

Ethical Ecosphere

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Ethical problems are problems of conflicting values. We value things, ideas, beliefs, faiths, with varying intensities. When values held with similar ardour clash, then a serious ethical problem emerges. In the arena of environmental ethics a high valuation of people competes with a rising valuation of the Home Place.

Some people associate ethics and morality with the narrow mind and manners of Mrs. Grundy, thinking of codes, rules and regulations that cramp and confine. Others equate ethics with social controls over business finagling, medical chicanery and sharp legal practices. But to disparage morality and ethics as no more than systems of prudish or protective "dos" and "don'ts" is to ignore their roots in the fundamental values that evolve at the centre of human culture. They are connected to the springs of human motivation and will change as root values change.

The urge to understand ourselves and our world merges ethics, art and religion, for all are in pursuit of the same goal: new valuations befitting new realities as they are revealed. We know, perhaps too well, the value of ourselves, and an appreciation of our own kind is strong in traditional ethics, art and religion. Can the world at least equally be valued in all three important modes?

An affirmative answer for Nature will not come simply from exhortations to change our ways. We value things and act ethically toward them when we feel their importance deeply and when, just as profoundly, we understand why they are important. An unshakable ethic for the Ecosphere will emerge when we believe in our heart and minds that our worldly environment is a reality more important than me, you and all of us. When such a conviction about Nature becomes second nature, we will know that we are parts of the ecological whole that produced us and sustains us.

Because ethical problems revolve around values and their relative importance, we must examine our values to help reform our ethical sensibilities. Aldo Leopold preached the need for a land ethic (1), but that new ethic can only come when land is valued. If very little or no importance is attached to the idea of "land", then ideas about land as a physical entity will not make it an object of ethical concern. It will fail the test of being a moral object and exhortations to respect it will ultimately be ignored. In the crunch, when choices are made, whatever is relatively valueless will be sacrificed to the more valuable. The planet, its land and water and air surface, is being beaten and poisoned to death because, compared to people, it is considered to be relatively unimportant. We have developed little feeling for it as a valuable thing. Nature study has barely made it into our school and college agendas and our natural attraction to the world remains uneducated, diffuse and unrefined.

The key question for environmental ethics, therefore, is how shall we value the Ecosphere? Does it deserve our sympathy and care? What is its importance relative to other things we value? Can we make it a moral object? Certainly its significance is gaining ground as air, water, soil, food, plant and animal life deteriorate, goading us into action, but as an admired thing, a loved thing, it is far from displacing people, animals and plants from centre-stage. George Bush spoke for the majority in conceptualizing a future "where self-determination and individual freedom replace coercion and tyranny, where economic liberty replaces economic controls and stagnation, and where lasting peace is reinforced by common respect for the rights of man."⁽²⁾ He envisioned the triumph of human rights, which superficially is well and good--except that their full flowering may mark the death knell of the planet and its rights. And when no Home Place worthy of the name is left for our species, human rights will be only an empty ideal.

The Ecosphere is degenerating because of our people-first attitude, and a dual problem for environmental ethics is how to elevate the importance of the Ecosphere while putting a damper on the overweening pride and self-aggrandizement that plague our species. To value the Earth more and to value people differently--not less but as an essential collaborative part of it--seems necessary if over-exploitation of the globe is to be stopped. As long as the needs and wants of people have first priority, we will continue to pummel the second priority--the planet. Relative values set the priorities.

What, then, are values? How are they affixed to objects, and can they be changed? What are the possibilities of people learning to evaluate the Ecosphere more highly, making a supreme moral object of it?

Values seem to have three intertwined sources, two in the observer and the other in the observed.⁽³⁾ First is the powerful cultural source, comprising all the learned likes and dislikes of particular societies and religions, transmitted by language and other symbols. This first source is primarily important because if an idea, a concept, is not expressed in a culture then for that culture it does not exist. Second is the inherited genetic source, the instinctive likes and dislikes, expressed in the behaviour of infants who, without thought, value warmth, comfort, food, sweet liquids, familiar faces. The third can be called the objective source, comprising all apparent emanations from the thing itself. If the emanations are harmonious and empathic to us, if the resulting experience is of wholeness and health, then our response projects beauty to the thing perceived.

The Ecosphere has not been an object of importance and high value, a moral object of great interest and concern, because our culture has not conceptualized it as such. No commonly used words for it exist, and language reflects our ignorance and neglect. The cultural source of values has therefore been stoppered, effectively closing the mind also to the other two sources. Without the cultural idea, without the elevating concept, a focus for the other two value sources--the instinctive and the objective--is missing. Our instinctive love of nature has been lavished on scenery, on pleasant landscapes, on flowering plants, on birds and other animals, but not on the unsensed Ecosphere. Because we are enveloped in it, the whole has not been comprehended and its objective values of beauty and harmony have largely passed unnoticed.

Change is on the way. Now that the Ecosphere has been seen from the outerspace perspective and described mythically as Gaia, now that it is appreciated by some as a complex and diverse ecological system, its valuation is on the rise. For the first time we are being invited to love a Nature we can both see and sense, focussing on the reality of the planet: the living and more-than-living Ecosphere. Ecology is contributing to the sense of importance attached to the world, while also indicating the appropriate role of people in the greater whole.

Moral standards and ethical actions are human inventions, tied to beliefs, faiths and understandings. They are our own, formed by us and therefore human in form, homomorphic. This does not mean that they are necessarily homocentric, centered on ourselves. Ethical action need not be confined to our own kind but can be extended to whatever we choose, whenever and wherever we recognize the values and importance of things outside our skins. Specifically, we need not confine moral concerns to those protoplasmic fragments of the world that are conscious or sentient, for such organic parts though significant have no monopoly on importance. Biocentrism that limits value-laden concerns to people, to endangered species, to animal rights and to biological phenomena in general is a dangerous detour from the Way--which is valuing the largest unities, the most complete realities, that we can comprehend.

Our traditional realities have been Man and God, objects of such value and ethical importance that people have died by the millions in the name of both. Between the two another reality of importance must be interposed--the Ecosphere. Its surpassing values merit our sympathy, love and allegiance. Already in the radioactive jungles of America and in the chain-sawed jungles of Amazonia it boasts a few martyrs. These are the early signs of a New Ethic on the way, for new visions, new values, new religions never arrive without travail. The Way is lighted for us and now another human voyage of exploration can begin, exhilarating and much less lonesome than before.

Citations

1. Aldo Leopold. The Land Ethic, pages 237-264 in A Sand County Almanac. 1966. Ballantine Books, Oxford University Press, Inc., New York.
 2. George Bush. quoted under headline, "West Backs Gorbachev." Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, 5 December 1989.
 3. Jonathan Miller. The Nature of Emotion. Chapter 8 in States of Mind. 1983. Pantheon Books, New York.
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