

Environmental Degradation and Climate Change: An Ethical Dilemma

Shantaraj Debbarma

Assistant Professor of Philosophy

Adwaita Malla Barman Smriti Mahavidyalay, Amarpur, Tripura

Email: shantarajdebbarma@gmail.com

Abstract: *It is not a new thing that the environment is getting polluted and the climate is changing which is affecting the life of every living being in this world. To overcome the problem of environmental degradation and climate change we have to change our thoughts and behavior about nature. We have to set global ethics to preserve nature and for sustainable development. Our behavior towards nature has created these terrible situations, so only our appropriate and ethical behavior can correct these situations. We have to put aside personal interests and profits, and we should work for the betterment of every living and non-living being in this world. Time has come to rethink our traditional and conventional beliefs regarding nature. We have to be more conscious about our actions, because directly or indirectly we all are responsible for the environment and climate change. To overcome these situations we should respect each other and treat everyone with dignity. A Good ethical life can be possible when we live reasonably, accept the diversity and see ourselves among all. In this paper it is attempted to discuss the role of ethics in addressing the problems of environmental degradations and climate changes and it also tries to show how important it is to protect the environment for living a good life. Why wilderness is necessary for aesthetic feelings and spiritual development and to what extent do we have the right to use nature, that too discussed in this paper.*

Key Words: *Ethics, Environment, Good life, Climate Change, Nature etc.*

Ethics is a set of practical knowledge. Ethical judgment which is not good in practice, that judgment would be defective in theory. Ethics is not a bunch of short and simple rules and regulations such as 'do not steal', 'do not kill' and 'do not lie' etc. Ethics is not a set of prohibitions regarding sex or other similar related issues. Ethics is not based on religion. Ethics can be discussed without bringing the context of religion. Plato argued that what god approves is not good; rather we have to say that god approved those things which are good. To conduct ethical behavior, believe in hell and heaven is not required. When some people assume that anything natural is good, then it is not clear what is actually meant by the word natural. Man is a part of nature, so what man does will be also natural. Hence no action of man towards nature and humans and animals can be called bad. Anything which is done by man cannot be called unnatural. Peter Singer said understanding the origin of morality frees us from the two putative master i.e. God and Nature.

The society, the circumstances and the ethical code of conduct in which we live and grow up influence our decision making. But we can come out of it if we want and make a decision which is good to accept and act. Ethics may be relative to one society to another society but ethics are not relative in one society. And it is not a matter of subjective opinion. A person who finds reason and justification for his every action can be called an ethical person although his reasoning for the particular actions may be wrong according to traditional or conventional beliefs. Yet he must be called a man of principle. On the other hand people who do not think and give any justification for what they do, we can call them that they are not living according to ethical standards, although they are following conventional moral or ethical principles. But we also must remember that ethics goes beyond I and You to universal law. There is no place for individual interest in an ethical standard. One must think about the other fellow beings with whom I am living. I must consider the others who will be affected by my decisions and actions.

We all know that we are now facing climate change. This climate change is causing various problems in our life such as lack of safe drinking water, malnutrition, low rainfall etc. this climate change related problems did not arise overnight. We are experiencing these changes as a result of our daily lifestyle. We all are responsible directly or indirectly for climate change and we are also to some extent responsible for those living beings who are suffering as a result of climate change. The only way out of this climate change problem is to form a global ethic. Now those who are most responsible for this climate change or climate related issues must take great responsibility. This is called historical responsibility. The principle is that 'you broke it so you fix it.' For example if the river is polluted by the chemical, then the chemical producer i.e. the factory owner will be responsible to clean the river. This principle is also known as 'polluter pays.' Another principle is 'equal share', which means whoever pollutes should to de-pollute as much as he pollutes. It is true that all men or nations are not the same in socio-economic status, their resources are not equal. John Rawls in his Theory of Justice argued that justice means to devote more resources to those who are worse in their economic condition. Justice will take place if we provide them necessary resources so that they can improve their situation.

Now, the question is how can I know that my action is wrong? If I have done one thing and then others also did the similar thing and something bad happens, then I must understand that my action was wrong. I must be accountable and responsible if I knowingly and voluntarily participate in evil deeds. Man lives in society and while living in society he has to interact with other people as well as with animals, birds, forest and nature. The end of our life is to live a good and happy life. Now the question is what should be our relationship with nature to achieve a good life. What should be our behavior towards nature? Is there any moral significance of non-human beings?

Aristotle believes that there are hierarchies in nature, those who possess less ability or reasoning exist in this nature for the sake of those who possess more reasoning. For example plants exist for the sake of animals and plants and animals including domestic animals are existing for the sake of human beings. Nothing is created without purpose in this nature; nature is created in such a way that everyone is dependent on each other for survival. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* writes that there is no possibility of sinning, no matter how you treat non-human animals and the natural world, there is no sin involved. Sin occurs when we are not following God's commands and misbehave with our neighbors. Harming animals and destroying nature is not a sinful activity unless that activity harms human beings.

Permanent destruction of forest means severing our links with the past, because our socio-cultural and economy comes from the forest. It is something we have inherited from our ancestors, so it is our responsibility to preserve it for our future generation. We have not created it so we have no right to destroy it. We cannot have the right to destroy that which we did not create. We should not only think about the current benefits, but we should think and recognize about the long term benefits and values. Because we have to keep in mind that when something is lost, no amount of money can bring it back. We need to conserve forest and wilderness because it gives the greatest feelings of aesthetic appreciation and helps in our spiritual development. In Indian tradition it is believed that wilderness is the source of peace and serenity, even the contemporary thinkers like M.K. Gandhi and R.N. Tagore also believed that the relationship of man and nature is inseparable, all the creatures on earth have the same worth of existence. If we try to separate our life to the wilderness, we will not get peace. The alienation from nature means bringing sorrows to our life.

In which matter the future generation will be interested and what things they will value more depends on our present lifestyle. We can encourage future generations by various nature friendly activities such as preservation of forest and wilderness, walking in the forest, spending a day in a forest, learning activities in the natural environment etc. to generate the feelings for nature. Another point of reason to preserve nature is to give the choice to the future generation to see a world which is not created by human beings. If we preserve the nature-forest then they have the choice and opportunity to explore the beauty of nature. Moreover we have to adopt nature centric ethics instead of human centric ethics, because we human beings are only one part of nature. We have no right to harm other living and non-living beings and nature for our own sake, for our own greed. Thinking that only human beings have intrinsic value, other non-living beings, animals and nature have only instrumental value will lead to destruction of human civilization. We can achieve good and long-term happiness in our life only by living together, showing respect for each other and treating everyone with dignity. We should not do any act which causes the destruction of all living creatures living in nature and should take decisions keeping in mind that there will be no loss of nature in the future.

All living beings should be respected because all living beings want to live. I am a man and a living being. As I desire to live, all living beings also desire to live. Though some living beings may not express their pain and pleasure like human beings, but as they are living beings like us, they must have pleasure, pain and desire to live. This living and desire to live gives us pleasure. If I take away someone's right to live, I take away their pleasure, which cannot be

morally acceptable in any way. Right to live and development is not for only human beings, it should be applicable for all biotic and a biotic community. Thus the reverence for life should be our ethics. A man is ethical when he respects all living beings and helps all life and restrains himself from harming to living. Every living being is pursuing its own good in its own way. If we could see all living beings as we see ourselves, we would give them as much importance as we give ourselves. Any action is good when it preserves the integrity, stability and beauty of nature. And the bad actions are those actions which destroy the harmony of nature. Values come from loving relationships, from conversations, from close friends, sports and recreations – these will bring the feelings of harmony with the environment instead of harming the environment.

Conclusion:

Ethics is the philosophical discussion about what we should do and what we should not do to live a good life. It is a set of theoretical as well as practical knowledge to perform an appropriate action in particular circumstances. We will be free from all kinds of bonds when we know our duties properly. Our family and social upbringing play a big role in our decision making. Sometimes those decisions which were taken by our community code of conduct helps us to achieve our desired goals, but sometimes those decisions set us back or harm others fellow living or non-living beings. An ethical person is one who always finds reasons and justifications for his actions. A man is not ethical who blindly follows rules and regulations without any reasoning. We all are to some extent responsible for environmental degradation and climate change, now time has come to think and act in such a way that we can upgrade to this environmental degradation and restore the beauty of nature. Without destroying everything unreasonably in the name of development, rather we should think about sustainable development for our future benefits. We can live a happy life by living in nature, so protecting nature means protecting our own happiness. So it is our absolute duty to conserve nature and use it wisely. Nature gives us not only the basic human needs but it also provides aesthetic feelings and helps in spiritual development. Moreover human beings have to understand that they are a part of nature, not a master of nature. They have no right to unreasonable use and destroy nature for gaining temporary luxury profit. Good ethical life can be achieved when we respect each other and treat everyone with dignity. We cannot be happy by hurting anyone. We can be happy by giving happiness to everyone. A Good life can be possible if we can accept everything, when we can work with everyone and when we can see ourselves among all.

Acknowledgement: I am grateful to all the authors and publishers of the books from where I have acquired information and knowledge especially Peter Singer's Practical Ethics.

References:

1. Adomson, Peter. "Living the Good Life." Philosophy Now 2021.
2. Aristotle. The Eudemian Ethics. Trans. Anthony Kenny. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
3. —. The Nicomachean Ethics. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2004.
4. —. The Nicomachean Ethics. Trans. David Ross. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
5. Press, 1981.
6. Radhakrishnan, S. The Principle of Upanishad. Harpercollins, 2006.
7. Sharma, Chandradhar. A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2009.
8. Singer, Peter. Applied Ethics. Ed. Peter Singer. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.
9. —. Practical Ethics. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
10. Vivekananda, Swamy. Reflections. Om Books International, 2017.
11. Williams, Bernard. Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy. London: Routledge, 2012.