

Moral Pluralism in Environmental Ethics

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Abstract

In issues pertaining to environmental ethics, the environmental pragmatists accept multiple values. They thus take a position of moral pluralism. Moral pluralism is the view that acknowledges the existence of multiple values. In the discussion pertaining to normative ethics, moral pluralism demands the acceptance of more than one value in determining whether an action is ethical or not. Some philosophers like J. Baird Callicott do not support such many value projects and Callicott even terms value pluralism as like ‘metaphysical musical chairs’. Consequently, according to Callicott, the people who subscribe for this moral pluralism rely upon utilitarian for one ethical problem and deontology for another ethical problem and so on. (Callicott, *The Case Against Moral Pluralism*, 1990). As against moral pluralism Callicott subscribes for single value theory. He insists on the intrinsic value of nature and on the basis of this single value theory, he comes out with a position on environmental ethics in which according to him the whole eco-system should be preserved. In this paper we will argue against this holistic approach of environmental ethics and try to bring some points in support of pragmatic point of view. We will try to show that a context dependent and sensitive pragmatist position is better equipped in addressing the environmental issues than a universal, abstract monistic one.

Keywords: Moral pluralism, monism, environmental pragmatism, context

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Introduction

In issues pertaining to environmental ethics, the environmental pragmatists accept multiple values while considering environment related issues. Environmental pragmatists support more of a liberal view to address the environmental issues. They thus take a position of moral pluralism. Environmental pragmatism looks for consensus or compatibility amongst various values in environmental conflict resolution or conflict management. For example Andrew Light talks of compatibility between social ecology and deep ecology, (Light, *Compatibilism in Political Ecology*, 1996), while Bryan G. Norton calls for a convergence hypothesis for policy goal among different groups. (Norton, *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*, 1991). All these environmental philosophers' activities show that they believe in plurality of values and thus their position leads to moral pluralism. Moral pluralism is the view that acknowledges the existence of multiple values. In the discussion pertaining to normative ethics, moral pluralism demands the acceptance of more than one value in determining whether an action is ethical or not. "Instead of debating the one, right, univocal metaphysic of morals-ecocentrism versus anthropocentrism, biocentrism versus sentientism, deep ecology versus social ecology, etc.-pluralists and pragmatists seek agreement on practical policies that can be derived from a variety of moral principles." (Edelglass, 2006, p. 10).

The moral pluralistic position of pragmatists makes them to consider the relation between man and nature as a process and in this process, different circumstances may demand different yields. (Rosenthal, 1986) According to them, morality arises on the basis of how one values one's own things or circumstances. There are different kinds of moral worth or values for different persons and also in different perspectives. And even same person may have different values in various situations. "Different moral theories are possible depending upon which values or principles are included." (Buchholz & Rosenthal, 1996, p. 265) According to the pragmatists, as there are different set of values it is difficult to resolve environmental ethical problems on one value principles. For them, the problems are too complex to be resolved with the help of taking a value monistic position. Light remarks thus in this regard, "viewing this problematic situation it is the conclusion of environmental pragmatists that it is time for environmental ethics to consider some new positions in the field, and more importantly, to reassess its direction. The small set of acceptable approach to environmental ethics may be inapplicable to the development of an acceptable environmental policy" (Light and Katz 1996, 3).

Critique of Pragmatism

This position of environmental pragmatists is criticized by Callicott. Callicott being a moral monist believes that the pluralist position is essentially flawed. For him, an ethical monist position is simpler and sufficient in solving environment related issues. Keller brings out the difference between the monist and the pluralist position thus, "Ethical monist maintains that meta-ethical coherence can be achieved only through the adoption of a single unified normative theory. On the other hand ethical pluralists maintain that variety of entities worthy of moral considerability requires multiple normative theories." (Keller, 2010, p. 18) Callicott by maintaining a monist position feels that a single, monistic principle is good enough in dealing with ethical issues related to environment.

Against the moral pluralists J. B. Callicott comes up with a number of arguments defending his monistic standpoint. First, he thinks that with several ideas in mind in a particular course of action, the self-serving or vested interest may get preference among the many alternatives. It would be very difficult to choose the most suitable one which leads to a holistic goal. As he says, “with a variety of theories at our disposal, each indicating different, inconsistent, or contradictory course of action, we may be tempted to espouse the one that seems most convenient or self-serving in the circumstances.” (Callicott, *The Case Against Moral Pluralism*, 1990). Secondly, due to the multitude of ideologies, pluralism cannot provide a solid or determining principle for a course of action as to which one to be followed. And more importantly Callicott argues that pluralism leads to nowhere except nihilism and skepticism where we lose both moral and intellectual coherence for environmental ethics. (Edelglass, 2006).

Thus, according to Callicott as the pluralists do not have a consistent approach to deal with environmental issues and as there are no solid ground for them to take a course of action on that basis, they lose their ground in environmental ethics. He rather insists on the holistic approach towards environmental entities based on intrinsic value of nature. He even termed the pluralists’ position as ‘metaphysical musical chair’ who takes deontological position in one place and the consequentialist position in another place. (Callicott J. B., *The Case Against Moral Pluralism*, 1990), Now before going to argue for pluralism, let us see how Callicott sets the ground for environmental ethics from a monistic standpoint.

Callicott maintains an ecocentric position towards environment. Callicott bases his ecocentric approach from different traditions of philosophy. He brings in the notion of ‘stewardship’ from Judaeo-Christian tradition to point out the goodness of all creatures on the basis that all are His creations. He also supports his argument on the basis of an orderly world as seen in Leibnitz and other thinker’s works. More importantly Callicott gets the clue from Aldo Leopold’s *Land Ethic* who talks about a healthy eco-system that could carry a rich and diverse culture of creatures. According to Leopold “A thing is good if it provides the stability, integrity and beauty of the biotic community and it is wrong otherwise.” (Leopold, 1949) Callicott’s point is that an ecocentric position that has been envisaged over a period of time is sufficient to take care of the environment related concerns. He maintains that with such a strong historical, moral and normative ethical basis there is no need for pluralist position in environmental ethics. He thinks that without such historical continuity, a new theory, can’t give a good platform for the environmental ethics. (Callicott, *Non-anthropocentric value theory and Environmental Ethics*, 1994)

In defense of Pragmatism

Callicott’s arguments against moral pluralism to a great deal have to do with the problem of not having an absolute standpoint related to environmental ethical issues. By being a monist, Callicott feels that it might be better to have a single foundational principle to address the ethical concerns as such a standing shall give us a consistent approach in dealing with the environment related issues. But does consistency alone matter? The ethics should also take care of the sufficiency principle. This is where we wish to address certain issues with respect to Callicott’s position.

Callicott's position of having a monistic approach towards environmental ethics, and that too, an ecocentric position fails to address many of the persisting problems related to environmental ethics. Though it might sound sacred to have an intrinsic value approach towards the eco-system, but, it is quite difficult to substantiate the intrinsic worthiness of the ecosystem. The worthiness of the ecosystem possessing a value in terms of it being conducive to human welfare, for both the present and future generations, shall make it be valuable, but claiming that ecosystem to have value-in-itself is given for discussions and deliberations. Moreover, Callicott by emphasizing on the intrinsic value of the ecosystem as a whole doesn't seem fit to give the intrinsic value for the components that make up the ecosystem. For example, while the biocentrists might try to give an intrinsic value for the beings that are sentient, Callicott do not recognize this. As a matter of fact, he takes the individual species as a 'means' to achieve the 'end' of the ecosystem as a whole. This in fact takes a 'consequentialist' turn, even though he might not be subscribing to consequentialism. Influenced by the 'land ethic' of Aldo Leopold, Callicott disvalues the individual species which may hamper the integrity, beauty and stability of the biotic community. In this context Tom Regan questions the very basis of Leopold's land ethic which does not bother about individual species and termed such view as 'environmental fascism'. (Regan, 2004, p. 362).

Environmental pragmatists think that J. B. Callicott's argument is abstract and monistic in nature and it will fail to address the modern environmental problems. In a conflict between eco-centrists and animal rights, Callicott would immediately go for the eco-centric position without thinking about the concerned animal due to his over emphasis on ecocentric position as against a biocentric ethics. Similarly as between the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric position, Callicott overwhelmingly subscribe to a non-anthropocentric position, whereas in this situation, some pragmatists go for a consensus between the two poles of anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric in order to bring a solution to the ethical problems. (Norton, 1991).

Secondly, Callicott says that moral pluralism is like a 'metaphysical musical chair' for their tendency to display different attitude for different situations. With one value philosophy if we can able to resolve the environmental issues, it is well and good. But, the question is whether we can? Environmental philosophy is the relation/interaction between human and nature in different situations and human inevitably need different reactions for different situations. Christopher D. Stone finds that it is difficult to address different environmental perspective with a monistic principle. So pluralism carries this ethos that for different situation there may be different reaction and one monistic tendency can't solve all these different issues. (Stone, Moral Pluralism and the cause of Environmental ethics, 1988). Pluralists value different objects in different temporal and spatial perspectives. So these values with different perspectives inevitably lead to the incommensurable situation. In such situation trying to commensurate among different values through single matrix or monistic tendency would be a very difficult job. "The best we can do in these situations is to honestly seek a fair balance point at which we have done our best to minimize harms for which we are responsible." (Norton, Searching for Sustainability: Interdisciplinary Essays in the Philosophy of Conservation Biology, 2003, p. 377).

Callicott's argument to maintain a moral monistic position is susceptible to certain shortcomings. Due to overemphasis on the holistic environment, he even avoids the

rights and interest of the individual species. For the sake of whole eco-system Callicott takes the individual species as mere means which is nothing but a typical consequentialist's position. The acknowledgement of the moral worthiness of the whole as against the individual components many a time goes against our ordinary moral intuitions. One does not make a distinction when one tries to save the life of an animal, if it is in her capacity, to see whether it is rare or extinct or just a commonly available animal species. If one finds some being suffers, she helps it. Perhaps, Callicott's position may go against this intuitive sense of morality.

One of the arguments against moral pluralism which Callicott maintains is that it may lead to vested interests and there can be chances that decisions are based on vested interests. This can however be true and it demands a more serious study in terms of environmental decisions taken by the people but this maybe beyond the scope of this paper. However, to immediately jump to the conclusion that, therefore, moral pluralism may not be a better alternative is too farfetched. As the environmental issues are quite problematic and complicated, it needs to be addressed based on the situation and the context and other contingent factors. Hence, to think of a solution solely on the basis of monistic principle might rather be a tame solution without addressing some of the important concerns. Pragmatists on the other hand carry this pluralistic attitude to address the practical environmental crisis. Andrew Light accuses J. Baird Callicott of claiming ideological logjam between monism and pluralism, which actually hinders for compatibility among different values for solving environmental problems. Andrew Light finds that despite his deep sense towards intrinsic value of ecology, Arne Naess's philosophy is quite liberal to merge with the pluralistic world views to address the environmental issues than Callicott's position (Light, 1996). Keller mentions that Callicott forcefully argue that environmental ethics should be rest on one unified normative standard. (Keller, 2010)

Regarding the advantage of the value pluralism, it can be said that it can take the important elements of different theories from different situations. Marietta remarks, "A pluralistic theory has the advantage of using the elements of different theories which are attractive in different kinds of situations." (Marietta, 1993, p. 70) As William Edelglass finds that in a conflict between animal liberation and eco-centric ethics, moral pluralism gives us an opportunity to think about the proper course of action i.e. which would be better. So there is an ample scope of moral pluralism to find out a solution in a given conflicting situation than stick to a monistic view. "Instead of rejecting one theory wholesale in the pursuit of monism, pluralists and environmental pragmatists argue, we should prudently determine which moral principle to apply to a particular situation." (Edelglass, 2006, p. 10).

Conclusion

Environmental problems are complex in the sense that it is embedded socially and culturally with human beings. In these complex problems human beings have to think critically in policy formulation for the environment. Apart from that environmental pragmatism insists on context bound principles rather than mere abstract ideas or principles. In this process, it seems that moral pluralism is more flexible than moral monist. "All environmental problems are ecologically, socially, and culturally complex; the complex problems must be seen from multiple perspectives. In real policy context, good response to actual, complex problems are acceptable to as many

perspectives as possible, not judge up or down according to universal, philosophical principles. The goal of environmental ethics should be to use philosophical and ethical theory to tell normative stories appropriate to particular problems, to help community to develop a narrative that fits their perspectives and environmental challenges, not to support universal principles.” (Norton, Why study environmental ethics?, 2009, p. 51) While environmental pragmatism does take into consideration the involved complexities and try to address it as a case by case basis. It may not come up with one universal approach to tackle the environment related issues, but, that is what precisely its advantage also. By being localized and by bringing out context dependent solutions, it places itself as a sensitive and sensible approach towards the multitude of environment related problems than the universal, monistic principle approach.

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