

Ηθική. Περιοδικό φιλοσοφίας

Αρ. 4 (2007)



Environmental Ethics

Ayoub Abu-Dayyeh

doi: [10.12681/ethiki.22671](https://doi.org/10.12681/ethiki.22671)

Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Abu-Dayyeh, A. (2020). Environmental Ethics. *Ηθική. Περιοδικό φιλοσοφίας*, (4), 24–37.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/ethiki.22671>

Environmental Ethics

Ayoub Abu-Dayyeh

Introduction:

After attempting to define concepts related to the Environment, this paper is intended to define itself by asking the following questions hoping that it can provide some answers:-

What are the questions usually asked in Environmental Ethics?

How did the historical development of philosophy help in harming our perception to the environment?

What did the scientific revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries do towards our perception to Nature?

How did the industrial revolutions in the 19th and 20th centuries affect our environment?

Why are we concerned about the environment?

How can we establish environmental ethics to solve existing environmental issues?

Definitions:

Ecology: The study of structure and function of nature

(In Greek: household: Oikos).

Eco-system: Human, Animal and Plant Ecology: The relationship between organisms and their environment: The economics of nature, as ecology and economics are derived from the same root word.

Ecocentrism: Awareness of nature and its complicated interdependence. Awareness of life-centered morality.

Anthropocentrism: Moral obligations, concerning economical and socio-political obligations, of rational human-centered ethics. The feeling of duty towards the extinction of some species, depletion of resources

(sustainability), dangers of technology, global warming... etc.

Environmental concerns deal with changes in water, air, earth & life

Environment Ethics & Ecological Morality asks these questions:-

Is it immoral or unethical to pollute air?

If so: Is it because pollution makes people ill?

Is it because pollution disrupts the Eco-system?

Does nature has an intrinsic value we need to protect?

We must develop a new ethical system, why?

How can we develop a new ethical system?

We value the Ozone shield because it protects us from harmful radiation. We value phytoplankton in oceans because they provide much of our free oxygen. These things and others have been of concern to humans for a long time and has been widening in range as science and technology are introducing new species and new factors of concern to the environment. Do these things have intrinsic values separate from our needs?

Moral community has widened since ancient Greece: women, working men, animals, trees ...etc. They are now looked upon as important elements in the Eco-system. Some philosophers are now calling for animal rights, talking about feeling of boredom in closed farms, some are calling that even trees should have a stand to facilitate I & Thou relations¹. Of course, many refuse to extend the moral community as such! Yet, we ask: Is this mystical stance and talking about animal rights a distraction from other human issues?

If rational beings possess moral rights, can we claim to be the guardians of all the members belonging to the Eco-system, as they cannot exercise their moral rights by themselves!

We influence the life of next generations. However, do we really know what future generations will need or lack?

We need to develop a new attitude towards all issues that are changing

rapidly and imbalancing the Eco-system. Should we not talk about intrinsic values of the environment? Does an environmental intrinsic value have an end in itself, an objective value, a value not dependent in its existence on us?

Are we reducing environmental ethics to environmental management, directing our concerns towards our best interests? Do we need a transvaluation of values similar to Nietzsche's attitude? Let us see what philosophy has done to our perception of the world?

Kantian philosophy: The world is structured by us, the world and its reality is a manifestation of our Reason. The problem with zeitgeist philosophy and environment is that much of the western philosophy follows from Kant based on that noumenal reality is unknowable. The thing in itself is far from being known to us. How can we talk about intrinsic values of the environment then?

Linguistic philosophy suggests that the structure of the language reflects the structure of cognition. In the structuralist and post-structuralist philosophies, reality is a text, a manifestation of the mind, not very far from the Kantian perspective. Even Heidegger tells us that man is the lightening up place of being. Therefore, the world is epistemologically and ontologically dependent on our consciousness and its products: Theory, Text, Language, etc.

It is possible that the Greek Philosophy had started the phenomena of considering humans as rational animals capable of political organization by their Nature. This rationality is unique in human beings compared to other creatures. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have also preached the superiority of humans in the great chain of beings. Humans are by their Nature the closest to God. Who is situated at the top of that chain! God has put nature at our service!

There have been few trials by religious people such as: Saint Frances of Assisi in the 13th century who is thought to have tried to chat to birds and wolves trying to get men closer to Nature. However, they were actually

theological trials closely related to teaching Man to love God, be thankful to him, and glorify him more than anything else.

With Descartes in the 17th century a new vision to the Mind/Body problem has risen. The former was more important and can seek knowledge without any help. This turning point in history has given rationality a Divine status as Reason has become the center of the universe. This has coincided with the Scientific Revolution, which swept Europe.

On the other hand, Nature has become a great Machine very much like the mechanical clock, which was the ideal example of a perfect machine. The 16th century scientific revolution has given birth to the invention of the compass, scientific instruments, watches etc...

Developing sciences have convinced people that we can control Nature and make use of it for our benefits; this is what Frances Bacon in England has announced.

The scientific revolution intensified in the 17th century, and the Copernican Revolution dismissed the earth as the centre of the universe. Earth has become like any other planet revolving around the Sun.

Isaac Newton announced his laws of motion, as Nature now has become an obedient subject to his laws. The invention of the Telescope, Microscope, Thermometer, Barometer, have all helped in surveying the skies checking the laws of motion. Nature has become an object subjected to research. This great clock –Earth- is obeying beautifully the laws, which Man, through science, has discovered. Newton's world made planets subjected to the laws of motion and abiding by its orbits; this precision has inspired people and became an unimaginative symbol of good government. Romanticism has become a response to the mechanical world that worked precisely like a clock model working promptly without feelings.

Romanticism started late eighteenth century as a response to civil wars, which swept Europe, particularly in Germany, England and France. Nature is innocent while city is corrupt. Nature is where we seek solitude and tranquility. Rousseau (1712 – 1778), declared that man is good by

his nature, but destroyed by civilization. William Blake (1757-1827) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850) were whispering to peoples to follow their emotions and dismiss thought². In America Henry Thoreau (1817-1862) has expressed his resentment by leaving his town and living in the woods for 2 years.

This Mechanical perception to Nature has intensified further in the 18th century reaching a peak by the end of the 18th century when James Watt (1763 – 1819), the Scottish brilliant inventor, invented the steam engine by the end of the 18th century. He became rich as his machine was used intensively in paper mills, flower mills, Iron industries... etc. The industrial revolution has started in Europe and the world will have to pay the price of pollution ever since then.

The first industrial revolution that started using the technology of the steam engines and railways supported by the biomass fuel and coal has been developing into a more sophisticated industrial revolution by the end of the 19th century. The 2nd revolution was supported by fossil fuel oil, electricity and developed the internal fusion engine. By the end of the first World War the world has become more dependent on oil and gas thus reducing the need for coal, yet pollution was increasing rapidly as the need for power was increasing dramatically. Imperialism has set off at the end of the 19th century to conquer the world and plunder its resources.

It has become clear now the earth is warming up due to the increase in pollutant gases, particularly carbon oxides. The earth in the 19th century was warmer than the centuries before. It was also discovered that the 20th century was 3 times warmer than it was in the 19th century.

Life cycles of energy resources (Estimated Scenario see Diagrams 1& 2) show us the following details:-

19th century: Increasing need for coal, thus reducing demand on traditional biomass resources.

20th century: Rising demand on oil and gas and introducing nuclear energy in the second half of the 20th century have reduced demand on both coal and biomass resources.

Since the seventies (after the 1973 oil embargo), renewable energies have started building up. In 2006, energy generated from renewable resources (wind energy, hydropower, photo voltaic, solar thermal, wave energy, .etc) is almost equal to the energy produced by nuclear fusion (Ontario: 50 % of its power need at present is nuclear, 80 % of France's power is nuclear).

As nuclear power production is expected to rise slowly in the next fifty years (20 % possibly), most likely introducing cold nuclear fusion as a main source of energy, the production of renewable energy resources is expected to triple in 50 years, thus reducing fossil fuel dependency, simultaneously meeting the expected time when oil is expected to run out any way.

Observing the development of wind energy production in Diagram 3. The most advanced European country is Germany, followed by Spain. From Diagram 4, we can see how Germany is now producing almost half the power generated in Europe by wind. In diagram 5, we can see how Europe is leading the world in wind energy production, followed by North America and Asia respectively.

The aforementioned data demonstrates the division of countries into Rich and poor, North and South. It also demonstrates the oil monopoly in the world. As the United States has controlled much of the oil market, Europe has had to seek new resources to keep its industries going.

In diagram 6, we can see how the United States has been increasing its renewable resources since the Gulf war Crises. Now it seems they are convinced that occupying Iraq is not as easy as they thought. Last January 2007, president Bush announced that America will reduce its gasoline consumption by 20 % in the coming 10 years, giving priority to advocating greater use of alternative fuels, such as renewable resources, hybrid cars, cellulosic ethanol, etc.

The dramatic ending of the Second World War by inventing the nuclear bomb and destroying Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan in 1945. The radiation has alarmed people but the level of alarm has risen even further

after the Soviet Union started its nuclear experiments near the North Pole, and it was discovered that the winds moving from North to South has carried radiation as far as the South Pole, where traces of radioactive pollution were found in the fatty skin of the penguins. This has triggered a great alarm in the world.

In 1948, we started to see books published about the environment paving the way to survival. The environmental revolution probably started on a global scale when Rachel Carson published her book about the "silent spring" in 1962. Our improved chemicals can kill life on earth, such as the DDT, which killed millions of Birds treasured by human beings. Since then the world has announced the beginning of its environmental revolution.

Our main concerns will probably shift in 50 years time from worries about the Ozone layer and carbon oxides to worries about contamination from radio activity, problems rising from population growth, etc. whatever the causes of concern to the environment, there still remains the question to philosophy:-

Do only humans have Inherent value?

What sort of commitments do we have towards Nature, and why?

What can we do to stop this?

There is an urgent need to shift our anthropocentric behavior into a biocentric one, which assigns intrinsic values for every living organism. As Planet Earth, works like an Eco-system built up on interrelated relations between the wide variety of species, then we can understand that it would be easier to think of the concept of conservation as a state of balance and harmony between Earth and human needs. In no way we can Judge whether this bird is useful or that bird is harmful, as it has been thought that some sea birds are useless and it became known later that its feeding on fish in the oceans has a great influence over the natural selection of fish, as the weak becomes a prey and the strong lives to produce strong fish. This applies in almost all species in the eco system.

Bacteria, E-coli, for instance, are as old as the universe and have adapted themselves to us, and have become useful to our system. How is it possible

that we cannot adapt ourselves to them although we address ourselves as rational beings? The World has been managing perfectly long before humans became a member in the Eco-system. We are the intruders and we should rectify the damage we have inflicted to the environment. How can we achieve that?

We are faced with two trends in perceiving environmental issues and finding solutions. A Strategy based on shallow perceptions that seek spontaneous treatment of pollution or spreading pollution equally over the world, as Kyoto agreement has specified enabling rich countries to buy quota from poor countries in the south. Meanwhile, a deep perception strategy looks at the issue from another perspective; we need to establish long-term solutions by utilizing clean energy resources, such as solar energy, wind, hydropower, wave energy, geothermal energy and so forth. This is a technological approach to the issue, what about the philosophical approach?

We have to use philosophy to modernize our language seeking refutation of the overwhelming propaganda in marketing industrial goods and developing construction sites destroying forests and reshaping the surface of the Earth. We must change the logo that was set by Frances Bacon in the 17th century: (knowledge is power that can conquer Earth) and change our perception from making progress at the expense of polluting earth and using its limited resources. We must adapt to new ethical standards that can change the idea of unlimited profit at any cost into limited human needs in harmony with Nature. How can we do that?

The starting point is learning what damage we have inflicted on the environment. We have discussed that earlier, and we have connected pollution to politics, economics and North South relations. Some argue that socialism is a solution, it might be so, but our concern in this paper is to establish a philosophical stand towards this issue.

Since the 17th century, humanity has been on the decline from Charles Taylor's perception. Particularly after the Second World War, three main malaises of modernity appeared:

1) Individualism: - The old world order was hierarchical, God on top of the pyramid and other classes follow underneath. This order shaped human society for a long time. We broke loose from traditional moral codes, we feel connected to a cosmic order not to a regional one. We chose our pattern of life and chose our own convictions, and they are safeguarded by our modern legal system. Modern freedom came out thorough discrediting this social order. This discrediting has given rise to "disenchantment" of the world. We are no longer enchanted by causality; no longer have we attributed Gods to natural phenomena's.

People lost the higher purpose in life, focusing on their individual life. Democracy helps to draw individuals towards themselves. Our lives have flattened and narrowed, making us less concerned about others and society. The age of prevalence of narcissism has come.

2) Instrumental Reason: - A kind of rationality has come with modernity, this rationality calculates the most economical means to a given end, and uses maximum efficiency and considers this the measure of success. Using people as instruments has become essential to our success regardless of what we do to them or to the environment.

An Aura has surrounded technology, we don't look at man as a whole person anymore, we use high-tech knowledge to cure people neglecting the importance of nurses treating patients as human being, where feelings are involved, eye to eye contact and a human hand contact. Instead, we are using high-tech medicines only. Modern accessories are keeping us apart trapped in an "iron cage", central heating, mobiles and computers are pushing us to a solitude life while fireplaces in the past used to join people together. Actually, fireplaces formed a community around them; they established human relations, developed languages and built trust. We are trapped within the forces of the Market and the State.

3) The political level: - The industrialized society, controlled by institutions and laws of the market, is controlling our choices and destroying our environment (Thinning of the ozone layer, deforestation, pollution, etc). This is imposing a great loss of freedom on us. Also less participation in

public affairs as peoples are spending more time at home watching T.V and using the internet, which the governments are making them available to preoccupy their citizens from public affairs. This, in turn, pushes people to alienation as people have lost political control over their own destiny. We have lost the meaning of life, and our moral horizons have faded and we fell in the culture of narcissism³.

How can we act in response to the malaises of modernity?

Environmental philosophy is the branch of philosophy concerned with the value of the environment, so if we trap the reality of the environment in our consciousness, without any action, how can we talk about environmental ethics and its value objectively?

We can seek to promote Ecotourism⁴: consolidating sacred elements of nature (use of religion in the Environment to give an intrinsic values to the environment). Sacred trees, animal ...etc. eventually preserving nature and upgrading the standard of living at the same time.

"Love of life" is a philosophy being established which goes as far as defining bioethics simply as the "Love of life". As love is a common factor among all peoples of the world, we are fortunate to have had a long gestation period in our mother's wombs for nine months, which helped develop love feelings and affection.

We can learn from Taoism (Tao-teachings - 6th century B.C- China): The perfect man is connected with the primary virtues of love, compassion, patience, and the unconditional generosity towards all living beings⁵. Nevertheless, to lose diversity between the great varieties of nations in a gradual manner, we need to share wealth and technology. How far have we progressed in that so far?

An Ethiopian in Africa uses 1/600 the amount of energy consumed by an American. Obesity is a disease in America while some African countries announce their population suffering from hunger and starvation.. We need to change our values, promoting using environment friendly means of transport. We can choose our food, furniture....etc, based on the love of life⁶. If we love life sincerely we can thus avoid damaging it. We can impose

luxury tax on non-friendly items, but do all these actions make the world a just place to live in? We have to set a definition for Justice.

Unfortunately, Justice is nowadays understood in very much the same way the young sophist Thrasymachus defined it in Plato's Republic. He defined Justice as follows: Justice is whatever the strongest people decide according to their best interest ⁷. Socrates dismisses this definition by arguing that the strongest people hardly know where their interests lie.

Answering the question about the Just State, Plato perceives that it must embody four great virtues: Courage, wisdom, temperance and justice. Whereby courage characterizes the class of people which constitutes the Auxiliaries (the army and police), meanwhile, wisdom displays itself in the group of people Plato calls the "Guardians", who are supposed to be the best and the brightest amongst the population of the republic. As for the third virtue: Temperance. A state is said to have "temperance" if the "Auxiliaries" obey the Guardians in all things in the same manner that the producers (The largest group in the society who constitute workers, farmers, etc) obey both the Auxiliaries and the Guardians in all matters.

Finally, a state is said to be Just if the Auxiliaries do not only obey the Guardians but enjoy doing so too, and the same applies to the producers as in a Just State they are to obey the other two classes willingly and without coercion and at the same time enjoy doing so.

Consequently, the Ideal State is an aristocratic state (In Greek: the rule by the best), and it is Just because everybody obeys the aristocracy and enjoys doing so too. This is not too far from the Thrasymachus definition of justice. Yet, quite different from that of Aristotle. Aristotle defined Justice as a balancing act of moderation toward one self and others. We need to promote Aristotle's definition, but is it possible in a world controlled by a capitalist mode of production?

Pope John Paul II once said: "Only a socially Just country has the right to exist"⁸ we must add too that "only a socially Just world can survive". This "dream" is approached through ethical maturity, primarily enhanced by education.

We can learn from the North Indian culture how to offer sacrifices by letting animals free, not by killing them.

The Red Indians considered it a sin to scorch or harm the surface of the Earth, as in doing so we are scaring Mother Earth breasts that feed us.

In Shinto Faith, some forests were believed to harbor a divine atmosphere. Therefore, no one would dare harm them.

In Taiwan, there exist some sacred trees and lands where Gods reside. Who would want to hustle Gods?

In Buddhism, the philosophy of non-violence which respect all forms of life.

The mystical Philosophy of "I & Thou", as explicated by Martin Buber in the twenties of the twentieth century, considers Trees as necessary means to reach the Eternal Thou. Pantheism in Buber's words: "certainly the world dwells in me as an image, Just as I dwell in it as a thing.... The world and I are mutually included, the one in the other"⁹.

Richard Dawkins sees that the atheists must lobby together to prove that their ethical behavior is rational and historic and far more useful to the world and nature than the ethics taught in the scriptures which is practiced by people driven by fear of punishment¹⁰.

I cannot be one with the Eternal Thou (God) unless I build up a relationship with the "It" world first, followed by I-Thou relations with other people, as an essential mean to unite with the Eternal Thou.

Materialism and Darwinism: By evolution; we are the descendants of early life; the sea was our habitat, now it is land. Therefore, we have a duty to protect our heritage back to the simplest forms of life on Earth.

Humans inaugurated themselves as "moral animals" partly to avoid the punishment from the Gods that they invented in their imagination to compensate for their weaknesses and to compensate for their ignorance of the natural phenomena. Now that we do understand the birth mechanism of the Universe and the long and complex trends of our evolution, we must treasure life, which is rare in the Universe, if not unique, and there after

seek to preserve and protect all forms of life. Every element has an intrinsic value without which life could never have developed.

Ethics is a feeling of duty, which probably goes back to the era when we, humans, lived in small communities. We had to be nice to each other because we knew almost every body in the village. Our love to Nature is the same; we could never have harmed Nature because our survival depended on preserving Nature.

The Eco-system has a precious value in our conscious embedded deep down in our inner self's. All we have to do is remember it and start practicing Universal Ethics extending gradually from a feeling of belonging to the world and beyond (The Universe). A feeling of the Ethosphere extending to a feeling of the Cosmosphere, extending beyond earth, religions, race, cultures¹¹. What religions could not overcome, concerning our differences, is a future prospect for philosophy, which can hopefully create a unity of purpose and surpass regional conflicts towards assimilation in the cosmosphere of the Universe.

REFERENCES

1. Martin Buber, *I & Thou*, translated by Ronald smith, 2004 edition, continuum, London – New York.
2. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 1961 edition, Unwin Ltd., Kent – England.
3. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 11th edition, Harvard University press, Massachusetts – London, 2003.
4. M. A. Chen, "The Ethics and Attitudes towards Ecotourism in the Philippines", in *Asian Bioethics in the 21st century*, Eubios Ethics Institute 2003, pp. 313 – 319.
5. Darryl Macer, *Bioethics is love of life*, 1997 edition, Eubios Ethics Institute. p.19, 78.
6. Op. Cit. P.3.
7. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 10th edition, 1967, London, G. Allen & Unwin Ltd., pp. 132 – 133.
8. Darryl Macer, *Bioethics is love of life*, 1997 edition, Eubios Ethics Institute p. 146.
9. Martin Buber, *I & Thou*, p. 73.
10. Richard Dawkins, from his lecture at Lynchburg University, Virginia, October 23rd 2006.
11. R. N. Sharma, "Ethosphere and Cosmosphere", in *Asian Bioethics in the 21st century*, Eubios Ethics Institute 2003, pp. 331 – 334.

Σύνοψη

Ο δρ. Ayoub Abu Dayyeh αρχικά ορίζει τις κεντρικές έννοιες του θέματός του, τουτέστιν τους όρους Περιβάλλον, Οικοσύστημα, Οικοκεντρισμός και Ανθρωποκεντρισμός. Στη συνέχεια θέτει τους μείζονες

προβληματισμούς της Περιβαλλοντικής Ηθικής. Κυρίαρχος μεταξύ αυτών είναι το εάν και κατά πόσον τα μη ανθρώπινα έμβια και άβια όντα δύνανται να διαθέτουν εγγενή ηθική αξία. Επ' αυτού παρατηρεί πως η κοινότητα των όντων με ηθική αξία έχει διευρυνθεί αξιοσημείωτα από την εποχή της κλασικής αρχαιότητας. Παρακολουθεί την διεύρυνση του εν λόγου κύκλου από τις απαρχές του Χριστιανισμού και του Ισλαμισμού, θρησκειών, που θέτουν τη φύση στην υπηρεσία του ανθρώπου. Αναφέρεται στον ορθολογισμό του Καρτεσιού και στην μηχανιστική αντίληψη που αυτός εισήγαγε στην θεώρηση των φυσικών όντων. Τόσο ο Καντιανισμός όσο και η Φιλοσοφία της Γλώσσας, αργότερα, απέτυχαν να θέσουν τις βάσεις μιας ηθικής, η οποία θα μπορούσε να συμπεριλαμβάνει και τον περιβάλλοντα κόσμο.

Η Επιστημονική Επανάσταση, όπως και η επακολουθήσασα Βιομηχανική, θέτουν τον άνθρωπο στο επίκεντρο, ενώ στη φύση επιφυλάσσουν απλώς θέση παρόχου αγαθών και υπηρεσιών. Στην Νευτώνεια αντίληψη περί του σύμπαντος έρχεται να αντιπαρατεθεί ο Ρομαντισμός, με κύριους εκπροσώπους του τους J.J. Rousseau, William Blake, William Blake και Henry David Thoreau. Το ανωτέρω κίνημα, υποβοηθούμενο από τα –πολύ περισσότερο χειροπιαστά– επακόλουθα του Β' Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου, από την πληθυσμιακή έκρηξη και την διαρκώς αυξανόμενη υπερθέρμανση του πλανήτη, θέτει νέα ερωτήματα: Μόνο οι άνθρωποι είναι φορείς απόλυτης αξίας; Έχουμε ηθικές υποχρεώσεις προς τη φύση; Η Περιβαλλοντική Φιλοσοφία μπορεί να παράσχει τις δέουσες απαντήσεις. Ανευρίσκοντας ερείσματα στην Πλατωνική και την Αριστοτελική σκέψη, αλλά και σε ποικίλες θρησκευτικές αντιλήψεις, ο δρ. Dayyeh θεωρεί πως η Φιλοσοφία μπορεί να υπερβεί την διάκριση υποκειμένου – αντικειμένου και να θεμελιώσει υγιείς στάσεις και αντιλήψεις του ανθρώπου σε ότι αφορά στον περιβάλλοντα κόσμο.

Ε. Δ. Πρωτοπαπαδάκης