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Item Type	Article
Authors	Laal, Marjan
Publisher	Tehran University of Medical Sciences
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Download date	2026-11-05 10:41:25
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173755

Journal of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine

A Brief History of Enviroethics and Its Challenges

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Received: 16 May 2009
Accepted: 23 May 2009
Published: 09 Jun 2009
J Med Ethics Hist Med, 2009, 2:10

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Abstract

Environmental ethics has emerged during the early 1970s, when environmentalists started urging philosophers to consider the philosophical aspects of environmental problems. Environmental ethics considers the ethical relationships between humanity and non-human world. The Union of Concerned Scientists, a group of over two thousands scientists, has concluded that climatic change is beyond dispute, and already changing our environment. Environmental instability portend ill for public health and well-being. This paper attempts to apply ethical theories to support environmental concerns and provides moral grounds to preserve the earth's environment. This article documents consensus among environmental philosophers as given by synthesis data provided via survey among articles, websites, and books by the keywords: environment, ethics, health and crises. The field has come to exert significant influence over a large number of human science disciplines in relation to environmental sustainability and human wellbeing. Environmental ethics focuses on the possibility of the identification of human ego with nature, means the larger ecological self deserves respect, too. Environmental ethics expands the boundaries of ethics to include the nature and considers its sustainability to ensure human wellbeing. This study emphasizes mainly on a brief history of environmental ethics and its protection against damage. Environmental changes and extreme weather events in plus to species distinction and a growth of diseases are impossible to hide and ought to be impossible to ignore. The health decline associated with various forms of these changes is continuing. It raises crucial issues about environmental justice.

Keywords
Ethics, Environment, Health, Crises

Introduction

Enviroethics or environmental ethics (EE) is a part of environmental philosophy that extends the traditional boundaries of ethics from only including humans to including the non-human world. It has come to exert significant influence over a number of human science disciplines including Theology, Law, Economics, Sociology, Ecology, and Geography in relation to sustainability and human well-being (1). EE studies the moral relationship of human beings to the environment and its contents (2).

Traditional western ethical views are human-centered or anthropocentric (3). Anthropocentrism simply places humans at the centre of the universe; therefore, everything else in existence should be evaluated in terms of its utility for us. All environmental studies should include an assessment of the intrinsic value of non-human beings (4).

Therefore, EE as a branch of environmental philosophy considers the actual and possible ethical relationships between humanity and non-human nature.

Considering questions such as our obligation to future generations, to other species and even non-living aspects of the natural world are among questions investigated by the field (5).

Purpose

This paper attempts to apply traditional ethical theories to support environmental concerns. It provides moral grounds to preserve the earth's environment and describes the field landscape of EE.

Material and Methods

Data for this article is based on scientific consensus among various theories and theses for the field and surveys opinion of environmentalists via search by the keywords as: environment, ethics and crises. This article contributes the appearance of EE and challenge of the field.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Data entry contained the common agreement between environmentalists. Describing various positions individually not included.

Results

Although nature was the focus of much nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy, contemporary EE only emerged as an academic discipline in the 1970s (4).

The academic field of EE grew up in response to the work of scientists such as Rachel Carson (6) and events such as the first Earth Day in 1970, when environmentalists started urging philosophers to consider the philosophical aspects of environmental problems. The Earth Day celebrated April 22, is a day designed to inspire awareness and appreciation for the earth's environment (7).

Among the accessible work that drew attention to a sense of crisis was Rachel Carson's Silent Spring (8), which consisted of a number of essays earlier published in the New Yorker magazine. More recently, Silent Spring was named one of the 25 greatest science books of all time by the editors of Discover Magazine (9).

The main challenge of EE is anthropocentrism (i.e., human-centeredness). For example, Aristotle maintains that “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man” and that the value of nonhuman things in nature is merely instrumental (3).

In the literature on EE the distinction between instrumental value and intrinsic value has been of considerable importance. Instrumental value is the value of things as means to further some other ends, whereas intrinsic value is the value of things as ends in them regardless of whether they are also useful as means to other ends, a kind of value independent of its usefulness for others. For example, we can consider a person who teaches others. It is normally said that a person, as a person, has intrinsic values, i.e., values in his or her own right independently of his or her prospects for serving the ends of others. In addition to such values, the teacher has instrumental value for those who want to acquire knowledge. Alternatively, we can suppose the nature as the creature of God, which is itself intrinsically valuable (or sacred) despite the state of being beneficial for us and ought to be respected. It is commonly agreed that something's asset of intrinsic value generates a direct moral duty on the part of moral agents to protect it or at least avoid to damage it (10-13).

All environmental studies should include an assessment of the intrinsic value of non-human beings.

Despite the variety of positions in EE, they have focused mainly on issues concerned with wilderness and the reasons for its preservation (14-16).

The importance of wilderness experience to the human psyche has been emphasized by many environmental philosophers. Some encourage us to spend time dwelling in situations of intrinsic value (17). Likewise, the critical theorists believe that aesthetic appreciation of nature has the power to re-enchant human life (18).

Rolston seeks re-creation of the human soul by meditating in the wilderness (19, 20).

The focus on the value of wilderness and the importance of its preservation has overlooked another important problem – namely that lifestyles in which enthusiasms for nature rambles, woodland meditations or mountaineering can be indulged demand a standard of living that is far beyond the dreams of most of the world’s population.

Discussion

The questioning and rethinking of the relationship of human beings with the natural environment over the last thirty years reflected an already widespread perception in the 1960s that the late twentieth century faced a serious environmental crisis.

National and international science academies and professional societies have assessed the current scientific opinion on climate change (CC). These assessments have largely followed or endorsed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) position that "An increasing body of

observations gives a collective picture of a warming world and other changes in the climate system". There is new and stronger evidence that most of the changes observed over the last 50 years are attributable to human activities (21).

Scientific consensus is that the increase in environmental crises observed since the start of the industrial era (22, 23). CC is the most serious problem we face in 21st century. Air pollutants, which had stood at the safe baseline for 10,000 years, were today having caused global temperatures to increase, sea levels to rise several centimeters, dry areas to become even drier and wet areas to get still wetter (24).

The predicted effects of CC on the environment and for human life are numerous and varied.

Drought, changing weather patterns, the expected burden of caring for environmental refugees, the effects of consumerism, and the health decline associated with various forms of pollution are continuing and major problems for human beings themselves (25- 27), and raise crucial issues about environmental justice (28). At the same time, the continuing destruction of natural environments and the widespread loss of both plant and animal species pose increasing problems for other forms of life on the planet.

Climate instability portend ill for public health and well-being. CC encompasses temperature changes on global, regional and local scales, and changes in the rainfall, winds, and possibly ocean currents (29).

Any deliberate attempt to reach a rational and enduring state of equilibrium by planned measures, rather than by chance or catastrophe, must ultimately be founded on a basic change of values and goals at individual, national and world levels (30).

The call for a basic change of values in connection to the environment (a call that could be interpreted in terms of either instrumental or intrinsic values) reflected a need for the development of EE as a new sub-discipline of philosophy, therefore, the field emerged in the early 1970s, when environmentalists and philosophers began to consider the philosophical aspects of environmental problems and EE became a subject of sustained academic philosophic reflection.

From the EE viewpoint, individual interests and well-being should be subordinated to the holistic good of the earth's biotic community. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. The land as a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected as an extension of ethics (31-34).

New evidence of environment change suggests it could be serious, and the greatest danger that civilization has faced so far. It is a warning of worse to come (35).

Resistance and resilience strategies to unavoidable impacts can be built into development planning and policies (36, 37).

UNICEF notes that environmental changes will reduce access to clean water and food supplies, particularly in Africa and Asia. Disasters, violence and disease are expected to be more frequent and intense, making the future of the world's poorest children bleaker (38). Increases in catastrophes resulting from extreme weather are mainly caused by increasing population densities, and anticipated future increases are similarly dominated by societal change rather than CC (39).

In this way, to protect our environment and consequently our well-being, EE came to focus on the possibility of the identification of the human ego with nature. The idea is, briefly, that by identifying with nature I can enlarge the boundaries of the self beyond my skin. My larger ecological Self (the capital "S" emphasizes that I am something larger than my body and consciousness), deserves respect as well. To respect and to care for my Self is also to respect and to care for the natural environment, which is actually part of me and with which I should identify. "Self-realization", in other words, is the reconnection of the shriveled human individual with the wider natural environment (40).

Interdisciplinary approaches link EE with biology, policy studies, public administration, political theory, cultural history, post-colonial theory, literature, geography, and human ecology (41-45).

Conclusion

The academic field of EE developed when philosophers started considering the philosophical aspects of environmental problems. EE became a subject of sustained academic philosophic reflection in the 1970s. From anthropocentric view we tend to evaluate things wrongly in terms of their usefulness to further us, that humans are at the center of reality, and it is right for them to be so. EE discovers that everything has a unique value and that the nonhuman environment as well as human has intrinsic value.

No single discipline could claim sole ownership of those quandaries we now face about the origins of modern environmental crisis and the relation between environmental problems and social injustice, and that how human beings should relate to the natural environment regarding to happiness and well-being. In facing these problems, there will likely be great opportunities for co-operation and synergy between philosophers and both natural and social scientists.

Finally, a person with day-to-day non-anthropocentric thinking acts more benignly towards the nonhuman environment on which his or her well-being depends. This would provide reason for encouraging non-anthropocentric thinking.

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