Professional Ethics
HS-219

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ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Environmental ethics refers to:

1) the study of moral issues concerning the environment

2) moral perspectives on those issues

TWO METAPHORS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

Two metaphors are applied to thinking about the environment:

1) The Invisible Hand

2) The Tragedy of the Commons

Both the metaphors bring out unintentional impacts of the marketplace on the environment; but the first one is optimistic and the second one is cautionary.

THE INVISIBLE HAND

The origin of this metaphor is the book *The Wealth of Nations* written by **Adam Smith** in **1776**.

Smith talks about an invisible and divine hand governing or guiding the marketplace in a paradoxical way. The metaphor asserts that all businesspersons are concerned with their own self-interest. No butcher, baker, or seller of goods works because they feel benevolently towards the consumers but because they have their own gain in mind. Yet they end up benefitting the society and economy.

Their self-interest results in certain advantages or benefits:

Advantages

- ► By pursuing self-interest the businessperson creates new businesses/companies that provide goods and services for consumers.

- ► Self-interest also results in competition. And competition pressures companies and corporations to continually improve the quality of their products while at the same time controlling or lowering prices. This again benefits consumers.

- ► New jobs are created.

- ► The overall wealth generated benefits the wider community through taxes and philanthropy.

Disadvantages

Adam Smith could not foresee the impact of expanding populations and unregulated capitalistic economies. These have caused negative impacts on the environment, such as:

- ► pollution,
- ► destruction of natural habitats (like forests, jungles)
- ► depletion of shared resources (like water, vegetation)
- ► unintended damage to common resources (like forests, jungles, ocean, rivers)

THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS

The expression "the tragedy of the commons" was coined by **Garrett Hardin**.

The origin of this metaphor is in the Greek philosopher **Aristotle's** observation that we tend to be thoughtless and careless about things we do not own individually and which seem to be in unlimited supply (such as air, water, land, etc).

William Foster Lloyd observed that the cattle in the common pasture of a village were more stunted than those kept on private land. He also noticed than the common grazing fields were more worn than private pastures. He concluded that the individual farmers were motivated by self-interest to enlarge their common-pasture herd by one or two cows resulting in pressure on the pasture. When all the farmers behaved in this way, in the absence of laws constraining them, the result was overgrazing which was disadvantageous to everyone.

ENVIRONMENTAL MORAL FRAMEWORKS

Within corporations individual engineers can very well be agents of change. Doing so is rooted in certain moral or religious frameworks. These are:

- ➤ Human-Centered Ethics
- ➤ Sentient-Centered Ethics
- ➤ Biocentric Ethics
- ➤ Ecocentric Ethics
- ➤ Religious Perspectives

HUMAN-CENTERED ETHICS

Also called **anthropocentric ethics**, this focuses exclusively on the benefits of the natural environment to humans and the threats to humans presented by the destruction of nature.

It is assumed that among all the creatures on earth, only human beings have inherent moral worth and hence only they deserve to be taken into account in making moral decisions concerning the environment. The rest of the creatures are a secondary concern.

All four ethical theories provide a framework for exploring the moral issues concerning the environment.

Utilitarianism enjoins us to maximize good consequences for human beings.

These consequences constitute:

► **human interests** linked to nature. Many of these interests concern engineered products made from natural resources.

► **aesthetic interests** in the beauty of greenery, rivers, waterfalls, mountains, etc.

► **scientific interests** in "natural labs" such as forests, jungles, etc.

Rights ethics emphasizes the humans' right to a livable environment: an environment free of pollution and resource depletion.

Duty ethics emphasizes that we owe duties to humans. Kant asserts that we owe duties only to rational beings, which excludes all nonhuman animals. (Though Kant does condemn inhumane treatment of animals.) Thus duty ethics lays stress on the need for conserving the environment as human beings depend on it for their existence.

Virtue ethics focuses on such virtues as prudence, humility, appreciation of beauty, and gratitude toward the natural world. It emphasizes humans' role of stewardship over resources that are also needed for future generations.

SENTIENT-CENTERED ETHICS

This type of environmental ethics recognizes all sentient animals as having inherent worth. Sentient animals are those that can feel pain and pleasure and have desires.

Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation* insists that moral judgments must take into account the effects of our actions on sentient animals. Failure to do so is labelled "speciesism" by Singer. **Speciesism** implies bias towards the interests of members of one's own species and against those of the members of other species.

Giving consideration to the interests of animals does not mean equal treatment with humans. Sometimes animals' interests have to give way to human interests. For example, in building a dam humans may have to clear an area which is a habitat for animals.

BIOCENTRIC ETHICS

This type of environmental ethics considers all living organisms as having inherent worth.

Albert Schweitzer gave a pioneering idea under the name of "reverence for life". According to Schweitzer, our most fundamental characteristic is not our intellect but our will to live. The will to live includes both the will to survive as well as the will to develop according to our innate tendencies.

All animals have the will to live. Hence their inherent worth.

The human capacity to experience a kinship with other life on the planet is called "bioempathy".

Paul Taylor outlines four duties towards all the creatures:

1) **nonmaleficence,** which is the duty not to kill other living things

2) **Noninterference,** which is the duty not to interfere with the freedom of living beings

3) **fidelity,** which is the duty not to violate the trust of wild animals (as in trapping)

4) **restitution,** which is the duty to compensate for any violation of the above three duties

ECOCENTRIC ETHICS

This type of environmental ethics locates inherent value in ecological systems.

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) asserted that we have an obligation to promote the health of ecosystems. This implied a direct moral imperative to preserve (leave unchanged), not just conserve (use prudently), the environment.

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES

In the **Judeo-Christian** tradition, there are two contrasting ideas regarding humans' responsibility towards the environment.

1) In *Genesis* the first chapter portrays God as commanding human dominion over the earth. Humans are instructed to "fill the earth and subdue it" and have control over other creatures and "every living thing that moves on the earth".

2) The second chapter in *Genesis* talks about human beings' "stewardship over all the earth", suggesting the role of caretaker more than that of a sovereign.

In **Islam** human beings are stewards. They are supposed to utilize environmental resources in a responsible fashion. Islam emphasizes that human beings are the most superior of creatures and can control as well as responsibly make use of the other creatures on earth.

Asian religions emphasize images of unity with nature, which is distinct from both dominion/control and stewardship/care.

Zen Buddhism, flourishing in Japan, emphasizes establishing unity of self with nature through meditation. It calls for a life of simplicity as well as compassion towards the suffering of human beings and other creatures on earth.

Taoism, which has its origin in Chinese philosophy, also asserts unity with nature and the universe. The Tao (the Way) is about attaining harmony through being one with nature.

Hinduism, the religion in India, insists on oneness with nature. It also gives the principle of *ahimsa* – nonviolence and nonkilling. Moreover, it considers the sacred and the natural as fused and this idea is symbolized in the notion of divinities or gods being incarnated in living creatures (such as in certain animals).

The nineteenth-century **English Romanticism** as well as **American Transcendentalism** also put forth themes of unity. **Native Americans** believe that nonhuman creatures have spirits. Hence they are to be killed only out of necessity and then apologies must be made to their spirit.

CONCLUSION

Engineers, corporations, laws, local community regulations, and social activists all must be concerned about the health of the environment. So far as the conflicting points-of-view are concerned, there is a great need for ongoing dialogue and mutual respect and understanding.

Source:

Engineering Ethics by Charles Fleddermann