Ethics and Environmental Ethics and Its Evolution

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Ethics is the philosophical study of morality. Ethics can be viewed as understanding the foundation and structure of morality regarding how we ought to live. The terms “moral” and “ethics” denote the idea of custom. Although these terms have different origins, philosophers use these terms interchangeably. Ethics is defined as systematic understanding of moral concepts and justifies the theories and principles of right behavior that guides individuals and groups on how to behave in the society.

According to Peter Singer, an ethical issue is “relevant if it is one that any thinking person must face.” In this sense environmental issues are more relevant today. Ethics is not a bunch of principles that everyone should follow in society, rather, ethics guides and allows being a rational agent in society. The interesting fact about ethics is that it is not a scientific study and at the same time even scientific study comes under ethical scrutiny. Ethics is not a scientific study in the sense that there is no scope for proof and demonstration as in science and mathematics. At the same time, ethics can be over and above science for we pass value judgements on scientific discoveries and inventions. The general notion about all areas of knowledge is that if it is not scientific or demonstrable, then there is no use of it. Ethics breaks this dogma. Even in scientific discipline an ethical orientation becomes inevitable. But that simply does not mean that ethics is a code of prohibitions. In the pre-modern period ethics was in the hands of theologians and they used it as hegemonic tool. It has been rapidly changing in modern times. The scope and definition is being broadened along with modern society. Prominence and importance ethics is increasing day by day. As no society is static and problems related with it are also not static, ethics is not static and has been addressing ethical issues with different perspectives.

Since the introduction of applied ethics in philosophical discussions and debates, the role of philosophy is becoming more and more vital to the society as a whole. The definition of philosophy is expanding day by day. Applied ethics, especially environmental ethics has provided a new vision and a “new eye” to the blind materialist world. With this “new eye” man is having new perspectives which were unfamiliar to him but existed before him. Although such a new perspective is not a thing in Indian philosophy, we consciously or unconsciously neglected such pieces of wisdom in our run towards wearing the ‘westernized mask’ in fact the word ‘Darsana’ in Indian context means seeing or experiencing. In other words, we have to see or visualize the truth. The truth is that we need to realize that we are not isolated from nature rather we are part of nature. This aspect is recognized in the writings of great Indian philosophers. So, environmental ethics in its broadest terms in an attempt to find solution to the problems with regard to the environment which mankind faces today.

Environmental ethics as an academic discipline in its initial stages succeeded in creating awareness about the problems to the mankind. The main focus of environmental ethics is on the moral foundation of environmental responsibility to our environment. It is also about ascribing values to the non-human world.

Evolution of environmental ethics:

Environmental ethics is relatively a new branch in applied ethics. The term “applied ethics” is used in practical sense to find moral solutions to the problems in society and it is an attempt to solve our problems in professional ethics. Some of the important events that paved the way for the existence of environmental ethics in the west are as follows;

1. Reformation in academic curriculum in philosophy:

Environmental philosophy first came to be noticed as an academic discipline in the west in the context of curriculum reform philosophers who were divided on the basis of their theories and who debated on normative and meta-ethics started to think about an applied philosophy. So applied philosophy was formulated in order to bridge the gap between meta-normative and practical ethics. As a result, numerous subfields came under applied philosophy. The most important ones among them were medical ethics, environmental ethics and business ethics.

2. Misuse of science:
Instead of concentrating on humanitarian measures. Modern scientific, political, and cultural ethos has refused to entertain the term ‘value’. Politicians used science to capture power. They were limited in thinking beyond next elections. Their policy became mainly on higher production and higher export thus higher profit. Therefore science is no more treated as an embodiment of human dignity. Science and technology expand their horizons, beyond the limits. The rapid development is visible not only in technology, but also in the opportunity to use the technology. These rapid developments in science and technology pushed the existing frameworks to the back seat. Human rationality is basically two pronged. It has both moral and scientific dimensions. The excessive use of scientific rationality often ignored the moral dimension of human rationality. This is evident from the rapid developments in science and technology and ion the falling standards of morality.

3. Anthropocentric view and ecological deterioration:
The root of anthropocentric view is that man thinks that he is above natures laws. Man used science as to discover the ways and methods and devices to govern nature and to improve man’s laws. Ethical, social and cultural laws built by nature over thousands of years are being destroyed in mere 500 years of scientific and technological experimentation. Man destroyed old bond of tradition between man and nature and now he struggles to create new bond. But it is in vain, because the new bond is attempted with the help of violent science.

As an outcome of the Rio conference everyone felt the need for a new ethics which has its own moral commitments. These moral commitments were like biodiversity ought to be preserved, environmental policies should be formulated along with the lines of environmental ethics, barring of nuclear weapons, and so on. Underlying all these commitments is single concern, i.e, concern for environment. Thus environmental ethics is gaining crux of the concept of sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development was first articulated by the world commission on environment and development in 1987 through the now well known brundtland report entitled our common future. It reveals a paradigm shift in our thinking on the concept of economic development, which had assumed that natural resources are inexhaustible and are available to be exploited for human welfare. Sustainable development is now seen as that process of development which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.3

This concept of sustainable development is an important concept in the sense that it works as a connecting link between ecology, economics and ethics. In the ecological front, sustainable development is the preservation for future development. From the economic standpoint, sustainable development works for minimum and optimum use of natural resources. From the ethical viewpoint, sustainable development means reminding about future generations right to use natural resources.

Contemporary ethical sources in environmental ethics:
The major concerns of meta ethics is the status and nature of ethical claims. It is the discussion about ethics itself. Cambridge dictionary of philosophy explains about meta ethics as. “To a large extent, the general studies of goodness and right action and special studies of applied ethics consist in systematizing, deepening and revising our beliefs about how we ought to conduct our lives. At the same time, it is characteristic of philosophers when reflecting on such systems of belief to examine the nature and grounds of these beliefs. These questions, when asked about beliefs, define the field of Meta-ethics.4

The controversies in meta-ethical theories include discussion of environmental ethics also. The influence of meta-ethical disputes in environmental ethics is visible when we consider the relationship of humans to a non-human world. According to Stephen L.Darwall, the domain of meta-ethics is abstract philosophical issues that falls under four different kinds5 they are:

1. Questions in the philosophy of language concerning the meaning and content of ethical judgements.
2. Related issues in the philosophy of mind concerning what mental states ethical judgement express or what it is to hold an ethical view.
3. Metaphysical issues concerning the possibility and nature of ethical truth.
4. Epistemological questions concerning the possibility and nature of ethical knowledge and how we can justify our ethical views.

The meta-ethical issues about environment fall under the fourth category.

Normative ethics:
Normative ethics can be broadly defined as principles and concepts that are put forth in support of ethical judgements. The examination of normative ethical theories is unavoidable in any ethical issues. This is because of an important feature of ethical concepts that they are based on reason. Normative ethical principles form the crux of moral discourse in any society. It is about “what is to be valued for itself”.6
The development of normative ethics is most crucial in the history of environmental ethics. Before the development of normative ethics the main focus of ethical theories was man and his attitudes. But as normative ethical system grew, it opened the chances of applying ethical categories to areas in which they were never thought of. So development of normative ethics expanded the scope of the subject to non-human domain.

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