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## Man-environment: The inter-relation

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### Abstract

The word environment is derived from an old French word 'Environ'. This means Circle. According to Gisbert, "Environment is anything immediately surrounding an object and exerting a direct influence on it". Hence, the word 'Environment', consists of the physical, biological and socio-cultural environment. Man is intimately related to this Environment. He is so much related to the Environment that his acts have come under the purview of ethics and hence the name "Environmental Ethics". In this connection, it can be said that Ethics is a branch of Philosophy. It deals with man's action. The discussion of Ethics is sub-divided into 3 fields – Normative, Descriptive and Meta-Ethics. When we try to apply Normative Ethics in everyday life, we come to Applied Ethics. Environmental Ethics comes under this discussion. It is a type of Applied Ethics. The discussion of Environmental Ethics clarifies and distinguishes the difference between Intrinsic value - Instrumental value, Valued Object – Valuing Subject. It clarifies whether value is subjective, does value pre-suppose a valuer? What is moral standing? What kinds of things have moral standing?

Philosophers differ with respect to this last question and different theories have come up viz. Anthropocentrism, Non-anthropocentrism, Bio-centrism, Individualism, Holism, etc.

In the end, it is concluded that Environmental Ethics has a future, as long as there are moral agents on earth and the value of these agents are at stake in their environment. Environmental Ethics can be developed by appreciating nature for its own sake.

**Keywords:** Man, environment, ethics, anthropocentrism, non-anthropocentrism, biocentrism, individualism, holism

### Introduction

We often visit mountains, forests and beach to seek inspiration, to get rid of the monotonous daily life. While visiting these places we often keep back our computers at the hotel rooms. We find no need to carry such fancy technology with us. We intend to "feel" the nature. At the same time to climb up the mountains and roam in the forests we need "state-of-the-art boots"<sup>[1]</sup>. We carry our DSLR Cameras and mobiles with us. After the day's outing we thank our guide as well as the van and other technological developments that have made it possible for us to be there and enjoy ourselves at the lap of the nature.

In our daily life we face different types of problems. We try to gather confidence and inspiration from nature, hence the need to save mountains, forests and water bodies. Environmental ethics teaches us how to enjoy the world, as well as fix it.

The word "fix" is tricky. It has double meaning. On one hand, it means repair or improve. On the other hand, to fix is to stabilize, so as to prevent further change. Problem lies with this second meaning. Ecologists are not fixed. Actually they cannot be, because the essence of the eco-system is that, it is a thing always in flux. But it is the nature of human beings that they are nervous about the things that are in flux. They are more secured when, things are fixed. Hence, they try to fix the eco-system. Man invariably fails in this endeavor. Ecosystems evolve, so as human society. In this process of evolution, something gets decayed and lost. We find this in the lament of our past generations, we do also lament to our future generations. There is probably no generation, that did not view its world, as going to hell. But it is a matter of fact that, we still remain to be humans.

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<sup>1</sup> Willcott Elizabeth & Schmidt, "Why Environmental Ethics?", Oxford University Press, 2002

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### **Environmental ethics, as a branch of philosophy**

The discipline 'philosophy', can be typically divided into three sub-fields – Metaphysics (The study of fundamental nature of reality), Epistemology (The study of knowledge and how we acquire it) and Ethics (The study of goodness and rightness). The study of ethics is guided by certain pre-suppositions. These are

- a. Humans are more or less rational beings capable of understanding the world.
- b. Humans can act on the basis of what they understand.
- c. Human action can serve a purpose. They can make a difference.

### **Ethics is sub-divided into three subfields**

1. Normative Ethics – It is the study of rightness in action and goodness in states of affairs.
2. Descriptive Ethics – The study of opinion or beliefs about normative ethics.
3. Meta Ethics – The study of meaning and pre-suppositions of moral theories and moral language. It asks what it would be like to justify a moral theory.

From the above discussion, it is seen that normative ethics formulates theories about what is right or good and meta ethics states back to study normative ethics itself. When we try to apply the result of normative ethics, we enter into the domain of applied ethics. The primary area within applied ethics is medical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics to name a few. While medical ethics and business ethics are studied in different professional schools and form professional ethics, environmental ethics is not the study of ethical issues specific to any particular occupation. Environmental ethicists rather apply normative ethics to a particular set of practical issues. It is in-fact a new way of doing normative ethics. As we all know, one way of doing philosophy is from the arm chair. Environmental ethicists do not prescribe this. Rather they actually intend to find out how the real world actually works.

Now let us try to understand the work of environmental ethicists by the help of a thought experiment. Thought experiments are imaginary experiments that help us to accept or discard a theory. Thought experiments are used in cases where actual experiments are either difficult to perform or cannot be performed.

At a conference in 1973, Richard Sylvan proposed a science fiction thought experiment that helped to launch environmental ethics as a branch of academic philosophy. The thought experiment is known as the "Last Man Argument". The thought experiment goes like this:

Let us suppose that Ram is the last human being on earth. He shall die soon. When he is gone, the only life remaining will be plants, microbes, Invertebrates. For some reason Ram thinks that "Before I die, it would be nice to destroy the Last remaining Redwood, just for fun".

This thought experiment leaves us to think whether it would be wrong to destroy the Redwood? If Ram destroys the Redwood nobody will get hurt. Then where is the problem?

Environmental philosophers have been trying to answer these questions since then. In this effort they have found that answer to the above questions require addressing certain issues. The issues are discussed as follows

### **Instrumental value and intrinsic value**

The most fundamental question in environmental ethics is "What should be our attitude toward nature?". All environmental ethicists as well as others regard nature as a reservoir of natural resources. They differ over what kind of respect nature commands from us.

There are many objects that are useful because they are means to achieve further ends. They are valuable as tools or instruments. They do not have value of its own. In environmental ethics, this sort of usefulness is referred to as an object's instrumental value. In contrast to this, there are objects that have value apart from its usefulness to achieve further ends. These objects are said to have intrinsic value.

For example, even if we have no interest in that last redwood, as a source of timber we might value it simply because, it is a majestic living thing. If we value redwood, in this later sense, then we see it as having independent goodness.

So one of the main tasks of environmental ethicists is to find out the value in question and act accordingly. The question needs to be precise – Does the last Redwood have intrinsic value?

### **Valued object and valuing subject**

When an object is valued, it is pre-supposed that, there is a valuer, i.e a subject who is valuing. Valuing is a sort of relation between valued object and valuing subject. Instrumental value and Intrinsic value both are a kind of relation, but of a different kind. An object has instrumental value to a person when it is useful to him and an object has intrinsic value to a person, when the person sees it valuable in its own right.

Coming to the discussion of the thought experiment stated above, one needs to think that when the last person is gone, there will be no valuing subject left. Therefore, there will be no one to whom the last redwood will be useful. So, there will be no possibility for the redwood to have instrumental value. Regarding the intrinsic value, it can be said that since no one is left. Who can value the redwood for its own sake. When no one is there to value it, it is same as having no value.

### **Is value subjective?**

This question naturally follows from the above discussion, when it is said that valuing is a relation between valuing subject and valued object, it is clear that value is not purely subjective. It is objectively true that redwoods have the properties that inspire one to think of them as intrinsically valuable. That is they are alive, they are old and huge. At the same time, there are people who do not admit any aesthetic value of redwoods.

When we talk to valuing as a kind of relation, relation can be recognizing of a pre-existing relationship or creating a new one. The pre-existing relationship consists of the fact that given our nature and objects nature, there is reason to value the object even though the object is not known.

Regarding the last redwood, question arises is it an objective fact that there is reason to value redwood? If so, is the reason discovered (pre-existing) or created?

**Does value pre-suppose a valuer?**

Suppose the last person is gone. There is nobody to find the redwoods. In this situation is it meaningful to say that redwood would command respect? In a world where there is no conscious being whose respect would it command? Are redwoods that sort of thing which has value to conscious beings but does not have value in a mindless world?

There are some theorists who would say that we should rather stick to the question whether the last redwood commands the respect of the last person? This is independent of whether the tree will have intrinsic value after the last person is gone. There are other theorists, who would insist that the world will be a better place with the last redwood in it, regardless of the fact that, there is no one left to appreciate it. Now question arises, what difference does it make?

There is no easy way to settle the debate. The problem lies with the word "value". It is used in more than one way. Sometimes, it is used as verb, for example "I value redwood". In this sense, value pre-supposes a valuer. At other times, it is used as noun. Here the relation between value and valuer is less clear, for example "Redwoods have value", is another way of saying "I value redwoods". When I say the mindless planet would be a better place with the last redwood in it, it is same as saying that, I have some reason to value the last redwood. It is not the fact that the last redwood, would be valued by the beings on that planet. This is the scenario in the thought experiment. Where does this leave us? We are obviously in deep, treacherous philosophical waters. This leads to basically two conclusions:

1. When anyone says that the last redwood has intrinsic value, he is not saying that, he or anyone else is there to respect it, but
2. He is saying that, if he was there he must have respected it.

So, if anyone asks whether the last redwood has value, the answer depends on the perspective of the person answering. This position can be explained by a practical situation. We often make insurance policy for our children to make them financially secure, when we are gone. We do not think that, when we are dead we are gone, we will cease to be sentient valuing creatures, so no need to think of them. On the contrary those who think in this way are referred to as confused. The point that is being discussed is, what matters most is the present situation, we imagine a world where we no longer exist. When we say we value our children's financial security in that world, we value it from the present perspective. So valuing in a way does pre-suppose a valuer.

**Moral Standing**

After all these discussions, the fundamental question is what should be our attitude towards nature? Nature is composed of humans, non-humans, living and non-living. Many theorists have thought that, it is not possible for the non-humans to have the same sort of moral standing like the humans. Things with moral standing are the things to whom we have obligations (or are dutiful). Does a redwood command respect in the way a person commands respect? If the last redwood is destroyed just for fun, would it be like destroying a person for fun?

There are theorists who admit nature either has moral standing or not. But there are other theorists who accept an intermediate position. To them, moral standing comes in degrees. For example, trees have some moral standing while people have more.

**What kind of things have moral standing?**

Having intrinsic value does not lead to the possession of moral standing. Almost everyone agrees that persons have moral standing. Different theorists explain this in their own way. Some theorists say that the difference between plants and paintings is that, plants have lives. The difference between plants and animals is that, animals have perspectives. What separates humans from other animals is that humans have principles. They have the unique capacity of self-conscious moral agency.

Question arises, what is the connection between having the capacity of self-conscious moral agency and having a moral standing? Self-conscious moral agency is sufficient for moral standing. But is this connection necessary? Suppose, for the sake of this discussion, we admit that there is a necessary connection, would that imply that only humans have moral standing?

This question leads to two stand points – Anthropocentrism and Non-anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the view that, only humans have moral standing. Non- Anthropocentrism, on the other hand holds that there are at least some non-humans that have a capacity for self-conscious moral agency. Non – Anthropocentrists disagree among themselves in admitting, which non-humans have the capacity of self-conscious moral agency. Then there are animal liberationists like Peter Singer, who reject the view of Anthropocentrists. To them, sentience or the ability to feel pain and pleasure is a more properly inclusive basis to grant moral agency. In their view, the realm of moral standing extends to all sentient beings. There are still other thinkers, who extend moral standings to all living things. These thinkers are called bio centrists. Bio-centrists like Paul Taylor is of the view that, not only that all living things have moral standing, they are of equal standard.

Apart from these differences, there is also a difference between holism and individualism. Individualism is of the view that, only individual living things can have moral standing. Holism on the other hand states that individual beings are not the only kind of things, that can have moral standing. Bio-centric holists like Aldo Leopold believes that the most serious environmental issues concern not the suffering of individual animals, not respect for individual plants but rather the preservation of species and the whole eco-systems i.e the Environment.

Holism and individualism is similar to Anthropocentrism and Non- Anthropocentrism. Each have certain important perspectives and key insights in their discussions. Hence, all these discussions are important. It is a matter of fact that, much can be gained if we cultivate a bio-centric appreciation of nature. By appreciating nature- just for its own sake- is how environmental ethics can be developed. We learn to appreciate the world where we live in and learn how to live in a world of never ending disagreement about what we owe to each other and to our environment. We are free to choose how we want to live.

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