

Standard VI

Action Research Project

Topic for 2022–2023

Environmental Ethics Today

Some Observations

- *Tree-trimming in a housing society happened before the rainy season. Bird nests of Myna and Bulbul fell apart and their young ones were eaten by crows. A man worshipping at an adjacent temple noticed the chicks' cries; but remained silent and didn't care to save the chicks.*
- *Stray cats and dogs dwelling in the housing societies were relocated to public places like fish markets, temples, public grounds, etc., and again relocated to dumping grounds (like Uttan near Thane) to let them starve and die.*
- *Forest fires causing death of many virgin trees, plants, birds, and animals.*
- *Release of oil waste in various waterbodies killing thousands of aquatic species.*

Have you observed other such cases of environment crisis? Is it right? Can this be avoided? Why should this be avoided? We see no ethics, morals, awareness, rules and regulations, or punishment about it! All this needs to stop at some point!

The environmental crisis is an outward expression of the crisis of mind and spirit. It all depends on how we think and act. Excess civilization without environmental ethics leads to the destruction of nature and ultimately, the survival of humans. It is essential that we do our part to keep the environment protected and free from harm.

We can achieve it by implementing environmental ethics, laws, rules and regulations, following simplicity philosophy and maintaining sustainability.

Preface

The aim of the topic 'Environmental Ethics Today' is to study the current facts, issues, theories and methods to help understand and solve environmental problems, sustain ecological systems, make human communities better and protect important resources for the present and future.

The purpose of this topic is to reinforce that humans are not the only living species on earth to derive all the benefits from nature; but are only a part of nature like all other plants and animals. Instead of valuing nature only for its usefulness to humans, it is more important to recognize that nature has an inherent value.

Objectives

- To help students understand the environmental principles and concepts to describe the value of environment.
- Understand the essential features of ethical thinking about environment.
- Apply environmental ethics framework to assess current events.
- Encourage students to clarify their own environmental values and apply environmental ethics into everyday decision-making.
- Bring awareness about environmental ethics in the community.

Definitions

- **Ethics**, also known as moral philosophy, studies what constitutes good and bad conduct, right and wrong values.
- **Morality** and ethics loosely relate to distinguishing the difference between 'good and bad' or 'right and wrong'.

- **Philosophy**, in this context, is a set of beliefs that explains reasoning, importance of environment values, what is morally right and wrong and knowledge about why we ought to behave in a certain way.

What are Environmental Ethics?

Environmental ethics study the relation between the human and the environment. It explains how one should behave and what rules and moral values one should have to keep the environment safe and protected for present and future generations.

- Should we cut down the forests for the sake of human consumption?
- Should humans be forced to live a simpler lifestyle to preserve the resources for future generations?

Three approaches to environmental ethics:

- **Anthropocentrism** is a human-centric approach. It regards humans as superior to nature and holds the belief that nature is to serve humans only.
- **Biocentrism** maintains that all life forms are equal and deserve equal rights. As per 'Deep ecology', the natural world is a balance of all human and non-human organisms within ecosystems. All life has value, independently of its usefulness to humans. Humans have no right to reduce non-human life like plants and animals.
- **Ecocentrism** is the holistic theory according to which the whole eco-system, comprising both the living and non-living parts of nature, deserves equal rights.

The topic Environmental ethics is interdisciplinary. It influences on a large range of fields and disciplines like environmental law, environmental sociology, ecological economics, environmental geography, agriculture, business, geo-engineering, medicine, etc. There are many ethical decisions that human beings ought to make with respect to the environment.

Using Ethical Principles to Take Decisions about the Environment:

There are three main ethical principles which helps us to take decision about an environmental issue:

- Justice and Sustainability
- Sufficiency and Compassion
- Solidarity and Participation.

These principles orient us towards the difference between right and wrong action. Ethical principles can be used to evaluate conflicts and a decision-making process.

1) Environmental Justice and Sustainability:

Environmental Justice means that all living beings should be treated equally and should get equal access to the resources. This principle shows concern about animal welfare. To apply justice to an environmental decision, we should ask:

- Are all human beings involved in this situation being treated equally? If not, why not? Ex. Privileged and underprivileged, people from village and city.
- Are all living beings like human, plants, and animals involved in this situation being treated equally? If not, why not? Ex. Forest fires may prove convenient for potential industrialization, but will destruct habitat, animal and plant life.

Sustainability can be defined as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generations. We are consuming and degrading many resources today, faster than they can be naturally replenished, which means they will not be available to the future generations. To apply the principle of sustainability to an environmental decision, we should ask:

- What are the immediate and long-term effects of the problems before us? Ex. Wastage of fossil fuel today can lead to scarcity of fossil fuel in the future. Topsoil loss today can lead to inadequate topsoil for agriculture in the future.
- Who all are affected today by the problem before us and who will likely be affected by

this problem in the future? Ex. Urban sprawl today will provide houses for humans today, but will cause destruction of greenery and biodiversity in the future.

2) Sufficiency and Compassion:

Sufficiency, in this context, states that all forms of life are entitled to get enough goods to survive. This means that no one should waste or hoard resources intended to be used by all. This requires the individuals to share and live more simply. Communities should ensure that everyone has equal access to the goods they need. When we consider the needs of others, such as underprivileged individuals, we are asserting the moral principle of sufficiency. This principle helps us think about who else we need to consider and to who we owe moral duties. To apply the principle of sufficiency to an environmental decision, we should ask:

- Will the decision permit all those involved to have enough resources to live?
- Are we wasting the resources or using in excess? Are we doing proper resource management?

Compassion believes that non-human forms of life have moral significance equivalent to humans. Ultimately, the future of humans depends on the well-being of all other creatures. To apply the principle of compassion to an environmental decision, we should ask:

- What duties do we have to the other creatures which can be affected by our actions? Ex. Deforestation for human benefit leads to biodiversity loss.
- What does sufficiency mean for other creatures, especially those threatened with extinction? Have we preserved enough natural habitats for wild life?

3) Solidarity and Participation:

Solidarity invites us to consider how we treat others. We are a part of one family - our biological family, our local community, our national community, and a global community. Solidarity requires us to consider this kind of extended community, and to act in such a way that we show concern for the well-being

of others.

To apply the principle of solidarity to an environmental decision, we should ask:

- Who are the human stakeholders involved in this situation?
- Who are the non-human stakeholders like plants and animals?
- Is the ecosystem factor involved?
- Are there any stakeholders who are weak and vulnerable?

Participation is an ethical principle that requires us to recognize all the parties – both human and non-human, likely to be affected by a decision, and to recognize that all parties should have a say in how the decision is made. Genuine participation requires transparency. To apply the principle of participation to an environmental decision, we should ask:

- Do all stakeholders in this decision actually have a say in how the decision is going to be made?
- Are there any stakeholders who cannot represent themselves? Or who have little power? How will their interests be represented in the decision-making process? Ex. Voiceless animals and birds.

Modes of Ethical Reasoning about the Environment:

Whenever we consider an ethical problem, we take help of three modes:

- Command, 2) Consequences and 3) Character.
- **Command:** This refers to those things that we ought to do, no matter what the consequences. In terms of environmental ethics, the classic command is, 'Do no harm.' Animals have equal rights and therefore, justice requires that we do not harm them.
- **Consequences:** We need to think carefully about the consequences of our actions. Thus, we can determine the correct ethical action by choosing the one that will produce good consequences than bad consequences. Ex. The rights of animals can be neglected for the sake of some human monetary benefit. But the loss of animals is in form of premature death, undue pain or the loss can even be in

form of the violation of human rights of the under-privileged. An environmental action that leads to such harms would be ethically damaging with negative consequences. Working to protect the biodiversity is an example of ethical action with positive consequences.

- **Character:** Our actions towards others and the nature reflect on our character in relation to the environment. We need to become more just, more humble, more generous.

What Students Have to Do?

- Whatever subtopic you choose, stick to the main topic and look at it from an environmental ethics lens.
- Form a group of students, teachers, friends, parents, experts to complete your project.
- Select a locality around your residence, school, marketplace, native place, etc.
- Make a survey of the area, available resources and collect data.
- Identify the environmental issue/shortcoming/problem where environmental ethics are not followed. Analyse it considering each of these terms: Justice and Sustainability; Sufficiency and Compassion; Solidarity and Participation.
- Resolve the issue considering all three approaches that is Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism and Ecocentrism. The solution needs to be good for all three – humans, non-humans (plants and animals) and the ecosystem.
- Execute the plan.
- Analyse the proceedings to improve your plan.
- Bring awareness in the locality about your ethical remedial measures so that it becomes a practice.
- Write the report.

Some Examples

Example 1:

Tree-trimming in a housing society happened before the rainy season. Bird nests of Myna and Bulbul fell apart and their young

ones were eaten by crows. A man worshipping at an adjacent temple noticed the chicks' cries; but remained silent and didn't care to save the chicks.

Questions:

Why was the trimming done? How often is it done? (It is done for the benefit of humans. So, the action is anthropocentric)

- Does the tree provide habitat for other living beings? What is the breeding season of the birds on the tree? (Biocentrism needs to be applied)
- Could the trimming have been done after the breeding season of the birds? (Think of the consequences of the action)
- Can the trimming be supervised to avoid destruction of the bird nests?
- Can there be a data book to guide the type of tree, type of biodiversity and habitat it provides, better time for trimming, etc. to avoid harming the biodiversity?
- Could the nest and chicks be saved with awareness of environmental ethics? (Command required is 'do no harm')
- Why and how should we be thoughtful while dealing with nature? How to bring awareness in the community regarding the above issue so that environmental ethics are followed as a practice? (Build character by developing environment ethics)
- How to develop environmental virtues in people so that they get actively involved in conservation activities?

Example 2:

Case study of an environmental activist in your locality. This assignment provides an opportunity to apply ethical perspectives to real environmental issues, inspires one with positive examples of environmental action and activity.

Questions:

- What environmental issue(s) does the individual address?
- Which ethical perspectives appear to motivate this person's actions?

- How can one participate in the activity or start that activity at a different location?
- What is the outcome?

Example 3:

Case study of relocation of stray cats and dogs to public places or dumping grounds. Understand the interaction and conflict between various groups (for strays vs. against strays) and various ethical principles (anthropocentric, biocentric).

Questions:

- What happens next to the relocated animals? (Follow-up)
- Are they accepted by other animals and people from the relocated place?
- Do they get food, shelter and hygiene?
- Do they survive?
- What is a better way to handle this issue? (sterilization, vaccination, adoption, starting shelter homes, etc.)
- What are the laws regarding cruelty towards animals?
- How is the law enforced and what is the outcome?
- How are these situations handled at other places or cities?

Example 4:

Evaluate the role of environmental ethics in an institution in their everyday life and their approach to ethical decision-making on campus. Analysing situation and executing remedial measures regarding the following issues: pollution, waste disposal, travelling, status of underprivileged members, etc.

Additional Examples:

Issues Related to Ecosystem:

Unethical topsoil loss/absence of percolation pits/wastage and hoarding of resources/resource depletion/urban sprawl/forest fires/habitat destruction/ deforestation/pollution/oil spills, etc.

Some Malpractices about Non-human

Life Around:

- Activities disturbing the biorhythm of plants

and animals. Ex. Winding lights around trees, light and sound pollution, etc./trade of livestock, animal products/selling or nursing puppies and kittens.

- Malpractices in animal husbandry. Ex. Poultry, dairy livestock/ill-treated pets, animals like horses, camels, elephants, donkeys, etc./issue of transportation of livestock.
- Cruelty against animals. Ex. Honeybees, insects, birds, bull fights, cock fights, different customs, animal breeding, medical experimentation on animals like monkeys, etc.
- Tree-trimming ethics, plantation ethics, selecting local varieties, planting pollinator-friendly plants, preventing tree-cutting, etc.
- To bring about environment literacy, environmental value education, simplicity-philosophy, sustainability, zero waste lifestyle, civilization reforms, etc.
- Enhancing the life of underprivileged children, women, senior citizens, handicapped and mentally-challenged individuals, tribals, sick, poor, etc.
- Environmental ethics and - medical field/travelling/business/agriculture/food practices, etc.
- Ethical analysis in institutions like schools, hospitals, green building, etc.
- Case study of preservation of rare species.
- Any other subtopic related to the main topic.

References

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