



Anthropocentrism: A study on environmental ethics

Sangita Sahu

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Utkal University, Odisha, India

Abstract

Man is a moral being. Non-humans are devoid of moral sense because they cannot distinguish between 'is and ought', 'right and wrong'. On account of moral awareness human actions can be judged as desirable and undesirable. It is a fact that moral concepts and moral valuations are meaningful only in human domain. There can be no disagreement about the fact that human-beings have their moral obligations for their fellow-beings. But the central question in environmental ethics is; whether human-beings have any obligation for the non-human species and towards nature. In the broad sense of the term, nature consists of flora, fauna and different other elements in nature such as the mountains, rivers, forests, earth and atmosphere. Though non-humans do not have moral sense the real issue is whether and to what extent human-beings have any moral duty, moral obligations for the non-humans over and above their duty towards their fellow human-beings.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, bio-centrism, dominionism, cosmological anthropocentrism, epistemological anthropocentrism, teleological anthropocentrism, moral anthropocentrism, intrinsic value, end

Introduction

Man's attitude to Nature has undergone radical change in course of time. In the prehistoric time, man viewed Nature with awe and wonder. Man was conscious that he is at the mercy of Nature. He could neither understand nor predict the ways of nature. He considered himself to be small an insignificant before the vastness of Nature. So, he worshipped nature with reverence. Man became worshipper of Nature. He started worshipping gods, goddesses who were thought as controlling different forces of Nature. Later, there was growth of human mind and his intellectual abilities. Science and Technology came into existence. Man not only discovered the laws of nature but he wanted to control the forces of nature and use the forces of Nature for his good. Today, man is proud of the fact that he has conquered Nature. This psychology of superiority and dominance led man to exploit Nature. Man was under the expression that he is the 'end' and all the forces of Nature have only their 'instrumental value' in relation to him. But he was fundamentally mistaken. Today, we witness the detrimental effects of such conception of man about his relationship with Nature. Pollution of air and water, erosion of soil, warming of the planet are the results of such erroneous conception. There is the growing realisation that man has to live with nature because there is the relation of interdependence among things and beings. Man as a self-conscious being, has to play the role of guardian in relation to the flora, fauna and inanimate things which constitute nature.

Anthropocentrism is a theoretical framework in environmental ethics, which considers 'Man' as the most developed creature on this planet as he is capable of rational thinking. Since man is far ahead of others in the evolutionary journey, he is at the centre of the reality and everything else has been created to serve the interest of man. In other words, non-humans have been created in nature only to fulfil the interest of human species. It is a man-centred view which considers human-beings as the end and non-human species such as flora, fauna and the inanimate

nature have only their instrumental value. Human-beings have moral duty for one another but they do not have any moral obligation for the non-humans. Anthropocentrism has taken different forms such as, Ontological Anthropocentrism, Cosmological Anthropocentrism, Epistemological Anthropocentrism, Teleological Anthropocentrism and Moral Anthropocentrism.

According to Ontological Anthropocentrism, man is the most evolved creature on this planet. So, he is the ultimate object of metaphysical knowledge. Philosophers like Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Heidegger and Teilhard subscribe to this view. Nietzsche observes that human-beings are independent creatures and they are even independent of God. Feuerbach opines that man is the most perfect creation in nature because of which he can create culture. Heidegger opined that human-beings are superior to others because of their individuality or autonomy. They have the capacity to control and regulate the non-humans. Teilhard underlines the importance of Man in arguing that as human-beings are in the state of nature.

Epistemological anthropocentrism considers man as unique because he is not only self-conscious but possesses 'rational will'. Since 'reason' is the unique possession of man he is the highest object of knowledge and moral consideration. On account of the rational faculty it is only human-beings who can be members in the kingdom of 'ends'. Immanuel Kant, the chief exponent of epistemological anthropocentrism observes;

Man really finds in himself a faculty by which he distinguishes himself from all other things even from himself far as he is affected by objects, This faculty is reason.¹

Philosophers like Descartes, Fichte, Hegel and Husserl subscribe this view. Descartes goes to the extent of arguing that only human-beings can be the object of consideration because they have mind, soul and have the capacity to use language. The non-humans are not able to perceive and

choose. Therefore, they have only the instrumental value in so far as they are meant to be used by human-beings for their own interest. For Fichte, 'rational will' makes man free from the influence of non-rational factors. So, he is responsible for his actions in relation to human species as well as environment. According to Hegel, consciousness is basic and human-beings, on account of possessing consciousness, have the capacity to make history. According to Husserl, man is rational subject. So, he has the potentiality to realise himself completely. In this respect, man remains superior to non-human species. In other words, epistemological anthropocentrism considers man as superior to rest of the created species on account of being rational, self-conscious and having freewill.

According to 'Cosmological anthropocentrism', man is the centre of the universe. Brandon Carter argues that as man occupies the centre-stage of global living he is more privileged than others. There are weak and strong versions of Cosmological anthropocentrism. The weak version argues that an object exists only in relation to the presence of an observer in form of human species. Strong version goes a step ahead in maintaining that the whole system of reality presupposes not only a conscious observer like human species but also a conscious participant in the creation. The universe has been so made that non-human creatures have been created to serve the interest of man and the universe consisting of things and beings has meaning only in relation to human-beings.

Teleological anthropocentrism holds that in the state of nature things and beings exist for the sake of human species who occupy the highest place in the evolutionary scale. This is opposed to the mechanical view of the universe which states that everything is driven by causal necessity. A phenomenon or effect is caused by the causal antecedents but '*teleological anthropocentrism*' draws our attention to the fact that the lower serves the interest of the higher. Since human-beings are the most evolved species the non-human species have been created to serve the interest of man. Human-beings are not only superior to others because of their intellectual ability but also their capacity to control and regulate the non-human species. So, everything in the state of nature derives its meaning by serving as a means to fulfil the interest of human species who are ahead of others in the evolutionary journey.

The advocates of '*Moral anthropocentrism*' hold that human-beings are the only moral creatures on this planet. They have moral duty in relation to one another. Human-beings have intrinsic value because they are ethically conscious. On the contrary, the non-humans are devoid of moral sense. Moral anthropocentrism takes two forms such as absolute moral anthropocentrism and relative moral anthropocentrism. Those who subscribe to the former view consider that only human-beings have intrinsic value and the rest of the species have their instrumental value. So, human-beings are free to utilise non-humans to satisfy their own interest. They have intrinsic value because they are not only in possession of knowledge but also have the capacity to create values and lead life which is devoted to values.

It is also claimed that Anthropocentrism has the support of religions. Some scholars opine that some statements in Bible leave room for man's exploitation of everything that has been created by God.

*God created Man... to have dominion 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

It is claimed that since man has been created after the image of God he has the liberty to exploit the non-humans to maximise his interest. This has resulted in the mindless exploitation of flora and fauna resulting in environmental crisis today. So, there is a need of alternative ethics to solve environmental crisis. But John Passmore gives a defence of the Biblical view in drawing our attention to the other statements in Bible which doesn't support dominionism but the notion of stewardship. According to him, dominionism ignores the evil consequences of human actions on the non-humans and the environments. Man being the most developed creature, God doesn't give him absolute freedom to destroy nature which has been created by Him. So, man should act as a steward or custodian of nature. By utilising nature in so far as it is essential for human existence.

*The principles of stewardship includes responsibility for the whole earth, solidarity of all people, which need to take a long term view*³

Anthropocentrism in general takes two forms such as '*Enlightened anthropocentrism*' and '*Unenlightened anthropocentrism*'. Unenlightened anthropocentrism doesn't put in restraint on man's use of the non-human resources. On the other hand, Enlightened anthropocentrism argues that the non-human species have to be preserved to serve the interest of man in future. Man should have necessary wisdom to protect the flora and fauna in the best interest of man in the present as well as in the future.

Conclusion

Anthropocentrism has been criticised on the ground that it is not only human-beings but also non-human who integral parts of nature. Nature is an organic whole. Human-beings are as much the essential part of the whole as the non-humans. If there is harm in any part, it will affect the health and well-being of the whole. In the state of nature we come across the intimate interdependence among things and beings. The view that non-humans do not have intrinsic value but have only instrumental value disturbs the ecological balance. Everything animate or inanimate, small or big has its existential value in so far as it contributes to the harmony and well-being of the whole. Since man is self-conscious and possesses 'moral awareness' he should play the role of a guardian or a trustee by extending protection to the non-human species. Biocentrism extends the field of awareness to all living-beings because all the members of the biotic community constitute one family. But it ignores the inanimate nature such as mountains, forests, oceans and earth. Cosmo-centrism goes a step further in maintaining that everything in the universe has its intrinsic value. Therefore the ultimate well-being of the individual lies in working for the good and well-being of the whole.

References

1. Cahn SM. *Seven Master pieces of Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 2016, 321.
2. Pssmore John. *Man's responsibility for Natutre*, London, Duckworth, 1974, 6.

3. Weatson M, Sharp D. Green belief & religion. *The Politics of Nature: Exploration in green political theory*, New York. Routledge, 2002.
4. Leopold Aldo. *The land Ethics in: A Sand Country Almanac*, New York, Oxford University.
5. Singer. Peter, *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, 1979.
6. Singer Peter, *Animal Liberation*. New York, Avon books, 1977.