right.
- 4) The ecological crisis calls for a critical reflection on the mores of business as usual.
- 5) New ecological ethics addresses the major ecological crisis of global warming, which produces climate change, with a different perspective to overcome current limitations.
- 6) New ecological ethics addresses equity, as used by the international climate change convention, from the perspective of the equality principle.

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