

A COMPARISON BETWEEN ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND BIOCENTRISM

***BISWAJIT DEBNATH**

**Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Tripura University, Suryamaninagar, Pin-799022*

ABSTRACT

Environmental ethics stresses that what is the moral relationship of human beings with nature. How to behave towards nature? What are the responsibilities of human beings to nature? These types of problems are discussed in environmental ethics. There are mainly two views according to value of nature — anthropocentric and bio-centric. According to anthropocentric view human beings are superior to nature, it emphasizes that nature is like instrument. It has no value. But according to bio-centric view nature has intrinsic value. It is not just like instrument. Anthropocentric environmentalists think that human beings are rationally and mentally more develop. Hence, their thinking level is higher than non-human beings. John Passmore also refers traditional anthropocentrism of Christian attitude. There are two main forms – dominianism and stewardism. According to dominianism human beings as a master of nature, it is a limitless resource to which we can do anything. On the other hand, Stewardism stresses that humans are care-takers to the inherently valuable nature.

However, contemporary environmental philosophy blames the human beings for deteriorating ecological balance by domination. Truly, contemporary environmental philosophy is grown through analysing traditional anthropocentrism. Many human practices are condemned, like cruelty to animals, destruction of habitats, endangering species, and disturbing ecosystemic balances. As well as many human practices are only for human interests, even for unimportant, non-basic human preferences, higher than any non-human interests, basic or vital ones. The most important tendency of present day environmentalism is to climb above of this misguided view-point, which means that we should accept the intrinsic and inherent value of non-human world like human being.

Keywords: *Human being, Nature, Intrinsic value.*

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS?

The issue of responsibility for nature is not wholly new, but it has been neglected in the circle of philosophy in the long time. Surprisingly the so called philosophy of science is so much busy on scientific concepts and methods, rather than giving value on nature. Social and political philosophy also gives more importance on social environment than on the natural environment. As well as, none of the branches of western philosophy has given interest to the environmental issues and values. Only the newly developed environmental ethics has given interest of the relationship human beings to nature or non human beings. It makes aware not only our behaviour but normative theories and principles for the preservation and survival. Consequently it includes our views on nature, value theories, and our position on this earth, of the non- human animals and plants and the so called non living nature. With this environmental ethics and philosophy starts its journey.

Environmental ethics is one of the most eminent areas of applied ethics, like business ethics and other professional ethics. It is not a professional ethics like other applied ethics, like business or medical ethics because it does not discuss any professional issues. Environmental ethics has very vast area. Environmental ethics discuss about what is the right relation between human beings and nature? It discusses what the responsibilities of human beings for nature are? How human beings behave towards nature? For humans benefit nature is important. Nature serves humans. According to anthropocentric theory of environmental ethics human beings are superior to nature. Nature is just like instrument. It only used for humans need. On the other hand bio-centric theory of environmental ethics said that nature is not just like instrument. It has also intrinsic value.

ANTHROPOCENTRISM

The word anthropocentrism we got from Greek word ‘anthropos’ and ‘kentron.’ ‘Anthropos’ which means ‘human being’ and ‘kentron’ means ‘centre’. Hence etymologically anthropocentrism means human centeredness. That’s why from the anthropocentric view point humans are the centre of the universe. Most of the time it is believed that anthropocentrism is the root cause of eco-crisis, the human over population, and the extinctions of many non human species. It is the theory that to be the central problematic of contemporary philosophy. It is applied to draw attention in systematic bias in traditional western attitudes to non human world. Anthropocentric theory also says there have no any sin when we destroy natural things if it is not harmful for man. Aristotle is also the supporter of anthropocentric theory. He himself says: “Plants exist for the sake of animals and brute beasts for the sake of man, domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones (or at any rate most of them) for food and other accessories of life, such as clothing and various tools. Since nature makes nothing purposeless or vain, it is

undeniably true that she has made man all the animals for the sake of man”¹. Though anthropocentric theory gives much more value for human beings, it said that preservation of environment is important because if we do not preserve the environment then it will be harmful for us. Use of uranium for production of nuclear power is dangerous to human health. Likewise uses of various poisonous gases are harmful for human health.

John Passmore’s *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, has discussed traditional anthropocentrism that has expressed itself in two main forms: Dominionism and Stewardism.

DOMINIONISM:

Dominionism has two theories-(a) humans are masters of nature, and nature exists only to serve human needs, (b) nature is a limitless resource to which we can do anything. In fact in the west our moral values are largely developed by the Christian tradition. The Christian attitude in the direction of nature is explained in terms of either in dominionism or stewardism. The former view, in which nature is considered as something to be exploited for its materials, as a source of knowledge leading to power and control over it, is typical of the modern scientific attitude. In pagan religions the natural world is viewed as surrounded by spirit and Gods and therefore it is fearfulness or admirable. But from Christian view point that nature as created by God. Nature exists there only for man’s use. Human’s wants and needs are important, and will satisfy their desires. This is called strong anthropocentrism or domianism. In this context Genesis story we can refer, “God created men in his own image, and blessed them, and told them to have ‘domination over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”²

This has been called as man’s charter not only by Jews but also by Christians and Muslims that gives them licence to control the earth and all its inhabitants. And according to Genesis God has issued us a mandate, “be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it.”³ So Genesis wanted to tell man not only what they can do, but what they should do- multiply and replenish and subdue the earth.

God is represented, as issuing these instructions before the Fall. But the Fall did not, according to the Genesis story, considerably affect man’s duties. What it did rather, was to make the performance of those duties more difficult. After the Flood, men’s position in the superseding period is more than a little vague, God still advised Noah in this direction: ‘Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.’ But then he formulated two provisions.

¹ Singer, Peter, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979

² *The Holy Bible: The Revised Version with Revised Marginal References* Genesis 1:26. London: Oxford University Press, 1884. P.2

³ Ibid Genesis 1:28 op. Cit., P.2

The first provision is that men should not imagine to restrain the earth either by love or by the exercise of natural power, as distinct from force: “And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth and upon all the fishes of the sea: into your hand are they delivered.”⁴ The second provision—‘every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you’⁵—allowed men to eat the flesh of animals. In the Garden of Eden, Adam, along with the beasts, had been a vegetarian, whose diet was limited to ‘every herb bearing seed...and every tree, in that which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed’⁶. In contrast, not only the ‘green herb’ but all living things were handed over to Adam and his ancestors as their food. All these take in absolute anthropocentrism. The critics of western civilization, according to Passmore, are to this amount acceptable in their historical judgment, as there is clearly a strong Western tradition that man is free to deal with nature as he pleases, since it exists only for him. But, Passmore argues, they are not totally correct in tracing this attitude back to *Genesis*. *Genesis*, and after it, the Old Testament generally, certainly shows man to be master of the earth and all it contains. But at the same time it claims that the world was good before man was created, and that it exist to glorify God rather than to serve man. It is the result of Greek influence that Christian theology was directed to think of nature as nothing but a system of resources, man’s relationships with which are in no respects subject to moral condemn. Passmore criticises much of the western philosophical and religious traditions for encouraging man to think of himself as nature’s absolute master, for whom everything that exists was designed. Let me quote him: “It is one thing to say, following Genesis, that man has dominion over nature in the sense that he has the right to make use of it: quite another to say... that nature exists only in order to serve his interests.”⁷ Nevertheless, his interpretation could not rise above anthropocentrism: the natural world has no value in its own right; it is valuable because humans concern for it, love it, and find it beautiful. We have responsibilities regarding the natural world, but the source of these responsibilities lies in human interests.

STEWARDSHIP

Dominionism openly supports exploitation of natural resources, and they can use it as their thinking, in whatever way they get satisfaction. It does not indicate to caring and respecting about nature or for any other creatures. It does not worry about the negative consequences of human actions. But Stewardism supports that humans are the care-taker of the inherently valuable nature. That’s why stewardism is based on two tenets: i) humans are caretakers of nature that’s why they look after it in some way; and ii) humans are important as well as

⁴ Ibid Genesis 9:2 op. Cit. P.9

⁵ Ibid Genesis 9:3 op. Cit. P.9

⁶ Ibid Genesis 1:29 op. Cit p.2

⁷ Peter Hey. *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought*. Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press, 2002, p.105

other creatures have value. Some people of Christian faith declare that nature exists for God and it is the role to guarantee that His works carry on by acting as His stewards. A secular view of stewardism is that we should take care to nature because of our future generations.

Robin Attfield, argues that the Christian tradition should be viewed as one in which domination of the natural world entails not a rapacious attitude towards it, but the contrary. It implies that we should have control in the sense of being a steward appointed by God to look after and cherish both the garden he has given us to cultivate and the creatures that live in it. We do not unconditionally own parts of the earth, but clutch them on trust. This view may guide us to an ethic of environmental concern. It can be environmentally superior to a view in which property rights are believed to be absolute in which all parts of natural world are thought to be merely means to human ends, and we have a right what we want to do with our property even at the expense of those who come after us. The theory of stewardship may consider as example of weak or relative anthropocentrism. To gather more insight we can again refer the passage of Genesis in which man was commanded to multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it and have dominion over every living thing that moveth upon the earth, and fly in the sky, and that man was put 'into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it'. There have no benefit to denying that human beings were permitted to use nature. But it is not so clear that they have unlimited rights to exploit the nature, means they have responsibility towards nature. The word 'dominion' if we carefully take it, it means the granting of trust to humans, giving them stewardship to look after nature on behalf of God. It should not be consideration of as justifying absolutism or tyranny, but as the responsible exercise of a trust. The tradition of stewardship derives from this explanation. Human beings though they have a privilege place in nature, should behave towards nature responsibly. In this context it may be noted that the World Council of Churches mentioned recently that creation of man in God's image meant that humans should be seen as 'reflecting God's creating and sustaining love' and that 'any claim to the possession and mastery of the world is idolatrous'. In the connection, domination refers specifically to the task of upholding God's purposes in creation rather than imposing humanity's self-serving ends'. That's why symbolism of the garden is important: humanity's role is to tend and keep the garden which god has granted it to dominion over; the command to replenish that should be fertile and overlooked.

The concept of stewardship has thus motivated to the centre of modern Christian thinking. According to Watson and Sharpe, "Stewardship is today the generally accepted understanding within Christianity...of the role given to humanity in creation, in its relations with the rest of nature. This can be interpreted as co-worker with God in creation, but in no sense as co-equal. For it signifies that humanity's position is that it is tenant and not owner, that it holds the earth in trust, for God and for the rest of creation, present and to come. The principles of

stewardship include responsibility for the whole Earth; solidarity of all people; the need to take a long-term view. As such, they offer a critique of existing capitalist relations, and are congruent with broad principles of sustainable development.”⁸

There have so many interpretation are given by the story of Genesis, but none of them can rise above human centeredness in environmental matters. Some critics have opined that the cover of stewardship does not help us to transcend the spiciest anthropocentrism; it works like a sugar-coat for bitter quinine! Another problem of the stewardship position is that by no means it is characterized anywhere, especially when the religious background is removed, who is the man the steward for and responsible to? Anyhow there have a number of implications of anthropocentric view which stated the relationship of human beings with other species and with nature and ecosystem. Some of these are stated below:

1. The anthropocentric view whatever form it takes, it suggests that humans have greater intrinsic value than other species. The result of this view is that any species that are latent use to humans can be a ‘resource’ to be exploited. This use may occur in an unsustainable fashion that results in ruin, sometimes to the point of death of the biological resource, as has happened with the species, like dodo, great auk, and other animals.
2. The view that humans have more intrinsic value it indicates ethical judgements about interactions with other organisms. These ethics are often used to legitimize treating other species in ways that would be measured morally undesirable if humans were similarly treated. For example animals are frequently treated as very harshly during the medical research. But if someone behaves with a human like that way then he or she is punished.
3. Another definition of the anthropocentric view is the belief that human’s position is top of the natural evolutionary progress of species and life. This belief is in compare to modern biological interpretation of evolution, which suggests that no species are higher than any others, although some clearly have more anciently evolutionary roots, or may arise as relatively simple life forms.

However individual, cultural and technological skills of man make them special and different species in the world. No other species has achieved these qualities, which are the reason human can exploit and manage the environment. This power allows humans more successful species in the world. This success is shown by the population of humans that is now being sustained, the unstable growth of those numbers, and the increasing amounts of earth's biological and environmental resources that are being suitable to carry on the human species. Anyway, traditional justification for anthropocentrism are connected with emphasizing some unique

⁸ James Connelly and Graham Smith eds. *Politics and Environment: From Theory To Practice*: London Routledge, 1999 p.18

characteristics of human such as having an important soul or mind, rationality, or sophisticated language that set them apart from rest from nature including animals, that making ethics exclusively an human affair. In other words, traditional philosophers has stressed some distinctive characteristics of humans, such as rationality, capacity of using sophisticated language, and the like, which set them apart from non-human nature.

BIOCENTRISM

The root cause of the present day ecocrisis is the speciesism which is recognized by the most of the environmental philosophers. And contemporary environmental philosophy has started its journey by criticizing the moral anthropocentrism. Recently some theories are developed where human beings interpret their relationship with other species and with the nature and ecosystems. There have one such view which is called biocentrism which considered that all living being have intrinsic value and human being also a one kind of living organism among innumerable species live on the earth. 'Biocentrism' (From two Greek word bio means 'life' and Kentron means 'centre') is like that term which indicates more than one meaning. In environmental philosophy it indicates life centred environmental view. It means that not only human all living beings have moral value. It wishes welfare of all life in biosphere.

CLASSIC BIOCENTRISM

According to Taylor, each living has a good of their own or something has inherent value has invoked two principles: the principle of *moral consideration* and the principle of *intrinsic value*. The principle of moral consideration states that every living being that has a good of its own obtains moral consideration. And the principle of intrinsic value declares that the realization of the good of an individual is intrinsically valuable. These two principles constitute the fundamental moral attitude which Taylor calls 'Respect for Nature'.

The first principle, moral consideration declares that all living beings deserve the concern and attention of moral agents by virtue of their being members of the earth's community of life. From the moral point of view, their good must be accepted into account whenever it is affected for better or worse with the behaviour of some agents. This provision is equal for all, no matter in which species it belongs. The good of each entity is granted some value, so recognized having some weight in the deliberations of rational agents. However principle of moral consideration recommends that, due to each being has its own good, hopes to have moral consideration.

On the other hand, the principle of intrinsic value admits that, irrespective of what kind of entity is, if it belongs to earth's biotic community, the realization of its good is something intrinsically valuable. This means of

the entity concerned is valuable of being preserved or attended to, and this intrinsic and inherent value is an end in itself and sake for the entity concerned. While we consider an entity with intrinsic and inherent value, then we should avoid that it can be treated mere an object, or as an entity whose worth completely depends on being instrumental by promoting others good.

Though these two principles look nearer to each other, but they are not identical. While the principle of moral consideration accepts that all living beings deserve the concern and consideration of all moral agents by worth of their being members of the earth's community of life, the principle of intrinsic value declares that if some entity is a member of the earth's biotic community, the realization of its good is intrinsically valuable and its good is valuable, being esteemed, and this intrinsic value is an end in itself, and such it is sake for entity concerned. According to Taylor, when rational, autonomous agents consider such entities as having inherent worth, they situate intrinsic value on the realization of their good and so hold themselves responsible for performing actions which will have this effect and abstaining from actions which have bad effects. Not only that, also then they agree with the principles of moral consideration and of intrinsic value and so consider that wild living beings have that kind of value. From Taylor's view, "Such agents are adopting a certain ultimate attitude toward the natural world. This is the attitude I called "respect for Nature."⁹

Respect for nature thus implies a life centred world view of environmental philosophy. This ethics for nature brings three basic elements: a belief system, an ultimate moral outlook and a set of rules of duty and standards of character. These elements are linked with each other in the following ways. The belief system latent this attitude of respect for nature is called 'the bio-centric outlook on Nature.' Taylor explains in this way, the belief system presents a certain outlook on nature which supports and creates intelligible and autonomous agents adopting, as a vital moral attitude, the attitude of respect for nature. Living things and beings are thought as the proper object from the attitude of respect for nature, that's why they are regarded as entities carrying inherent and intrinsic value. Then one situates intrinsic value on the support and protection of their good. As a result, one formulates a moral comment to stand by a set of rules of duty to complete certain form of good character.

This ethics of respect for nature is similar with a system of human ethics grounded on 'respect for nature'. This has features: The first is a thinking of oneself and others as persons, as centres of autonomous choice.

⁹ Taylor, Paul. "Biocentric Egalitarianism." (Originally published in *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 3, 1981. in the name of 'The Ethics of Respect for Nature'). *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*. op. cit., p. 141

Second there is a feeling person as a person. It is accepted as proper moral attitude in which every person is regarded as possessing inherent worth or human dignity. Third, there is an ethical system of duties which are recognized to be owed by everyone to everyone. And these duties are structure s of manner in which public acknowledgement is given to each individual's inherent worth as a person.

Accordingly bio-centric outlook on nature entails these four things:

- i) Humans are members of the earth community of life similarly all the non human members are.
- ii) The earth's natural ecosystems are found as a complex web of interconnected and interdependent elements.
- iii) Each individual organism is considered of as a teleological centre of life, searching its own good in its own way.
- iv) Humans can be superior to any other living thing.

Consequently while developing the biocentric outlook; Taylor gets knowledge of the fact our being an animal species to be basic feature of our existence. He and his supporters do not reject the fundamental difference among us and other species, but they hope to keep in the forefront of our consciousness the fact that, in relation to our planet's natural ecosystem, we are but one species population among so many species. Our source lies in the same process of development which gives rise to all other species and that we are met with similar environmental conditions that deal with the members of other species. The well known laws of natural selection, of adaptation, and of genetics apply altogether with all of as member of the biological community.

If we deeply observe we would see that all animals and plants like us have their own goods and a *telos* of their own. Though our human good (e.g., of worth and importance of human life, including the individual sovereignty by selection of our own specific value system.) is not just similar can go without the biological necessities for the survival physical health.

Again the possibility of the destruction of the human species makes us conscious of another side in which we could not consider ourselves as better than other species. Our happiness and survival depend upon the ecological health and wellbeing of different animals and plants communities, while their survival and heath do not depend on human wellbeing. Relatively, many wild animals and plants would be benefited if human beings disappear from the earth. The reduction of their habitats by human beings in the name of 'development' would then end. The anthropogenic pollution of land, water, fire also would end. Ecosystems could slowly return back to its

balance, suffering only from natural disturbances. All these mean our existence is not so much essential from the community standpoint.

Let's discuss to the second component of biocentric world view that notices the natural world as an organic system. To accept the biocentric outlook, and consider ourselves and our place in the world from its standpoint is to see the whole natural order of the earth's biosphere as a complex but combined web of interrelated organism, objects and events. The ecological relationship community of living things and their environment shapes an organic whole of functionally interdependent parts. Such dynamic, but simultaneously, relatively stable structures such as food-chains, predator-prey relations, plant succession in a forest, are self regulating and energy recycling devices maintain the balance of the whole.

For this reason, while we think of the welfare of the biotic communities—of human beings, animal and plants, we should be careful for the ecological balance. When one takes the kingdom of nature from the biocentric outlook, one should never forget that in the long way the integrity of the entire biosphere of our planet is essential to the recognition of its constituent communities of life, both human and non-human. According to Taylor, this holistic view of the earth's ecological system does not by itself constitute a moral norm. These are the matter of biological reality, rather a set causal connections put forward in empirical factors. Its ethical involvements for treatment of the natural environment lie entirely in the fact that of our knowledge of casual connections is an important means to fulfilling the ends we place ourselves in accepting the attitude of respect for nature.

In order to discuss the third element of the biocentric outlook Taylor repeats that each individual organism is to be imagined of as a teleological centre of life. The organism appears to mean something to be one as a distinctive, irreplaceable individual. The final result of this process is the attainment of a genuine understanding of the biocentric point of view and with that understanding, an ability would crop up to get that point of view. Considering living being as a centre of life, one is able to look at the world from this viewpoint.

Considering living being as teleological centre of life does not require connecting them with human characteristics. We should not consider all them as possessing having consciousness like us. Some of them may be conscious about world around them and others may not be conscious. Nor we reject that different kinds and levels of consciousness are illustrate when high level consciousness in some form or other is present. But they are conscious or not, all are equal teleological centre of life in the sense that everyone is united of goal-oriented activities focussed toward their protection and well-being.

The fourth component of the biocentric outlook on nature is the rejection of human superiority and perhaps it is the most important way to establishing the justifiability of the attitude of respect for nature. The thought of human superiority is strictly from human point of view, that is, from a point of view in which the good of humans is accepted as the principle of judgement. That's why, all we require to do is to look at the capacities of non-human animals from the standpoint of their to find an opposite judgement of superiority. In every case, the support of human superiority would be discarded from a non-human viewpoint.

Taylor describes as, it is right that we are different from non-human animals because of our some special capabilities. But only for these capabilities we cannot establish the superiority of human beings. If we observe a little, we would find that it is only from the human point of view that it looks like this. On the other way, some non-human animal have some unique qualities that we human beings have not. For the cheetah can run faster than men; an eagle can see things from far; so on and so forward. Why would we consider on this basis that they are the superior to human beings? From unbiased angle, the demand of human superiority does not bear credence, rather it could be considered as 'an irrational bias in our own favour.'

According to Taylor, this has been clear as and when we consider our relation to other species in terms of the three components of the biocentric outlook. These components jointly give us a general view of the natural world and of the place of humans in it. As we take this perspective, we come to recognize 'other living things, their environmental conditions and their ecological relationships in such a way as to awake in us a deep sense of our kinship with them as fellow members of the earth's community of life.'¹⁰ We then understand humans and non-humans form a united whole in which all living beings are functionally interconnected. All are then found to distribute with us the same characteristics of being a teleological centre of life. When this whole outlook has been a part of the conceptual structure, we have seen ourselves as bearing a certain moral relation to non-human forms of life.

It's true that contemporary environmental philosophy has developed through critiquing traditional (speciesist) anthropocentrism. Contemporary findings of ecology have undermined man's view of himself as the centre of the universe, showing him instead as a product of natural evolutionary process, having considerable affinities with other creatures, and to have vulnerable dependence on ecological conditions of existence. So, it's considered, a human being occupies no special position on this planet, and this naturally calls into question his prerogative to use non-human aspects of nature as 'resources' in whatever way they like. This ensures widespread moral intuitions that animals, plants and even the so called abiotic nature have value in themselves, which means,

¹⁰ Ibid., P.152.

they have intrinsic or inherent value. As well as many human practices, like cruelty to animals, destruction of habitats, endangering species, and disturbing ecosystemic balances are now being criticised on this ground. Most environmentalists see anthropocentrism as speciesism and human chauvinism, with narrowness of sympathy comparable to sexual and racial discrimination and chauvinism. Hence, it involves the core belief that underpins the human relationship with the natural world. And many of the traditional human practices are concerned only for human interests, even for trivial, non-basic human preferences, over and above any consideration of interests—even basic or crucial ones—of animals, plants and so called material nature. The most significant trend of present-day environmentalism is to rise above this closed, misguided view-point, and this means, among other things, focusing on *locus* of moral value other than on humans.

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