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Ethical Obligations to Non-Human Life in Climate Change Issue

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Abstract:

Al Gore makes the assertion that climate change has become one of the moral issues of our time. It has been observed that the debate about climate change at the most fundamental level is a moral and ethical crisis. Science has been able to forecast that how severe climate change will be, but there are many ethical issues that are hidden inside the science of climate change. With the help of science we have come to know that humans are majorly causing the production of various greenhouse gases. This would cause major harm and which brings out many ethical issues on the surface. But just accepting that climate change is an ethical issue does not take us too far. The next question that gains attention is that what are the ethical issues that we face in the light of climate change? One of the problems posed in front of us is our effect on the non-human world. This paper analyses our ethical obligations to the non-human world in the light of anthropogenic climate change.

Keywords: Climate Change, Non-Humans, Ethics, Moral Responsibility

1. Introduction

There have been many discussions about climate change focusing on significant issues like: questions about human rights, justice between developed and developing nations and questions concerning the moral responsibilities of existing people towards future people. These are all issues which are seen from an anthropocentric perspective. Many ethical issues arise as a result of the harms of climate change on human beings. However, given the likely planetary effects of climate change, one might also expect another area of ethical debate: the nonhuman world.

It is a well-known truth of this day and age that the use of scientific technology and modern machinery has changed and is continuing to change the natural environment. While this

technology and advancement is helping us to prosper, there is also no doubt that its production and use is having a negative impact on our environment too. The polluting of rivers, oceans and the air are speeding up the growth of greenhouse gases, leading to depletion of the ozone layer, and deforestation, each of them pose an instant threat to the health of humans and also to the survival of the non-human species.

Certainly, concerns about the impact of climate change on the non-human world directly have been expressed, both by environmentalists and by ethicists. Some ethicists writing about climate change have shown such concerns. For instance, Stephen Gardiner notes that “deciding what trajectory to aim for [in terms of long-term global carbon emissions] raises issues about our responsibilities with respect to animals and nature.”(Gardiner) John Broome also emphasizes that, independently of effects on humans, “Damage to nature may well be one of the most harmful consequences of climate change.”(12)

In the light of this inquiry the relevance of environmental ethics is obvious. Questions of animal welfare and rights and questions about whether species, ecosystems, habitats or other ‘ecological groups’ have rights, have featured in the environmental ethics literature for a long time. 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. Environmental ethics concerns itself to the natural environment and a proper behaviour towards it. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston in their book *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology* maintain that the goal of many environmental ethicists is to expand moral considerations to animals, plants, to species and even to ecosystems. Here, in this paper, I would dwell into some of the ethical approaches which concern themselves with the moral obligation of humans towards the natural environment.

2. The Three Approaches

There are three kinds of views concerning ecological morality. One common view is that ecology; its constituents and their interdependence necessitate the development of a fundamentally new ethics, which is nature-centered and so non-human-centered morality, this view is called as Ecocentrism. This view tells that there is a need for a new ecological ethic that is not man-dependent, it tells us that nature should be valued in itself. Ecocentrists believe that ecosystems have a good moral standing of their own. There are many philosophers who explicitly espouse this view. Aldo Leopold gave voice to such a view when he claimed that we need a Land Ethic, a conservation ethic, the one which will broaden the membership of the moral community by including all the constituents of nature.

A second view about is that the findings of ecology make it necessary to develop a new ethic, but one that is new in a less radical sense, namely in the sense that it is ecologically oriented,

ecologically aware, a normative ethic that enlarges the circle of moral community, that is animal-centered or life-centered morality, this kind of view is referred to as biocentrism. This approach of biocentrists maintains that all living creatures have a good of their own and so have moral standing as such. Their flourishing is intrinsically valuable. They do not deny that ecosystems have value but they maintain that this value arises from the way that ecosystems facilitate the lives and flourishing of the numerous individual creatures that comprise them or depend on them.

The third kind of view is that the findings of ecology do not necessitate a basic revolution in ethics but simply a more informed, more accurate thinking out of our moral obligations and moral rights, we can call this kind of view, a careful, considerate and rational human-centered ethics or anthropocentrism. H.J. McClosky says that according to this view there is no need for a specifically ecological ethic to explain our obligations towards nature, that our moral rights and duties can satisfactorily be explained in terms of traditional, human-centered ethical theory. (31)

This view consequently maintains that ecology stands on ethics and morality and in that it brings out extremely important and far-reaching effects of human actions that led to extinction of species pollution, population growth, depletion of resources and henceforth humans can be held accountable for such outcomes.

There have been many environmental philosophers who have developed anthropocentric approaches towards environmental ethics. It is a view that human beings are the central and important entities in the universe. A human-centered theory of environmental ethics holds that our moral duties with respect to the natural world are all ultimately derived from the duties we owe to one another as human beings. According to McClosky, it is because we should respect the human rights, or should protect and promote the well-being of humans, that we must place certain constraints on our treatment of the earth's environment and its nonhuman inhabitants. (32)

The upholders of the first two views generally disagree with this human centered view. For instance, Aldo Leopold argues that we have a well-articulated human-to-human ethic; now we are in need of a comparable human-to-land ethic (203) 'Land' according to Leopold is referred to as an ecosystem that includes soil, water, plants, and animals. He critiques the human exploitation of nature and believes that it is important to change the role of human beings from conqueror of the land-community to just ordinary members and citizens of it. (Leopold 204)

The main aim of human to land ethic for him is to develop a method of cooperation in the land-community. He affirms that an ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social. Leopold suggests that in ethics there has been an underlying theme of moral extensionism. From this, an ethic for nature that is for Land can evolve. He grounds his Land Ethic on the idea of moral extensionism.

In the same way, Arne Naess promotes deep ecology in order to shift away from what he calls 'anthropocentric shallow ecology' which is only concerned with resource conservation and pollution control for the protection of humans. Naess maintains that an authentic ethical concern for environmental issues must go away from the pursuit of human interests. According to Naess, A new ethic which embraces plants and animals as well as people, is essential for human societies to live in harmony with the natural world on which they depend for survival and well-being.

Consequently, he puts forward the principle of biospherical egalitarianism, announcing that all the members in the ecosphere share equal rights to live and blossom. Following the lines of Leopold's land ethics, Naess also believes that "richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves." (224-25)

Following the arguments of Leopold and Naess, some environmental philosophers argue that the intrinsic value of natural objects or nature is independent of human consciousness. For instance, Tom Regan declares that the presence of inherent value in a natural object is autonomous and free of any awareness, interest or appreciation of it by any conscious being. (Regan 71)

Besides these arguments, against anthropocentrism there has been an attack on it by the biocentrists like Paul Taylor who describe the fundamental points of biocentrism, he argues for the view that all living things have inherent value, and so deserve moral respect, equally. For Taylor, all that is required to have an inherent value is to be alive.

He argues that a biocentric ethic can be established or justified by us taking on a new kind of moral attitude. This attitude is that all living things, and not only humans, have inherent worth. Taylor's strategy is to argue that the claim that living things possess inherent worth will be justified if it can be shown that we are justified in adopting the attitude of respect for nature. Apparently, he believes that respecting nature directly implies that we regard living things as possessing inherent worth.

Underlying the justification for the adoption of the attitude of respect for nature is the belief system, which is characterized by Taylor as a biocentric outlook on nature. This is an ecological outlook, with the key idea of the interdependence of living things.

Taylor suggests, the adoption of this biocentric outlook, leads us to adopting the attitude of respect for nature, with the implication that we now have a non-anthropocentric environmental ethic. Taylor proposed that the life-centered ethics is opposed to human centered ethics because from the perspective of life centered theory we have a moral obligation to wild animals and plants because they are members of the biotic community. We are morally bound to protect their good for their own sake. Then he also maintains that their well-being as well as human well-being should be realized as an end in itself.

This biocentric approach permits us to extend the concept of a community so that human beings become merely a part of the biotic community. Thus we get the holistic approach of the Land Ethic. This kind of a holistic approach encompasses the idea that human beings who are a part of the biotic community, are to act in a way so as to preserve the ecological system. Scientific progress and technological advancement should not lead to disruption of the environment (including the human and the non-human life) as such. Maintenance of diversity of species thus becomes a moral requirement.

At this point, I would again go back to the question concerning climate change. Do we have moral obligations to avert harms to non-humans when we discuss climate change? If so, on what basis should we argue that we have moral obligations towards non humans? One's answer to this question would depend on which entities one thinks deserve moral consideration. The three approaches i.e. Anthropocentric, Biocentric and Ecocentric, may lead to different conclusions about duties and moral considerations to preserve plants, animals, and ecosystems. The Anthropocentrists argue that the duty to protect plants and animals stems from their value for human uses. The Ecocentrists argue that ecosystems have an intrinsic value and should have a moral standing rather than being treated as material for human consumption. Then there are Biocentrists who say that all living creatures have a good of their own and so have moral standing as such.

In reply to the question whether we have moral obligation towards the environment when we consider issues like climate change one might hold an anthropocentric view that only humans deserve moral consideration. However, ethicists such as Peter Singer, argue that limiting moral consideration to humans is arbitrary and analogous to racism and sexism. (148-162) Moreover, I have provided enough arguments of different philosophers against anthropocentrism. So if we do not agree with this approach then we are left with the two views – biocentrism and ecocentrism.

I find that both a biocentric view and an ecocentric view might offer good moral basis for our obligations towards environment which we are destroying by our unprecedented use. From a biocentric perspective the case to cut down on our emissions becomes stronger to some degree as it requires agents to pay attention to the harm done to all living beings. But a much greater difference is made when the interests of the non-living beings is also added, which takes us to an Ecocentric approach towards environment. Ecocentrism incorporates the perspective of a whole ecosystem. It holds that the ecosphere (inclusive of everything organic and inorganic), rather than individual life forms, is the source of all existence, thus promoting a holistic approach towards the environment. However, I find that there should be a fourth approach which can be well suited for taking moral action on climate change regarding non-human world.

3. A Natural Approach

Consider an example of a natural park which contains rocky woodlands, swamps and waterways which support a wide variety of life, it contains species which are rare and endangered. It is a

place of immense beauty and ecological significance. Now let us imagine that such a place would be destroyed because we interfere with the natural beauty of the park by the acts of mining or pollution. What kind of an approach would offer a good moral basis for not destroying it?

Moving beyond the anthropocentric, biocentric and even an ecocentric view why not consider protection of the environment because of some other property that it has for being morally considerable? Well, what can be the other properties for being morally considerable? Let us imagine that when activities like mining would be done in the national park then it would involve the smashing up of rocks, destruction of fossils, disturbing the geological structure.

Is there something wrong in doing so? If we are not thinking in terms of the above mentioned three approaches then, we are actually not thinking about the loss done to humans, plants and animals and ecosystems. We are now asking that is there something wrong in destroying these things considered in themselves? Now if we are looking for something beyond the property of being a rational being or the property of having a life or property of being a part of an ecosystem, then what other property can be ascribed to lifeless things like rocks or fossils? How about its property of being a natural thing? Or why not talk of the aesthetic value that these things have?

The claim of exemplifying beauty can be a basis for considering something morally considerable. Let us say that one should not destroy the natural park because it has an aesthetic value. Leopold would consider such an ethic. He argues that a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it does otherwise.

Holmes Rolston also points to such a view and says, "Aesthetic experience is among the most common starting points for an environmental ethic. Ask people, why save the Grand Canyon or the Grand Tetons, and the ready answer will be, because they are beautiful. So grand!"(127-141)

But as Rolston proceeds further in his essay he maintains, that aesthetics is the wrong place to begin in environmental ethics. Nevertheless, one ought to celebrate and conserve beauty in nature. Rolston maintains that Aesthetic experience is indeed a capstone value when humans enjoy nature, but that does not make it the best model for all values carried by nature. The problem is that the aesthetic model keys value to the satisfaction of human interests; indeed, it leases value to just one particular kind of interest. But there are many non-aesthetic human interests, and these may urge compromising, even sacrificing, aesthetic values. Starting off with an aesthetically oriented approach may disorient us and leave us with too weak a locus of value to protect all the values in jeopardy.

I think Rolston has a point, if we go back to the natural park example and consider that the mining company promises to replace the whole natural park with the artificial trees and rocks

which gives the same aesthetic appeal as the natural one. Would one still allow for the destruction? Another important consideration can be that if no human being was there to see the beauty of this natural park or even if no living creature existed in this natural park, then would it be fine to destroy the natural beauty that this land has?

Well my intuition still says no. But what can be the reason for this intuition of mine? Recent work in environmental ethics seems to have found ways to talk about the moral importance of the natural environment. There is a need to find value in the basic processes and functions of life itself. The world should have a value in itself before we came along, and it needs to have a value in itself long after we are gone.

The natural world should carry an intrinsic value alongwith it that human beings should understand. These values exist not only at the level of individual living organisms but also in species, ecosystems, and natural processes. If such a value exists then it would mean that humans should have duties towards the natural world.

Upholding such a view where one should value things in themselves would mean that a biocentric or an ecocentric approach is not enough. The best approach to ascribe moral responsibility to humans towards the non-human world would be the one which claims that species as such, ecosystems and the Earth itself, all have an intrinsic value. Infact such an approach would claim that the humans are also essential parts of the ecosystem. If we suppose that one's body has an intrinsic value, then we can claim that one's body organs such as brain, liver, heart etc would also have intrinsic value as they are all components of one's body, without which the body would not work.

So, even as the brain, heart or liver perform certain functions, they also have an intrinsic value as an essential part of the whole. In this way we can move our argument beyond humans and incorporate all living things, ecosystems, and finally, the whole earth. In that sense such an approach offers us a much broader perspective and a better moral reason for not destroying the environment. It is better to adopt this 'natural' approach, as I call it, towards saving our environment from climate change.

4. Conclusion

Hence, I conclude that the best way to face climate change challenge with respect to the non-human life is to appeal to this natural approach. This ultimately implies that humans should avert their increased CO₂ emissions or any other activity which causes climate change because all natural things get affected by it and from the perspective of a natural view, all natural things are intrinsically valuable.

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