

Ideological dimension of environmental ethics

Asist.univ. drd. Caciuc Viorica – Torii
Teacher Training Department
“Dunărea de Jos” University, Galați

Abstract: Rezolvarea unor controverse privitoare la probleme de mediu presupune apelul la ideologie și la principiile care oferă o orientare morală a acțiunilor noastre față de natură (moartea animalelor, eroziunea solului, secarea izvoarelor, etc.). În scopul de a participa și a evalua corect situațiile care au drept rezultat deteriorarea mediului, omul trebuie să înceapă să lupte împotriva acestor fenomene utilizând măsuri de combatere interdisciplinare.

Key words: ecological ethics focusing on humans, ecological ethics focusing on non-humans, deep ecology, shallow ecological ethics

Contemporary society is still dominated by the ecological hedonism which keeps individual dynamics focused on consumption. The ecological sensitivity has allowed, in some degree, the moralization of the production and consumption processes, directing the demand and offer towards the ecological alternative technologies. The ecological consensus did not stop the growth of the individualistic consumption, but gave birth to an eco-production which was doubled by the ecology of consumption. In this context, one feels the need to support the ecological moral which is promoted by the ecological ethics, by means of the intervention of policy makers, and especially by those who are responsible for the education of young generation, in order to shape their moral-ecological conscience and behaviour that should lead to the safety of life and of humankind on Earth.

Even though in the last decade of the past century Romania has developed an entire strategy for protecting the environment – the legislation regarding the environmental protection was adopted, some projects for the preservation and care of the environment were put forth with the help of some extra-budgetary funds, some programmes for sustainability were implemented, even some educational projects were made, etc. – all of these were accomplished without autochthon ecological ethics, but only through the valuing of the theories established by the Western philosophers.

Starting from these remarks, the present paper is intended to name some of the ideological aspects of Western ecological ethics which might be a starting point for the development of an autochthon ideology.

The ecological ethics is an applied one because it represents the practical replica of the abstract theories regarding the normative ethics. It intends to offer an ethical perspective on specific problems and on practical situations. The solving of some controversies regarding the problems of the environment presupposes an appeal to principles that should offer a moral orientation to our actions towards nature and their (the death of animals, the ground erosion, a lifeless stream of water, the generation of new wealth, etc.). “Such principles which guide our attitude towards nature make up the ecological ethics in general. There is a variety of ecological ethics that are either competitive or partially coincidental.” (1).

The Ecological Ethics focusing on Humans is based on the principle of evaluating the environmental policy just according to the way in which it affects people. It is possible that the destruction of some national parks or wild areas may have a series of negative effects on the human well being: their sensibility towards the animals’ grief, their sadness towards a species’ extinction, their lack of access to some aesthetic and recreational pleasures. Such an ethics, even if it may lead to the making of some real agreements with the ecologists on what concerns the environmental problems, focuses on the realities concerning the effects that they have on people. According to it, only humans are important from a moral point of view. For example, from the perspective of the ethics focusing on the humans, a species at the verge of extinction is not considered valuable from a moral viewpoint no matter if it is seen as a whole or as individual parts. Only the human’s happiness or unhappiness is important, and these may or may not be affected by the extinction of a certain species (2).

The Ethics focusing on Animal implies giving a moral consideration to animals seen as individuals, not as species, because the way in which the species is affected matters only indirectly and only if the individuals are affected. So, can observe that even if all individuals are significant morally speaking, this does not mean that they are equal. Different moral value is being given to different types of animals. This way of differentiating involves the arbitrary neglect of the animals' interests, as to the human ones, thus permitting similar interests to be treated in the same manner, and those which are different, to receive a certain degree of moral significance (3).

The Ethics focusing on Life claims that beings are important from a moral point of view, regardless of their moral significance (the more complex a living being is, the more important it becomes from the moral viewpoint). This type of ethics says that the choice of the paths of action must be made according to the impact of our actions over every involved being. Under a radical form, the ethics focusing on life sustains that every living thing is significant from the moral point of view, but they also have an equal moral importance (4). According to it, a difference in meaning can be made inside one class of beings, thus not making men the most important ones. In some situation, the preservation of the biosphere and of the complex ecosystems may be considered more important than the conservation of a large number of human beings (5).

"The Ethics on Totality" states that things, who like some of the living beings, do not have conscience and not even the most rudimentary biological organization, are significant morally speaking. According to it, one can attribute to rocks some "rights", and mining or testing missiles are considered to be bad as such (6).

The Ecological Holism considers that only two categories are relevant from the moral point of view: the biosphere as a whole and the complex ecosystems that compose it. The animals seen individually (including men, plants, rocks, molecules etc. that make up the complex systems) are not significant from the moral viewpoint. Their value is given by their contribution to the preservation of the whole they are a part of. From the holistic perspective, the individuals lack moral significance, but a species' extinction is against the purpose of preserving the biosphere or the ecosystems. This type of ethics promotes the environmental policy which is similar to the ethics focusing on life, on animals and "the ethics on totality", having in common the mechanisms of conservation of the ecosystems and of the biosphere (7).

The problem that emerges is what kind of ecological ethics is to form the basis of the *environmental policy decisions*. The first impulse would be to say the one focusing on humans, but how justified is this choice by means of the *ethical commitment*? "The consequence and the avoidance of some arbitrary moral distinctions supports the transition from the ethics focusing on humans to that focusing on the animal" (8) and even to other types of ecological ethics. In this case, one might appeal to a series of arguments in order to support this idea.

Thus animals have moral value both because they have interests, and because they have aesthetical qualities – like beauty. These offer them even an intrinsic value.

Plants, ecosystem and the biosphere have a moral relevance because they are considered to have interests, like the interest for a long life, which might be explained by the fact that it has a good in itself, "determined by the type of being that it represents, the type of biological order it pertains and the role it has as part of a whole", an argument that, unfortunately, is not solid enough. The fact that plants and ecosystems "do not have a point of view by means of which to express life", "even though they have a natural purpose, they do not manifest any attitude on what concerns this purpose, and the steps taken in order to reach it are not understood and felt", represents objective arguments in order to make an impartial distinction between the ethics focusing on humans and that focusing on life. Other

arguments, like those that refer to the quality of being a complex living thing and that of aesthetics, similar in the case of animals, gives them an intrinsic value (9).

The property of being a complex system which is specific to groups of objects between which there are certain relationships – i.e. the snowflakes, the planets that make up a solar system, the erosion textures on a cliff – gives their moral value. Another argument in favour of attributing them moral value is “given by certain details which are specific to the way in which things are functioning biologically”, argument which is controversial (10). Holmes Rolston III argues that “nature has in people’s minds a long range of values” among which the aesthetic one, thus trying to prove the intrinsic value of nature. In discovering such an aesthetic value, it is crucial to separate it both from the utility and the life support and only those who will recognize this difference can appreciate the desert or the tundra.” (11)

The passage towards the ecological holism is made by the existence of some other moral features, even if they are being contested by the more restrictive ethics. Such an example would be the feature of being a natural object, not one that is a result of the human created technology or of culture. According to it, the destruction of rocks – which are natural objects – by means of mining activity, is to be condemned. Some other features like the existence of a diversity of parts, the functional integration of parts, the existence of a balance and a *self-adjusting* system can be accepted as determinants of the moral significance of ecosystems and biosphere. By analyzing the natural character and the existence of a diversity of parts, R. Elliot compares a natural rock with a synthetic one, or an aria covered with rain forest with a similar one which was cleared and cultivated to prove the value of the natural ecosystem. Thus, the rain forest becomes valuable due of its diversity of flora and fauna and because of its beauty that was obtained “because of the way in which parts work in harmony in order to sustain the whole” (12). It follows that the ecosystem of the natural rain forest is definitely superior to the artificial environment. “A reason for which a man-made forest is not as good as the natural one is the experienced eye that can make the difference ... These differences can be spotted and they affect the value of the forest. The reasons for the low value of the ‘fake’ forests are similar to those for the low price of a forgery” (13). In this way, one can prove that the restoration projects can be a viable solution for the destroyed environments and that their value can be restored. However, R. Elliot proves in his article that the regeneration actions “do not always bring back value because part of the reason we cherish the environment is because it is purely natural.” (14)

In conclusion, the appreciation of a decision of environmental policy is based on the relationship between the human interests and the non-human ones. Taking into consideration the above mentioned arguments, one might state that a first step towards solving the contradiction would be finding out some alternative solutions for satisfying the human interests, especially if “the changing of ecosystems is in general against the long term human interests”. (15)

In the article “On Ecological Ethics: A Critical Introduction”, Patrick Curry presents a series of key concepts that round off the preoccupations towards the ecological ethics (16).

Ecocentrism is a philosophy which recognizes the fact that the ecosphere and not the individual organisms, is the source and support of all living forms and this quality suggests a holistic and an eco-centred approach to all the governments, industries, and individuals. It puts first the idea of ecosphere, by admitting the relevance of the environment and of life in general and by understanding the fact that no organism is more important than another. It does not make a difference between the animate and inanimate life. The whole sphere of life is important.

Deep ecology is a new branch of philosophy that considers the men as an integral part of the environment. It emphasizes other species, ecosystems, and other natural processes than those allowed by environmental movements so as it leads to a new system of ecological

ethics. It describes itself as being profound because it focuses on the fundamental philosophical problems regarding the role of the human life as part of the ecosphere and not as a limited vision of ecology as a branch of biological sciences, and it wants to avoid the utilitarian environmentalism.

The shallow ecological ethics finds that the ethical sphere must be extended beyond the human one, and the ethical theories from this category give value as such to a being and not to the species it belongs to, because the species is not perceived as a valid criterion. The criterion according to which a living thing has value as such from the moral viewpoint, is different for every representative of this ecological ethics – the interest, for Peter Singer, the gift of life, for Thomas Regan, a criterion that allows non-human beings to have rights and to be judged from the same moral perspective as humans (17). The critic brought to this course of ecological ethics is based on its weakness, on the fact that it gives nature only an instrumental value, considering it a resource for the humans' needs.

The intermediate ecological ethics considers that natural elements have certain intrinsic values, but when they are in conflict with the human interests, the latter has priority. People are made to choose between the vital needs (intrinsic values – e.g. the conservation of the environment for aesthetic reasons) and those that are apparently vital (oil, minerals, etc).

Even though it appeared and developed relatively late in the XXth century, the ecological ethics had a continuous evolution, becoming a sub-branch of the applied ethics, just because of the complexity and seriousness of the environmental issues. The ecological crisis, as part of the contemporary problematics, no matter how powerful its specificity is, cannot be analyzed and explained without taking into consideration its links to some other problems. In order to participate and evaluate facts or situations which result in deteriorating the environment, one sees oneself forced to learn to fight against complexity and to use the interdisciplinary measures, taking into consideration its links to other problems. The interdisciplinary measure “regards the transfer of methods from one discipline to another. There are three degrees of interdisciplinary: applied, epistemological and generator of new disciplines”. (18) Even though *interdisciplinarity* goes beyond the boundaries of disciplines, its result is still part of disciplinary research.

Talking about the evolution of the ecological ethics as a science, Holmes Rolston III appreciates that “only a few ethical studies are so profound so as to pass from theory to practice. Environmental ethics is both radical and revolutionary” (19).

Thus, from Aldo Leopold's “Land Ethics” of the '60s, which had a considerable impact on the shaping of environmental ethics, by means of the rights of different species to continue their existence in a natural environment, of the demand to give up the role of ruler of the land and to respect all living being, of enlarging the boundaries of the community so as to include the soil, water, plants and animals, or simply, the entire world, in the '70s the ecological ethics becomes a distinct part of ethics. It has a diverse and complex problematics, including all present and future human beings, animals and the entire nature, the biosphere, pollution, the population control system, the use of resources, the production and distribution of food, the production and consumption of energy, wilderness preservation and biodiversity. (20)

Within the modern ecological ethics, one might distinguish between several approaches where different ways of thinking are found within: those based on humanity, or the anthropocentric approaches, which claim that only the men matter, and those non-anthropocentric ones, which assume that things should be the subject of a moral concern as well as the good of humankind. A controversial problem is emerging, that of who is the addressee and the reader of these studies and papers regarding the ecological ethics. According to Bryan G. Norton: “The flourishing literature concerning the environmental ethics is especially read by other philosophers, and occasionally by analysts of environmental

policy, but quite rarely by environmental activists or managers” (21). Workineh Kelbessa, who dealt with the environmental ethics of Africa, shares the same opinion. He claims that common people like countrymen and farmers have limited access to it. “The modern environmental ethics was not made for the common people. They deal with a different ethics. As long as this is true, the modern environmental ethics will not have what to offer to farmers and shepherds.”(22) Even Romania is confronted with the same problem. On what concerns the young generations, these have access to information and to ecological training due to the formal, informal and non-formal forms of education.

The characteristics of the contemporary environmental issues (universality, *globality*, *pluridisciplinarity*, etc.) make quite clear the need for a new universal ecological ethics which should correspond to the new problems facing humankind and which should decrease the unbalance between man and nature. The sources of this dissemblance must be searched in the way nature is seen and relates to culture, science, technique, and progress. The solution is the shaping of a global conscience, of a new attitude towards nature and of a new moral-ecologic behaviour, these being purposes that can be reached both by means of ethics and education (23). As long as the ecological ethics will remain structured according to the human interests, on one hand, and the non-human ones on the other, they will not manage to produce major changes in people’s minds, be they specialists or common people. The contradictions between the two categories of ethics should be dealt on a higher level, in a *transdisciplinary* manner which is based on the principle of the third party included. This way the world could be seen as a whole, and people might find their place in it, a place that they have lost before they managed to reveal all its secrets. The role of the ecological ethics is to give the structure and background of the philosophical system from the perspective of sustainability, which the ecological education can implement at the level of each individual. By means of education one might change one’s mentality and behaviour. Together with educational systems, the ecological education can intervene in the shaping and reorganizing of human behaviour towards nature, by means of rethinking the philosophical system of each individual, and even by means of a new philosophy that should guide science and technics in their future development strategies. For example, Aristotelian ideal of measure which, according to some authors, lacks applicability in the analysis of some destructive facts regarding nature can be seen as a principle useful in the training and development of an ecological conscience and conduct from the perspective of the strategy regarding sustainability in contemporary society.

Notes and References:

1. Elliot, R., - *Etica ecologică*, în Singer, P. - *Tratat de etică*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2006, pp. 314 – 315;
2. Elliot, R., - Op.cit. p. 315
3. Ibidem, p. 315
4. Naess, A., - *Self-reliance in mixed communities of humans, bears, sheep and wolves*, în *Inquire* – apud. Elliot, R., - *Etica ecologică*, în Singer, P. - *Tratat de etică*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 317.
5. Elliot, R., - Op.cit. 317
6. Ibidem,, pp. 317- 318
7. Ibidem,, p. 318
8. Ibidem, p. 319
9. Elliot, R., – Op.cit, p. 320
10. Ibidem, p. 320
11. Holmes Rolston III - *Environmental Ethics. Duties to and Values in the Natural World*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1998
12. Elliot, R., - Op.cit, p. 321
13. Elliot, R., – *Faking Nature*, în Elliot, R.,(editor) - *Environmental Ethics*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, p. 88;
14. Elliot, R., – Op.cit., p. 80 ;
15. Elliot, R., - *Etica ecologică*, în Singer, P. - *Tratat de etică*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 322
16. Curry, P. – „*On Ecological Ethics: A Critical Introduction*”, <http://eco.gn.apc.org/cv.html#Patrick%20Curry>
17. Tincu, A - *Etica mediului*, <http://sacri.ro/files/texte/eticamediuului.htm>
18. Nicolescu, B., - *Noi, particula și lumea*, Ed. Polirom, Iași , 2002

19. Holmes Rolston III – Op. cit.
20. Workineh Kelbessa - *The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa* , Diogenes 2005; 52; 17
<http://dio.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/52/3/17;>.
21. Norton, Bryan G. (1986) - *Conservation and Preservation: A Conceptual Rehabilitation*’, *Environmental Ethics* 8(3): 195–220 – apud. Workineh Kelbessa - Op. cit., p. 27
22. Workineh Kelbessa - Op. cit. p. 28
23. Mureșan, V - *Comentariu la Etica nicomahică*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2006.

Bibliography:

1. Elliot, R., – *Faking Nature*, în Elliot, R.,(editor) - *Environmental Ethics*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995;
2. Elliot, R., – *Etica ecologică*, în Singer, P. - *Tratat de etică*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2006;
3. Holmes Rolston III – *Environmental Ethics. Duties to and Values in the Natural World*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1998;
4. Mureșan, V., - *Comentariu la Etica nicomahică*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2006;
5. Nicolescu, B., - *Noi, particula și lumea*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2002;
6. Curry, P. – *On Ecological Ethics: A Critical Introduction*,
<http://eco.gn.apc.org/cv.html#Patrick%20Curry>;
7. Tincu, A - *Etica mediului*, <http://sacri.ro/files/texte/eticamediului.htm>;
8. Workineh Kelbessa - *The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa* Diogenes 2005; 52; 17
<http://dio.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/52/3/17>.