

Philosophy and the Challenge of the Environmental Crisis

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Abstract. The environmental crisis is an extremely complex problem for its causes are many and diverse. An effective solution to this crisis will require a concerted effort among various academic disciplines and socio-economic institutions. This kind of undertaking, however, is immensely challenging given the lack of a unifying framework that is acceptable to everyone. One preliminary step is to have a clear conception of the kinds of causes that have brought about the crisis to determine the roles the various academic disciplines and socio-economic institutions can play in the management and eventually the resolution of the crisis. This article provides one conception of how this preliminary step can be done but with a special focus on the role of philosophy. The main objective is to clarify the aspect in the management of the crisis in which philosophy can make a substantial contribution.

Keywords and phrases: environmental crisis, environmental ethics, ecological crisis, environmental protection, ecological sustainability

Introduction

Taylor (2009, 1240) defines an “environmental crisis” as follows:

I define an Environmental Crisis as a dramatic, unexpected and irreversible worsening of the environment leading to significant welfare losses... First, the change has to be dramatic and rapid in its pace... The environmental change has to be “unexpected” and by this, I mean it is a low probability event... An element of irreversibility is also important. If resources or nature are quick healing then it is difficult to see how any change in the environment should be of much concern, but if recovery would take a century or more things are quite different. Finally, the change in the environment must produce a significant welfare loss; therefore, the scale of the damage cannot be small.

This definition clearly shows us why we should take the environmental crisis very seriously. On the one hand, while we know for sure that the damages of this crisis shall be global in scale, we are, however, uncertain as to when the full effect of these damages will occur. On the other hand, while it will take a long period of time for nature to recover from these damages, the changes in nature that will bring these damages about, however, shall relatively be swift.

As its causes are many and diverse, the environmental crisis is an extremely complex problem. And given the lack of a unifying framework that is acceptable to everyone, to work out an effective solution to this crisis is going to be immensely challenging. Among others, it will require a concerted effort among the various academic disciplines and the different socio-economic institutions such as national governments and business institutions (like the corporations). For this undertaking to even take off the ground, some prior conditions must first be laid out, foremost of which is having a clear conception of the various kinds of causes that have brought the crisis about. It is only when we have managed to identify the root causes of the crisis and examine their nature that we can begin to talk about the role that each of the various sectors in society, especially the academic and socio-economic institutions, can play in the concerted effort to effectively handle the crisis. It is along these lines that this article intends to contribute. It aims to provide one perspective on how this preliminary step can be worked out.

This article, however, focuses on the role of philosophy. The main objective is to clarify the aspect in the management of the crisis in which philosophy can make a substantial contribution. While it is said that philosophy, being a discipline critically examining the underlying assumptions of human knowledge and attitudes towards the world, is well suited to investigate the deeper causes of the environmental crisis, it is not readily clear how this is done by philosophers (Kureethadam 2017; Chislenko 2022).

The study identifies four broad types of causes of the environmental crisis, namely, the physical, socioeconomic, legal and attitudinal causes and examines the dynamics at work among these causes. It shows that it is to the analysis and resolution of the attitudinal causes that philosophy can make a substantial contribution. The article is divided into three sections. The first section establishes the appropriateness of philosophy as a discipline dealing with framework questions to handle the kind of issues or challenges that the environmental crisis brings with it. The second section examines the possible causes of the crisis. These causes are classified and their dynamics are analysed. The third section identifies the kind of causes of the crisis that philosophy is most suitable to handle and elaborates on how philosophy carries out this role in environmental philosophy.

The Appropriateness of Philosophy

When speaking of the role of philosophy in resolving the environmental crisis, one consideration that immediately arises concerns the appropriateness of philosophy as a kind of discipline to handle the kind of problems that the crisis brings with it. Philosophy is commonly understood as an abstract or theoretical undertaking, mostly dealing with concepts, beliefs and frameworks; whereas the challenges of the environmental crisis are quite concrete and practical, mostly dealing with survival issues. On the face of it, there seems to be an incongruity between philosophy as a method and the crisis as a problem.

This calls for a clarification of the nature of philosophy. As Chislenko (2022, 781) notes, “The question of what role philosophers should play in climate change is itself a question about the methods and value of philosophy, or of how philosophy should be done. It also raises questions about the nature of philosophy”. For the use of philosophy to handle the crisis to be meaningful and fruitful, it must then first be established that the crisis is very much within the realm of issues that philosophy properly deals with.

Philosophy, in one of its standard conceptions, refers to a discipline whose main task is to clarify and evaluate the foundational concepts and theories serving as our frameworks for interpreting the world and for defining our relationship with this world. Philosophical questions, in this light, are described as foundational or framework questions. In the perspective of Carnap (1950), they are the kind of questions that deal with a framework’s “external questions”, in contrast to scientific questions which deal with a framework’s “internal questions”. External questions are those concerned with the coherence and plausibility of a framework. As such, they are not answerable using the concepts and rules of the framework. To handle such questions would then require the theories and methods of philosophy. In contrast, internal questions are those concerned with the applications of the framework. As such, they are answerable using the concepts and rules of the framework.

Take the framework of mathematics. Simple examples of questions internal to this framework are “What is 2 and 2?” and “What is the square root of 64?”. On the other hand, some examples of questions external to the framework are “What kind of things are numbers?” and “Are mathematical rules based on facts, human conventions, or the structure of our mind?”. In the framework of the natural sciences, when we ask the question “What are the causes of earthquakes?” we are asking a question internal to this framework. We can use scientific theories and methods to handle this question. But when we ask, “What is the nature of

causality?” or “What justifies inductive reasoning?”, we are asking a question external to this framework. As these questions cannot be handled appropriately by scientific theories and methods, we resort to philosophical theories and methods (see Nagel 1987; Mabaquiao 2013).

This conception of what constitutes philosophical questions, while capturing the essence of these questions in so far as distinguishing them from scientific ones is concerned, however, may give rise to some misconceptions about the nature of the philosophical enterprise. Conceiving philosophical questions as mainly foundational may lead one to think that philosophy is not concerned with the concrete, practical and everyday phenomena which form the subject matter of the internal questions. It may be thought that being primarily concerned with the foundational issues, philosophy is a purely academic, theoretical, or abstract undertaking that does not concern itself with the affairs of everyday life.

On the other hand, the environmental crisis is one very concrete phenomenon. It is a factual problem threatening the existence of the various species, especially our own, inhabiting this world (Bentley 2009, 113; Kureethadam 2017, 1). What is at stake in this crisis is something very concrete, namely, the survival of the different species including our own and not something theoretical or abstract like the coherence of our beliefs—though our beliefs about nature, as will be discussed later, significantly contribute to the emergence of the environmental crisis. Moreover, the crisis is brought about by very concrete causes such as pollution, depletion of our natural resources and global warming as amplified by human interventions (Bentley 2009, 113).

The question that naturally arises from these considerations is whether philosophy is an appropriate discipline to handle the issues that go with the environmental crisis. Differently put, the question is whether philosophy, as a discipline primarily dealing with framework issues, has anything substantial to contribute to the solution of a very concrete and practical issue like the environmental crisis. Any response to this query, negative or positive, would presuppose a certain understanding of how foundational studies relate to the practical concerns of life. The hypothesis, however, that this article maintains is that foundational issues, on the one hand, do have practical consequences and practical issues, on the other, do have foundational causes. Let us provide some simple illustrations.

Take the area of philosophy of religion which examines framework questions about religion such as the existence of God, the relation of evil and God and the meaningfulness of religious statements, among others. Consider the issue of whether we have sufficient reasons to believe in the existence of God. How

we deal with this question, or whatever conclusion that we shall reach from our examination of this question, will certainly affect the way we conduct our lives. For one, it will surely affect the meaning and value that we give to our personal sufferings and challenges in life. James (1896) highlights this point when he considers the belief in God as a living, forced and momentous option.

Another, take the area of political philosophy which examines framework questions about politics and the conduct of political organisations such as those concerning social justice (what it means and how to achieve it), political power (what justifies, structures and limits this power) and distributive justice (what fair distribution of rights and resources is). We know that certain political philosophies, such as Marxism and liberal democracy, which have dealt with such questions have inspired political revolutions in different areas in the world. Often at the cost of numerous human lives, these revolutions have radically changed how people conduct their social and political lives.

It is thus not surprising that philosophy has applied areas, foremost of which are those classified under practical or applied ethics which include, among others, bioethics, business ethics and environmental ethics. In these areas, the philosophical examination of foundational issues of morality is done in the context of some concrete and practical human concerns. For instance, the concept of moral rights and duties is discussed in the concrete contexts of medical practices (such as in the cases of abortion, euthanasia, organ transplantation, etc.), business practices (such as in the conduct of advertising, hiring and promotion of employees, etc.) and our dealings with the natural environment (such as the various ways in which humans use natural resources for their consumption or to satisfy their interests).

Now, while it is true that the environmental crisis has very concrete causes like pollution, resource depletion, global warming, deforestation, coal mining and the like, it is, however, not accurate to consider such causes as the only important ones. While they are the direct causes, some of them may be caused by things not as concrete as they are. In short, scientifically explainable causes are not the only important ones at work here for some of these causes may have not occurred without the things that may not be scientifically explainable. As we shall later discuss, other equally important causes involve, among others, the kind of laws regarding environmental protection and how these laws are implemented, socio-economic factors like overpopulation and poverty; and beliefs about the value of nature relative to human interests like the one claiming that nature is there primarily for human consumption. The natural sciences may not be suitable to handle these kinds of causes. Other disciplines such as the social sciences, humanities and philosophy may be the ones qualified for the job.

Kinds and Interplay of Causes

In his analysis of the environmental crisis, Kureethadam (2017, x) emphasises the need to “diagnose and treat the real root causes of the problem”. The fact that the situation continues to worsen despite the many efforts to manage the crisis only points, for Kureethadam, to the failure to identify the root causes of the crisis. Kureethadam likens the situation to curing an illness. A doctor can only determine the right medication for the illness once he has correctly diagnosed the cause of the illness. If the real causes of the crisis have not yet been properly diagnosed, the many efforts geared towards managing the crisis may be wrongly headed and may, in fact, just worsen the situation.

The environmental crisis, however, is an extremely complex issue. Determining its root causes is immensely challenging in light of the numerous factors, with their complex interplay, that significantly contribute to its emergence and progression. But complex as they are, the task of doing so is both necessary and urgent; and we need all the perspectives that can possibly lead us to the proper diagnosis of the crisis. Following this direction, we shall, in what follows, present one perspective that shall be built on a previous attempt to classify the causes of the crisis.

Bentley (2013, 108) attributes the environmental crisis to the “imbalances between human demands and the ability of the natural environment to satisfy those demands”. In determining what brings about this imbalance, he identifies three broad types of causes; namely: (1) those caused by purely natural conditions, (2) those caused or aggravated by human activity and (3) those arising from increasing human demand for sources of energy to power infrastructures that have become increasingly energy-dependent over time (*ibid.*). As regards the first type of causes, Bentley (2013, 110) refers to the “purely natural processes such as collisions with extraterrestrial objects, volcanic activity, global warming, rising ocean levels, hurricanes and typhoons and others as well”. For the second type, he identifies the “influence of agriculture, including herding as well as cultivation and especially industrialisation” (*ibid.*). And for the third type, he (2013, 113) points to the increasingly ingenious ways by which humans, following their intelligence, have exploited energy resources for their own benefit.

While the first type of causes is indeed different from the other two, these other two do not seem to be that different from one another. The third type of causes can be subsumed under those of the second type, for the increasing human demand for sources of energy is just one form of human activity that causes or aggravates the environmental crisis. Based on the examples provided by Bentley for both types, these causes have something to do with the socio-economic conditions of humans.

Given such, they may better be referred to as the socioeconomic causes of the environmental crisis, in contrast to the physical causes. Consequently, Bentley has identified only two broad types of the environmental crisis, namely, the physical and the socio-economic causes.

There are two important features of the crisis that are apparently lacking in Bentley's analysis. One is the role of national governments in regulating human activities and practices involving the natural environment. Through their laws and enabling institutions, governments regulate not only the interaction and dealings of humans with one another (either as individuals or as organised groups) but also how humans make use of the resources of nature to satisfy their needs. In this regard, some have considered "failures of governance" as a major cause of the environmental crisis (Taylor 2009, 1240). Some refer to this kind of causes as political causes and have even gone to the point of saying that the environmental crisis is mainly a political issue (Winarmo 2017, 81; see also Ide et al. 2020). For our purposes, we shall refer to these causes as the legal causes of the environmental crisis.

Another equally important kind of causes lacking in Bentley's analysis concerns the attitude of humans towards nature resulting from certain belief and value systems. Fielder (1991, 229) underscores the importance of this kind of causes by saying "Any significant response to the environmental crisis will require changes in living patterns brought about through political action. Neither will occur on the scale needed unless there is an appropriate change in how people think about themselves in relation to the natural world". Fielder further notes that "no amount of bureaucratic manipulation or procedural [changes] will bring meaningful reform... Such measures, without a change of values, can provide no more than temporary, symptomatic relief" (ibid.).

Some of the beliefs considered to be major contributors to the environmental crisis include the Christian religion (Fielder 1991; York 2022; White 1967; Toynbee 2007), anthropomorphism (Droz 2022) and the modern worldview (represented by Cartesian metaphysics – see Kureethadam 2017). With regard to Christianity, White arguably singles it out as the major contributor to the crisis. White (1967, 1207) writes, "[W]e shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man". Some have claimed that anthropomorphism is the root of the global environmental crisis (Droz 2022, 25). Anthropomorphism results from the belief in the hierarchy of beings in which humans are placed above all organisms in the natural world or in which "we place ourselves at the centre of the world" (Droz 2022, 28). This belief is supported by certain worldviews including the one subscribing to

the so-called “great chain of being” (see Nee 2005). Some philosophical views have also contributed to the environmental crisis. The Cartesian metaphysics, for instance, with its split between mind and matter, “has sanctioned the domination and exploitation of the natural world at the hands of humans” (Kureethadam 2017, 7). Other contributing beliefs to the crisis include patriarchy and the belief that regards nature as a commodity (Fielder 1991).

For a more exhaustive account of environmental crisis and analysis of its causes and possible resolutions, the causes of the crisis can thus be divided into four broad types; namely: the physical, socioeconomic, legal and attitudinal causes (see Mabaquiao 2017a, 212–218). First, the physical causes refer to those that can generally be studied by the natural/empirical sciences. They are, in this regard, observable and quantifiable; and their processes are governed by the deterministic laws of nature. We must, however, note that these physical causes can either be natural or human induced. By natural physical causes, we mean that their occurrence is brought about solely by processes of nature. This means that they happen independently of any human intervention. These natural physical causes include, among others, earthquakes, forest fires, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, dry seasons and pests.

On the other hand, the human-induced physical causes refer to those whose occurrence partly results in human intervention with the processes of nature. These causes include, among others, pollution, global warming, depletion of natural resources, emission of toxic substances in the atmosphere, dumping of non-biodegradable waste materials into the oceans and rivers and oil spills. Examples of the major environmental disasters whose physical causes are human induced are the Chernobyl power plant explosion, Union Carbide pesticide plant accident, Kuwaiti oil fires, Love Canal tragedy and Exxon Valdez oil spill, among others (cited in Mabaquiao 2017a, 213).

Now, while we obviously are not accountable for the occurrence of the natural physical causes, we can, however, do something to minimise their damaging effects. As such, we are only responsible for this kind of causes to the extent that we are able to minimise their effects. For instance, knowing that a strong storm is most likely to hit a certain town, there are things that we can do to minimise the damages of this storm. What we are directly responsible for, on the other hand, are the human-induced type of physical causes, for their occurrence is partly due to our own doings. In light of these considerations, when we subsequently speak of the physical causes that we can resolve, we mean the physical damages of the natural physical causes that we can minimise and the occurrence of the human-induced physical causes.

Secondly, the legal causes naturally include existing laws of the land that have something to do with the environment. They also include the absence of laws that effectively prohibit practices damaging to the environment and of legal mechanisms that effectively punish those violating existing environmental laws. In many cases, however, the problem is not so much the absence of appropriate environmental laws but the poor implementation of these laws (see Jones et al. 2015, 11048).

One most discussed issue concerning the causes of environmental crisis concerns the liability or accountability of those, including states and private corporations (see Mabaquiao 2002; 2017b), that have done serious harm to the environment (Percival 2010; Jones et al. 2015; Shucharitkul 1996). With regard to the (legal) liability of a state, Sucharitkul (1996, 1) explains that it should obligate “a recalcitrant state to pay compensation or make amends for the resulting damage for which the state is accountable”. Aside from their poor implementation of their environmental laws due to negligence or politicking (say, allowing certain mining companies to operate though such companies have not met the legal requirements for environmentally safe operations), some have argued that states should also be held accountable for the damages done to the environment by their military exercises and operations (see Greenwood 1996). In this connection, the legal causes of the environmental crisis can thus be likewise understood as referring to those causes for which states or governments can be held legally liable.

Third, the socio-economic causes include poverty, population and economic growth. Over-population naturally results in the competition over limited resources which in turn contributes to the depletion of these resources (see Pacheco et al. 2018, 238). Poverty, on the other hand, pushes people to prefer cheap but usually non-environment-friendly products over expensive but usually environment-friendly products. Hollander (2003, 2) goes further in considering poverty as the major cause of the crisis, saying that “[p]overty is the environmental villain... Impoverished people often do plunder their resources, pollute their environment and overcrowd their habitats. They do these things not out of wilful neglect but only out of the need to survive”.

Finally, the attitudinal causes refer to the beliefs held by humans about nature that allow them or make it permissible for them to cause serious damages to the natural environment. These beliefs may be personal, cultural, or even religious. In addition to the ones already mentioned earlier as examples for this kind of causes are the beliefs that natural resources are there simply for human consumption or to satisfy human interests; that humans can only have moral obligations; that these moral obligations of humans can only be directed towards their fellow humans; and that since certain aspects of nature such as certain parts of the oceans, rivers

and the atmosphere are not owned by human individuals and thus are not governed by property rights then we are not in any way accountable for our actions towards them or we are not duty-bound not to pollute them.

Spretnak (1997, 219–220) further adds those values and beliefs involving industrial and agricultural practices (cited in Coates 2003) namely: “homo economicus”, the belief that economic well-being is primary and will bring about well-being in all other areas of human life; “progressivism”, the belief that the human condition will gradually improve through abundance and technological developments; “industrialism”, the belief that mass-production and rationally designed institutions and programs are the best way to perfect human society and achieve the abundance needed to sustain human consumption and “consumerism”, the belief that well-being is achieved through abundance and consumption.

Let us now examine how these four broad types of causes related to one another. It shall be observed that the physical causes are the direct or immediate causes of the environmental crisis. Pollution, depletion of natural resources, lack of trees, toxic substances emitted into the atmosphere, toxic chemical wastes dumped into the ocean and the like are what directly bring about the environmental crisis. On the other hand, the other types of causes are the indirect causes of the environmental crisis in that they are what bring about the physical causes. Pollution, for instance, is brought about by causes of the other types. The pollution of a river, for instance, can be due to the absence of an effective law prohibiting the dumping of wastes into that river. It can also be the result of some socioeconomic causes like when people living near the river do not have the financial means to avail of mechanisms for the proper disposal of their wastes. Still, it can also be the result of some wrong attitudes like the belief that there is nothing wrong in dumping wastes into the river because nobody really owns the river and thus no property rights will be violated in the process.

Let us now examine the relationships among the indirect types of causes. It is quite clear that the socio-economic causes can themselves be caused by the legal causes, as laws in a certain country can control or significantly affect the socio-economic processes in that country. Issues concerning poverty and overpopulation can be resolved by legal interventions. For instance, as earlier noted, it is usually the case that the environment-friendly products are more expensive than the non-environment-friendly products. But this need not necessarily be so if the government can make the appropriate interventions in the economics of these products. A country may be economically poor but this may not be because it lacks natural resources. Such a country may in fact be blessed with rich natural resources and the only reason why it is economically poor is that its government

fails to manage these resources well. Contrast this to some countries that are not so blessed with rich natural resources and yet are doing well economically. Another, consider the case of overpopulation. It too can be resolved or minimised by legal means as what has been done in some countries where certain forms of family planning are actively being promoted by their government.

Turning now to the attitudinal causes, we earlier noted that they can bring about the physical causes of the environment crisis. Pollution, for instance, can be due to the belief that since we are not violating the property rights of some persons when we pollute the air and the oceans (since the air and the oceans are not the properties of individual persons) then there is nothing wrong to pollute the air and the oceans. Now it shall be observed that the attitudinal causes can likewise significantly affect both legal and socio-economic causes as well. For instance, that the same belief that causes pollution, as considered above, can be the same belief responsible for certain legal and socio-economic causes of the crisis.

One reason why, for instance, there is an absence of a law prohibiting companies from dumping their wastes into a river may be the same belief that no property rights of individual persons are violated in polluting the oceans and rivers. In the case of the socio-economic causes being caused by an attitudinal cause, consider the case of overpopulation. This case may be brought about, among others, by the belief that natural resources are unlimited such that there will always be enough resources for humans (which in turn may be brought about by a religious belief that God will always provide for the needs of His people) however much they multiply. Laitos (2014, 1–2), in explaining why the environmental crisis is continuously worsening, despite the many environmental laws we already have, points to certain beliefs that served as the framework for these laws.

In sum, the physical causes directly bring about the environmental crisis. The attitudinal, legal and socio-economic causes in turn bring about these physical causes. On the one hand, the legal causes can also bring about the socio-economic causes; while, on the other hand, the attitudinal causes can also bring about the legal and socio-economic causes. These considerations show the pervasiveness of the attitudinal causes as they significantly influence, if not bring about, all the other kinds of causes.

The Role of Philosophy

Distinguishing these four broad types of causes of the environmental crisis gives us a working idea of which disciplines and institutions can properly address which aspects of the said crisis. Generally, the physical causes are properly be addressed

by the various natural sciences and institutions geared towards the development of technology; the legal causes by certain social sciences, especially political and legal sciences and by the various relevant governmental institutions – those concerned with the crafting and implementation of the law; the socio-economic causes by the various relevant social sciences (such as economics, psychology and sociology) and governmental institutions such as those dealing with the nation's economy, population, health, income and others; and the attitudinal causes by the humanities, religious studies and philosophy.

Speaking of beliefs about nature, it is important to distinguish between the factual and the moral types. Our factual beliefs about nature concern our knowledge about the features of nature that are independent of our interests, preferences and attitudes. Such beliefs are supplied to us by the sciences. Searle (1999, 16–17) technically calls this kind of knowledge about things “observer-independent”. On the other hand, our moral beliefs about nature concern what we think about nature in relation to our interests, preferences and attitudes. These beliefs form part of the kind of knowledge Searle classifies as “observer-dependent” or “observer-relative” (*ibid.*). Accordingly, our moral beliefs about nature speak of the kind of relationship we, humans, ought to have with nature; or more specifically, whether we have certain moral duties towards nature or its non-human members.

Now, other social sciences such as sociology, anthropology and psychology also study human attitudes. Being primarily concerned with objectively recording phenomena as they occur in the world, these disciplines are generally descriptive. The approach of philosophy, as well as those of religions and the humanities, in contrast, is normative. That is, the focus is on determining what ought to be the case, rather than merely describing what is the case. Philosophy, more specifically, is concerned with analysing these attitudes with a view to determining which among these attitudes conform to some ideal standards, especially moral standards and which do not.

Our moral beliefs about nature are usually initially based on religion and culture. In certain tribes, for instance, it is a matter of religion on why they will not dare damage a mountain for they believe that the mountain is sacred. Or they will not cut trees for the belief that these trees are inhabited by some spirits. In the discipline of philosophy, particularly in the area of environmental ethics, these moral beliefs are subjected to a rational analysis using the lens of the moral standards advanced in the various normative ethical theories (see Evangelista and Mabaquiao 2020). These environmental ethical theories, in general, all seek to provide a moral framework that will justify the human obligation to protect the natural environment (Kureethadam 2017, x). Using these various ethical theories,

philosophy analyses which among our moral beliefs about nature will result in the destruction or protection of the natural environment.

There are currently four widely discussed theories in environmental ethics, namely, homocentrism, utilitarianism, biocentrism and ecofeminism. These ethical theories provide different justifications for our moral duty to protect the natural environment. The disagreement on the basis and scope of these moral duties is what brings about the differences among these ethical theories. They provide different accounts on which among the members of the natural environment have moral status or are endowed with moral rights and thus should serve as objects of moral concern. Let us, in what follows, briefly look into the main contentions of each of these theories.

The homocentric (anthropocentric or human-centred) view claims that our moral duty to protect the natural environment derives from our moral duty to respect the rights of our fellow humans. Consequentially, humans only have indirect duties towards nature, for their direct duties are only towards their fellow humans. According to this view, only humans, in virtue of their rational capacities (consisting of their intelligence and free will), have moral rights; and so humans only have moral duties towards themselves. But as humans have environmental rights such as the right to a clean and liveable environment, protecting the natural environment is a moral duty of humans towards one another. Some have further argued that our duty to protect the natural environment is a result of our obligation towards future human generations who, as justice would require, deserve to live in a natural environment whose condition is not worse than what we at present live in.

This environmental ethical theory is supported by the deontological theory of morality developed by Immanuel Kant (2019). Strictly speaking, however, what has moral status for Kant are rational beings which in principle are not limited to humans. But in so far as only humans are the rational members of the natural world, then humans, in so far as this natural world is concerned, are the only beings that have moral status. Kantian ethical theory considers the actions done by rational beings as the only kind of actions that can be said to be morally good or bad; and judges the morality of these actions, whether good or bad, in terms of whether they follow rules that consistently apply to everyone in similar conditions (the moral principle of universalisability) and that respect human persons (the principle of respect for persons).

The utilitarian view (in so far as its hedonistic and preference versions are concerned) holds that only sentient entities or organisms that have the capacity for experiencing pleasure and pain, which include humans and animals, can be said

to be endowed with moral rights. So here humans have the moral duty to protect the natural environment in order to respect the moral right of sentient entities to pursue and experience pleasure and avoid pain. With sentience as the basis of moral rights, humans and animals have the same moral standing. In case there is a conflict of rights among animals, among humans and between animals and humans, the utilitarian principle of maximising the greatest welfare of all affected persons (also known as “the greatest happiness principle” – see Hare 2009) becomes the standard for resolving the conflict.

Two pioneers of this ethical view were Bentham (2000) and Mill (2004). In the contemporary period, its supporters include Hare (2009) and Singer (1992). The utilitarian principle as applied to environmental ethics especially involving animal welfare has been championed by Singer. According to Singer (1992), any entity that is capable of suffering has moral status. Furthermore, to prefer human interests over animal interests simply on the basis of the fact that human interests are human is to morally discriminate against animals. Singer (1992) calls this kind of discrimination “speciesism”.

The biocentric view holds that every member of an ecological system has the moral right to a sustainable ecological system. In gist, there are basic points in the biocentric perspective (see Taylor 1999, 474): (1) that humans and nonhumans are equal in so far, they are members of Earth’s community of life, (2) that members of the Earth’s natural ecosystem are interdependent for their existence and (3) that the life every individual organism, for pursuing its own good, is valuable.

This view includes the “deep ecology” of Naess (1973) and the “land ethic” of Leopold (1999; 1949). Leopold identifies four main elements of his land ethic (by “land” he includes all the members of nature); namely: (1) the moral community should include soils, waters, plants and animals (Leopold 1949, 204), (2) the role of homo sapiens should be changed from conqueror to plain member of the land community (Leopold 1949, 204), (3) we can be moral only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, respect, admire or otherwise have faith in (Leopold 1949, 214, 223, 225) and (4) “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold 1949, 224–225).

Humans, in this regard, ought to protect the natural environment, which consists of various ecological systems, in order to respect the rights of the various members of these ecological systems. Humans, animals and plants, in so far as they are all members of ecological systems, have, according to this view, the same moral standing. In case of a conflict among the rights of the different members of an

ecological system, the rights of an organism that will contribute the most to the sustainability of the ecological system are to be preferred.

We earlier noted that among the belief and value systems considered by Fielder (1991) as major contributors to the environmental crisis is patriarchy, generally referring to a social system in which positions of power and privilege are primarily held by men. In this regard, an environmental ethic of the feminist orientation, called “ecofeminism”, developed and poses as an alternative to the three previous ones we just considered. In particular, ecofeminism links the degradation of nature with the oppression of women, both of which are regarded by ecofeminists as consequences of patriarchy (Glazebrook 2002, 13).

Anjum (2020, 846) explains that ecofeminism “believes that the earth is interconnected and nature does not recognise human boundaries. It holds that one of the reasons for the destruction of the Earth is that patriarchy only values the masculine traits of conquering and dominance and devalues the ‘feminine’ traits of life-giving and nurturing”. It is not clear what serves as the basis for giving moral status to an entity. But basing it on “care ethics”, an approach to feminist ethics developed by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984), it is one’s involvement in a caring relationship. In the main, for ecofeminism, the environmental crisis cannot be resolved unless the social issue of oppression involving women and other marginalised members of society, that has been brought about by patriarchy, is resolved (see Warren 2000).

Needless to say, there is still an ongoing discussion on which of these theories is most appropriate in defining and justifying the moral obligation to protect the natural environment. Each theory has its own limitations which the others may supplement or complement. Some combine these theories in a certain way. Nozick (1974), for instance, combines Kantian deontology with utilitarianism, arguing for Kantian ethics when humans deal with fellow humans but for utilitarianism when humans deal with animals. Another, ecofeminism critically adopts certain aspects of the views of some biocentric theories specifically with regard to animal rights and the interdependence of members of the ecological system (see Warren 2000). In general, however, their appropriateness as a theory will depend on the nature and details of the situation being considered. Be that as it may, these theories do provide us powerful frameworks for clarifying and analysing our moral beliefs that lead us to adopt certain attitudes towards the natural environment.

Conclusion

To the question “What does philosophy have to do with the environmental crisis?”, Fielder (1991, 229) believes that the answers “Everything” and “Not much” are both correct, although in different ways. It is everything because philosophy analyses the beliefs and values underlying environmental decision making. On the other hand, it is not much for philosophical analyses of these beliefs and values allegedly have little influence within and outside the university. As evidence for the latter, Fielder cites that fact that governments do not usually consult philosophers in their decisions pertaining to the environment; and that they do not usually institute offices or agencies for the primary purpose of studying the philosophical aspects of the environmental crisis.

In a way, this article is a demonstration of what the answer “Everything” really means and a justification of its correctness. We have shown that in a concerted effort to face the challenge of the environmental crisis, it is in addressing the attitudinal type of causes where philosophy can make its substantial contribution. Philosophy’s role consists in critically examining our beliefs about nature in light of the various theories in environmental ethics to ascertain which of these beliefs lead to practices that are damaging to the natural environment. And given the pervasiveness of the attitudinal causes of the crisis—as they significantly influence all the other kinds of causes—this role of philosophy proves to be a critical one. As Callicot (2010, 34–35) writes:

So, who can lift the world out of the environmental crisis? Everybody has to do what they can, but the most important and fundamental job falls to us philosophers. It is our job to dig up, expose to view and subject to criticism the flawed ideas about the nature of nature, human nature and the proper relationship between humans and nature that we have inherited from the past.

But with regard to the answer “Not much”, two things need to be considered. First, philosophy’s role in a concerted effort to face the challenge of the environmental crisis, as we have analysed, is a normative one. It is in the realm of how things should be. As such, its value is not measured by how things are in the current state of affairs; but in how effective it will guide us to achieve the ideal scenario. Thus, if philosophy’s role would not be recognised by some governments, that would not change the fact that such a role is a highly valuable one. This case is actually no different from the fact that some people do not take the environmental crisis seriously – for this does not change the reality that the challenge of the environmental crisis is a serious one.

Second, it is through education that philosophy will really make its influence in resolving the environmental crisis. In particular, it is through the planting of the philosophical seeds in the minds of students who will later on be politicians, businessmen, economists, etc. In this light, a government's national council for environmental protection may not include professional philosophers as members; but if the people who are there in the council have in their consciousnesses the philosophical insights of environmental ethics, whose seeds have been well implanted during their student days, philosophy will surely be in their midst influencing their reasoning and decisions.

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