



Environmental Ethics and Sustainability: An Ethical Approach

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Abstract

Environmental Ethics and Sustainability is now becoming a global discourse in addressing long-term environmental challenges. Environmental ethics recognizes the intrinsic value of Nature; whereas sustainability emphasizes the harmony between environmental preservation, social equity, and economic prosperity. It strives to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Therefore, in the present context, where human beings continue to exert immense pressure on eco-systems through various activities, understanding the role of Environmental Ethics and Sustainability is utmost important. This research study is basically an attempt to highlight the core concepts of environmental ethics and sustainability and its role in mitigating environmental problems in the present context. The degradation of the environment is linked with human activities and the development process. Development is must for human civilization but sustainable practices make possible progress with a sustainable future.

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Introduction

The environment refers to everything that surrounds us and influences life on Earth. It includes both living (biotic) and non-living (abiotic) components of the world. Human being is also a part of the environment. Human being is a social animal live in and with Nature. Nature provides us everything that we need for our survival. The development of mankind is also depending on Nature. Therefore, the protection of every element of Nature is our prime duty and responsibility. But, with the development of science and technology our environment is being increasingly degraded by human activities. Consequently, the negative impact of environmental degradation is not only faced by the other species but human beings too. Hence, as a rational animal human beings have to think about their duties and responsibilities to protect environment. In this context, environmental ethics and sustainability provides an ethical framework to preserve environmental resources. As one of the parts of the environment human cannot survive without using natural resources; but the use of natural resources should be limited. Environmental ethics and sustainability emphasized on the stewardship, responsibility, and the moral obligation to preserve and respect the natural world. Hence, studying the role of environmental ethics and sustainability can make people aware of the importance of environment. Therefore, this study seeks to discuss the concept of Environmental Ethics and Sustainability to explore and examine the role of Environmental Ethics and Sustainability in mitigating environmental challenges in the present context.

Methodology

The proposed study is based on secondary sources. The secondary data are collected from the different sources, viz. books, articles, internet, library works, etc. The proposed research study is used descriptive and analytical method to authenticate the data. The conceptual framework of the study is attained through the descriptive method and analytical method helps to analyse ethical role of environmental ethics and sustainability in addressing present ecological issues.

Significance of the Study:

The study of environmental ethics and sustainability is very significant in the present context. Environmental problems are mainly caused due to the negligence of human beings towards the protection of environment. Therefore, this study will help people to bring the attention of environmental concern. It will make understand people that environmental problems are the global problems. Hence, a unanimous effort is necessary to counter such problems; otherwise no species can survive in this world. This study will provide a framework that ethical consideration with sustainable practices can somehow reduce such problems.

Brief Review of Literature:

(i) The book entitled '*Principles of Environmental Ethics*' is authored by Dr. E. Arumugam in 2008. In this book the author has discussed the meaning and the basic concepts of environmental ethics such as moral psychology and environment, the significance of wilderness, environmental axiology, economics and environment as well as the development of environmental ethics. This book states that environmental ethics examines the relationship between human beings and Nature from the moral perspective. It also deals with the theories of ethics, the origin of environmental crisis, sustainable development, social ecology and deep ecology, eco-feminism, etc.

(ii) The book entitled '*Environmental Ethics an Anthology*' is edited by Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III in the year 2003. In this book the editors have compiled various articles related to environmental ethics. The anthology is systematically organized into seven thematic sections and each section deals with the fundamental questions of environmental ethics such as the concept and scope of environmental ethics, Aldo Leopold's concept of land ethics, Peter Singer, Tom Regan and Paul W. Taylor's view on intrinsic moral value of animals, plants and eco-system. It also explores the concept of deep ecology, eco-feminism, environmental pragmatism, etc.

(iii) The book entitled '*The Global and the Local an Environmental Ethics Casebook*' by Dale Murray is published in the year 2017. This book has a significant contribution to the field of environmental ethics. The content of the book is divided into two parts. In the first part it deals with the general moral theories and applications and approaches to environmental ethics. It discusses the concept of anthropocentrism, biocentrism, eco-centrism, deep ecology, eco-feminism, etc. The book also addresses issues ranging from global concerns like climate change and ocean acidification to local dilemmas such as land use, hunting ethics, and everyday environmental decisions through 51 case studies.

(iv) The article entitled '*Environmental Ethics*' authored by Clare Palmer, Katie McShane and Ronald Sandler is published in Annual Review of Environment and Resources in October, 2014. This article deals with the definition, scope and development of environmental ethics. It also interprets the intrinsic value in environmental ethics, the idea of anthropocentrism, biocentrism, eco-centrism, environmental justice and sustainability, etc.

Discussion on the Topic:

Environmental Ethics: A Brief Outline

Environmental ethics is developed as a branch of philosophy in the 1970's. Although the concept of ethics is as old as philosophy; environmental ethics is relatively a new area of study. It examines ethical questions regarding human relationships with the non-human environment. Environmental ethics tries to determine how human beings should behave

toward the environment and what moral obligations people have to non-human entities such as animals, plants, eco-systems as well as to future generations. It places importance on the intrinsic value of Nature and asserts the moral significance of other animals, plants as well as the non-living elements. The practical purpose of environmental ethics is to provide moral grounds for social policies aimed at protecting the earth's environment and remedying environmental degradation. It ensures sustainable use of natural resources without exploitation and highlights the interdependence of all things.

There are many different perspectives in environmental ethics such as human-centred or "Anthropocentric" that gives a greater amount of intrinsic value to human beings than to any non-human things. It believes that the protection or promotion of human interests or well-being at the expense of non-human things turns out to be nearly always justified. It also believed that the values of non-human things are merely instrumental. It views Nature as worthless if it is not used to serve human beings. At the same time, it often recognizes that the destruction of environment might damage the well-being of human beings at present and in the future, since our very existence and well-being is essentially dependent on a sustainable environment. But other perspective of environmental ethics such as "Biocentrism," or the life-centred approach believes that all living things deserve equal moral consideration. It emphasizes on the preservation of biodiversity, animal rights, and protection of the environment, etc. Another perspective of environmental ethics is "Eco-centrism," or the ecosystem-centred approach. It emphasizes the importance of all living and non-living things in the environment. It seeks to de-emphasize human importance while promoting the importance of plants, animals, and other organisms as well as non-living things such as water, soil, etc. This concept asserts that all things have their own value. It gives importance on the intrinsic value of all living and non-living things. In order to sustain a healthy environment around the world, we must follow some key principles of environmental ethics. Here, we have illustrated some of the major principles of environmental ethics.

Principles of Environmental Ethics:

Environmental ethics has several principles to reshape human-nature relationship. The main principles are discussed as follows –

1. **Intrinsic Value of Nature:** Environmental Ethics asserts the intrinsic value of Nature independent of human use. Hence, all the natural elements should be preserved not only for their utility but also for their intrinsic worth.
2. **Sustainability and Justice:** Justice refers to equal treatment unless there is a sufficient reason to treat anyone or anything unequally. In the context of environment, justice can be called as environmental justice that concerned with the inequitable access to environmental resources. It means right to safe and secure environment to all human beings irrespective of their nationality, religion, gender, income or race. On the other hand, sustainability means meeting present our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs, effectively balancing economic growth, social well being and environmental pollution. It extends the concept of justice into the future generations too.
3. **Sufficiency and Compassion:** The principle of sufficiency mandates that all living things are entitled to enough resources to live. It implies that no one should waste resources intended for the sufficiency of all. Compassion extends the notion of sufficiency to the environment. Environmental ethics asserts the moral significance of all the natural elements; hence, humans have responsibilities to act in such a way so that the needs of these elements are met too. The behaviour of human beings should be compassionate to everyone or everything.
4. **Solidarity and Participation:** Solidarity and participation are foundational principles in environmental ethics. Solidarity helps human beings to recognize their interconnectedness with nature. It also helps us to think about the well-being of one another. Participation extends the idea of solidarity to make it practical. It ensures that local communities, indigenous groups, and citizens have a genuine voice in environmental policies, land-use planning, and conservation efforts, etc.
5. **Responsibility and Stewardship:** As a rational being humans have some moral responsibility to protect, manage and to take care of the environment or eco-system. Stewardship promotes a responsible relationship between human beings and the environment by emphasizing conservation, restoration, and careful use of natural resources.
6. **Precautionary Principle:** It is an ethical guideline that states if an action or policy has a suspected risk of causing harm to the public or the environment then protective measures should be taken to prevent harm.

Environmental Ethics in Indian Philosophical Perspectives:

The concept of environmental ethics is primarily a western concept; yet the environmental concern can be seen from ancient Indian scriptural text to different philosophical traditions. Several doctrines or theories in Indian Philosophy reflect the interdependence of every being on earth. The concept of Brahman, Dharma, Karma, Ahimsa, *Pratīyasamutpada*, the Vedic *yajna*, all of those emphasized harmony, non-violence, interconnectedness, etc.

The Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas contain extensive teachings on maintaining ecological balance, emphasising the protection of natural resources and sustainability and living in harmony with nature and showing reverence for all life forms. The Vedic tradition as well as some of the Indian Philosophical traditions especially Jainism and Buddhism promote the concept of Non-violence; which means "non injury" towards all forms of life. Even the Samkhya philosophy shows the interdependence of everything through its explanation of the evolution theory. It asserts Prakriti is the source of all material existence including human, animals, plants, etc. In Yoga philosophy the concept of *yama* includes *satya*, *ahimsa*, *aparigraha*, *asteya* and *brahmacharya*. All of these promote restraint, responsibility, ecological protection and sustainable living. The Nyaya-Vaisesika philosophy though not explicitly stated about environmental ethics; yet the theory of atomism in Vaisesika philosophy reflects the importance of natural elements to compose and balance the world. Mimamsa and Vedanta philosophy also promote cosmic harmony and the unity of all existence.

Indeed, the philosophy of most of the contemporary Indian philosophers like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda also reflects the concern for environment. Gandhiji advocated for simplicity and a non-violent way of living; which reduces material consumption and promotes sustainable living. He said that “Nature has enough for everybody’s need, but not for everybody’s greed”. Rabindranath Tagore also acknowledges the kinship of man with Nature, the unbroken relation of man and Nature. Swami Vivekananda’s philosophy is deeply influenced by Vedanta philosophy which recognizes that fundamentally all life is one and in essence everything is reality.

The Concept of Sustainability:

Sustainability refers the ability to maintain or support processes continuously over time without depleting natural resources or damaging the environment. It focuses on meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainability is the process of living within the limits of available physical, natural and social resources in ways that allow the living system in which humans are embedded to thrive in perpetuity.

Sustainability has three interconnected dimensions. These are environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Environmental sustainability emphasized on protecting biodiversity, ecosystems, and natural resources. It refers to the responsible and balanced relationship between humans and the natural environment. Environmental sustainability ensures the maintenance and preservation of the natural resources and ecological systems for present as well as future generations. It involves practices, policies and strategies that aim to minimize the negative impact of human activities on the environment and ensure the well-being of ecosystems, species, and the biosphere as a whole. It aims to preserve natural resources and biodiversity, reducing pollution, adopting the use of renewable energy, addressing climate change, promoting sustainable practices and environmental awareness, etc. On the other hand, social sustainability ensures equity, health, education, and quality of life for all. Again, economic sustainability promotes responsible, long-lasting growth that doesn’t degrade the environment.

The United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a comprehensive global framework for achieving sustainability. It seeks to realize the ideal of sustainable development through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are designed to maintain a balance among the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

The Modern Environmental Challenges:

An environmental challenge implies all the problems related to the environment that affects natural world and ecosystems. These issues can be caused by natural events or human activities. But most of the environmental problems are either intentionally or unintentionally created by human being. Though human beings live in and with nature but with the advancement of society due to liberalization or modernity and industrialization the life of people has become mechanical and they have little opportunity to look after the welfare of others. As for example, commercial farming practices mostly use some chemical fertilizers, pesticides, etc. to maximize crop yields and profits, which are also capable of impacting on environmental and public health. There are several human activities like over consumption of natural resources, overfishing, burning of fossil fuels, mining activities, improper waste disposal; wildlife exploitation, etc. all leads to many of the environmental issues. The excessive and uncontrolled use of natural environment for a long time by human beings has made irreparable damage to environment. Thus, environmental issues are now becoming a global problem. These issues include ozone layer depletion, depletion of natural resources, pollution, deforestation, desertification, global warming and climate change, etc. It extensively harm environment, human health and biodiversity. Some of the major environmental issues are as follows:

1. **Pollution:** Pollution implies the contamination of air, water, and soil through the release of harmful substances, such as chemicals, plastics, and waste, which can harm wildlife and human health.
2. **Deforestation:** Trees and plants hold carbon dioxide and provide oxygen, raw materials and help to maintain the Earth’s temperature. But, the depletion of trees and forests at an alarming rate for agriculture, urban development leads to habitat and biodiversity loss and contributes to climate change.
3. **Overpopulation:** Environmental problems are correlated with the population growth. Almost all the problems of environment are due to overpopulation. As the global population grows; demands for natural resources is increasing day by day. It leads to deforestation, shortages in food and water and other resource depletion.
4. **Loss of Biodiversity:** Biodiversity loss is the decline or reduction of plant and animal species and ecological diversity due to overuse or misuse of natural resources, habitat destruction, pollution, climate change, and over-exploitation etc. Due to loss of biodiversity ecosystems can become vulnerable and lose their ability to provide essential services.
5. **Climate change:** Due to the anthropocentric view human beings have used maximum amount of natural resources without thinking about the environment. Again, human activities like burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial processes leads to global warming and extreme weather events. Consequently, human beings have faced the negative impacts of the climate change in the form of heavy rain, drought, lack of water for agriculture, rising temperatures, sea level rise, forest fires, storms, flood etc. Climate change is primarily caused by the greenhouse effect which keeps warm air trapped inside the earth’s atmosphere.
6. **Ozone Layer Depletion:** Ozone layer protects natural environment including human beings by absorbing harmful ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the Sun. But due to some human-made chemicals such as chlorofluorocarbons, halons, nitrogen oxides etc., ozone layer has started depleting over time. It is also a serious environmental issue which can increase several human diseases like skin cancer, sunburn, permanent blindness and cataracts. It can also harm plants and animals as it allows more harmful UV radiation to reach the Earth’s surface.

An Ethical Approach to the Environmental Ethics and Sustainability:

The present world is battling with several environmental issues which are a major threat to all kinds of existence. In this context, environmental ethics provides a moral framework, while sustainability offers practical solutions to combat such issues. Both of these are essential for long-term human survival. The solution of environmental issues cannot be limited to only scientific or political means but it needs ethical considerations too.

Environmental ethics goes deeper to find out the root cause of environmental problems and provides the moral framework and practical strategies to protect the planet. It aims to bridge the gap between ethical principles and actionable measures. It emphasizes humanity's responsibility to move from exploitative and anthropocentric views to a stewardship model that values nature intrinsically. Sustainability again integrates environmental, economic, and social systems to ensure resource availability for future generations. Environmental ethics and sustainability help in developing policy, education, etc. and fostering awareness among peoples. It can construct more environmentally conscious and responsible society.

It can be said that lack of moral responsibility towards the environment is a fundamental cause of environmental damage and degradation. At this juncture, environmental ethics provide a moral basis for human decision-making process with regard to environment. It promotes the ideal of environmental justice which seeks to ensure equality, equity and fairness in environmental matters. Likewise, the goals of sustainable development are determined to solve environmental issues for the benefit of both the present and future generations. Environmental ethics and sustainability help in rethinking and reshaping human relationship with the natural environment. There are 17 goals of sustainable development which plays a crucial role in shaping a balanced and sustainable future. These goals are: - No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and well-being, Quality education, Gender equality, Clean water and sanitation, Affordable and clean energy, Decent work and economic growth, Industry, innovation and infrastructure, Reduced inequalities, Sustainable cities and communities, Responsible consumption and production, Climate action, Life below water, Life on land, Peace, justice, and strong institutions and Partnerships for the goals. All of these goals aim to maintain a balance between economic development, social welfare, and environmental protection in order to achieve a sustainable future.

Critical Comment

In this scientific era environmental ethics and sustainability have a great significance to create environmental consciousness among people. We cannot deny that we have to think about the environment and also for future generation. But it is also a fact that growing population increases the basic needs of people and this definitely creates a pressure on the environment. At present people only focus on the development and progress; therefore, it is a little difficult to apply moral principles in the real-world situation. These concepts can aware people but awareness does not always lead to action. Even, many people do not fully understand ethical responsibilities toward nature. Again, the laws to protect the environment are also not strictly enforced. Several challenges persist in practical application of this concept; yet within these challenges lie opportunities for innovation, technological and scientific advancements that can drive progress towards a sustainable future.

Human Responsibility for Environment:

Human beings live in and with environment and acquire everything from it for survival. Therefore, people must have some responsibilities to take care of the environment. However, human being is now realising that a clean and secure environment is necessary for survival. As a rational being it is humans' responsibility to ensure stewardship of the planet and sustainability for the future generations. People should stop exploitation of natural resources to conserve it for long run. The pollution of the environment should prevent as much as possible. For this purpose, people can adopt the 3R principles. Here, the 3R represents reduce, reuse and recycle which is able to mitigate climate change and ecological damage. Environmental devastation is primarily caused by human activities. Therefore, humans have an ethical duty to adopt sustainable practices, which includes the use of renewable energy, reducing waste, and protecting natural environment for future generations. To minimise pollution wherever possible people can use public transportation, can reduce the use of plastics, can save water to deal with the scarcity of clean drinking water, etc. Again, planting tree is one of the best ways to conserve Nature. But the protection of environment needs a collective effort rather than individual. In doing any activity people must be aware of the social and environmental context of their acts.

Conclusion and Findings

From the above discussion we find that environmental ethics as a branch of ethics deals with ethical problems pertaining to environmental matters. As we know that population growth and environmental problems are inevitably connected. In this context, environmental ethics helps to foster environmental consciousness among people. It emphasized sustainability to balance ecological harmony by preserving natural resources. Therefore, it has a great significance in the present context where it becomes very necessary to think about the environment for the existence and survival of each and every species on earth. The study and understanding of environmental ethics and sustainability could make people aware of the issues of environment and its consequences. It also provides some ethical solutions to save the mother Earth as well as to live in harmony with Nature. In this scientific and technological era, ethical framework can bring a progress with sustainable future. With the scientific advancement and development, it is also necessary to think about our fellow beings as well as the environment. Since, human beings are also a part of the environment destruction of environment ultimately leads to the destruction of human existence too. Therefore, in the present time, it is very important for human beings to act in such a way that maintain a balanced relationship with the environment.

Statements and Declarations

Authors Declaration:

We declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published elsewhere, and is not under consideration by any other journal.

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