
INTRODUCTION

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: QUESTIONS AND SOLUTIONS

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...it is possible to perform noble deeds even without being ruler of land and see: one can do virtuous acts with quite moderate resources.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, VII+10.

In the book *The Moral Austerity of Environmental Decision Making*¹ that has been recently published, a group of prominent environmental ethicists, policy analysts, political theorists, and legal experts challenged the growing influence of market inference on shaping the environmental policy. Stressing the concept of sustainability and the significance of its ethical reflection, they examine possibilities for a wider variety of moral principles to play an active role in defining what they call “good” environmental decisions. The austerity may suggest a triumph of instrumental rationality, when “the humanness of man and the thingness of things dissolve into calculated market value,” as Heidegger expressed it, as well as the lack of ethical debate over what is right or wrong within political or legal discourse. Actually, the authors assume that normative philosophical concerns have been separated from empirical sciences and environmental decision-making. If environmental policy is to be responsible to humanity and nature in the twentieth first century, they argue, it is imperative that the discourse acknowledge and integrate additional normative assumptions and principles other than those endorsed by the market paradigm.

Some scholars suggest that existing environmental ethics theories are much too abstract, fragmented and isolated from the ‘real world’ illusions of mind. They advocate for an active and logical environmental ethics, which can provide a framework for the reflection on the consequences of environmental degradation (see Weston, A. (2002), *A Practical Companion to Ethics*, 2nd edition, New York, Oxford University Press). Others assume that respect for nature and control of the natural world progressing degradation have to become a ‘second order’ principle (see World Health

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Organization, Commission on Health and Environment, 1992, p. 4), when confronted with growing poverty and human survival needs. A third party (philosophers like Baird Callicott) maintain that theoretical environmental ethics “is nevertheless having a significant impact in the public realm, transforming the discourse of environmental value among activists and environmental professionals in much the way the language of human rights changed the legal and political culture of the West” (B. Minteer, *Refounding Environmental Ethics*, p. 11). Various publications, meetings and conferences can indeed enlighten the professionals about the necessary coexistence of diverse forms of life. This does not mean, however, that the ethical deliberations over the proper biodiversity management are becoming more comprehensible and relevant to the ‘others,’ e.g., policy makers and open public within different cultures and away from environmental ethics mainstream.

On the other hand, it became fashionable to look back for indigenous knowledge and their ‘collective stewardship’ toward nature. Recognition of indigenous believes that warn of dire consequences for trespassing frontiers between humans and nature can certainly lead to protection of natural environment through appropriate actions. The quest for ‘save it all’ recipes within indigenous beliefs often expresses our yearning for coexistence with the natural world that a modern person is alienated from. We live within a human-made world of genetic engineering, space technologies, artificial trees and many other artifacts. Since the old, colorful picture of nature has been torn down into many pieces, we long for a pantheistic, creative cosmos and its natural beauty, although through the glasses of mathematics and natural sciences. How shall we reconcile our daily life with the demands of nature to avoid its and ours destruction? We have to open our eyes and see, for nothing could be more dangerous than the illusion that we have a formulated problem and its solution, when we have only frame both of them in overly narrow terms. Long-lasting, national and regional human dealings with the natural world are shaped by a variety of factors (chance, human aspirations, unexpected events, etc.) and cannot be summarized in economic models ² or in analytical or computer simulations.

Possibly, a few positions within environmental ethics do require some reconstruction and changes of directions, yet they are here to stay. The values they proclaim are not like the species in extinction, nor are we living in an axiological desert. We dwell in, as some say, in a forest full of theories that have been helping us to explore intellectual and moral causes for environmental destruction, and to propose alternatives to avoid any harmful modus operandi. Undoubtedly, ethical theories and scientific ideas leave us better informed, with plenty of food for thought, and hopefully the inspiration to investigate pending issues like clean energy,

conservation, and so on. Nevertheless, as Aristotle wrote: "Most people (...) take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good this way, behaving like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do." If environmental philosophy is to leave an enduring legacy and not just as a mere theoretical thought, we have to bring it down to earth, that is, create policies that put in action the values environmental ethics proclaim.

All agree with Aldo Leopold (1949) that "system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided," yet the question of financial incentives that can alleviate poverty in the developing world, and specify alternatives to environmentally damaging practices, has to be addressed without delay. Economic growth brings wealth to people. Wealth increases peoples' demands for environmental protection and the ability of society to provide it, especially through technological development. The overwhelming majority of proposals to conciliate economic progress and quality of life with the necessities of biological conservation have financial incentives attached to them. Until now, disbursement of the funds, public or private, has often been insufficient or sporadic, and frequently derailed. On the one hand, the governmental subsidies (local and national) frequently bring more harm than benefit. On the other, the international fund-lending institutions tend to promote unrestrained development, directly threatening biological, ecological and cultural diversity. Power groups have also used the aid without changing local ideas and uses of the environment. The subsidizing agencies hardly visualized the complex interactions between protection of biodiversity, requirements of development, and the community life. Nor have they analyzed the direct connections between the local activities and the possible reduction of deforestation or other environmental pressures. As James, et al., pointed out, "governments could safeguard the world's biodiversity with a small fraction of the money they spend on harmful environmental subsidies ³." It is one thing to campaign against climate change and quite another to depict a compelling and engaging vision of a post-carbon world in such a way as to enthuse others to embark on a journey toward it. We are only just beginning to scratch the surface of the power of a positive vision of an abundant future.

It has become commonplace for those who speak and write about global environmental problems to stress the importance of values in motivating people to assume the responsibility for the world around them, as well as to call for an integration of politics and morality while discussing problems of the natural world. The question is: how to translate values into policies and decisions that will move the world toward the ideal visualized in a proposed ethical system? Transforming attitudes through the environmental education ⁴ will be important in the long run, but what will have

direct and immediate impact is forcing decision makers to consider whether proposed actions measure up to the principles environmental philosophy projects. The choices we make are rational when we have grounds of a certain sort for them. Usually, we automatically apply the traditional norms of the respective culture together with a quasi-instinctive disposition of “social instinct.” We can find them as a desire for thinking that what we will do will come out best, or in belief that we are a rational species. These approaches leave plenty of room for being wrong about the possible outcomes and for doing things badly. As Hume remarked, “’tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of my finger.” However, these approaches involve some general rules—those of moral theory or of different, competing moral theories. Different theories whose norms are hardly agreed upon⁵ offer different answers, some leaning towards the “others”, and some stressing the autonomy of human being. There are many general rules though there is little consensus. Thus, when the conflict between several norms arises, we have to undertake a rational analysis.

Facing ethical ambiguities on one side, and unclear scientific foundations together with the lack of fundamental data, on the other, should we rely on environmental values or on ecological knowledge? Shall we base our decisions and policies on what we suppose to be scientifically correct ecological models or on moral categories?

There is no pathway from ecology to ethics, culture and other humanistic concerns like human rights, population problems, poverty, and so forth. To assume that science or economy can provide efficient and correct models of the natural world is incorrect and dangerous. Biology does not offer a reliable set of specific ethical norms. Yet, all these concerns have substantial relationship with the life sciences if we want our decision-making process be made not in an informational vacuum. An ecologically informed system is not derived from the facts but is consistent with them. A rudimentary knowledge on certain developments of science, particularly biology (ecology) is fundamental for most work in decision-making process. Otherwise, how can one make any reasonable decision concerning environment without having a considerable understanding of how ecosystem behave or what is the global climate change all about. As Ernest Mayr indicated: “An ignorance of the findings of biology is particularly damaging, whenever humanists are forced to confront such political problems as global overpopulation, (...) the depletion of non-renewable resources, deleterious climatic changes, increased agricultural requirements worldwide, the destruction of natural habitats⁶ (...)”. Our way of successfully dealing with problems of environmental destruction will depend to a considerable extent on our understanding of the puzzling phenomena in our world. There are many significant aspects that our

authors take into consideration to encourage positive environmental actions like reforestation, restoration, conservation of biodiversity and reduction of pollutants. Perhaps, there are no more big ideas left, but we still can recommend extending Emmanuel Kant's initiative, expressed in his groundwork, *The Metaphysic of Morals*, to act so that we use humanity (and the nature around), in our own person as well as in that of another (being), always as an end and never only as a means.

NOTES

- 1 *The Moral Austerity of Environmental Decision Making: Sustainability, Democracy and Normative Argument in Policy and Law.*
- 2 See the note "Ecology and economics" in www.perc.org
- 3 A.N. James, et al., "Balancing the earth's accounts", *Nature*, 1999: 323-324.
- 4 Environmental education should introduce a set of concepts that stem not so much from abstract philosophical principles but which seems to emerge from the contemporary biology and form subjects abilities and strategies to create meaning within highly complex and contradictory situation of modern society.
- 5 Good, justice, truth have long been accepted as outstanding values, though no one seems to be able to agree on what is just, what is good and what is fair.
- 6 Ernst Mayr, *This is Biology. The Science of the Living World*, 1997, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., p. 39.