UNIT 2: ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: INTRINSIC WORTH OF NATURE, DEEP ECOLOGY

UNIT STRUCTURE

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2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- identify environmental ethics and the issues pertaining to it
- explain different perspectives related to environmental ethics
- discuss the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric views on environmental ethics
- understand the contemporary debates on environmental ethics along with contributions from key thinkers
- Evaluate the issues in environmental ethics critically

2.2 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we will be discussing one of the important issues in applied ethics, namely environmental ethics. **Environmental ethics is**

concerned with the ethical issues pertaining to environment. An ethical issue is that which studies whether a particular action is right or not. Here, we will be concentrating on understanding the moral rightness of the action with respect to environment.

To give an idea as to what are the concerns with respect to environment ethics– Some important questions are- Is it right to use nature as in whatever way we want to? If we are constrained to use our environment, why is it so? Does nature have a value of its own? Is it right on our part to kill and eat animals? On what basis can one justify as it differ right or wrong? These questions can be raised in order to start our discussion.

2.3 EMERGENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

The etymological meaning of environment is 'surrounding'. "Environment" comes from the French term "environner", which means to encircle. The oxford English dictionary defines "environment" as "the objects or the region surrounding anything." Though there is a difference between nature and environment, within the environmental ethics discourse, the concern is oriented towards the natural environment. "Environmental ethics is the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its nonhuman contents." The concerns of environment was brought to the forefront by two important books in 1960's, one is Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring in 1962 and the other is* Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb in 1968. These two books dealt with the harmful effects of using chemical pesticides and the increasing levels of human population respectively.* Those books are not purely philosophical and had more to do with the empirical aspect of the human population and its explosion.

Lynn White in his famous article in 1967, "The historical roots of our ecological crisis", claimed that environmental problems are not purely scientific or technical and it cannot be solved purely by means of development of technology alone. He says, "what we do about ecology

depends on our ideas of the man –nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get out us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one." White in his essay vehemently criticizes the Judeo-Christian attitude towards nature which results in the present ecological crisis. He claimed in his article, that environmental problems are more to do with our worldview and he claims that the solution to the environmental problems need to be done through a change in the worldview.

Lewis W. Moncrief, in his article "The cultural basis of our environmental crisis" (1970), argues against White's position that environmental problems are not religious in nature, rather, they are cultural. Irrespective of which religion, the environmental degradation is basically a cultural phenomenon, maybe a culture that is being charecterized by industrialism and capitalism. He says, "The force of democracy, technology, urbanization, increasing individual wealth, and an aggressive attitude towards nature seem to be directly related to the environmental crisis now being confronted in the western world."

This suggests that there cannot be a purely technological solution to environmental problems. The emergence of academic journals in the field of environmental ethics gives us a picture that ethical issues do play a part in the understanding of environmental problems and solutions. The international academic journals in environmental ethics and value study were started in the late 1970's and early 1980's. The journals *Environmental Ethics* (1979), *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* (1983), *Environmental Values* (1992) address the concerns of environmental issues from the ethical perspective. Similarly, some academic institutions also started environmental ethics as a subject of study. J. B. Callicott started teaching *Environmental ethics* as a course in the University of Wisconsin in 1971.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: What is Environmental ethics? (Answer in about 20 words)

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Q2: What is the etymological meaning of the word 'environment'?

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Q 3: Who is the author of 'Silent Spring'?

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Q 4: What do you mean by environmental degradation?

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2.4 PERSPECTIVES ON ENVIRONMENT ETHICS

As mentioned earlier, the important issue with respect to environmental ethics is what duties we have with respect to environment and, more importantly, why do we have such duties? The discussions pertaining to answering these issues gives rise to different perspectives with respect to environment. We broadly categorize the environmental ethical discourse as either Anthropocentric or Non-anthropocentric. Biocentrism, Ecocentrism and others can be brought under one umbrella category, that is, Non-anthropocentrism.

2.4.1 Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism means human-centeredness. Anthropocentric approach to environmental issues takes the basis that human beings are at the centre of the environment. Anthropocentrism views that all values are related to the mankind. That is all the objects whether it is biotic or abiotic should be used for the benefit of mankind. Anthropocentrism suggests that man is the only being who can think and have rational capabilities; so all values should be related to the human being. Moral standing is

confined to human beings alone and human beings are not obligated to environment as it does not have any moral standing. For example – I am not supposed to harm/kill any other human being as he or she enjoys equal rights like me, but on the other hand, a goat or a cow cannot enjoy equal rights like me and hence there is no wrong in killing a cow or goat. All objects should be used for the benefit of mankind. Anthropocentrism is a prominent philosophical position from the earlier days, at least in the prominent Western tradition. Judeo-Christian Genesis says that man is in the image of God. Man can dominate over all beings of land, water and even sky. Aristotle also says that all the biotic and non-biotic objects are for the sake of man.



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Instrumental value: It is the value of objects, not as end in themselves. It is considered as extrinsic value in the sense of considering it as means of achieving something else.

For anthropocentrism, everything else in existence should be evaluated in terms of its utility for the human beings, thus taking a position of instrumental value for the nature. Invariably anthropocentrism tends to go by speciesism. The term 'Speciesism' was first coined by Richard D. Ryder in 1970 which means that humans consider themselves superior only because they are human species and others are not. Speciesism tends to favour human beings over and against other beings and nature by the virtue of merely being part of a species. Some thinkers maintain that in the realm of ethics, an undue advantage is given to human species, which cannot be justified. Except for our bias towards human species, there is no other reason to favour humans as against animals in certain situations. This position by some thinkers had led to a different perspective that can be broadly categorized as Non anthropocentrism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5: How can we categorize the environmental ethical discourse?

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Q6: Name the category under which bio-centrism, eco-centrism and others can be discussed.

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Q7: What is anthropocentric approach? (Answer in about 50 words)

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2.4.2 Non Anthropocentrism

Non-anthropocentric approaches take the basis that human beings are not to be treated as the centre of environment. For the non-anthropocentric thinkers value should be given to other beings also. Our moral obligation should be extended to animals, plants, rivers and even for all living and non-living things. But, non-anthropocentrists are not a homogeneous group. Some subscribe to biocentrism while some others subscribe to ecocentrism. From the religious perspective as well, some of the ancient eastern conceptions like Jainism and Buddhism subscribe to one or the other form of non-anthropocentrism. Buddhism talks about Ahimsa; Jainism advocates a strong view of not killing any animals. Philosophically, extending moral obligation beyond the human beings is one of the most discussed issues in non- anthropocentrism. One important question is as to what is the criterion or the basis on which it can be argued that man can extend his moral obligation beyond human beings? Is the moral obligation directed to other animal species or does it also include plant life as well or does it include the nature as such with its rivers and rocks and mountains, that is,

the ecosystem? Even amongst the non-anthropocentrists there is difference of perception with respect to these issues.

So, the moot question is, if moral standing is extended beyond human beings, then which are all the beings or what are all the things that should also be considered for moral standing? In that case, I (human being) am not supposed to harm/kill them.



Sentient: able to see or feel the things through senses.

2.4.2.1 Bio centrism

Some thinkers articulated that animals have rights and our moral obligation is and should be extended to animals as well. Philosophers like Peter Singer (1946–), Tom Regan (1938–), and Gary Francione (1954–) have argued from different moral theories for the protection of animal welfare. Singer, for example, from utilitarian standpoint and Regan from rights perspective have argued for the animal liberation.

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the utilitarian philosopher puts the question regarding animals in these words “the question is not whether they can speak or think, the question is, can they suffer?” Following the utilitarian point of view Peter Singer in his book, *Animal Liberation* assigns an equal consideration of interest to animals. Singer says that animals are *sentient* beings. They can feel pleasure and pain. On the basis of *sentience*, we have to extend our moral obligation to animals. On the other hand, Tom Regan says that not merely sentience but anything which is the subject of life has to get moral support. Regan’s view is important in the sense that some animals and even some human beings such as mentally retarded person, persons under coma etc. have their life but no capacity for sentience. In such cases, they deserve moral support from fellow human beings. Following Kant’s deontological ethics, Regan also argues that every being should be considered as an end not as a means.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q8: What is non-anthropocentrism? (Answer in about 50 words)

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Q9: Who says- "All the biotic and non-biotic objects are for the same man"

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Q10: Who for the first time involves the term 'ecosophy?'

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2.4.2.2 Eco centrism

While some non anthropocentrists argue for animal liberation, some other thinkers like Aldo Leopald (1887-1948), Arne Naess (1912-2009) argue against the *unnecessary* intervention with respect to nature. They extend the moral obligation beyond the human beings and animals to the entire eco-system that may include the living and the non-living. Leopold comes up with the notion of 'land ethics'. In order to keep a balance in ecology such type of land ethics is essential. Land should not be merely considered as commodity, but, according to him, it is also a community. Leopold acknowledges the evolutionary changes that have happened in nature and tries to argue that man-made changes are of different order from the evolutionary changes as man-made changes are prone to be more violent because of population density.

Arne Naess (1912-2009), the Norwegian philosopher advocates a holistic approach to the nature. He termed his philosophy as Ecosophy. Everything has its own value of it. **Naess makes a distinction between 'shallow' and 'deep' ecology. He makes the distinction on the criteria that**

valuing the object without self-realization is shallow ecology. In this sort of value, the value that is assigned is only an instrumental value. As against the shallow ecology, is the 'deep ecology', where the nature is valued with self-realization. Here, the value of nature is not because of its instrumental value, but it has its intrinsic worth. According to Naess, it is the deep ecology with self –realization that actually helps us to preserve our different ecological aspects of nature. Naess, along with another person George Session, formulated eight principles for ecological development that include the admission that the human and the non-human life on earth have intrinsic values, they are values-in-themselves, and the humans have no right to reduce the richness and diversity except to satisfy their own vital needs, etc.



LET US KNOW

Ecology: It is the scientific analysis and study of interactions among organisms and environment**.**

2.4.3 CRITICISMS

While there are different perspectives such as anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism with respect to environment and other beings each one of them is criticized either for their shortcomings or for their impractical positions. If we see anthropocentrism, it is too human centered without any obligation to any other beings except humans. This may tend to be too narrow without any moral extension, therefore, thinkers like Ryder, Singer and others have pointed out that this can be a biased perspective in favour of human species and is being denounced as speciesism. Even if the anthropocentrists are bothered about human beings alone, are they bothered only about the present generation or also bothered about the future human generations? If they are bothered

about the future human generations, then they are extending their moral worthiness that goes beyond the present generation. If we take the biocentrists, though they talk of moral worthiness beyond human species, yet they restrict the moral obligation only to those animal species that have the capability of experiencing pain, according to Singer. Those beings that have sentience, the capacity to experience pain, are worthy of moral considerations. This suggests that we should not harm/kill animals like goat or cow or hen. In a sense, these theories subscribe for vegetarianism. Suppose, you have lots of problems with rats in your home, then, are you not supposed to kill them by setting a trap? If they have moral standing, then, can we do that? The biocentrists may come up with an answer maintaining that for necessity we can kill them, but not for other reasons, say, for example, using leather products. But, what is necessity is also contentious. If we face problems with the biocentrists with respect to practicality, we also face similar and more serious problems with ecocentrists as well. How can we think of giving moral worthiness to plants and other existing entities like mountains and rivers? What does it mean to say that they have rights?

This raises a serious issue with respect to environmental ethics as to what course of action should we adopt regarding our environment. The different viewpoints with respect to the human's treatment of animals and their inter relationship with nature has given rise to numerous ethical problems. What is the best course of human action with respect to animals? Whether the humans are right in interfering with nature? Whether nature does really possess a value? If there is a value to the nature, what type of value it is? Is it intrinsic or instrumental? How all these issues translate to policies and development issues? Are the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric viewpoints are contrasting? Is it possible to reconcile between these two viewpoints in order to make good decisions?

2.4.4 Environmental Pragmatism

In order to address these types of issues, environmental pragmatism as a school of thought emerged in the 1990's. Environmental pragmatism tries to address these environmental issues from the pragmatist view point. Environmental pragmatism, thus, is a new strategy to environmental thought. It argues that theoretical debates are hindering the ability of the environmental movement to forge agreement on basic policy imperatives. Bryan Norton, within the fold of anthropocentrism, makes a distinction of strong and weak anthropocentrism. While strong anthropocentric argues that humans are at the centre and only the humans possess the intrinsic value and all other things, if they possess any value, then they do have it as an instrumental value. The weak anthropocentrism might acknowledge that significantly a greater amount of intrinsic value is given to humans as compared to other beings and hence the protection of humans as against the other nonhuman beings is always justified.

The environmental pragmatists believe that the environmentalist's dilemma is primarily a dilemma in values, conceptualizations, and world views more than a dilemma regarding action and policies, and only occasionally and tangentially does it affect those policies themselves. In this regard, Norton comes out with a theory called as 'Convergence hypotheses'. Norton views that though in the worldview, the weak-anthropocentrists and the non-anthropocentrists differ, but, in terms of choosing the policies, they come up with the same set of policies and procedures. The convergence thesis is a hypothetical conditional. It predicts that if person A is a consistent weak anthropocentric and person B is a non-anthropocentric with a consistent notion of the intrinsic value of the environment, for Norton, both A and B will end up supporting the same environmental policy position. This is only a hypothesis and there are criticisms for this

hypothesis and environmental pragmatism as well. This suggests as to environmental issues are bothering and at the same time shows why they are difficult to resolve? But, still we need to make an attempt to understand the ethical issues involved in environment to try to make as much just decisions as possible.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q11: How does Naess make a distinction between 'shallow and deep ecology' (Answer in about 60 words)

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Q12: What is strong anthropocentrism, according to Bryan Norton? (Answer in about 30 words)

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Q13: What is weak anthropocentrism, according to Bryan Norton? (Answer in about 40 words)

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ACTIVITY: 2.1

What do you mean by environmental pragmatism?

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2.5 LET US SUM UP

- Environmental ethics is concerned with the ethical issues pertaining to environment.

- The environmental ethical discourse can be explained from two perspectives: One is Anthropocentric and the other is non-anthropocentric. Biocentrism, Ecocentrism and others can be brought under one umbrella category, that is, Non-anthropocentrism.
- The etymological meaning of environment is 'surrounding'. "Environment" comes from French term "environner", which means to encircle. The oxford English dictionary defines "environment" as "the objects or the region surrounding anything." Though there is a difference between nature and environment, within the environmental ethics discourse, the concern is oriented towards the natural environment.
- Environmental ethics is the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its nonhuman contents.
- Anthropocentrism means human-centeredness. Anthropocentric approach to environmental issues takes the basis that human beings are at the centre of the environment. Anthropocentrism views that all values are related to mankind. That is all the objects whether they are biotic or abiotic should be used for the benefit of the mankind.
- Bryan Norton makes a distinction between strong and weak anthropocentrism. Strong anthropocentrism argues that humans are at the centre and only the humans possess the intrinsic value and all other things. If they possess any value, then they do have it as an instrumental value.
- Weak anthropocentrism might acknowledge that significantly a greater amount of intrinsic value is given to humans as compared to other beings and hence the protection of humans as against the other nonhuman beings is always justified.
- The environmental pragmatists believe that the environmentalist's dilemma is primarily a dilemma in values, conceptualizations, and world views more than a dilemma regarding action and policies, and only occasionally and tangentially does it affect those policies themselves. In this regard, Norton comes out with a theory called as 'Convergence hypotheses'.



2.6 FURTHER READINGS

1) Jamieson, Dale. *Ethics and Environment.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

2) Rolston Holmes III. *Environmental Ethics*. Temple University Press, 1989



2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: As a discipline of philosophy it is concerned with the moral relationship of human beings to the environment.

Ans to Q No 2: The etymological meaning of environment is 'surrounding'. "Environment" comes from French term "environner", which means to encircle.

Ans to Q No 3: Rachel Carson's

Ans to Q No 4: Environmental degradation implies environmental pollution caused by industrialism and capitalism.

Ans to Q No 5: We can categorize the environmental ethical discourse under two heads:

i) Anthropocentrism ii) Non-anthropocentrism

Ans to Q No 6: Non-anthropocentrism

Ans to Q No 7: Anthropocentrism means human-centeredness. Anthropocentric approach to environmental issues takes the basis that human beings are at the centre of the environment. Anthropocentrism views that all values are related to the mankind. That is, all the objects, whether biotic or abiotic, should be used for the benefit of the mankind.

Ans to Q No 8: Non-anthropocentric approaches take the basis that human beings are not to be treated as the centre of environment. For the non-anthropocentric thinkers value should be given to other beings also. Our moral obligation should be extended to animals, plants, rivers and even for all whole living and non-living things.

Ans to Q No 9: Aristotle

Ans to Q No 10: Naess

Ans to Q No 11: Naess distinguishes between 'shallow' and 'deep' ecology. He makes the distinction on the criteria that valuing the object without self-realization is shallow ecology. In this sort of value, the value that is assigned is only an instrumental value. As against the shallow ecology, is the 'deep ecology', where the nature is valued with self-realization.

Ans to Q No 12: According to Bryan Norton, strong anthropocentrism argues that humans are at the centre and possess the intrinsic value. It is considered the instrumental value.

Ans to Q No 13: Weak anthropocentrism holds that a greater amount of intrinsic value is given to humans as compared to other beings and hence the protection of humans as against the other nonhuman beings is always justified.



2.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Objective Questions

Q1: What is environmental ethics?

Q2: State the etymological meaning of 'environment'.

Q3: Who is the author of *The Population Bomb?*

Q4: What is weak anthropocentrism?

Q5: What is strong anthropocentrism?

B) Short Questions (Answer in about 150 words)

Q1: Write a brief note on Anthropocentrism.

Q2: What is non-anthropocentrism? Explain briefly.

Q3: Write briefly on the concept of biocentrism.

Q4: Do you find any distinction between 'Shallow' and 'Deep ecology'? Briefly explain

Q5: Distinguish between weak and strong anthropocentrism.

C) Long Questions (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q1: Explain the concept of Environmental pragmatism.

Q2: Describe the concept of Eco-centrism.

Q3: Explain critically the different perspectives with respect to environment.

Q4: Discuss the concept of Anthropocentrism.

Q5: What do you mean by Non-anthropocentrism? Explain.

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