

# Anthropocentrism and Eco-centrism: On the Metaphysical Debate in Environmental Ethics\*

Koshy Tharakan, Geevarghese Iype V & A.V. Afonso

*“What is metaphysics?” The question awakens expectations of a discussion about metaphysics. This we will forgo. Instead we will take up a particular metaphysical question. In this way it seems we will let ourselves be transposed directly into metaphysics. Only in this way will we provide metaphysics the proper occasion to introduce itself.*

Martin Heidegger

*Metaphysics begins from the moment when, ceasing to live in the evidence of the object—whether it is the sensory object or the object of science—we apperceive the radical subjectivity of all our experience as inseparable from its truth value. It means two things to say that our experience is our own: both that it is not the measure of all imaginable being in itself and that it is nonetheless co-extensive with all being of which we can form a notion. This double sense of the cogito is the basic fact of metaphysics...*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

## 1. Introduction

Environmental Ethics is concerned with the values attached to the natural world. It deliberates on the appropriate ethical stance to be adopted by humans in order to protect or promote these values. The very possibility of

Revised version of a paper presented by the first author at the ICPR sponsored National Seminar on “Current Debates in Metaphysics” organized by IIT Bombay during February 16-18, 2007. The author thanks all the participants in the seminar as well as the anonymous referee of this Journal whose comments helped in revising the paper.

environmental ethics as an autonomous discipline is a matter of debate in contemporary writings on environmental philosophy. Of course, this debate presupposes many a metaphysical view about both "Man" and "Nature" besides meta-ethical questions regarding moral valuations on Nature. Most of the participants in the debate agree that environmental ethics would be possible only when man grants moral standing, besides humans, to all living entities other than humans. However, this raises a further problem of addressing the claims and counter claims that emanate from the conflicts of interests of the differing moral entities.<sup>1</sup> From the metaphysical perspective of the relation between Man and Nature, there are two seemingly contrary moral positions namely, 'eco-centrism' and 'anthropocentrism'; and as the quote from Merleau-Ponty mentioned above points out, both these positions implicate the 'cogito' in a double sense and accordingly would be part of metaphysics.<sup>2</sup>

Metaphysics, as Heidegger points out, is an "...inquiry beyond or over beings which aims to recover them as such and such as a whole for our grasp."<sup>3</sup> In what follows, we aim at understanding our own relationship with Nature, that too in its unity and entirety. Such an understanding, we believe, is metaphysical in the Heideggerian sense as it goes beyond the mere discussion *on* beings: whether "human" or "non-human" to bring back the relation among beings in their proper perspective—a "metaphysical" one at that. Accordingly, the paper begins with a discussion of 'deep ecology' in order to lay bare the metaphysical dimension of 'eco-centrism' to which deep ecology belongs. However, as many environmentalists point out, deep ecology often run into conflict with "human rights" and engenders the debate on "saving nature versus feeding people". Thus, the next section of the paper takes up the 'anthropocentric' perspective for critical scrutiny.

Unlike the older version of 'anthropocentrism', where 'man' is regarded as the only source of value, modern anthropocentrism recognizes that the very survival of the humans necessitate a holistic perspective of nature that rejects the instrumental attitude that he/she hitherto adopted towards nature. Thus, the concluding section makes a case for "sustainability" as the goal

1. VanDe Veer, Donald and Pierce, Christine (ed.): *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book*, p.37.
2. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Sense and Non-Sense*, p. 93.
3. Heidegger, Martin: 'What is Metaphysics?' in David Farrell Krell (ed.): *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, p.109.

of environmentalism by shifting the axis of the debate from 'eco-centrism vs. anthropocentrism' to 'strong anthropocentrism vs. weak anthropocentrism'.

## 2. Eco-centrism: Relevance of Deep Ecology

All environmental ethical thinkers agree upon 'nature' as having 'value' which makes it worthy of moral consideration. Moreover, in order to sustain human community, it is necessary to take into account our concern towards Nature which thereby brings into the fore the domain of values. The question of value may be raised in terms of an instrumental concern or as intrinsic to the object. Deep Ecology believes that all living and non-living things have values in themselves, that is to say that it acknowledges the intrinsic value of Nature. Intrinsic value can be explained as value that the object of valuation has on its own accord rather than one that it inherits from the usefulness to the subject of valuation. Deep Ecology is thus a branch of Eco-philosophy that has been taking a more holistic view towards nature. It recognizes that humans are one among many other species that have developed in this global eco-system. Arne Naess emphasizes the intrinsic value of each living being. He explains that all entities have intrinsic value and we have an obligation in respecting the inherent value of beings in pursuing our interest. We are not supposed to diminish the potentiality of other entities. Though man has exceptional characteristics such as culture, communication skills, and so on, the other entities should also be treated on par with their sentience, the ability to feel pain or even the poetic properties of existence.

John O'Neill projects the importance of 'intrinsic value' in understanding our obligations towards other beings when he says, "Intrinsic goods are goods that other goods are good for the sake of. It is a well rehearsed point that, under pain of an infinite regress, not everything can have only instrumental value."<sup>4</sup> Here, O'Neill mentions three varieties of intrinsic value with regard to Deep Ecology, which are often glossed over by many thinkers. First, as a synonym for non-instrumental value, secondly as to the value an object has solely in virtue of its intrinsic properties, and finally as a

4. O'Neill, John: "The Varieties of Intrinsic Value" in Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (ed.): *Environmental Ethics*, p. 131.
5. Objective value here refers to the value an object possesses independently of the values that are ascribed by the valuers.

synonym for objective value.<sup>5</sup> One who advocates an environmental ethics with the support of intrinsic values usually employs the first sense of intrinsic value that O'Neill discusses. However, O'Neill points out that in order to defend an environmental ethics based on intrinsic values one may have to commit to the other two senses of the notion of intrinsic value. He takes up the notion of intrinsic value as one that depends solely on the non-relational properties of the object of valuation for further scrutiny. Non-relational properties of an object are actually characterized as the intrinsic properties of that object. O'Neill interprets the term non-relational properties in two senses, a weak and a strong sense. To quote O'Neill:

(i) The non-relational properties of an object are those that persist regardless of the existence or non-existence of other objects (weak interpretation)

(ii) The non-relational properties of an object are those that can be characterized without reference to other object (strong interpretation).<sup>6</sup>

If we take intrinsic value in any of the senses of the two interpretations given above, we will end up with a problematic conception of environmental ethics. As O'Neill shows 'rarity' is a property that is relational, as it cannot be characterized without reference to other objects. Thus, the existence of a species as a 'rare' one obviously depends on the 'abundance' of other species. Now, going by the above interpretation of intrinsic value, the 'rare' species does not qualify to be considered in an environmental ethics that is founded on the notion of intrinsic value. However, we very well know that 'rarity' confers a special value to the objects and the preservation of such rare species is of utmost concern for a practicing environmentalist. O'Neill says that this absurdity is the result of the equivocation we commit with regard to the term 'intrinsic value'. This can be stated without absurdity if we distinguish between the two kinds of 'relatedness' regarding values:

(1) values objects can have in virtue of their relations to other objects;  
and

(2) values objects can have in virtue of their relations to human beings.<sup>7</sup>

Now, we should note here that the values mentioned in the second set is

6. O'Neill, John, *Op.cit.*, p. 134.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

not the same as values that are so solely in virtue of being instrumental for human satisfaction. In other words, something may have value by virtue of its relation to human beings, yet it need not be only of instrumental value for humans.

Aldo Leopold incorporates intrinsic value in the organic world and thus brings in the notion of relatedness with regard to the intrinsic value. He conceives the land and its functions in a broader perspective. Leopold observes:

“Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals. Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy upward; death and decay return it to the soil. The circuit is not closed; some energy is dissipated in decay, some is added by absorption from the air, some is stored in soils, peats and long-lived forests; but it is a sustained circuit, like a slowly augmented revolving fund of life... The velocity and character of the upward flow of energy depend on the complex structure of the plant and animal community, much as the upward flow of sap in a tree depends on its complex cellular organization. Without this complexity, normal circulation would presumably not occur.”<sup>8</sup>

Leopold's concept of “land ethics” thus originates from his understanding of land and other forms of life as interrelated. It is this very same notion of interrelatedness that characterizes the metaphysics of Deep Ecology.

Arne Naess' distinction between Deep and Shallow ecology was so seminal that in a way the subsequent debates in environmental ethics move around Naess's work. According to him, shallow ecology views humans and their environment as separate entities. It institutes a Dualism between man and Nature. Nature seems to be the other of man and has only an instrumental value, man being the center of value. Deep Ecology on the other hand projects “the relational or total-field” image of the environment and man. It rejects the image that dualistic metaphysics imposes, namely “human-in-environment.”<sup>9</sup> The intuition of Deep Ecology that everything is interrelated can be seen at work in the metaphysics of ancient cultures, which revered Nature. All entities somehow have a role in making the environment as ‘Valuable’. Humans, animals, other species of organisms,

8. Leopold, Aldo: *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, p. 216.

9. Naess, Arne: “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary.” *Inquiry*, Vol. 16, 1973, p.95.

and eco-systems guide each other in exploring values. According to Deep Ecology, organisms are best viewed as 'knots' in the biosphere net or field of intrinsic relations. Deep Ecology thus views humans as just one constituency among others in the biotic community. It replaces the mechanistic materialism with a better 'code of reading nature'. This code may be described as one of 'Unity in processes'. By this it means both the idea that all 'things' are fundamentally, that is, internally related and the idea that these interrelationships are in constant flux. In stressing the interconnection between ethics and metaphysics, deep ecology recognizes that an ecologically effective ethics can only arise within the context of a more persuasive and more enchanting cosmology than that of mechanistic materialism. Deep ecology is concerned with address existing social, political and economic arrangements and to replace the ideology of economic growth with the ideology of ecological sustainability.

Warwick Fox interprets the central intuition of deep ecology with reference to Buddhist visionaries and TAOIST physics. According to him, the Shallow/Deep ecology distinction is one that is not so simple and easily characterized as it appears. However, for the sake of argument, Fox characterizes shallow ecology in the following way. Firstly, shallow ecology views humans as separate from their environment. Shallow ecology thus views humans as the source of all value and ascribes only instrumental value to the non-human world. This then is akin to Anthropocentrism, which says, "We ought to preserve the environment not for its own sake but because of its value to us." Secondly, shallow ecology views humans as the source or ground of all value, man as the measure of all things. Finally, shallow ecology tends to accept the social, political and economic projects of mechanistic materialism, which has become the characteristics of industrial and developing societies.<sup>10</sup>

The relevance of Deep Ecology can be seen from the fact that nature cannot be understood purely in mechanistic terms. Deep Ecology is more concerned than other approaches with the understanding of nature as a living organism. Merleau-Ponty's notion of Ontology is here relevant to understand the basic presupposition of the philosophy of Deep Ecology. According to Merleau-Ponty the self and non-self, human and non-human

10. Cf. Fox, Warwick: "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of Our Time?" In Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (ed.) *Environmental Ethics*, p.253.
11. Langer, Monika: "Merleau Ponty and Deep Ecology", in Galen A Johnson and Michael B. Smith (ed.): *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau Ponty*, p. 115.

intertwine in a mutual unfolding.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the comprehension of other, including non-human nature itself becomes a relation of 'embrace' with the other. Ontology and alterity, thus understood, put us well on the way to resolving the environmental crisis.

This new ontology, which is a break from the Cartesian dualism that conceives nature as a lifeless machine calls for an inquiry that is holistic and transdisciplinary and directs itself to the pre-personal, personal and transpersonal levels of experience. It involves an inherently ongoing "dialogue with nature." On the other hand, Cartesian dualistic ontology encourages Science to manipulate nature. Its fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object, as though it meant nothing to us. Having lost any feeling for the opaqueness of the world, scientific thinking "has become a sort of absolute artificialism, which threatens to precipitate a sleep or a nightmare, from which there is no awakening."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Deep ecologists need not ask for the abolishment of science, but of "understanding its meaning and scope, revealing its implicit ontology and questioning its pretension to absoluteness. Science separates vision and the visible, between thought and being and leaves us with 'mutilated fragments' of reality."<sup>13</sup>

Understood from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, Deep Ecology asks us to situate ourselves within the being we are dealing with, instead of looking at it from the outside. Thus, Deep Ecology aims to understand the relations of consciousness and nature. It calls for a fundamentally different conception of nature, consciousness and understanding itself. It would consider the physical, vital and mental to be three significations or three forms of unity. For Deep Ecology, it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or other forms of reality start there. The ontology of 'Deep Ecology' shows that organism's behaviour manifests 'intrinsic value' and meaning. The ontology of deep ecology enables us to see more clearly, the absence of dichotomy between nature and culture. Matter, life and mind are philosophical instruments to understand 'ontological intrinsic value' of beings. It brings to the fore the relevance of intrinsic value in all organic beings, processes and systems. The explanations that conceive the relevance and consequences of Deep Ecology perceived truly that human life should be in accordance with the harmony of nature.

12. *Ibid*, pp.120-121.

13. *Ibid*, p.121.

### 3. Anthropocentrism: The Return of the Prodigal Son

There are environmentalists who feel that the emphasis on wilderness preservation as well as preserving biotic diversity to the detriment of human needs by Deep Ecologists is problematical. Thus, Guha opines that uncompromising commitment to deep ecology leads to the deprivation of the poor and is incapable of addressing the pressing environmental crises of the Third World.<sup>14</sup> It tends to benefit the rich and encourages imperialistic outlook of Western conservationists. According to Bookchin, hierarchy and domination are the sources of all socio-political aberrations, including environmental degradation. Thus, Bookchin questions the wisdom of those, for example the Deep Ecologists, who see the domination of some people by others as a consequence rather than a cause of environmental exploitation. He criticizes the deep ecologists for what he calls their 'misanthropy', that is the view that humanity is essentially an "ugly anthropocentric" thing, a "malignant product" of evolution, which overpopulates the world and devours its resources, destroys its wildlife and the biosphere.<sup>15</sup>

Anthropocentrism in environmental philosophy accords only an instrumental value to nature and non-human beings. It assumes humans as qualitatively different from non-human beings. Anthropocentrism, following Naess' distinction may be termed 'Shallow Ecology'. It considers the values of nature to be instrumental to humans. Even though there is the acceptance of certain rights of non-human beings, it is strictly secondary to human world. Anthropocentric Environmental Ethics or shallow ecology emphasizes the relationship between individuals and is said to be atomistic. Immanuel Kant may be considered as one who clearly argued for this form of anthropocentrism in olden days. According to Kant only rational beings deserve moral consideration.<sup>16</sup> He believed that rationality has intrinsic value and hence worth seeking in itself as far as any rational being is concerned. Morally correct behaviour for rational beings is to help each other thereby contributing to their common goal of realizing a rational world. If rational

14. Guha, Ramachandra: 'Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique.' in Richard G. Botzler and Susan J. Armstrong (ed.): *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*, p. 296.
15. Bookchin, Murray: 'Social Ecology Versus "Deep" Ecology', *Green Perspectives: Newsletter of the Green Program Project*, Vol. 4/5(Double Issue), Summer 1987, pp.1-23. Cited in Peter Hay: *A Companion to Environmental Thought*, p.66.
16. Kant, Immanuel: 'Duties to Animals' in Richard G. Botzler and Susan J. Armstrong (ed.): *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*, p. 312.

beings bring harm to each other for personal gains, the attainment of a rational world would never be realized. Kant believed that only rational beings contribute directly to achieve the intrinsic good of the rational world. Since non-rational beings do not contribute directly to the making of the rational world, the way they are treated by rational beings does not matter for the attainment of the rational world. Hence, according to Kant it is quite justifiable to use non-rational beings as a means to the end of realizing the rational world.

An economic understanding of man's behaviour as portrayed in conventional economics points out that both consumers and producers wish to maximize their satisfaction from a transaction. Consumers want some form of contentment from the purchase and the producers want to make a profit from it. Conventional economics assumes that both the consumers and the producers are in possession of perfect information about the state of market and of sources of alternatives and that, the supplier does not have a monopoly of the product. This assumption thus has given to a tendency to construct highly rationalist models in economic theory, which does not always fit well with the world of reality. This then prompted the idea of 'conservation' within environmental discourse as well as a whole branch of economics known as environmental economics.

The conservation movement had scientific backing. Some of the pioneers of conservationism such as Gifford Pinchot had a scientific training. The emphasis of conservation movement was on wise management of natural resources. Pinchot observes:

“The first great fact about conservation is that it stands for development. There has been a fundamental misconception that conservation means nothing but the husbanding of resources for future generations. There could be no more serious mistake. Conservation does mean provision for the future, but it means also and first of all the recognition of the right of the present generation to the fullest necessary use of all the resources with which this country is abundantly blessed. Conservation demands the welfare of this generation first, and afterward the welfare of the generations to follow. The first principle of conservation is development, the use of the natural resources now existing on this continent for the benefit of the people who live here now.”<sup>17</sup>

17. Quoted in Donald VanDeVeer and Christine Pierce (ed.): *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book*, p. 175.

Pinchot always emphasized that the object of conservation is not to preserve the forests because they are beautiful or they shelter wild animals but to better human standard of living.

If 'conservationism' owes a great deal to science, the normative aspects of arts and aesthetics inspired the 'preservationist' paradigm in environmental ethics. Thus, John Muir, a contemporary of Pinchot argued for preservation of the wilderness for aesthetic and spiritual reasons. For Muir nature provides spiritual as well as aesthetic experience. Muir says:

"Watch the sunbeams over the forest awakening the flowers, feeding them every one, warming, reviving the myriads of the air, setting countless wings in motion—making diamonds of dew drops, lakes, painting the spray of falls in rainbow colors. Enjoy the great night like a day, hinting the eternal and imperishable in nature amid the transient and material."<sup>18</sup>

The point to be noted here is that though Muir's 'Preservationism' clashes with Pinchot's 'Conservationism'<sup>19</sup> both are anthropocentric, for one argues for the conservation of nature from economic resource perspective with the goal of betterment of human life, the other argues for the preservation of nature for the satisfaction of certain peak experiences of humans.

Anthropocentrism is thus intended as a means to an end, which we may call as sustainable economic system in the case of conservationism and spiritual and aesthetic joy in the case of preservationism. As Murdy points out humankind is to be valued more highly than other things in nature by humans. It is proper for men to be anthropocentric and for spiders to be arachnocentric.<sup>20</sup> This goes for all other living species. Thus, Simpson argues that:

18. Muir, John: *To Yosemite and Beyond, Writings from the Years 1863-1875*, Quoted in Donald VanDeVeer and Christine Pierce (ed.), *Op.Cit.*, p. 175.
19. A concrete case where the two paradigms came into conflict may be seen in the controversy over the Hetch Hetchy Valley in California. The preservationists led by Muir fought for the preservation of the Hetch Hetchy Valley when the city of San Francisco wanted to set up a dam in the area. Pinchot and other conservationists supported the move of the city administrators as according to them the dam would resolve the problem of water supply faced by the people.
20. Murdy, William H.: 'Anthropocentrism a Modern Version' in Richard G. Botzler and Susan J. Armstrong (ed.): *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*, pp. 316-317.

“Man is the highest animal. The fact that he alone is capable of making such judgement is in itself part of the evidence that this decision is correct. And even if he were the lowest animal, the anthropocentric point of view would still be manifestly the only proper one to adopt for consideration of his place in the scheme of things and when seeking a guide on which to base his actions and his evaluations of them.”<sup>21</sup>

Darwin’s account of natural selection confirms the above view. As Darwin points out species exists as ends in themselves. If it is so, then it is only natural for man to behave in a manner that is conducive to his own survival. In other words, man has the freedom to exploit nature for his proper ends. Thus, Murdy argues that Lynn White’s criticism of anthropocentrism is not justified, though he was right in reminding us how sadly short sighted we were in our mindless exploitation of nature. We may note here that the problem lies in selecting the ‘proper ends’. We find it difficult to decide which end as progressive and thus needs to be promoted and which end as retrogressive and hence to be discarded.

The dualistic approach in Anthropocentrism eschews the fundamental equality of all life forms. The critics of anthropocentrism affirm that all species have equal rights. This however is a problematic notion as it becomes necessary for us to destroy pathogenic bacteria; unless we do that, our own existence is under peril. Of course this does not sanction the wanton destruction of all life forms simply because they serve no useful purpose to man. Anthropocentric point of view ascribes value to things of nature as they benefit man. This is clearly an instrumentalist notion of value. Nevertheless, as recent developments in ecological sciences reveal our dependent relationships with nature makes it imperative to value a variety of things in nature. Thus, anthropocentrism now recognizes that an individual’s well-being is dependent on the well-being of the ecological support system as a whole. Murdy points out:

“Continued growth of knowledge may lead to an awareness that no event in nature is without some effect on the whole of which we are a part and therefore we should value all items in nature.”<sup>22</sup>

21. Simpson, G.G.: *The Meaning of Evolution*, p.286. Quoted in William H. Murdy, *Op.Cit*, p.316.

22. Murdy, William H.: *Op.Cit*, p. 317.

Thus, the modern view of anthropocentrism in environmental ethics holds that our anthropocentric attitude towards nature does not require that man be the source of all value; nor does it exclude a belief that things of nature have intrinsic value. Rather what it emphasizes is that though all species have intrinsic value, humans should behave in a manner that enables his/her survival than the survival of any other species. Moreover, anthropocentrism argues that humans are better judges as to what course of action to be taken keeping in view the entire ecological support system. According to anthropocentrism this is inevitable as humans are the only species the evolutionary process has ever produced that has culture and the requisite knowledge to shape the nature in any significant way that takes into account the ecological balance as a whole. The fact that we collectively failed in carrying out this task is no argument to deny the preeminent role humans have in the course of nature. As Murdy contends:

“The ‘ecological crisis’ is basically a crisis in human evolution. Modern man stands at a crossroads. Continued geometric growth in human numbers, consumption of resources, and pollution of environments will propel mankind down a road of diminished options. ....It is anthropocentric to value the factors that make us uniquely human, to seek to preserve and enhance such factors and to counter antihuman forces which threaten to diminish or destroy them. Nature outside of man will not act to preserve human values: it is our responsibility alone.”<sup>23</sup>

When we assert the survival of our own species, the intrinsic value of other non-human beings may be neglected. However, we may better remind us of what Teilhard\*de Chardin says about the future of man. Though man is not the measure of all things and not the source of all value, he is “the present crest of the evolutionary wave.”<sup>24</sup> This comes with a responsibility for man to live up to the exalted status he has in nature. It calls upon us to strive for a comprehensive understanding of our relationships to the larger environment of which we are a part. This has to be achieved without relegating the human reality in any manner. As Murdy argues:

“Effective participation in our own evolution requires not only that we establish a harmonious relationship to larger wholes, but in addition that we

23. Murdy, William H.: *Op.Cit.*, p. 321.

24. de Chardin, Teilhard: *The Future of Man*, p. 237. Quoted in William H. Murdy: *Op.Cit.*, p. 322.

affirm the human phenomenon to be a vitally significant process in its own right and our individual selves to be holistic centers.”<sup>25</sup>

Midgley offers a critical account of man being central to the cosmos. The Enlightenment world-view had placed man at the center of the universe. However, the subsequent developments in our scientific understanding as well as the progressive ideals that inform a democratic form of governance have eroded the certainty with which we had placed ourselves at the center of the cosmos. Of course, there still is the view that we are the center as it is our own lives, and our own species that provide the natural focus on the universe. Thus, Midgley agrees that the perspective from which we see things is bound to be our own and in that sense, we still are the center of the universe. Each one of us is at the relative center of a particular life. Thus, we may have no other choice but to be interested in ourselves and those around us. Bishop Butler notes that unless we have not enough self-love we cannot love others. However, as Butler points out:

“The trouble with human beings is not really that they love themselves too much; they ought to love themselves more. The trouble is simply that they don’t love others enough.”<sup>26</sup>

When we turn from self-centered individualism to species politics, things get more complicated. Here people tend to see themselves as placed at the objective center of everything and not just the perspectival subjective center of a particular life. Enlightenment view of Kant gives us such an objective view of us being the center of everything. Kant says:

“As the single being upon earth that possesses understanding, man is certainly titular lord of nature and, supposing we regard nature as a teleological system, he is born to be its ultimate end.”<sup>27</sup>

Midgley draws our attention to the three themes that Kant states here, namely the claim to dominance, the emphasis on intellect as its ground, and the reference to cosmic teleology. Thus, the Enlightenment rationality construes humans at the center of the cosmos. It is this notion of

25. Murdy, William H.: Op. Cit, p. 322.

26. Butler, Joseph: *Butler's Sermons*. Cited in Midgley, Mary: 'The End of Anthropocentrism?' in Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey (ed.): *Philosophy and Natural Environment*, p.103.

27. Quoted in Midgley, Mary: Op.Cit, p.104.

preeminence of man that led him to exploit the nature and subjugate all other forms of being.

#### 4. Conclusion.

The recent developments in science have eroded the kind of confidence that the 'enlightenment rationality' instilled in us with regard to our own place in the whole of nature. Our conception of the universe has now changed and accordingly we have now realized that man is not the center of the cosmos. In fact, the very talk of being at the center has become problematical. As Midgley points out we now accept that the universe is much larger and much less neatly organized that literally speaking the very idea of it having a center does not make any sense. Ecology tells us that unless we heed the guiding principles of nature, rather than distorting it to suit our conveniences, we must be heralding a catastrophe that would wipe out the present life forms including us. Thus, Midgley notes:

"The teleological assumptions that seemed to hold the symbolic core of 'anthropocentrism' in place are themselves no longer deemed scientific. The idea of a central cosmic purpose is as foreign to modern science as the idea of a central location is. The word 'anthropocentric' itself seems to have been invented to make just this point. Thus the *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes Haeckel... writing in 1876 of 'the anthropocentric error, that man is the premeditated aim of the creation of the earth.'<sup>28</sup>

The kind of anthropocentrism that would always privilege human interests above those of other life forms is no longer defensible, given our current ecological understanding. This does not, however mean that anthropocentrism is no longer valid. On the contrary as pointed out by Butler, we need to show concern for ourselves, our own species, which alone would prepare us to recognize the value of other beings. This anthropocentric concern would now make us realize that to save human beings, we need to save the entire biosphere from wanton destruction and exploitation. Thus, we now have the task of reinterpreting anthropocentrism itself and an attempt in that direction is offered by Brian Norton.

Norton points out that many consider the possibility of environmental ethics as a distinctive form of inquiry, distinct from traditional ethics, is

28. Quoted in Midgley, Mary: Op.Cit, p.107.

conditional on the rejection of anthropocentrism. That is, the distinctiveness of environmental ethics is thought to be based upon principles that attribute intrinsic value to nature, independent of human value. Consequently, it is argued that one has to reject anthropocentrism that treat humans as the only loci of intrinsic value. However, Norton calls into question the equivalence by arguing that the usual debate between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism is of far less importance than is usually held. Thus, Norton argues that non-anthropocentrism is not the only adequate basis for a genuine environmental ethics.

According to Norton, environmental ethics cannot be derived from either rights or interests of non-humans or from rights or interests of future generations of humans.<sup>29</sup> He distinguishes between two forms of anthropocentrism, namely strong anthropocentrism and weak anthropocentrism. Our failure to distinguish between these two forms had in fact resulted in the privileging of non-anthropocentrism in environmental ethical discourse. According to Norton:

“A value theory is *strongly anthropocentric* if all value countenanced by it is explained by reference to satisfactions of felt preferences of human individuals. A value theory is *weakly anthropocentric* if all value countenanced by it is explained by reference to satisfaction of some felt preference of a human individual or by reference to its bearing upon the ideals which exist as elements in a world view essential to determinations of considered preferences.”<sup>30</sup>

In strong anthropocentrism there exists no means to criticize the exploitative attitude of individuals who consider nature merely as a resource of raw materials to be used for human preferences and needs. Weak anthropocentrism takes our felt preferences as either rational or irrational; and is thus capable of criticizing the exploitative attitudes of humans. Weak anthropocentrism as Norton points out has the potential to address the environmental issues in an authentic manner. Weak anthropocentrism values nature and nonhuman entities for more than their use in satisfying unreflective human desires and needs. Rather it values them for enriching

29. Norton, Brian G: 'Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism' in Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (ed.), *Environmental Ethics*, p.163.

30. Ibid. p.165. A felt preference is a desire or need of an individual prompting him to act in accordance with the same without any rational assessment of the desire. In contrast, a considered preference is a desire or need that one expresses after careful deliberation.

human nature—a lesson we learn from the homecoming of the one who had gone astray. The realization that the very existence of humans depend on the proper balance between ‘man and nature’ is what gave rise to the ideal of ‘sustainable development’ in our times.

### References:

1. Attfield, Robin and Belsey, Andrew (ed.): 1993, *Philosophy and Natural Environment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
2. Attfield, Robin: 1994, *Environmental Philosophy: Principles and Prospects*, Avebury, Ashgate Publishers.
3. Botzler, Richard G and Armstrong, Susan J. (ed.): 1998, *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*, Boston, Mac Graw hill.
4. DeMarco, Joseph P et al. (ed.): 1986, *New Directions in Ethics: The Challenge of Applied Ethics*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
5. Hay, Peter: 2002, *A Companion to Environmental Thought*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
6. Johnson, Galen A and Smith, Michael B (ed.): 1990, *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
7. Krell, David Farrell (ed.): 1978, *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
8. Leopold, Aldo: 1989, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, Oxford, Oxford University Press
9. Light, Andrew and Rolston III, Holmes (ed.): 2003, *Environmental Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers.
10. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: 1964, *Sense and Non-Sense*, (tr.) Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
11. Taylor, Paul W: 1986, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
12. VanDe Veer, Donald and Pierce, Christine (ed.): 2003, *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book*, Australia, Thomson Wadsworth.