

# Role of Ethics in Nature-Human Relationship: a Pragmatic Inquiry

## Rola etyki w relacji natura-człowiek: podejście pragmatyczne

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### Abstract

Primitive people, in their initial struggle for existence, must have found Nature to be a formidable force to reckon with. Our ancestors eked out their means of survival from the abundant bounties of the ancient world with the meager tools at their disposal and sometimes tried to placate Nature by worshipping her. The earth was a rich mother and the needs of the early people were few. With time the ever increasing demands of humankind were matched by their growing power to wreak destruction and havoc. They destroyed forests and dug into the earth with unrestricted abandon in the quest of greater wealth and enjoyment, slaughtered every type of life for food and even for the mere pleasure of killing. Human beings remain the only predator that kills the young adults of a species, damaging the reproductive capital of the latter. Philosophers have argued against the wanton destruction of the earth's resources. That these warnings have been largely ignored is apparent in the danger signs that have started to raise a question mark on the future of life on this planet. Therefore, these ethical theories are needed to be analyzing in a pragmatic point of view of their applications. The tendency of the theories is to concentrate on the former and take the latter for granted. This creates a gap between knowledge and application of environmental ethics. There must be some aspects other than worldviews that affects human behavior. We proceed with a pragmatic theory of ethics which takes into account the practical aspects and strengthen it further with a psychological probe into the aspects responsible for creating the gap.

**Key words:** environmental ethics; environmental behavior and habits; ethical theories; pragmatism; pragmatic environmental ethics

### Streszczenie

Ludzie prymitywni w swojej początkowej walce o byt musieli uznać Naturę za potężną siłę, z którą trzeba się liczyć. Nasi przodkowie szukali środków do przetrwania dzięki obfitym dobrodziejstwom starożytnego świata za pomocą skromnych narzędzi, którymi dysponowali. Czasami oddawali Naturę cześć. Ziemia była bogatą matką, a potrzeby pierwszych ludzi były niewielkie. Z czasem coraz większym wymaganiom ludzkości towarzyszyła rosnąca siła siania zniszczenia i spustoszenia. Niszczono lasy i kopano ziemię w poszukiwaniu większego bogactwa i przyjemności, mordowano każdy rodzaj życia dla pożywienia, a nawet dla samej przyjemności zabijania. Istoty ludzkie pozostają jedynym drapieżnikiem, który zabija młode osobniki dorosłe gatunku, niszcząc jego kapitał reprodukcyjny. Filozofowie sprzeciwiali się bezmyślnemu niszczeniu zasobów Ziemi. O tym, że ostrzeżenia te zostały w dużej mierze zignorowane, świadczą znaki ostrzegawcze, które zaczęły stawiać pod znakiem zapytania przyszłość życia na tej planecie. Dlatego te teorie etyczne należy analizować z pragmatycznego punktu widzenia ich zastosowań. Teorie mają tendencję do koncentrowania się na pierwszym, a drugiego przyjmowania za oczywistość. Tworzy to lukę pomiędzy wiedzą a stosowaniem etyki środowiskowej. Muszą istnieć pewne aspekty inne niż światopogląd, które wpływają na ludzkie zachowanie. Kontynuujemy pragmatyczną teorię etyki, która uwzględnia aspekty praktyczne i wzmacnia ją dodatkowo sondą psychologiczną dotyczącą aspektów odpowiedzialnych za tworzenie luki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** etyka środowiskowa; zachowania i nawyki środowiskowe; teorie etyczne; pragmatyzm; pragmatyczna etyka środowiskowa

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## 1. Introduction

Nature-Human disjunction is evident when we look around us. The growing pollution of land, air and water, the destruction of the forests, the ozone layer depletion, global warming, acid rain, extinction of species, etc. are only to name a few of the problems that we have brought on ourselves (Gare, 2006). Environmental problems have escalated to such heights that scientists have called the situation a *crisis*, or more specifically an *environmental crisis*. It goes without saying that much of the problem, though not all, has been human contribution in the name of development. In this context the statement of Barack Obama the president of United States of America, *We only get one planet, there's no Plan B*, acquires significance. Be it the pollution generating machines or waste disposal of industries or even the regular activities of individuals like using a plastic bag, all point to indifference in human attitude towards nature (Medina, 2007). If we do not make an effort today, there might not be a tomorrow to give us a second chance. The paper deals with the gap between environmental knowledge and behavior, the failure of the theories of ethics to address this issue and some possible ways of bridging this gap. The introduction is mainly a statement of the problem. It states the fact of present environmental degradation, of human dependence on nature on the one hand and human indifference to nature on the other. One of the major causes of such inconsistent human behavior is the tendency to evaluate everything in economic terms. The value of an object is how much we are required to pay for it. There seems to be a spillover of such an attitude even in case of things that are not economically evaluable, like air or water, to the extent that we forget the distinction between *free* and *priceless*. Nature is not free but *priceless*, considering how much depends on it. Nature is the origin and source of sustenance of life in the planet.

The theories of environmental ethics prescribe different ways of healing the dysfunctional relationship between nature and human beings. The theories, in spite of very logical and convincing arguments, fail to impress the general public at least to the extent of being adopted in real life. As such they remain a fiction to be discussed but not implemented. Any theory of applied ethics must take into account two things: its arguments must be logical and persuasive. If it has persuasive arguments, it should be able to motivate actual behavior and the changes in behavior. This necessitates a pragmatic analysis of the ethical theories from the point of view of their applications. This gap between theory and application also necessitates a psychological probe into factors that can affect environmental behavior. Finally, keeping in mind the failure of the theories in their applicability and the factors that can affect environmental behavior, a few pragmatic strategies, namely *bioregionalism*, *early childhood education for sustainability* and *metaphors and anthropomorphism* would be suggested to bridge the gap. Therefore, Ethical theories are important to study in order to establish a strong foundation for decision making and it is primarily concerned with what kind of people we should be, what kind of characters we should have, and how we should act. This directly develops one's character and pro-environmental attitudes to wisely use the natural resources; more specifically, preserve the natural environment which ensures the environmental sustainability.

## 2. Theories of Environmental Ethics: Defending a Pragmatic Viewpoint

This paper includes an analysis of the different theories of environmental ethics: the traditional theories of ethics, the theories of environmental ethics as well as some recent developments, from the point of view of their applications. The basic contention is that there exists a gap between theory and application and that applied ethics should also concentrate on the application of the theories over and above the theoretical disputes. First, however, we have to see where the theories fail in application to get an idea about how the role of ethics can be developed to include the applicability of the theories.

## 3. Traditional Theories and Environmental Ethics

The section discusses the possibility of extending the traditional theories of ethics like consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics to include environment. The traditional theory that environmental ethicists are most skeptical about is *Consequentialism* (Brennan & Lo, 2002). Their undue stress on *pleasure* or *interest satisfaction* leaves no scope for including organisms incapable of experiencing *pleasure* or *interest satisfaction* within the moral sphere. Deontology, although, initially developed as an anthropocentric theory, can be extended to include intrinsic value of nature, as shown by Christine Korsgaard (Nuyen, 2011). However, practical application of it fails because of its stress on duties. The duties to environment are not as easily seen as duties to fellow human beings. For instance, when our children are hungry, we do not stop to think about what our duties would be, but act instantly to provide them with food. However, when it comes to duties to environment, our habits are quite the reverse. We do not think twice before throwing garbage on the street or in a water body, using plastics, etc. Habits are best developed in childhood and hence childhood learning would have an important contribution to make in this sphere. Regarding virtue ethics, it is sometimes thought that, since its central concern is human flourishing, it cannot help being anthropocentric in nature. However, it may also be developed in a way to include environmental values as a part of human flourishing. But the role of

environmental values in the development of human character is again not as easily seen as the role of virtues like honesty, kindness to fellow humans, etc. Thus the inclusion of environmental behavior in determining human flourishing would require a change in basic understanding of these notions leading to the desired change in perception and attitude. A change is required in our semantics, in commonly used metaphors, which constitute the basic framework in which we think (Reddy, 1979).

#### 4. Practicality of the Theories of Environmental Ethics

This section analyses the theories of environmental ethics, especially their practicality. The important theories of environmental ethics include anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the view that only human beings deserve direct moral concern, other animals, organisms or nature is valuable depending on their value to human beings (Batavia & Nelson, (2017). It is controversial whether such a theory can be the ground for an appropriate environmental concern. Anthropocentrists argue that protecting nature for the sake of its instrumental value to human beings is accepted more easily by the public than intrinsic value of nature (Hargrove, 1992). Biocentrism is the view that all living beings deserve equal moral consideration. Absolute biocentrism is not practical since some utilization and use of the natural world is necessary for continuity of human or any life (Curry, 2011). Animal Rights refers to that string of arguments which include only animals, usually higher animals, over and above human beings in the sphere of moral concern (Garner, 2013). For instance, Peter Singer's criterion for moral consideration was *sentience*. Peter Singer has captured an important strand of human psychology (Singer, 2013). Human beings seem to be able to empathize with another being only through comparison with their own experiences. There is a striking similarity between a sentient animal's expression of pain and that of human beings, so a cat or dog crying is able to move humans to the extent of including them in the moral sphere. Thus, an important way of inducing empathy is through comparison with self. Ecocentrism states that it is the ecosystem that deserves direct moral concern and everything else is valuable depending on the role it plays in the ecosystem (Berenguer, 2010). Ecocentrism, however, is radical environmentalism, which leaves one wondering whether it is necessary to go this deep for an adequate environmental ethics. People like Aldo Leopold and Henry David Thoreau had come in direct contact with nature in order to realize their oneness with nature (Scheese, 1991). Therefore, one way of having such a realization is to find our way back to nature.

#### 5. A Pragmatic Evaluation of Virtue and Environmental Ethics

This section defends a pragmatic viewpoint in the field of virtue and environmental ethics. Pragmatism is not a separate theory but a different way of looking at the theories. Pragmatism, instead of engaging in arguments to establish one theory and negate others, concentrates on the application aspect of the theories. It endorses value pluralism which holds that one theory need not necessarily negate others (Lo & Spash, 2013). All may coexist and differ only in their spheres of application. A theory is pragmatically true as long as it is applicable in real life. As such, arguments and disputes regarding the validity of a theory, establishing the pre-eminence of one theory over another, are merely theoretical and lose sight of the actual goal of bringing about tangible changes in human behavior. The theories, in spite of very convincing arguments for their positions, remain fictions which are not reflected in real life scenarios.

#### 6. Strategies to Bridge the Gap

After establishing a gap between knowledge and practice, and looking into the model of environmental behavior for factors that occur in between knowledge and behavior, we now attempt to bridge the existing gap with the help of some strategies. The strategies aim to bring about changes in ways of *rationalizing* by enhancement of the emotional connection with environment. Emotional involvement can intensify pro environmental attitudes leading to rationalizations in favor of pro-environmental behavior. The three strategies are Bioregionalism, Early Childhood Education for Sustainability and Anthropomorphism. While anthropomorphism attempts to directly trigger emotional involvement, bioregionalism tries to achieve it by reducing the physical distance. Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS) is an attempt to provide similar exposure from the beginning of one's learning experience.

#### 7. Bioregionalism

Human beings inexorably interact with and are affected by their specific location, place or bioregion. Bioregion is not only a geographical place but also a way of seeing ourselves in the place (Brunckhorst, 2013). There are two key terms central to the concept of bioregionalism: Re inhabitation or the process of becoming native to a place; and Identification which requires both an intimate knowledge of the place as well as an

emotional attachment with the place. (Booth, 2012). These may be expected to bring about changes in nature-human relationship. Some arguments have been suggested in its favor. It has been shown that the approach is a pragmatic endeavor as regards its core principles. Finally, the applicability of the strategy in present context has been dealt with.

### 8. Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS)

According to the director general of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, *Education – in all its forms and at all levels – is not only an end in itself but is also one of the most powerful instruments we have for bringing about the changes required to achieve sustainable development* (Bryson, 2018). This kind of education is not a one-time learning process, but has to be continued and transformed with changing information and facts, beginning from early childhood and continuing throughout life. Arguments have been provided to establish the importance of ECEfS in developing environmental conscience (Luff, 2018). This too has been shown to be a pragmatic approach. The description of the approach would remain incomplete without considering the possible limitations of its application.

### 9. Metaphors and Anthropomorphism

A metaphor may be defined as an indirect comparison that implies a likeness between two unlike things. Metaphoric understanding of nature plays a role in shaping nature human relationship. Some commonly used metaphors of nature are *nature as a capitalist resource*, *nature as a woman*, etc. It would be argued that metaphors, especially anthropomorphism, have a huge role to play in bridging nature-human gap (Fleer et al., 2015). The changing knowledge and conceptual frameworks about the condition of the Earth has to be accompanied by a change of images and metaphors, otherwise a change of attitude or practice might not result. Reality has many dimensions and not all dimensions are at once revealed to us. Metaphors aid in highlighting some aspects that may be previously hidden but may have great consequences in determining human behavior. Anthropomorphism refers to the linguistic habit of attributing humanistic traits to non-humans like god, animal or object (Rendall, 2021). Anthropomorphism is a linguistic habit, which in its naive form, can give rise to confusions and has been criticized in contemporary human animal studies (De, 1999). However, it may contain important insights about what is the appropriate way of talking about animals and how the way we talk about animals can affect our relationship with animals. For this reason, it has been argued that anthropomorphism is not necessarily an error. The claim is that anthropomorphism increases an emotional response called *empathy* towards non humans, by way of highlighting the similarities between its subjects and objects. Although the main function of anthropomorphism is to produce empathy, it can have various other uses. Its flaws have to be kept in mind, to steer clear of possible confusions. This strategy too, like the others, is pragmatic in its approach.

### 10. Bridging the Gap

All the three strategies have been explained, established through arguments, criticized and shown to be pragmatic in their approach. The basic understanding of pragmatism entails the appreciation that no strategy is complete, not even the three together can claim universality. Application of each is only to a limited audience, outside which they fail to reap successful outcomes. Further, what is applicable today need not remain pragmatically true in future. However, in the present situation applied to their own sphere of audience, the strategies can enhance nature-human relationship. This paper ends with a reflection on the similarity of the strategies in their use of the emotional component to extend the cognitive representation of the self to include elements of nature. In this way, side by side with personal and social identities, a person may find for himself a *natural identity* through emotional connection or re-connection with nature.

### 11. Conclusion

At the end of a pragmatic enquiry into environmental ethics, it may be stated that the role of ethics in human-nature relationship is not simply normative in prescriptions of what should be but also practical in enquiring why it is not what it should be. The present paper over and above such an enquiry has provided strategies to bring about practicality in the discipline of environmental ethics. However, looking for pragmatism in environmental ethics is not entirely a new endeavor. The writings of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), one of the first to extend the realm of moral consideration beyond human beings to include the non-human world, made implicit pragmatic claims in environmental ethics (Sandstra, 1999). It is also possible to trace the root of Bioregionalism and anthropomorphism in Thoreau's writings. A proper framework for sustainable development will be created through the interaction of these ethical theories and their implementation in a pragmatic

view point in the daily life of human beings can be economically profitable, environmentally clean, and socially responsible.

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