

Ecocentrism or the Attempt to Leave Anthropocentricity

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Abstract

With the emergence of industrialization as a social phenomenon, an event identifying the onset of dysfunctionality of the biotic community emerges: the issue of environmental sustainability. This question carries with it the need for expanding the views of traditional ethics that rests on anthropocentric theses. One of these approaches is ecocentrism, where the issue of the rights of individuals is crucial (whether it is just humans or people along with other living beings), stating that ecocentrism takes into account all participants in the biotic community as integral parts of the system. Logically, the mutual relations of the individuals of such a community and the consequences arising from their actions, which are the subject of research in this essay, are the main subjects of this position.

Keywords

Ecocentrism; bioethics; anthropocentrism; Aldo Leopold; land ethics.

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With the emergence of industrialization as a social phenomenon, an event identifying the onset of dysfunctionality of the biotic community emerges: the issue of environmental sustainability. This question carries with it the need for expanding the views of traditional ethics that rests on anthropocentric theses. One of these approaches is ecocentrism, where the issue of the rights of individuals is crucial (whether it is just humans or people along with other living beings), stating that ecocentrism takes into account all participants in the biotic community as integral parts of the system. Logically, the mutual relations of the individuals of such a community and the consequences arising from their actions, which are the subject of research in this essay, are the main subjects of this position.

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I. Introduction

Ethics, as a theory of morality, has appeared and been considered as anthropocentric for most of its history. Human behaviour as an object of ethics has been explored strictly in relation to other people. Starting from Aristotle's theory of virtue, to the deontological ethics of Kant and conventionalism in Bentham and Mill, all ethical systems that are imposed as classical in contemporary philosophy were almost entirely based on anthropocentrism.

But with the advent of industrialization as social phenomenon, an event that particularly marks the beginning of the dysfunctionality of

the biotic community, the issue of environmental sustainability has emerged. At the same time, the question of our attitude towards it is raised, because the reality shows that man is increasingly destroying “the bed of his life,” thus threatening his survival. These questions carry the need to extend the views of traditional ethics that rests on anthropocentric theses for our relationship to nature and life.

This is why the conception of nature (especially from the perspective of the new century’s natural sciences, whose paradigms, with its anthropocentrism, are considered the basis of the contemporary industrial civilization), treats nature as an object of human activity only. Moreover, for an instrumentalized nature which is “pure lumber - organic or non-organic material” [1] (p. 67), it is a mean to achieve the goals. Namely, from Bacon onwards, the implications are strengthened on the basis of the claim that knowledge is power, and science, as the highest degree of knowledge, is only a tool for man’s control over nature, which is increasingly considered hostile and alien.

Namely, the mathematized, quantitative, and experimentally-oriented science has removed all of its qualities from its subject matter and thereby resolved the nature of its internal values. The quality of Aristotle in the new age science has been replaced by quantity as a priority task of the new sciences, which in the mathematical expression and formulas received the most perfect expression. Thus, modern science until today, along with modern technique as its practical application, is shown as a manifestation of the changed attitude of man towards nature established since the beginning of the new century.

Hence, this conception of nature is considered to be the most responsible for situations of general ecological crisis, disturbance of balance, and dying as a consequence of human intervention. The most powerful weapon of man, i.e. his product, projects nature as a means, material, and not as “a kind of life force” [2] (p. 151) which has value in itself.

II. The necessity of new solutions, new approaches, and positions

Modern civilization is anthropocentric, characterized by an infinite belief in human reason by the means of which man raises above all other living forms (and even as the master of nature). This subjectivism, since the new age philosophy, in symbiosis with the understanding of

nature as presupposed by modern science, is a spiritual basis of the contemporary civilization. It is a civilization dominated by the subjective mind, while wisdom is expelled from nature and exists only in man. Nevertheless, because of the negative consequences of actions towards nature, it slowly becomes aware of the urgency of changing the approach, otherwise it will go extinct.

This need is a logical consequence of the admixture of the living community to which the man belongs. As such, all the consequences that this community suffers from, directly or indirectly, are reflected in the man himself. Hence, in certain (bio)ethical circles in 20th, and especially the 21st centuries, several new positions expand the boundaries of anthropocentric ethics in order to cope with the problems that are neglected in the traditional approach.¹

Such positions which extend the moral objects of the traditional anthropocentric ethics (where man, as an intelligent being, is central and represents the axis of everything around him) are the only object of moral behaviour:

- *Pathocentrism*; is an attempt to expand the subject of all sensitive living beings. These are the positions most clearly expressed through the views of Peter Singer, according to which animals that have developed a sophisticated sensory system tend to avoid situations that cause them pain. Namely, this attempt hierarchically selects highly-developed animal species (primarily mammalian) as moral objects to which the conduct of the moral subject should be the same as in a situation where the moral object is the man himself. In other words, every living being in which we can, by behavioural observation, establish analogous behaviour as of that in man, has the potential to be a moral object, that is, the object of reviewing our behaviour.
- *Biocentrism*, expands the ethical horizons to even greater distances, the moral object determining here a step further and wider than pathocentrism (where it is determined by behaviour), i.e. by biological path. Namely, everything that is living is an object of moral behaviour or, starting from plants and insects, to the most

¹ That is why the ecological crisis, because of this necessity and urgency, shattering the faith in the correctness of the key assumptions of our civilization, is shown as a general crisis or as the basis of the general crisis.

sophisticated living beings, every living individual should be taken into account when making a decision that includes that living individual. This is therefore an individualistic and egalitarian position which argues that living beings are individuals who should possess and should be respected according to their respective rights. This is an important feature which separates this position from that of ecocentrism.

- *Ecocentrism*. While for all the other ethical theories the question of the rights of individuals is crucial (whether it is only humans or humans along with other living beings), ecocentrism is a position which considers all participants in the biotic community as integral to the system. It argues that this is a holistic system in which the mutual relations of individuals of communities and the consequences arising from their actions are the main subject of review.

III. Pro et contra ecocentrism

Every ethical position has tangible implications. Every ethical attitude is essentially pragmatic and manifests itself through certain intentional behaviour. In the case of eco-centrism,² its procedures take into account the harmonious state of the ecosystem. This fundamentally distinguishes it from the other two positions, in particular from biocentrism. It is so because of the following reasons [3] (p. 298):

- First, eco-centrism has a comprehensive perspective. This is because procedures based on the eco-centric position seem to be able to solve a number of contemporary environmental problems, but also problems that the environment faces in general. Although by modern positions of various animal communities, this concept of living beings as resources is rigorously and deeply condemned, it is justified by the eco-centric theory because the use of a member

² In social theory, ecocentrism, which has an ecological sign, is often equated with the so-called “deep ecology.” although it may seem more appropriate to consider it as a kind of stream within ecocentrism. Compare with Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, Lifestyle: An Outline of an Ecosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37; Mathew Humphery, *Preservation Versus the People: Nature, Humanity and Political Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

(prey) in a community can represent a natural resource for another member (predator), as long as it does not adversely affect the natural equilibrium of the ecosystem.³

- Second, the eco-centric position avoids counterintuitive conclusions that are represented by other ethical positions, above all biocentrism, which advocate the defence of animal rights as individuals.⁴
- Third, eco-centrism is a completely non-anthropocentric position. Unlike other ethical systems (anthropocentrism, pathocentrism, biocentrism), where man is the only moral subject, or man besides other animals enjoys privileged rights as an individual, man is considered in eco-centrism as a simple member of the biotic community. Therefore this position, through its holistic views, gives moral dignity to natural objects and the ecosystem as a whole. With this, it is in accordance with the teachings of ecology.

A deeper analysis of these views, as well as the requirement to find a soundly-based answer to the question of why it is reasonable to adopt ethical holism in relation to the ecological community, necessarily refers to a nominal review of one of the most relevant advocates of ecocentrism: Aldo Leopold and his key essay “Land Ethic.” This is the first systematic presentation of ecocentric ethics, published in the classical text of the ecological movement, the collection of essays entitled *A Sand County Almanac* in 1949. The ethics of the land, the idea on which Leopold built his ethical holism expressed in three philosophical pivotal moments, states: “a certain procedure is correct when it strives to preserve the wholeness, stability and beauty of a

³ Of course, this assertion cannot and must not be generalized, which means that ecocentrism does not justify the mass destruction of entire ecosystems by systematically cutting out forest areas or industrially growing large quantities of goods, which are scientifically proven to be one of the most important factors for the negative consequences on all ecosystems, such as the issue of global warming.

⁴ For example, killing an animal by a farmer or hunter, or cutting wood in the yard for fire are fully justified by ecocentrism as these activities are aimed at securing personal existence and satisfying biological needs, while they do not harm the overall functionality of the biotic community, and are in the interest of some members of the same community, i.e. they are part of the natural equilibrium.

particular biotic community. It is incorrect, however, when it tends to a different state” [4] (p. 262).

Leopold **first** [5] (p. 299) writes a study on the practical cause of the adoption of ethical holism. He argues that it will be seen when⁵ we will allow ourselves to “think like a mountain” [6] (p. 137). This is alluding to our limited opinion on individual situations that do not allow us to understand the interdependent mechanisms of the entire ecosystem. In this sense, when “we think like a mountain,” when we identify with the mountain as epistemological subjects, we are able to see the interdependencies of a functioning living community. This is of particular importance, because unlike other ethical systems that have an individualistic approach, the ethics of the land, with its holistic vision, provide positive practical consequences not on individuals, but on the entire biotic community as a system.

Secondly, Leopold explores the foundations of the epistemological holism that allows the existence of its ethical system, i.e. it is a cognitive basis for the existence of the ethics of the land. Therefore, he believes that it is necessary to identify and catalogue the roles of all members within an ecosystem, so that we can safely derive the correct ethical implications. Namely, it is necessary to know each other’s role in order to claim that everything which is being done is done in order not to allow the hyperpopulation of one kind of animals in relation to others. The same issue concerns maintaining the balance of the biotic community.

Lastly, Leopold developed the metaphysical holism as the necessary presupposition to justify the existence of ethical holism. Namely, metaphysical holism is an extension of the concept of the “living being.” Thus the biotic community is seen as a system built by individual organs or parts which not only include people, animals, and plants, but also certain parts of the planet itself, such as mountains, rivers, the atmosphere, etc. With the inclusion of these elements in the biotic system, traditionally regarded as inanimate nature, Leopold gives an entirely new dimension to the term “living being.” As he explicitly claims: “philosophy expresses a certain reason why we cannot destroy the land, without being punished; it is because the ‘dead’ nature is an

⁵ Although expressed as a syntagm with metaphorical meaning.

organism that possesses a certain kind or degree of life, which we as such intuitively respect” [7] (p. 47-48).

Hence, ethical holism is impossible without assuming that the land has a certain *livelihood*. Moreover, the land can no longer be treated as a pure object, a dead element that can be used and shaped to the extent of human desire.⁶ Land should be understood as a living organism that can be healthy or ill, hurt, or killed. “Land, therefore, is not only ground; it is a source of energy that flows through the circuit of the ground, plants and animals” [4] (p. 253).

Several notes on the ethics of the land

However, despite the seductiveness of the ecocentric positions, especially the notion of the ethics of the land, when they are more deeply and critically analyzed, they are not immune to systematic criticism. Two of these criticisms are of fundamental philosophical significance.

The **first** critique addresses concerns regarding the extended metaphysics of Leopold (i.e. that the categories “health”, “death” and the like, which can be attributed to any single living organism) cannot be attributed to the whole environment as a system. This way, Leopold himself, as well as the advocates of this position, must and should admit that the “vitality” of his ecosystem is merely metaphorical, and not literal.

This is because the ethical implications of such learning rise doubt in the realization of a natural equilibrium advocated by the ethics of the land. More specifically, doubt appears at the impossibility of a concrete answer to the question of what exactly the “integrity, stability and beauty” of the ecosystem relate to. Despite the systematic research of

⁶ This new perspective, which can be called “environmental awareness,” has been developing for decades, and was fully presented in the late 1940s in the form of *Ethics of the Land*. This is a turning point from the understanding of nature that possesses only an instrumental value, towards the understanding that recognizes the intrinsic value in natural systems. This is why our short-sightedness bothers more than it contributes to natural balance. Until we learn to “think like a mountain” and understand nature from wider and long-term perspectives, we are doomed to inefficiently manage ecosystems. More detail on this in the essay “Thinking Like a Mountain,” in *A Sand County Almanac*.

existing ecosystems (i.e. finding the appropriate place for each member in the biotic community, as well as their roles as interrelationships on which the eco-system is built), and despite perceiving the consequences which would arise from each particular manipulation with each individual member of the community, the possibility of the full awareness of the procedure which would bring us closer to establishing the “wholeness and stability” of the ecosystem is questionable. In this way, we cannot even come up to the way these facts are related to this valuable conclusion.⁷

Secondly, justifying the sacrifice of individual animals and/or plants as resources, as long as they are in the interest of the ecosystem, puts the land’s ethics and ecocentrism to a fierce and serious test. Within this test, the land’s ethics is referred to as “totalitarian ethics” by Marty Kiel [9] (p. 135-147), a learning that undermines and destroys respect for the individual [10] (p. 241-256), thus it is also called “ecological fascism.” As Tom Reagan sums up in his work “The Case of Animal Rights” [10] (p. 241-256): “the weight and implications for the development of rights based on ecological ethics imply the consent of the individualistic nature of moral rights with the holistic understanding of nature... Aldo Leopold is an example of this tendency ... The implications of this understanding contain a clear perspective that claims that an individual can be sacrificed in the interest of the great biotic good, in the name of ‘the wholeness, stability and beauty of the biotic community.’ It is difficult to see how the notion of the right of the individual can find a place in an understanding that can rightly be called ecological fascism.”

This is why the criticism of the two premises (i.e. that the sacrifice of individual animals and/or plants as resources is justified as long as it is in the interest of the ecosystem and the second, that humans, together with other living beings are only members of the living community) leads to the conclusion that certain sacrifices are in the interest of maintaining the “wholeness, stability and beauty” of the eco system. Furthermore, this holistic ecocentrism and the ethics of the land are unable to respond to this criticism, which raises the question of

⁷ For a more detailed defence of this view, see: Laura Westra, *An Environmental Proposal for Ethics: The Principle of Integrity* (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham Md., 1994).

whether such an ethical approach is appropriate and whether the answer should be sought elsewhere.

IV. Conclusion

At the forefront, it is noticeable that these are undefined positions of holistic ecocentrism and the theory of the land because they completely ignore the rights of individual members in the interest of the biotic community as a system. However, when considering the remarks of their criticisms, the possible compromise offered by this position should also be considered.

Namely, a systematic research of the existing ecosystems (i.e. finding the appropriate place for each member in the biotic community, as well as their roles and interrelationships on which the eco system is built), would allow us to know what consequences could arise in each particular manipulation with each individual member of the community. Then we may know which procedure could bring us closer to establishing the “wholeness and stability” in the ecosystem, and which would distract us from such a state. Thus, the ecocentric approach, if properly understood, could give positive results which would primarily respect the balance of the animal community, while also respecting the rights of individual members of the system.

Moreover, the very existence of ecocentrism as an ethical position, although nominally, yet unequivocally, allows for progress in ethics. This is why any opposition to and refutation of the arguments of this theory could only bring us closer to finding such an ethical system that would allow the harmonious functioning of all members of the living community without disturbing individual, single rights.

The justification of this view could be found in the claim that ecocentrism⁸ is actually trying to question and change our conventional understanding of the environment. The “main point of overlap between all authors who have been advocating this approach is actually a critique of civilization conditioned conception of nature as an element which primarily appear as supplies for production of our humanity” [11] (p. 197).

⁸ As one of the many streams inside the ecological movement that appeared in the mid-70s of the last century.

Hence, instead of seeing nature as a relatively simple phenomenon, the prism should be turned to nature and be regarded as an almost infinitely complex system. This, in turn, leads to the conclusion that it is only about blurring our core notch networks with Prometheus watching nature. So everything that is in the domain of “natural” is susceptible to exploitation that can be exclusively limited by the logic of the work itself. This gives the right to Naess and Goldsmith to insist on an additional effort to revise the ontological status of nature itself, not just to improve laws and internal rules of production.

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