

Progress and Prospects of Environmental Ethics in the Contemporary Society

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Abstract: Ethics is the philosophical study of morality. Ethics can be viewed as understanding the foundation and structure of morality regarding how we should live. The term “applied ethics” is used in practical sense to find moral solutions to the problems in society and it is an attempt to solve, or rather to point out problems in professional ethics. Environmental ethics is relatively a new branch in applied ethics. In environmental ethics, all the questions are raised in the context of global level. Therefore, environmental ethics is concerned with public morality or societies actions over nature. The questions raised in environmental ethics are having a global character. These questions demands actions not from one individual or group of individual as in the case of most inquiries in professional ethics. This paper is an attempt to capture the evolution, development and prospects of Environmental Ethics in the contemporary society.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Normative Ethics, Applied Ethics, Environmental Crisis.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethics is the philosophical study of morality. Ethics can be viewed as understanding the foundation and structure of morality regarding how we should live.¹The terms moral and ethics denote the idea of custom. Although these terms have different origins, philosophers use these terms interchangeably. Ethics can be defined as systematic understanding of moral concepts that justifies theories and principles of right behaviour that guides individuals and groups on how to behave in society. According to Peter Singer, an ethical issue is ‘relevant if it is one that any thinking person must face’². In this sense, environmental issues are more relevant today. Ethics is not a bunch of principles that everyone should follow in society. Rather, it guides and allows being a rational agent in society.

The interesting fact about ethics is that on the one hand it does not come under the category of scientific study and on the other hand, even scientific study comes under the realm of ethics. Ethics is not a scientific study in the sense that there is no scope for proof and demonstration as in science and mathematics. At the same time, ethics can be over and above science and scientific study in the sense that it urges us to be humane in all our scientific endeavours. The general notion about all areas of knowledge is that if it is not scientific or demonstrable, then there is no use of it. Ethics breaks this dogma and it is proven time and again that ethical orientation in scientific discipline is must. However, that simply does not mean that ethics is a code of prohibitions. In the pre-modern period, ethics was under the hands of theologians and they used ethics as hegemonic tool.

Ethics has been rapidly changing with modern times. The scope and definition are being broadened along with modern society. Prominence and importance of ethics is increasing day by day. As no society is static and problems related with it also cannot be static, ethics as well is not static and has been addressing issues with different perspectives. Since the introduction of ‘Applied Ethics’ in philosophical discussions and debates, the role of philosophy is becoming more and more vital to the society as a whole. The definition of philosophy is expanding day by day. Applied ethics, especially environmental ethics has provided a new vision and a “new eye” to the blind materialist world. With this “new eyes”, man is seeing new perspectives which were unfamiliar to him even though that existed before him. Although such new

perspectives are not new in Indian philosophy, we consciously or unconsciously neglected such pieces of wisdom in our run towards wearing the 'westernized mask'. In fact, the word *Darsana* in Indian philosophy itself denotes seeing or experiencing. Therefore, experiencing nature and becoming part of nature also become an integral aspect in such perspectives.

To be precise, environmental ethics in its broadest terms is an attempt to find solution to the problems with regard to the environment being faced by the world. The most important task before environmental ethics is not to find solutions to all the problems in environment, but in presenting the problems themselves. Environmental ethics as an academic discipline in its initial periods succeeded in creating awareness about the problems to the mankind. The goal and role of environmental ethics is not to teach us or warn us that we should be concerned about our environment. There is already growing literature in this area and we are already concerned about our environment. The main focus of environmental ethics is on the moral foundation of environmental responsibility to our environment. It is also about ascribing values to the non-human world. This paper is an attempt to capture the evolution, development and prospects of Environmental Ethics in the contemporary society.

II. ETHICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

A. Evolution of Environmental ethics

The term "applied ethics" is used in practical sense to find moral solutions to the problems in society and it is an attempt to solve, or rather to point out problems in professional ethics. Environmental ethics is relatively a new branch in applied ethics. Some of the important events that paved the way for environmental ethics in the west are as follows.

1. Reformation in academic curriculum in philosophy

Environmental philosophy first came to be noticed as an academic discipline in the west in the context of curriculum reform. Philosophers who were divided and debated on the basis of their theories and deliberated on normative and meta-ethics started to think about applied philosophy. Subsequently, applied philosophy was formulated in order to bridge the gap between meta, normative and practical ethics. As a result, numerous subfields came under applied philosophy. The most important ones among them were medical ethics, environmental ethics and business ethics.

2. Misuse of Science

Instead of concentrating on humanitarian measures, science has fallen in the hands of business and violence. Modern scientific, political and cultural ethos have denied recognising long term values and politicians used science to capture power. They were limited in thinking beyond next elections. Their policy focused mainly on higher production and higher export and thus, higher profit. As science and technology expanded its horizons, the demand for controlling its evil practice became more and more prevalent. The rapid development is visible not only in technology but also in the opportunity to use the technology. These rapid developments in science and technology pushed the existing ethical frame works to the back seat. Consequently, instead of engaging in critical self-reflection of its own methodologies, ethics started responding from the part of society. It started to assess social and political implications of technological development. The result was the evolution of "applied ethics".

3. Excessive anthropocentric view and ecological deterioration

The root of anthropocentric view is that human beings think that they are above nature's laws. They used science only to discover the ways, methods and devices to govern nature and to modify and improve its laws for the sake of human beings alone. Ethical, social and cultural laws built by nature over thousands of years are being destroyed in mere 5000 years of scientific and technological experimentation. Men destroyed old bond of tradition between man and nature and now, they struggle to create a new bond in vain, with the help of violent scientific methods. As an outcome of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) 1992, everyone felt the need for a new ethics which has its own moral commitments to environment. These moral commitments were matters such as bio diversity ought to be preserved, environmental policies should be formulated along with the lines of environmental ethics, and barring of nuclear weapons. The apprehension underlying in all these commitments was the single concern regarding environment.

It is clearly evident that environmental ethics is gaining much higher priority in the contemporary human society. Moreover, environmental ethics is the crux of the concept sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development first articulated by the World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, through the famous

Brundtland report entitled, 'Our Common Future', reveals about a sharp shift in our thinking on the concept of economic development, which had assumed that natural resources are inexhaustible and are available to be exploited for human welfare. Sustainable development is now seen as that process of development which meets 'the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'³.

This concept of sustainable development is an important concept in the sense that it works as a connecting link between ecology, economics and ethics. On the ecological front, sustainable development is preservation for future development. On the economic stand point, sustainable development work for minimum and optimum use of natural resources. On the ethical view point, sustainable development means reminding about future generations right to use natural resources.

B. Contemporary ethical sources in environmental ethics

Meta-ethics

The major concern of Meta-ethics is the status and nature of ethical claims. It is the discussion about ethics itself. Cambridge dictionary of philosophy explains Meta-ethics as follows: "To a large extent, the general studies of goodness and right action and special studies of applied ethics consists in systematizing, deepening and revising our beliefs about how we ought to conduct our lives. At the same time, it is characteristic of philosophers when reflecting on such systems of belief to examine the nature and grounds of these beliefs. These questions, when asked about beliefs, define the field of Meta-ethics"⁴.

The controversies in Meta-ethical theories include discussion of environmental ethics also. The influence of meta-ethical disputes in environmental ethics is visible when we consider the relationship of humans to a non-human world. According to Stephen L. Darwall, the domain of meta-ethics is abstract philosophical issues that falls under four different kinds⁵ as follows.

- a) Questions in the philosophy of language concerning the meaning and content of ethical judgments.
- b) Related issues in the philosophy of mind concerning what mental states ethical judgment express or what it is to hold an ethical view.
- c) Metaphysical issues concerning the possibility and nature of ethical truth and Epistemological questions concerning the possibility and nature of ethical knowledge and how we can justify our ethical views.

The meta-ethical issues about environmental ethics, like issues about intrinsic/instrumental values, fall under the fourth category.

C. Normative Ethics

Normative ethics can be broadly defined as principles and concepts that are put forth in support of ethical judgments. The examination of normative ethical theories is unavoidable in any ethical conflict. This is because of the vital feature of ethical concepts that they are reason-oriented. Normative ethical theory is the crux of moral discourse in society. It is about "what is to be valued for itself"⁶. The development of normative ethics is most crucial in the history of environmental ethics. Before the development of normative ethics, the main focus of ethical theories was man and his attitudes. However, as normative ethical systems grew, it opened the chances of applying ethical categories to areas in which they were never thought of. Therefore, development of normative ethics expanded the scope of the subject to non-human domain.

D. The Global Crisis

The 21st century is becoming a century of problems. The world is facing with almost every kind of crises. This century can be witnessed as the reward for human deeds in the past centuries. The most serious threat is related with environment. As Fritj of Capra says that "the survival of humanity and of the planet are at stake, concern about environment is no longer one of single issues, it is the context of everything else, of our lives, our business, our politics"⁷. The problems related with environment are going to affect every sphere of human activity, from cradle to tomb. If one asks whose fault this is, it can be argued that simply because a selected group controls all modes of production and distribution and such elite group is entitled to use tools of destruction at his own will, it is destroying the whole planet. A tiny minority who is at the helm of power is exploiting the majority. This exploitation started from nature, when colonialist used their subjugated people for exploiting the wealth of nature.

By analysing all the ecological movements, one can very well reach to the conclusion that all these movements were successful in a limited manner, in the sense that we could not materialise such movements to a unified massive one. It was either confined to one particular country and area or fragmented in pieces. There may be exceptions as well, but still it is not projected in detail and that does not solve the problem. The problem lies in tact, unaffected and untouched by the cries of science and technology in particular and humanity in general.

A UNESCO publication on environment rightly states that imperfect understanding of natural systems and mechanisms which make possible the maintenance of life on earth, disregard of the unintentional effects of technology in particular, the various terms of pollution, poor management of the soil, forests and water, unbridled consumption of forest fuels, uncontrolled urbanization, the relegation of rural population to a marginal position; and the crushing of traditional values these are the most obvious and the most frequent disadvantages of the change that is taking place in relation between man and his environment. While analysing the present day problems in relation with environment one can broadly reach to the point that, “If the present growth trend in world population, industrialization, pollution, production and depletion of natural sources continues, the net result will be a sudden extinction of species, which bores the brunt of human atrocities as is happening now and the destruction of whole earth as unfit place to live.”

However, it is not as dark as it appears, since it is still possible to alter such negative growth trends and rearrange ecological stability in tunes with sustainable ecology for future. There are both positive and negative results. The positive outlook is that there is already advancement in creating environmental awareness. Thousands of activists across the world are toiling for educating the masses. There is not only one path; there are hundreds of ways of doing it. There are hundreds of movements that are engaged in different parts of the world for recreating a better world and making citizens aware about their role in such movements. There is no complete failure or complete success like situation. Each battle is a well fought one and no victory is small one.

The negative news is that isolated protest and ecological movements are not going to help nature greatly. Targeted, result oriented action is needed and co-ordination of all movements are very crucial. There is no need to teach the world that there is environmental crisis. Merely lamenting about the crisis is not the end of the problem. The problem did not start all of a sudden in a day or two. The services provided by ecological systems to humanity cannot be measured with any scale, as these services are integral for human welfare. Neglecting such services is a crime. Such negation is characterized as ‘philosophy of exemptionalism’ by Edward. O. Wilson.⁸ The philosophy of exemptionalism argues that there is no point in agonizing about past, humanity is a new order and progress cannot be blocked in the name of spices, scientific and technological genius will find another way. He reminds us:

Human advance is determined not by reason alone but by emotions peculiar to our species, aided and tempered by reason, what makes us people and not computer is emotion. We have little grasp of our true nature, of what it is to be human and therefore where our descendants might someday wish we had directed space ship Earth. Our troubles arise from the fact that we do not know what we are and can not agree on what we want to be. The primary cause of this intellectual failure is ignorance of our origins; we did not arrive on this planet as aliens. Humanity is part of nature, a species that evolved among other species. The more closely we identify our selves with the rest of life, the more quickly we will be able to discover the sources of human sensibility and acquire the knowledge on which an enduring ethics, a sense of preferred direction, can be built.⁹

As the Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki explains the concept of “exponential environmental destruction as that “environmental problems not grow in linear fashion, one step at a time. None of us can see all of them. An ecosystem may be attacked in a thousand ways, from a thousand sources. But because the assault is not a strict progression you can monitor, the ecosystem may look fine one day and be dead the next”¹⁰. Similarly, Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke, authors of seminal work “Blue Gold”, gives some important instances of environmental degradation which is worth noticing:

Thousands of miles away in China, the dangers of drought became a theme of one of myth, in which a great archer shot down nine out of ten suns to prevent the earth from drying out. Chinese tradition also held that water and other elements of earth exist in a balance that should not be disturbed. If there was a disruption in the normal cycles of nature, Chinese governors were called upon to alleviate the problems. They were expected to help make up for the harm done to crops by reducing taxes or by distributing grains from the countries. Store houses, today, the normal cycles of nature are disrupted by climatic change and the abuse at almost every water system on earth. However, unlike governments that followed the

*Chinese tradition described above, our governments are abdicating their responsibility to protect and conserve water and they are handing its management over to the private sector.*¹¹

The instances like this which are occurring in different parts of the world show the alarming situation that the world is facing today. There is a well known saying that the next world war will be a war for water. United Nations themes on Earth day was “wanted seas; dead or alive”. The ecological crisis in today’s world has proven the fact that man has altered and broken the divine relationship with nature without making a new one. Eco-crisis is an example for man’s thirst for more. It is a kind of war waged against himself, without realizing man as a part of nature. It is reflected in the above instances, i.e. the contamination of air, water and soil.

So far, the developed countries used the advancement of technology for harvesting nature. Their catchword for development was “nature made for man”, but now the world has realized that the true guiding principle for nature is “nature and man-made for each other”. The optimism created by industrial revolution is today being displaced by the pessimism regarding scarcity of natural resources. This pessimism created a new cultural attitude. Concerns about nature have been arising all over the world. The so called techno-industrial social value system is put in question. This has resulted in wide range discussions about nature. There is a systematic attitude towards nature among the thoughtful people. The world is looking for a solid philosophical base to give an impetus to such an attitude.

Such a philosophical basis is being provided by environmental ethics. Environmental ethics addresses the normative significances of the relationship between human beings and their non-human environment. The task of environmental ethics is so huge that it has to address the environmental problem from a new angle. It has to correlate all the basic problems regarding man and environment. Observed from this view point, there are five practical issues which are needed to be addressed before dealing theoretical aspects. A practical philosophy should be able to provide practically viable solutions in a rational manner. The five practical issues that need to be tackled by environmental ethics are as follows:

1. Population
2. Poverty
3. Technology
4. Policy frame work and political perspectives
5. Culture and values

These five issues are intrinsically interconnected and become core issues for dealing environment related problems. The task of environmental ethics here is to address these issues from a practical point. The above issues may seem nothing new, but along with globalization, these issues are becoming more dangerous and the time to tackle this is becoming lesser.

E. Science and Ethics

From the beginning of civilization to present day society, man continues to dominate the earth using two powerful tools namely scientific advancement and technological achievement. In the beginning of modern society, man used science as knowledge and gradually transferred it into power. Now, the same role is overtaken by technology. Man has been working with his scientific knowledge and technological achievement to meet his target with which he defined and redefined development. Nonetheless now, there is an impression that such development is development through conflict. There is a difference between growth through conflict and growth through co-operation. In the case of growth through conflict, the main problem in relation with environment is that to what extent could we expect that countries with low economic growth follow principles of ecologically sustainable development. Economists and political leaders of the country will advocate for development first and environment second. However, it is overlooked that with regard to growth through co-operation, environment and development can go side by side mutually fulfilling each other’s aspirations.

Consequently, one of the negative approaches to science is that its method of looking at problems, scientific method and scientific approach to the problems are engaged in pinpointing a certain problem in its own context and resolving it in its own sphere without considering the total eco system concerned. Science is actually an enquiry of human insight into the working of nature through reason, observation and experience. Remarkably, Ethics is defined as discipline dealing with what is good and what is bad and also with moral duty and obligation.¹² In this sense, it coincides with science. Therefore, it is interesting to critically analyze the area of convergence between these two disciplines.

Ethics impinges on every human activity, while science is human in essence. It is an unwritten rule that science in all its applications and practices should be adhered to ethics or should be coherent with ethical principles. Such ethics or ethical principles should be cross culturally valid and secular in values of integrity, equity and distribute justice among others. The harmonious relation between ethics and science is affected when there is no coherence between these two disciplines. We cannot reject the development of science simply in the name of ethics. In the past, religion played a major hurdle in the path of science leading to progress. Now, the scientists often argue that ethics has taken that role. Such an allegation is contrary to reality. Whenever science diverts its path from human welfare to human destruction, it is the duty of ethics to bring it back to the path of human welfare to lead it to spiritual and material prosperity without affecting anyone. Ethics should come down from theoretical abstraction to practical aspect. We need such a system of ethics that addresses and checks unhuman scientific practices. Since today's science and scientists are far away from life preserving activities and very near to a life destroying activities, it is integral to have a watch dog to monitor.

The halo of 'scientific imperialism' also needs to be removed. Scientific imperialism claims that science is capable of answering all the important questions about man and his place in nature.¹³ The role of science and technology in making the world as a global village is an undisputed fact. Nevertheless by making the world into a global village, the mindset of man also got narrowed. The present day man has lost his humanistic character. It is obvious from the fact that each countries are competing with each other for acquiring knowledge about weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Each country is eager to destroy her enemy country. The industrial revolution created a dogma that the only way to achieve prosperity is through exploiting nature. Man used the words 'exploitation' and 'conquering' mainly in relation with nature. According to Caroline Merchant, "what scientists are doing today is not life furthering or life preserving but life destroying with physicists designing nuclear weapons that threaten to wipe out all life on the planet, with chemists contaminating our environment, with biologists releasing new and unknown types of micro-organisms without really knowing what the consequences are, with all these activities occurring, it seems that it is most urgent to introduce ethical standards into modern science".¹⁴

The main aim of introducing such ethical standards in modern science is not to put a check on scientific progress but to introduce and promote welfare oriented science. The main reason behind such life-destroying scientific practices is that we separated value system and cultural standards from science. Prior to scientific revolution, cultural standards and value oriented science dominated and were the driving forces behind scientific experiments. With the introduction of scientific revolution, values diverted from facts and the dogma that science and technology are totally independent of life-oriented value system became prominent. It is the duty of ethics to remind science and scientific community that they are not only responsible for their intellectual pursuit but also morally responsible for the aftermath of their scientific activity.

As B.M. Hedge opines, Pascal was the first person in scientific community to proclaim that there are two important aspects of man's life that are vital to his actions.¹⁵

- 1) Exclusion of reasoning activity in man's dealings.
- 2) To believe that there is nothing beyond reason.

These two are the dangerous aspects that science and scientific community are facing today. Both of these aspects have a direct or indirect link between science and philosophy or science and ethics. The alienation of philosophy and philosophers from mainstream society has helped scientific discoveries to advance in undesired directions. This alienation is not particular to science but to the whole society. Philosophy concerns a lot of different positions. There are philosophers who defend materialism and consumerism, but it is difficult for a philosopher or a concept to get into the public sphere. The main reason for this tendency is that the media is dominated by commercial interests. Another important fact is that philosophical discussions failed to relate to people and everyday lives of people. If we look at into the history of philosophy, it was not always that way. There were Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Mill and alike philosophers who were always engaged in public sphere.

The biggest ethical issue that the world is facing now is about inculcating ethical perspective, primarily with human development approach and largely with nature itself. Science and technology are tools that should be used to raise productivity, standard of living and for reforming social structure. At the same time, ethics is a discipline which has its deep roots in value system and culture which helps to retain the balance between tradition and modernity. Therefore, the right combination of both is the need of the hour.

III. CONCLUSION

Compared to all the other sub fields in applied ethics, environmental ethics is the most concerned area with human actions in the society. In environmental ethics, all the questions are raised in the context of global level. Accordingly, environmental ethics is concerned with public morality or society's actions over nature. The questions raised in environmental ethics are having a global character. These questions demands actions not from one individual or group of individuals as in the case of most of the inquiries in professional ethics. In the case of bio ethics or medical ethics, the questions are to be tackled by professionals who are having a better understanding of the problems. Instead, in the case of environmental ethics, even the layman can contribute something positive to the problem. The very concept of environmental ethics is primarily concerned with awareness in society.

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