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VANGELIS D. PROTOPAPADAKIS

**THE MAINFRAME OF AN ADEQUATE
AND EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS**

During the last two centuries, occidental philosophical meditation has triumphantly advanced through previously poorly charted fields. Science has reallocated the methods as well as the goals of philosophy, forcing scholars to advance a little further, embrace new cognitive challenges and correspond to new social needs. As a result, our everyday life has become easier and our world is a better place to live in. But still, an optimum situation is not achieved. As a matter of fact, there are more things at stake in our era than there were in previous ones. Even basic prerequisites for a prosperous life are not fully met. For the first time in the history of mankind, we can not even be sure about the survival of our planet, not to mention well being of it's living entities –man included. So far, where is the improvement? Our ancestors may not have had the luxury of fast transportation, immediate information or adequate medical treatment, still they could take some things for granted: they positively knew that they and their successors would be given the minimum of chances: they, at least, would have a place to live.

If that is the case, what went wrong? Obviously, somebody has not done his part. Whenever problems appear, specific scientists are entitled to deal with them and solve them. Science is advancing due to and in accordance with practical difficulties. If environment is endangered, there is a specific scientific cast to blame. Might they be the environmentalists? Definitely not. Enviromentalists inform us on how an ecosystem works, and which should our actions be in order to rescue or to improve its functions. They can not force us to act in favour – or, to the detriment – of it. They can not imply what is the right thing to do and what should we abstain of. That is an ethical philosopher's duty. Are there the ethicists to blame? If yes, what for?

One might notice that Ecoethics now days are advancing, ethical committees are being world wide formed, green policies are being adopted. All these happen due to environmental ethicists' efforts. It appears to be no ground for blame.

It would be meaningless to argue that ethics and, in particular, its most specialized branch, Ecoethics, detriment the environmental case. If not the better arrangements still achieved, it is not due to bad intentions or inadequacy, but mostly due to the complexity of the issue and its interconnections with human activities. Environment is not an isolated issue like, for example, euthanasia, which philosophers can easily focus on and attempt to provide their proposals. Environment is everywhere. An ethicist can not deal with it in vacuum, as if it was some kind of mind game or an intellectual challenge. When it comes to environmental issues, the situation becomes urgent and pressing, yet it requires caution and dedication of the highest degree. For, when a particular issue is settled, a brand new one, internally associated with the former, arises. Due to that, in my belief, it is necessary for someone willing to deal with environmental ethics to be specific, precise and always focused. Maybe it was the lack of the above mentioned attributes that has caused delay and confusion to the environmental issue.

Nowadays, he who deals with environmental issues will probably get lost and find himself driven to unfamiliar terrain, such as ontology or religion. Is the man superior to other living species? Can we attribute ethical merit to non living matter? Are we entitled by the Creator with stewardship over the world? Is it probable that animals share an immortal soul? May intrinsic value be attached to sentience alone, or sentiments count morally as well? Is it sound to argue that the whole has ethical priority to the individual, or could that lead us to a slippery slope situation, misleading us to ethical appreciation of fascisms of any kind? All these questions are familiar to anyone who is – even superficially – engaged to environmental ethics. They constitute important – as well as misleading – matters. For when the questions are provocative and ample, it is easy for someone to get driven away of the primary goal.

Environmental ethics' primary goal should and could only be the

survival and flourishing of life on earth as we know it.¹ It would be useless and detrimental, as well, to charge environmental ethics with duties that belong to a broader field of meditation. If the goal is the above mentioned, the only thing missing is the means to the end. The only way of achieving the pre-mentioned aim is to form an adequate ethical structure to sustain the preservation of the environment. A structure to be adequate, it has to be solid and broadly applicable. If not, it will fall apart like a castle built on sand, leaving environment and its inhabitants pray to a society which entirely lacks ethical compass. For an ethics to be solid and broadly applicable it takes to be clear, inductive, stable, prescriptive and, in no case, contradictive. That is because ethics are to be adopted by the majority of people to be effective, and such a majority hardly never is moderately informed on ethical matters. An ethics to be inductive means that one step has to be followed by another, pacing slowly from simple to more complex issues, always keeping in mind aim and principle. To be prescriptive, an environmental ethics has to attribute intrinsic value to the environment and its components, that means lifeless matter, non sentient life, sentient non human life and, finally, humans. If not successful in this effort, conclusions may be paradoxical. For instance, it may be argued that one ought to respect sentient non human life, but has no prima facie duty to protect the life sustaining ecosystems.² It is the same as to insist that we are ethically obliged to respect and protect someone, but we are permitted to destroy his residence endangering his future existence.³ Furthermore, the intrinsic value of each component should not exceed the value of every other. Equality in the possession of value is the only way to avoid further complications. If not, we may be forced to reach the conclusion that some beings are ethically prior to others, which is an untoward as well as an inconvenient one. That is because we should entitle some one to judge the amount of ethical value that beings possess and to form an appropriate ethical hierarchy. However, who would be of such ethical merit and skill to fit to that role? Further more, if we adopt a hierarchy of merit, we may be

1. Leopold A., *A Sand County Almanac*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949.

2. Stone C., *Should Trees Have Standing?*, Los Angeles: Kaufmann, 1974.

3. Protopapadakis E. D., *Ecoethics*, Athens: Sakkoulas, 2005:32-40.

involved in a slippery slope situation. We could easily accept an ethical priority of wholes to single individuals, which is an ethically perilous acceptance, dynamically leading to misanthropy and different kinds of fascism.⁴ Therefore, an environmental ethics should be an egalitarian one when it comes to value possession and priority affairs. Yet, as perilous as the task might be, the need for attributing intrinsic value to the environment remains. For that kind of value is most prescriptive and stable over time. Recognition of intrinsic value creates a prima facie direct moral duty on behalf of moral agents to respect and revere the carrier or the possessor of that value.⁵

One might argue that attributing intrinsic value to nature is not the only way to reach an ethical structure capable of sustaining the preservation of the environment. We could, as well, focus on the instrumental values that environment holds. As a matter of fact, we could much easier, that way, derive ethical imperatives acceptable by the majority of mankind.⁶ No one could ever deny that the preservation of flora and fauna is essential to humans because they provide us aesthetic pleasure and supply us with oxygen. Such a view – usually referred to as anthropocentric – focuses on human interests in the preservation of the environment. Non human objects do not possess some kind of value as such, but because they are means to valued ends: the human wellbeing. That way it would be self evident that people do have an ethical duty to care for and protect the environment, as their care is not really focused on environment but, in fact, takes into consideration only their own and other people welfare. Such an ethics would be clear and solid enough, hence most effective. Nevertheless, it would be not at all stable over time. It is evident, for example, that a forest possesses instrumental value, as the major provider of oxygen, which is essential to human life. However, as technology advances, it is very possible that oxygen may be mechanically produced in the future. Which one will be the instrumental value of forests then? None, since their existence would not any more be valuable to

4. Callicott J. B., *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.

5. Næss A., "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement" in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, G. Sessions (ed.), Boston: Shambhala, 1995.

6. Frankena W., *Social Justice*, Spectrum Books, 1962:19.

mankind. On the contrary, deforestation would have much more ethical merit, since it would provide housing to the homeless and vast areas for agricultural purposes. One might insist on the aesthetic value of the forests, which, as well, is an instrumental value. But the wilderness is accessible to few people nowadays, hence an aristocratic form of rejoice.⁷ On the other hand, virtual reality could provide us the means of wide spread rejoice, accessible by anyone. Or, there could be artificial fauna created for aesthetical admiration. If a rare species of butterfly has only aesthetic value, what keeps as of outnumbering it in order to make it accessible by people in much visited museums or putting it on stamps? It is evident that such an anthropocentric view faces the environment as a mechanical producer or as a state of art but, clearly, the environment is not only that. Furthermore, philosophy should deal with reality as well as with probability, as far as the probability is not antithetic to logic. Ethics, as well, when in the state of formation, should be greatly considerate about slippery slope situations. That means, all possible consequences – positive as well as negative ones – should be taken into consideration, otherwise moral agents may be involved in untoward situations. If nature is considered as a mere supplier, no means would be able to prevent an ecological catastrophe in no longer obviously beneficial. Finally, an ethics which is based on opportunity and chance is not a stable one at all. Thus, an environmental ethics to be stable is to be non anthropocentric.

The next step to an ethics stable over time is to render it self standing and independent from other sciences. That means that it should be not approached in consequentialistic terms. Consequentialism attaches intrinsic value to the aftermath of an ethical choice. The primary goal is to achieve the optimum balance of pleasure over pain for the maximum number of individuals. Especially essential to consequentialistic analysis is the capability of feeling pain and pleasure.⁸ The former is intrinsically disvalued, while the later is considered to carry

7. Stretton H., *Capitalism, Socialism and the environment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976:211.

8. Bentham J., *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, cp. XVII, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948.

intrinsic value. Therefore, one should abstain from acts that produce pain, unless they are inevitable –that means they produce greater pleasure than pain to the greater number of beings. Thus, humans should abstain from eating meat, as the pain inflicted to animals could be easily avoided with no essential cost to mankind.⁹ That is because the amount of protein gained from animal flesh can be adequately substituted by vegetable protein. But that way, ethics trespass biology and dietology terrain. As far as dietology indicates that vegetable protein is equivalent to meat protein in nutrient value, the case is ethically stable. Ethics is not self standing anymore, though. As dietology advances, it may be manifested that meat protein is essential to human nutrition, not exchangeable to vegetable one.¹⁰ In that case, the consequentialistic argument no longer stands. One should say that ethics should be informed by reality, so there is nothing wrong in taking into consideration other sciences' conclusions. Well, information is quite different to formation. Ethics should be informed but not formed by actual facts. Ethics should form reality, not the other way. To render the argument clearer, we could use a more complex example. The hunting of whales, analysed on an utilitarian basis, is ethically disapproved since it inflicts pain to those – close kin- animals without producing any benefits which could not substituted by other means. In grassroots terms whale hunting produces more pain than pleasure, therefore it possesses ethical disvalue. However, a whole culture may be based on whale hunting. Small societies residing in specific places, an ethical system adopted by people, a way of life, a specific sentimental state, these are side factors which should be taken into consideration before a conclusion on the value of the specific practice is reached. As apparent, the case involves psychology, sociology, applied economics, ethics and social sciences as well. For example, psychology may conclude that those people occupied in whale hunting could not alter their way of life. Economics could indicate that the cessation of the practise would be detrimental to the Norwegian economy as a whole. In that case, the ethical assessment of whale

9. Singer P., "All animals are equal" in *Applied Ethics*, P. Singer (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986:221-222.

10. Lappe F. M., *Diet for a small planet*, New York: Ballantine, 1971:4-11.

hunting as a practice bearing ethical disvalue would not any longer stand. Being consequentialistic, ethics cede their domain to other sciences. Not only that, it also adopts the “is and ought” fallacy, inferring an ought from fact. However, as mentioned above, ethics is intended to form reality. If this wasn’t true, humans should be permitted killing each other according to their natural abilities, since it happens in nature. Law, culture, obedience to rules and self commitment would be mere intellectual occupation with no practical value. Furthermore, there had to be a scientific committee available whenever decisions concerning environmental issues should be made. Bearing in mind the need for stability, independency, efficiency and simplicity for an ethics concerning the environment, we have to reject consequentialism. In my belief, environmental ethics should be a deontological example.

Deontology applies intrinsic value not to the consequence of an ethical decision, but to the rule according to which the decision is formed. In philosophical terms we could call that an a priori approach, while consequentialism uses an a posteriori one. Deontology holds some rules of intrinsic value, with which the acts of moral agents should comply. For instance, murder is always denounced, whether produces benefits or not. Reverence for life is always a value possessor, whether the life of the specific individual is good or evil. These are clear rules, easy for people to understand, stable over time, already proven sufficient in forming an ethics which hitherto sustained occidental civilization. The question is whether deontology is applicable to environmental ethics or a paradigm shift should be needed. If deontology is such a sufficient approach, then why has it hitherto failed in forming an ethics capable of preventing the obvious and omnipresent exploitation and destruction of the environment?

The problem lies in distinguishing a priori values in nature, such as life, sentience, self identity, consciousness or soul.¹¹ Deontology, due to its inner structure, is unable to function without attributing a priori values as such. That is because individuals or beings are not to be ethically respected as such, but only as possessors of specific values. As

11. Vlastos G., “Justice and Equality” in *Equality: Selected Readings*, L. Pojman & R. Westmoreland (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997:120-133.

for people and higher animals, it is quite easy to establish an appropriate reverence of their existence, for they possess the majority of the pre mentioned attributes. However, when it comes to rocks or brooks, insects or serpents, viruses or bacteria and, most of all, ecosystems, it is very difficult to deontology to stand its grounds. For it would be preposterous to attribute life or sentience to rocks, self identity to viruses, soul to ecosystems and consciousness to termites. Every effort aiming to apply such attributes to non-sentient life is destined to end up in bizarre argumentation. So, what will it be? To use Bentham's phraseology, should we leave non sentient natural existence without redress to its possible tormentors? I suppose not even one of us should like that.

The main principles of occidental ethical deontology are reverence of life, respect of ones autonomy and dignity, abstention of acts who endanger other people's interests and well being. Any act complying with these principles is ethically valued, while all opposite disvalued. But what do we really mean when we state that someone or something is alive? Of course that it exists, but not only that. For a rock exists as well, but is not alive at all. Life is far more than that, it includes conscience, self identity, sentience etc. Sometimes life is independent from existence, since one can reasonably argue that a beloved person who recently passed away lives in his memory or that Plato is alive through his philosophy, though both obviously do not exist. But one may be heavily insulted if another speaks ill of his passed away beloved person, meaning that it is life itself we revere and not existence. It would be life in any form that has intrinsic value, whether actual or not, whether existing or absent. Autonomy, on the other hand, is intrinsically valued in fact as well as an idea. One that argues in favour of slavery is equally to blame as one who practices slavery. Rules and principles are not actual beings, just ideas; therefore they are applicable to both ideas and existing entities. This reasoning seems stable enough as far as it goes unchallenged. For instance, do we have to respect only living beings, whether they exist or not? When it comes to a dead body, we only can admit that it just exists, but it is not alive. Yet principle indicates that it must be treated with respect. As a matter of fact, people often consider it a major crime to offend a dead body than to mistreat a living person. If one hits another he is

said to be quick tempered or lacking manners, but when a corpse is being kicked we call the perpetrator malicious and evil. The same applies to a person in permanent vegetative state. Though apparently he lacks life, sentience, self identity, prospect or any other property we usually attach to life, it is strictly prohibited to be treated in a bad way even in the absence of those who might be dissatisfied by such a treatment. In these cases, it is mere existence that we are ethically obliged to revere.

Life is just one form of existence. There are many forms of life, and much more ways of existing. A living person is the possessor of both life and existence, and we ought to respect him. A dead person is only existing, but we ought to show him due respect as well. In fact, we can face life only as a subset of the total, which is existence. Further more, when we talk about dignity or autonomy, we are obviously referring to a form of existence. People fight and die for such ideas, so they obviously exist for they have the power to influence and manipulate. The same applies to sentience or self consciousness. They are not ways of living but ways of existing. A person who lacks self consciousness is alive as one who does not, but they exist in different ways. It is that fact, that they exist, that we have the duty to respect. If it is existence in some of its forms that we respect, then it should be proven why we shouldn't we do the same in all other ones. Why should we respect a dead body but not a valley or a non sentient organism? One might argue that it is justified on account of each ones past history. A dead person has a personal history while a forest has not. Yet, a dead person is to be transformed into a valley, and, anyway, in his present situation he exists the same way as any natural being does, being used by nature for nutrition purposes as any decaying debris is. Further more, if what we call personal history is just a succession of acts and achievements, I suppose that even a termite could be recognized some. Is it because he formerly was the possessor of an immortal soul? One who argues that way is about to embrace theology, therefore he is not reasoning in safe ethical grounds. Many religions hold that natural beings possess an immortal soul but that, as well, is not philosophy. We are in need to prove on a philosophical basis that a human corpse differs essentially from a tree trunk in the way they both exist. I think that nothing can be even slightly convincing on that. One might also

argue that respect of a being is due to his human nature. That means we have the duty to respect existence only in its human form. That argument as well can not stand the challenge. Why only in its human form? Is it because of life? Life is proven to be an weak excuse. Is it due to sentience? Sentience has been proven likewise. Is it because of its formation? But then we would have no moral duties to deformed war victims, whether living or not. Is it because of the immortal soul? Even if we accept the hazard of trespassing theology's terrain, we would be embarrassed by the vulgarity of the argument: we ought to revere a person due to something we have never seen, having properties which we arbitrarily recognize and which once were, but are not anymore. Frankly, I would be very thankful to be shown a reason why we should count human existence in all its forms differently to every other natural existence. Humans are just a noble contribution to the variety of existence on earth.

Therefore, when we argue on moral agents' duty to respect life, in fact we are referring to the ethical merit of existence. Using that term we could only be referring to existence in every form, from sentient to insentient life, from organic nature to lifeless matter. Reverence for existence in its every form is a safe ground for the foundation of environmental ethics. In my opinion, no peculiar reasoning or paradigm shift is needed in order to achieve an ethics capable of sustaining preservation of integrity, stability and beauty of the environment. We could just be driven to an adequate ethics by analyticity, reasoning in an inductive and stable way. In any case, we shall keep in mind the principal purpose: the formation of ethics comprehensive, stable, solid, prescriptive enough, far from unnecessary novelty or unwanted revolutionary tendencies, one which could easily be adopted by mankind and which could lead to the reverence of the environment and the preservation of biodiversity on earth. In my opinion, such an ethics could be based on the deontological principle of reverence for existence, which appears to be a powerful ethical imperative.

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