

12 ECOPHILOSOPHY AND PARENTAL EARTH ETHICS (On the Complex Web of Being)

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The Judaeo-Christian view of nature which has permeated Western philosophical thought has nurtured a form of possessive individualism which is disrupting the complex web of being in which humans are a part. The Judaeo-Christian ethic has placed humans apart from nature, a factor that has contributed to global environmental degradation. There is a need for a shift towards a new epistemological outlook in which humankind is viewed as part of a complex and systematic totality of nature. This chapter argues for an ecophilosophical approach which recognizes the totality of (spatial, temporal, spiritual and other) interlinkages in nature. We illustrate the importance of taking an ecophilosophical approach with an exposition of 'parental earth ethics'.¹

Ecology and philosophy

The Environment Crisis facing humanity is due in part to the philosophy of possessive individualism, a philosophy which is spreading in today's World as pluralistic democracy and free market economy become the dominant political and economic norms for humanity.²

It is appropriate to begin this chapter with this quotation from one of the distinguished scholars of philosophy in the Western world. It is now generally known that major concerns of the debate on environmental ethics in the West have been: (i) whether ethics should be restricted to human beings or whether non-human sentient-beings should also be subjects and agents in the domain of ethics, and (ii) whether any other matters in nature such as hills, rocks, rivers, also have moral value. If so, then ethics becomes ecocentric rather than anthropocentric.³

By destroying paganism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of the natural objects. It is often said that for animism the Church substituted the cult of saints. True; but the cult of saints is functionally different from animism. The saint is not *in* natural objects; he may have special shrines, but his citizenship is in heaven....The spirits *in* natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man's effective monopoly on spirit *in* this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions on the exploitation of nature crumbled.⁴

Peden introduces one special view of the 19th-century American philosopher, Francis Ellingwood, (1836-1903) who argued for a philosophical shift from the anthropocentric conception of nature with its philosophy of possessive individualism to universalism based on the theory of the organic constitution of all life. A position is essentially individualistic, Peden writes, following Abbot, if it 'seeks the ideal end of individual life' in the primary ethical welfare of the individual. While on the other hand, a position is 'essentially universalistic' if it identifies the ideal end with the ethical welfare of humanity, with individuals being a part of humanity.⁵

Ethics traditionally (at least in the West) has concentrated on the ideal of the individual while ignoring the insights provided by the biological, physical and social sciences. We wish to consider and harmonize the views of Abbot with the similar views of scholars who using other cultures, have contributed to the subject of humanity and nature. And on the basis of this consideration, we shall strive to argue that the views of these scholars form sufficient grounds for the assertion of the parental earth ethics. But just before we come to that, a brief sketch of the history or nature of ecophilosophy, which is defined here as the totality of the philosophy of nature, is pertinent.

Our approach differs from the traditional worldview in which nature is seen as existing solely for satisfying the material needs of humanity. This view is clearly articulated in the Bible which has over the centuries served as a source of divine rules for a large section of the Western world.

In Genesis (1: 27-28), for example, we are taught: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowls of the air, and every living thing that moves upon the earth".'

Western political thought has been equally influenced by the ideas of the classical philosophers such as Aristotle who generated hierarchical justification for the dominance of humanity over nature. In *Politics*, for example, he asserts that:

Plants exist [for the sake of animals, while] animals exist for the sake of man, the game for use as food, the wild, if not all, at least the greater part of them, for food and for the provision of clothing and various instruments. Now if nature makes nothing incomplete, and nothing in vain, the inference must be that she has made all animals for the sake of man.⁶

Cicero, echoing similar views in *De Natura Deorum* through his character, Bulbus the Stoic reinforces this view by arguing that '[W]hat other use have sheep save that their fleeces are dressed and woven into clothing for men?...Oxen?...their necks were born for the yoke and their broad powerful shoulders for drawing the plough.' This view was articulated in the teachings and Biblical interpretations of Thomas Aquinas and acquired the status of divine wisdom.⁷

We shall depart from the anthropocentric, utilitarian and hierarchical view of the relationship between human and nature and adopt a holistic outlook in which everything is related to everything else. This inter-relatedness requires a corresponding philosophical approach that looks at nature in its totality and derives from it ethics that reflect this outlook. We shall refer to this exposition as *ecophilosophy*.

The development of ecophilosophy

The term *ecology* derives from the Greek word *oikos* which is supposed to mean a house. The earlier precursor to ecology was *ceconomy*, which literally means household management. But when applied to nature, *ceconomy* takes the form of the divine governance of the natural world. It is claimed that it was Sir Kenelm Digby who was the first to use the term (*Economy* (1658)).⁸

Gilbert White: Antecedents of ecophilosophy

*The term ecology came into use in the 19th century as a better substitute for the old expression. Worster writes that '[t]he term ecology did not appear until 1866, and it took almost another 100 years before it entered the vernacular.'*⁹

One of the earliest persons (in the West) to carry out the systematic study of flora and fauna was the Englishman, Gilbert White, who in 1789 published *The Natural History of Selborne*. This was a collection of letters on wildlife, seasons, and antiquities of White's Parish at Selborne.

According to White, '[n]ature is a great economist,' for she 'converts the recreation of one animal to the support of another!' ¹⁰ He adds that the 'most insignificant insects and reptiles are of much more consequence, and have much more influence in the economy of nature, than the incurious are aware of;....Earthworms though in appearance a small and despicable link in the chain of nature, yet, if lost would make a lamentable chasm.'¹¹

The implication of White's observation is that we must be careful in the way we handle nature for it seems as if almost everything in it has value not just for itself but for the reality of the survival of the rest. This kind of religious-cumstoical attitude to nature is a contrast to the views of other Western scholars such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) who had earlier taught that 'the world is made for man' and that man is not made for the world. Bacon and even no less an institution than the Christian Church stood for exactly the opposite views to those expressed by White. They were for what Worster refers to as 'imperial ideology' of nature — where nature is a domain in which man must rule and exploit unchecked.¹² The position of Bacon and that of Christianity illustrate the Western anthropocentric view of nature.

Carl von Linne: Reverential awe of nature

Despite the onslaught of the dominating Western philosophy of irreverent exploitation of nature by man, thinkers like White were not without support from some persons of genius. The Swedish pioneer-botanist, Carl von Linne (latinized as Linnaeus) lent most of his great mind to the discovery and systematization of nature. Linnaeus wrote much, but one of his most admired essays was *The CEconomy Of Nature* (1749). From this we are taught that: 'we understand the all wise disposition of creator in relation to natural things, by which they are fitted to produce general ends, and the reciprocal uses'. In this arrangement, living beings 'are so connected, so chained together that they all aim at the same end, and to this end a vast number of intermediate ends are subservient.'¹³ So for Linne, all of animate nature is bound together in a common interest 'by the chains of substenance that link the living to the dead,

the predator to its prey, the beetle to the dung on which it feeds.' ¹⁴

Although Linne is known in some versions of his work to have postulated that all the arrangement of nature is designed by God for the ultimate benefit of humans, this was a mere gesture to please or reconcile his views with the forces of the anthropocentric view of nature. Living in the post-Baconian scientific world and in a dominating Christian era, Linne could not help avoid such a 'tongue-in-cheek' compromise with his community. We can thus ignore this aspect of his views and adopt the deeper aspect, i.e., his views about the inter-connectedness of the ecology of nature.

Charles Darwin: A special link in ecophilosophy

We regard ecophilosophy as the totality of the philosophy of nature. In this sense ecophilosophy is broader than such subjects as environmental studies and environmental ethics. Environmental studies have so far, restricted themselves to the study of the earth and the atmosphere. Environmental ethics has not gone much beyond the attempt to consider the possibility of extending ethics from human beings to the non-human creatures on earth.

Ecophilosophy must include the totality of both human-made as well as nonhuman-made philosophy about nature and the totality of the universe. Some of the non-human philosophies are studied and adopted by human beings, but such philosophies still remain non-human made. Humans have derived metaphors from the non-human world to enrich their own understanding of the world they live in or create. For example, they have derived metaphors on organizations that ensure collective living under one sovereignty from the ants. They have also derived the sense of the philosophy and technology of flying from the birds.

In ecophilosophy there is a significant link and affinity between the philosophies of White, Linne and Darwin, the father of the theory of evolution.¹⁵ This link can be expressed as that of the earth with all its benefits as the common good for all the creatures. So that even the gains each one of the species can have as its absolute and exclusive possessions are in reality historically limited.

The observation goes well with Darwin's postulation that 'no one species can hold a particular place in the economy of nature for ever. At every moment each place is up for grabs and sooner or later a replacement will be found and

the old occupant shoved out of the circle to perish alone.'¹⁶ Now, and for beings which claim to be rational and visionary such as humans, it would appear sensible to co-operate with those who might one day replace them by the law of nature rather than turn and see their privileges as absolute and eternal possessions. Darwin's philosophies of 'conflict in nature' and the 'survival of the fittest' do not in any way, if we take a deeper conception of nature, contradict the position of White and Linne.

The practice of the survival of the fittest passes only within the level of subservient, species-limited end, but for the ultimate end the survival of the fittest is but a mere passing means to the ultimate arrangement or development of nature. Thus, Linne's observations that living beings are so connected that they all aim at the same end, link consistently with Darwin's argument that 'nature is web of complex relations...and no individual organism or species can live independently of that web. A parallel assumption was that even the most insignificant creatures are important to the welfare of their conjoining species.'¹⁷ He acknowledged that even if they are not essential members of society now, some time in the past they have been and are therefore part of the historical chain of being.

Darwin's theory, like that of Linn& was indeed based on ecology and not on some form of genetics. It is notable that Darwin's thinking was to a large extent inspired by social theorists such as Herbert Spencer. The interplay between social theory and ecological thought is complex and warrants a separate assessment.¹⁸

The White-Linne-Darwin ecological perspective contrasts sharply with the Judaeo-Christian perspective of nature.¹⁹ The latter we wish to refer to as the *imperial ecophilosophy* as a contrast to the former which we wish to term as the *common-earth ecophilosophy*.

Ecophilosophy in other cultures

Abbot was the first American philosopher to support Charles Darwin.²⁰ Abbot developed a philosophy that rejected idealism given Darwin's revolution and emphasized experience and reason as the basis for all knowledge. Considering the situation facing humanity in his day, Abbot became convinced that a shift from individualism to universalism was required as the basic principle of ethical theory.²¹

Abbot's position was a grand shift in Western philosophy from the individually centred position emanating from the philosophies of Western classics such as Aristotle, Kant and Hegel: The root of the ethical individualism of Kant and Hegel is found in the Aristotelian theory of universals in metaphysics.²² For Kant the individual is a universally self-legislating mind declaring the categorical imperative as the source of all moral law. For Hegel, following Kant, the individual is a self-legislating will in a universal perspective and there is really no ethical authority over the subjective conscience of the individual.²³

What Abbot brought to Western philosophy is the view of the organic constitution of all life as a shift from individualistic theories. This is the notion that every organism functions partly for the others — this means that, it is both a means and an end to itself and to others.²⁴ The truth of organic constitution implies that the proper principle in human life and in nature in general is the principle of reciprocity. Abbot writes in his work, *Scientific theism: Reciprocity between the individual and the society* is well formulated in the old saying... "each for all and all for each."²⁵ Thus, Peden adds, reciprocal justice is the social ideal; it seeks to cultivate in each organism individual differences while subordinating these differences to the universal social ideal of reciprocal justice.

The Indian dharma

Pappu contrasts the basic issues in Western environmental ethics with the basic issues in Indian philosophy.²⁶ Ethics in Indian philosophy is not human-centred, but dharma-centered. All life is sacred, and the ethical relationship between humans and animals is one which demands equality. **All** natural objects such as trees, hills, rivers and stones are sacred and deserve respect. In Indian philosophy humans are in nature not against nature.

*Morality is conceived as an aspect of Rta, and Rta is the eternal law of the universe which when applied to nature becomes the natural law and when applied to living beings becomes the moral law. Rta as a concept joins together with dharma, which means that which holds together. Pappu's claim is supported by Singh, who writes: 'Gandhi presented a manifesto of a counter culture of plain living and high thinking and ecological balance between nature and man.'*²⁷

Hawaiian cosmology

Gruver writes that the traditional concept of family in the Hawaiian Islands embraces a system of social relationships that was essentially pan-Polynesian.²⁸ In Hawaii, family means *ohana* which comprises a matrix genealogical kinship that extends to include all elements of creation. Both human beings and the rest of nature occupy a position of parity that originated from environmental union of the *earth* and the *sky*.

These two are named *Papa* (mother earth) and *Wakea* (the sky father). There are interesting details given in this oral narration of Hawaiian cosmology on how all the islands of Hawaii were given birth to and how the totality of nature is intertwined.

Dogon cosmology

Anyanwu argues that the Dogon conceptions of humans, nature, society and the universe offer a unitary and an organic view of reality in which humans, nature and society are continuous with the universal creative process.²⁹ This cosmology emphasizes unity in diversity. It regards myths, religions, morality, politics and economics as important forces which integrate the individual with the community.

Wiredu refers to the traditional African practice of communally based life.³⁰ In this practice, land — the most fundamental means of livelihood belongs not to the individuals but to the clan. The clan itself is thought of as consisting of members currently living, those in the world of the ancestors and those not yet born. All these categories of people have a psychological reality that greatly influences the thoughts, feelings, behaviour, decisions and relationships in the community. The earth or the immediate environment on which our lives are based is thus a common good for all.

The foregoing texts lend us some solid scientific and philosophical ground on which to postulate pan-organism as the basic truth underlying all nature. This basic truth has two major philosophical implications. First, it means that all aspects of nature are interconnected, so that the ecological activities are a network. So a break or imbalance in one aspect has serious consequences in other aspects of the domain. Secondly, it exposes the empirical-cum-ethical

plausibility of the principle of the earth as a common good to all mankind and to all creatures.

This principle is seriously objected to by those who favour exclusive individual or national survival as the fundamental truth or reality in all human and natural relations. Let us refer to this as the principle of 'exclusive individual or national survival'. One philosophical derivative of this principle is the 'life boat ethics'. This is an ethics which stands in the way of formulating a new ethic that is built on ecophilosophy i.e. the parental earth ethics.

Parental earth ethics

Ecophilosophy can provide a practical basis upon which to formulate a new ethics that would take into account the complexity and totality of nature. This would be a parental earth ethics. Parental earth ethics is not simply a product of intellectual enquiry. It is the basis upon which different cultures around the world base their environmental perceptions. The ethics can be presented in the form of principles and rules.

Imagine a family with six children. Two of the six are relatively rich and four generally poor. Among the rich, one is extremely rich while among the poor, three are very poor. The reasons for the differences in status have to do partly with the family history, partly with personal luck and partly with individual talents. Though the children have different and diverse possessions, they have certain things in common such as parents (whether alive or deceased). They are also common in that each of them has status and achievements based on the teaching which the family as a whole provided. Some made better use of that education while others may have squandered it.

The children find that their lives and relationships are guided by the unwritten ethical laws which can best be summarized under two main principles: (i) parental-debt (or bound) principle (PP), and (ii) individual luck principle (**IP**).

Parental debt principle

This principle consists of four related rules dealing with family security and dignity, parental debt, and individual and family survival.

The family security rule states that the fate and security (physical or welfare) of each member of a family is ultimately bound up with the existential

reality of the family as a whole. Any one of the six members may, for example, be arrogant and have enough to claim self-sufficiency and independence from the rest. However, eventually the person of the person's own progeny may experience a turn of events which could make them desperately in need of protection from the family.

History abounds with such examples. Both the Roman and the Ottoman empires disintegrated and their children and dependents sought their security and fate elsewhere. Western Europe was liberated from economic ruin after the Second World War by a power from outside her borders. And today the former Soviet Union is desperately looking for rescue even from such a small power as Italy.

The kinship shame rule is that the life conditions of any member of the family affect all the others materially and emotionally, so no member can be proud of his or her situation however 'happy', if any member of the family tree lives in squalor. There is a partial non-earthian application of this rule in our current world: European powers are more inclined to help fellow Europeans out of their squalor than they are prepared to do the same for some Third World country. Today, for example, Russia and Eastern Europe are a greater concern of the West than the rest of the world including China.

The parental debt rule assumes and explains the organic relationship and debt between the family members: Whichever member of the family is affluent or destitute owes his fortune or misfortune to the parental and historical factors inherent in the development of the family. Hence, within the family no one alone is fully responsible for his affluence nor for his misfortune.

The individual and family survival rule states that no member of the family, given the above rules, has any moral obligation to refrain from interfering with the possessions of any brother or sister who ignores the obligation to abide by the rules of the family ethics. This rule allows the disadvantaged to demand assistance from the affluent, but it also allows the creative and hardworking members of the family to repossess underdeveloped possessions of the idle relatives and develop them for the welfare of humanity and for use by posterity.

The individual luck principle

This is made up of three constituent rules dealing with personal achievement,

personal supererogation, and public law. *The personal achievement rule* states that what a member possesses is due mainly to the person's special talents. This is a kind of family individualism which disregards historical experience and the organic constitution of the family. *The personal supererogation rule* provides that every member has a right to do whatever he or she wishes with his or her possessions. Finally, the *family public law rule* states that any member of the family who contravenes the right of another member as given by the second principle will be subject to the family public law, and would be punished or reprimanded and ordered to restore justice.

The parental debt principle takes precedence over the individual luck principle, in case of a conflict between the two. And this is as it should be. Why, for example, would we not see it as senseless that an individual member of a family would want to do anything she wishes with her possessions, while a number of her kith and kin may be in desperate need of help.

The basic ethical rationale for why the parental debt principle takes precedence is as follows: the individual luck principle (IP) is supported fundamentally by the 'right of first occupation', personal luck and achievement, i.e., the veil of fate. But the first principle (PP) springs from the fact of organic unity between the children, the common pool of their wealth (whatever their differences in possessions) and the need for their common security.

The ethics of common sense shows that when in any given family or community, matters of common wealth, and common security conflict with matters of the personal possession, luck or achievement, the former must prevail over the latter.

There is no country in which, for example, an individual institution would be safe-guarded if it endangers the security or the economy of the nation. And it is also clear that no country would accept the wish or a will from one of its citizens which stipulates that upon death all his achievements, however dear to the country, should be exterminated or kept out of use by anybody. The reason for such a will would be that those achievements are personal and hence, the personal supererogation rule is to prevail. The objection to the will can only be supported by invoking the issues of common origin, common security and common wealth.

We hope it is clear that the earth or the world is a kind of a family unit in

which the members have kith and kin relationship with one another. So far, our discussion is driven towards the claim that the earth is a common wealth to all humanity.

We are prepared to concede that the world has no sovereign. But this does not affect the claim that planet earth—not the world—is a common good or heritage for all humankind. The question of the right by the first occupation or personal achievement does not overrule this truth. If it did, then it would make no sense to accept the territorial rights of the Europeans who migrated to the Americas after Christopher Columbus 'discovered' that continent over five hundred years ago.

The territorial rights and sovereignty in the Americas would, in that case, rightly and legitimately belong to the indigenous Indians. However, the reality today is such that indigenous Indians have no more a legitimate claim to that part of the earth than the migrants who invaded it five hundred years ago.

Again, if the right of first occupation or generally the veil of fate is to prevail over the principle of the earth as a common good for all humankind, then all that was procured through the colonization of such places like Africa and India should have been returned to these former colonies a long time ago. But nowadays it seems it does not make sense to demand that such resources be returned.

On colonialism, what we lament is the fact that those who developed themselves by it have turned their backs on those they colonized and now claim that they (the former subjects) have no share in or claim to any of their current possessions. But given the organic constitution of life and the principles of parental earth ethics, the former colonies have a legitimate claim to such possessions.

Conclusion

We wish to conclude by attempting to answer several objections which we foresee as coming from some of our readers. One such objection would be that the earth is not a common good in the sense of sharing whatever we have gained from it with everybody; the earth is a common good only in the sense that it is an open field for the survival of the fittest.

We have already cautioned against a crude interpretation of Darwin's theory of the origin of species. A more detailed interpretation reveals that nature is a

web of complex relations and that no particular species can exist independent of that web. 'Survival of the fittest' may sound correct when we limit ourselves to subservient (personal, or national) ends. Such limitations have beguiled some nations to believe that their given historical domination of others would last forever.³¹

The Third Reich of Hitler was to last 1,000 years. But it lasted for only 12 years. The Roman empire of course lasted a long time, but it did not last forever. Today the descendants of (say) the British empire would surely feel some relief and pride in any historical revelation of any good which the empire did to the colonies. For it is precisely from the goods not the evils done by colonization that makes former subjects tolerant and at times even friendly to the descendants of their former oppressors.

So when we take not the subservient ends of nations, but the ultimate or organic ends of all nature, no particular species or nation could be the fittest or weakest in accordance with the historical organic shifts of nature. Perhaps what all nations which are rich and powerful need to do is to invest in the pool of service to the rest of the world, so that when their historical turn or shift to oblivion comes, others may remember them with compassion. This would be a parental earth insurance policy.

The other objection we foresee is that parental earth ethics is a quasi-religious exaggeration of the kinship relationships between all people of the earth: that it is a doctrine for preachers in churches but not relevant to the real world of the political and economic chess board.

The kinship issue is not being dragged into this matter just as a moralization of the virtue of declaring all human beings, and all species in nature as 'brothers and sisters'. It is given here as an assertion derived from the ecological truth about nature and the ultimate common fate of all creatures living on planet earth. Without the element of kinship or organic unity of nature none of the arguments of the current environmental protectionists would be valid for all peoples and nations. But given the organic unity of nature the arguments make sense, for it is clear that the pollution and the degradation of sections of the earth are likely to have consequences in the rest of the globe. This is the concern that led to the convening of the Earth Summit in Brazil in 1992. That meeting was a symbolic family gathering.

The last objection we wish to consider is one which claims that we are

placing creatures such as even earthworms in the same moral level as human beings. Equality of all human beings may be understandable, but how about equality (say) between a head of state and an earthworm? The earthworm does not demand or require equality with a head of state. But nature demands that we do not extinguish earthworms as a species. Earthworms are a part of the biodiversity without which even a head of state would be non-existent.

There are basically two main reasons in the need for the sustenance of biodiversity: One is that all sentient-beings have an intrinsic value, and the other is that human life on earth is doomed to perish if we destroy biodiversity. Although the first reason is still too remote for most people to grasp, the second reason is and should be today common knowledge among reasonable adult human beings. We propose parental earth ethics as a basic ethics that would offer a motivation for both a global environmental concern and a global redistribution of the wealth of nations.