

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS OF THE FUTURE

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SUMMARY

In future we shall have to enrich our impoverished and endangered world by substituting our claims on pleasure, comfort and power with a claim for responsibility and stewardship.

By doing this we ought to transform nature from being the refuse-heap of technology into a breath of culture.

The world was created for man to live on it and not to be mutilated and reduced to irredeemable chaos.

As a criterion for our association with nature we must remember that everything that we are technologically capable of, is not necessarily morally desirable. We should not live and work at the expense of our environment but for the benefit of the environment.

The tradition of man's dominion over nature should be replaced by a tradition of stewardship.

This new approach to environmental ethics must constitute an inalienable part of a multi-disciplinary approach.

PREAMBLE

I would like to compare my perspective of the environmental ethics of the future with the historical course and the prevailing position of thought in this field. I thus compare three systems of thought with one another. Firstly we have environmental ethics that emphasizes man's dominion and exploitation of the environment, and secondly we have environmentalists who advocate a friendly, harmonious existence with nature. Then we have, next to these, a third environmental ethics of stewardship that is

strongly recommended on account of the appropriate alternatives it poses to the first two approaches.

1. ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS OF DOMINION

The origin of environmental ethics of dominion coincides with the start of Western Civilization when Greek philosophers emphasized the gap between man and all other beings. Man gained importance and value by placing himself at a distance from nature and his environment. With the slogan of Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626), viz. that "Knowledge itself is power"¹ the conquering and dominion of the natural environment became a specific aim of science. Man and the natural environment are separated and all emphasis falls on the dominion of man and his spirit over the non-human and material world. This was a situation of "mind over matter".

The Industrial Revolution in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries enforced man's dominion technologically.

The environment was seen as a source of raw material that could be transformed into consumer goods. "Progress" became the watchword for a civilization that wanted to conquer and exploit the world. Man aggressively pursued productivity at the expense of social and environmental life. Armed with a blue-print for growth or development this approach in environmental ethics seeks a strategy to use the environment for the benefit of man.

This is anthropocentric environmental ethics that easily leads to over-consumption and abuse of the environment and to under-emphasis of the cultivation of the environment. Anthropocentric environmental ethics states that every man has the right to do what he wants, provided he does not impede or cause damage to fellow human beings. Care of the environment is totally left out of this picture and where it does occur it

¹ (In : Religious meditations. Of Heresies. 1590.)

is merely a matter of man's own interest. At the beginning of this century, the American industrialist Carnegie gave a very appropriate title to one of his writings, *Gospel of Wealth*. He says that if we are faithful to the laws of industrial progress he guarantees us a new life where all poverty, oppression and exploitation on earth will disappear.

But we are all aware of the fact that many labourers were exploited and that industrial monopolies were responsible for the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor. Essential raw materials and energy resources are rapidly being exhausted, and some will even be totally consumed during our lifetime. Some plant and animal species have been destroyed and some animal species face total extinction.

We therefore see that science, technology and money do not necessarily imply progress, but that they also bring about pollution, exploitation and deterioration of the natural environment. Our emphasis on prosperity has resulted in a discarding society leaving behind refuse and litter wherever man has worked, lived, competed and relaxed.

Even within Marxist and socialistic countries the environment and nature are placed at the service of man and society and are reduced to mere consumer goods. Nature's only value lies in being a means to satisfy the needs of society.

Our technological and economical progress resulted in a shortage of clean unpolluted air and water, in untouched ecosystems and in a paucity of natural and human silence.

We may ask if the solution to the abovementioned problems lies in more economical and technological progress, with the concomitant use of raw materials and progress by virtue of further stimulated needs of consumers?

The answer to this would be an emphatic no, as this would imply that no negative sides of economical and technological growth exist. Economy and technology have no power to liberate themselves from this destructive process. In the new ethics we shall have to break away from the modern over-emphasis on economy and technology as the talisman in all areas of

human life. Science, technology and money can contribute towards prosperity but are no guarantees for prosperity. Besides, if no appeal exists but the authority of science, technology and economy, then we have created a new problem for man and his environment - a technocratic and economical dictatorship. The solution of problems in the area of pollution and environmental matters is not only a matter of availability of money and technological-scientific proficiency but is rather a matter of a new way of life that has to be propagated by individuals, communities, governments and institutions.

In the famous second report to the Club of Rome Mesarovic and Pestel pointed out that mankind at large is at a crossroads and that ethical reorientation is necessary in order to make valid choices. Our possessive attitude of exploitation and our craving for satisfaction of expedience will have to be replaced by a more meaningful relationship between man and nature.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS OF PARTICIPATION

A contra-reaction to the ethics of dominion is to condemn all technology and progress and to proclaim 'nature' as good. This reaction against the aggressive disregard of nature is aimed at a harmonious integration between man and environment. This environmental ethics of participation has its roots in a neoromanticism that states that man forms an integral part of the natural environment and cannot live in seclusion from nature. Man is considered as an extension of nature and is treated accordingly - he should live in peace and harmony with nature. H.D. Thoreau (1817-1862) promoted environmental preservation in an untouched and unviolated nature with the slogan, "In wilderness is the preservation of the world".

The Counter-Culture movement of the nineteen-sixties constantly emphasized the effect of environmental pollution caused by technology and industrialization and points to the depersonification of man. Theodore Roszak and Charles Reich state, in *The Making of a Counter Culture* and *in the Greening of America*, that the technological excesses of our century must be resisted by a feeling of unity with the planet earth. Instead

of waging a war against nature man must come to a peaceful settlement. In this process there is an urge to scale down the power of the industrial giants to a more human dimension and to recapture the ethos of small commune(s) in order that the feeling of alienation between man and nature might be overcome.

In West Germany the supporters of 'Die Grünen' have already gained several seats in parliament. They emphasize that nature can be preserved by developing and adopting alternative living conditions, alternative nutrition and alternative ways of recreation. They are opposed to the development of nuclear power because they believe that man and plutonium cannot exist on earth reciprocally. Man may not act as an autonomous agent who deliberately enforces his own imprints upon nature.

Environmentalists advocating the unity and harmony between man and nature are fiercely campaigning to proclaim certain areas as protected areas. This indicates the destructive influence of man on his environment and many studies are made of deforestation, erosion, over-stocking and over-grazing of land, irrigation methods, the quest to recover the delicate balance and natural chain between man and the environment. In opposition to the strong discontinuity brought about by the ethics of dominion between man and nature, these environmentalists proclaim a continuity, even a gradual equality, between man and nature.

In this process valuable information and conclusions about the complex balance and interaction between living beings among themselves and between living beings and their habitat have been pointed out. The disturbance of the relation between predator and prey or between habitat and food illustrates the interdependency and vulnerability of a complex network in which man and environment existed in harmony. Even more, a disturbing discovery has been made - within his spaceship earth, man is in the process of consuming the earth itself a fuel. The scenario of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is a criticism of man's quest for evanescent technological solutions in his endeavour to achieve prosperity, comfort and power.

Instead of separation between man and nature, or between spirit and the materialistic world, the environmental ethics of participation advocates an ecosystem where spirit and the material world are in perfect harmony. Rather than emphasizing the gulf between man and nature, man is placed into and interpreted in the same category as his environment. This calls for a strategy of survival and balance rather than a strategy of growth and exploitation.

In contrast to an aggressive attitude of intellectual dominion and exploitation, the environmental ethics of participation poses an attitude of sensitive care and preservation. Opposed to a man-centred environmental ethics we have an environmental ethics that is nature-centred.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS OF STEWARDSHIP

The ethics of stewardship that I support finds its preamble in the veracity of both the ethics of dominion and the ethics of participation. The ethics of stewardship bases the concept of the responsibility of man towards his environment upon the difference from as well as man's association with the natural environment. In the Old Testament man's dominion over earth was qualified in terms of his responsibility to care for the creation of God. The earth in totality belongs to God and man must act as curator, keeper, preserver and steward. It is then unfair to blame Christianity for the present-day environmental crisis as is done by Lynn White Jr. Ian Barbour (1978:367) repudiates White very effectively in saying that we have to "note that ...

- Several nonbiblical sources of the dominion theme can be identified in the West;
- The stewardship theme in the Bible itself sets limits on dominion, which were subsequently ignored;
- Environmental destruction has been common in nonbiblical cultures of both East and West since antiquity; and

- Institutions as well as ideas must be examined as determinants of environmental behaviour, even if institutions are themselves partly the product of ideas".

Only man was created in the image of God and nature is not divine (nature has in fact been "de-divinated"). Man must not worship nature and his own accomplishments that reside in nature, but he must worship God. Therefore it is wrong to "mystify" nature and to regard it as sacred. On the other hand nature should not be regarded as demonic or as the enemy of man. Nature has its own inherent value and man must show appreciation for it. God was pleased with the creation of plant and animal life before man was created.

We do not demand an impossible return to an idyllic natural state but a creative interaction between man and nature and culture. The modern environment is both a natural and a cultural one.

The environment has far more than just an economical value. If we over-emphasize the economical value of the environment it easily leads to environmental exploitation for the sake of economical progress. That implies economical prosperity rather than well-being.

The environment is the natural surroundings in which we work and relax. The environment also has a cultural side brought about by the creative hand of man. Many of our cultural values cannot be maintained without the natural environment. A deprivation of nature often symbolizes a retrogression in the quality of cultural values of civilization. In this way nature is a breath of culture and culture the heartbeat of nature.

From the story of the creation we see that the earth was important for the existence of man. Man has a responsibility for the unfolding and expanding of nature and creation is involved in the well-being of man on earth.

The future task of the environmentalists is to make a study of the non-instrumental value of material, plants and animals in the environment. The only values are not man-centred ones. The environmental ethics of

the future will have to be ethics going beyond egoism, hedonism and utilitarianism and the concomitant man-centred approach.

Environmental ethics of stewardship calls on man to observe the intrinsic value and reality of nature. The modern consumer-orientated society has blinded man to the value of nature. Everything is measured in terms of pragmatic value. We have become blind and are glad when natural flowers can be substituted with plastic ones - and they still perform the same function or still have the same use to us.

It is not necessarily wrong to have a pragmatic perspective on the environment, but when it becomes the only and most important perspective, then we obstruct the understanding of the primeval qualities of the world (and mankind). Then we overlook the mystery and wonder and the plurality of existence. We alienate ourselves from nature and see it ultimately only in terms of its being identified as picnic places, as a claim for mineral exploitation or for estate development.

Man-centred codes of ethics subordinate nature to the interests of man. Perhaps we shall be reminded, like Job, of the prehistoric time when only animals existed on earth, and of the fact that man was a 'late-comer' in creation - even though God called him to be the most important collaborator in the Garden of Eden.

In this we do not regard nature as more important than man, but we seek to find a dynamic balance and a creative interaction between man and environment. Because of man's difference from the rest of nature, because of his reflective self-consciousness, future-orientated planning, creativity and stewardship, he can achieve interaction with his natural environment.

The answer to the anthropocentric slogan of "mind over matter" is not to be found in a naturalistic slogan of "matter over mind".

4. ANTHROPOCENTRISM, TECHNOLOGY, CONSUMERISM AND ETHICS OF STEWARDSHIP

In South Africa we are gradually coming to realize that the water in our polluted rivers and dams tastes like progress. The slogan that proclaims civilization and technology over nature is an obsession to dominate and exploit nature for man's own convenience and welfare. It spells out the devastation of our environment.

We can't hear the sound of silence any more; in our cities we inhale toxic material to the equivalent of 20 cigarettes a day; and in the last twenty years industrial progress has caused aquatic life to diminish by 40%, ecologists say. Modern technology accounts for a great increase in the poisoning of land, air, water and human life with pesticides and non-biodegradable substances.

Although technology has solved many problems in labour and industry, it has also created new problems which cannot be solved by technology itself. In this respect technology is the god that failed. We need a new ethic to counter the bulldozer mentality or an infinite trust in the computer.

We need an environmental ethics that looks for the wisdom of how to use our sciences and technology for the good and benefit of both the environment and man. Environmental ethics of the future should try to find alternatives to an egoistic and hedonistic life style that says "since we are on a sinking ship, we might as well travel golden class".

The exploitative attitude of these gluttons sees man at the centre of all created values with the right to exploit nature for their own ends and for the gratification of their own senses. This directly relates consumerism to pollution. Environmental ethics should level its criticism also at those hidden persuaders manipulating the consumer into buying what is non-essential (Packard, 1957).

We ought to counter the widespread opinion and practice that non-human things in our environment have only instrumental value and that they are dispensable. What people do to nature, and what they do for our

environment, depends largely upon what their ultimate concerns are. To the Christian mind all the non-human creatures have an intrinsic value. It is wrong to handle non-human living things and the land as nothing but chattels and property.

We have to arrest our power-intoxicated technology by our sense of stewardship and responsibility towards our environment. In future we will have to gear our consumerism to the ethical ends of the well-being of all creatures. Progress and development should be redefined in terms of the humane qualities of life. In mastering our technological mastery, we are humanizing technology and civilization.

Ralph Nader once called the new ethics "a Spartan ethic" that de-emphasizes economic activities that merely multiply the production and consumption of goods.

To adopt new policies will be costly to industry, to local governments and to the taxpayer. But to carry on fatalistically or stubbornly with the present situation means that nobody will be able ultimately to foot the bill of environmental pollution.

An environmental conscience among all South Africans is not a one-day affair - it must be a continuous lifestyle. A bearable and liveable environment is the only spaceship that we have. Our new ethics is demanding a new disposition, a new commitment towards man and his environment.

We have to redefine "The Good Life", because traditionally it has done a lot of harm to man and environment. In future it should not and must not mean lust, status, gluttony, greed of gain or affluence. We must work for a proper change in man's outlook on life and its environment. In future, a new lifestyle based on modesty and discipline is needed to enable us to work at a new business and marketing ethics that will expose industry's aim callously to stimulate and exploit man's mania for luxury, gadgets, power and status.

Our dealings with our environment have their moral dimensions, because nature has its own inherent values. Plundering the environment is also morally wrong, because the object destroyed has a value in itself. This

doesn't exclude the fact that we also have to care for the environment because of the human interest in recreation, in scientific knowledge of nature and in natural beauty; or because of the human interest in agriculture and food production.

Man's interest in nature is qualified by his responsibility and stewardship. Man is responsible for his care of the earth and for its continual improvement. Dominion over nature should not mean that people may manipulate their natural environment for their own ulterior motives.

The new ethics will have to extend man's responsibility beyond his fellowman and his societal institutions to his fellow creatures. Man is simply a steward or a custodian, not the owner of the earth.

By cheerfully performing our duty now, we are best furthering the realization of a future environmental ethics of alliance between man and environment. I agree with Robin Attfield (1983:193) that in principle we have the same obligations and responsibilities to future generations and the future environment as to the present. We can affect future generations, they hardly can do the same to us. That's why our environmental ethics is not simply anticipating the evil day - it is coping with it creatively now.

5. TACTICS OF OUR ETHICS

Up till now I mainly concentrated on the ethics of our tactics. In conclusion I would like to make some suggestions on the tactics of our ethics. The war of words has to be replaced with a plan of action, and this should mainly deal with the following:

- (a) how to de-pollute the environment;
- (b) how to prevent pollution; and
- (c) how to make people aware of the fact that it is indeed man as an individual or as an organization that pollutes the environment.

The environmental ethics must be part of a multi-disciplinary approach. Environmental conservation has for too long been the concern of isolated individuals involved in agriculture, of medical research and of nature lovers. A multi-disciplinary approach seeks to involve people from all areas, political and local authorities, churches, consumer councils, youth and sport organizations and also industrialists and advertising agencies.

Environmental ethics wants to co-operate with people and authorities in the public and private sectors in order to diminish the all-consuming urge for production and in order to create new opportunities for jobs that are not maintained by exploitation and manipulation.

Our new constitutional dispensation has far-reaching implications for a future environmental conservation strategy. We will have to take into consideration that some inhabitants of the country are naturally and inextricably engaged in their (natural) environment and consequently very dependent on it. The solution for their unique problem is not to be found in integrating them in a system that exploits and opposes nature.

Environmental ethics of the future will be very dependent upon demographic studies and will have to look at the moral ground for underlying the rationale for a more limited rate of growth and development among some of our population groups in order to assess and allocate claims on natural resources, energy, food and housing.

In the area of consumer ethics and advertising there will have to be co-operation in order to find an alternative for a hedonistic mentality of consumption and squandering, the so-called obsolescence syndrome.

The new environmental ethics would like to involve scientific ethics in order to investigate the ethical preconditions and ethical practice of experiments on man and animal.

An ethics of technology will have to answer the question as to whether everything that is technically possible is also morally desirable. New technological research is necessary to increase recirculation and to decrease wastage and wanton consumption.

To conclude: We must not live and work at the expense of other environments but for the benefit of the environment. We must replace the tradition of dominion with a tradition of stewardship.

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