

Deep Ecology: The Construction and Controversies of Biocentric Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into deep ecology, a biocentric environmental ethics theory proposed by Arne Naess in 1973. It analyzes its fundamental norms, including self-realization and biocentric equality, and the eight-principle framework. Self-realization, inspired by Gandhi's ideas, aims to break the anthropocentric mindset by enhancing the identification with all living beings. Biocentric equality posits that all organisms have an equal right to exist and thrive, challenging the traditional view of nature's instrumental value. The eight principles emphasize the inherent value of human and non-human life, the importance of biodiversity, and the need for policy and ideological changes. However, deep ecology faces critiques. Biocentric egalitarianism struggles with the practical trade-offs in life, self-realization may lead to anthropomorphic illusions and the imposition of will, and the biocentric position risks slipping into anthropocentric thinking. Despite these issues, deep ecology offers a novel moral perspective for environmental ethics, contributing to the exploration of solutions to ecological problems.

KEYWORDS

Deep Ecology; Biocentric Ethics; Self-realization; Biocentric Equality; Anthropocentrism

1 Introduction

Arne Naess brought about the concept of deep ecology in 1973, which provides people with a new environmental ethics from a biocentric perspective, which means it is non-anthropocentric. This paper will discuss ultimate norms and main principles of deep ecology, which included the eight principles, self-realization as well as biocentric equality. Then the main critiques of deep ecology will be presented. In the end, the critical evaluation will be carried out on both sides.

2 Deep Ecology

Deep ecology is one kind of ethical biocentrism, which wants to extend the moral consideration to all living beings for their own goods. In deep ecology, Naess denies the arrogance of human beings in anthropocentrism, because their starting point of thinking only gives nature the instrumental value for human using, but these are not enough to solve environmental problems, it is needed to think about the intrinsic value of nature in order to protect the environment. Naess developed the most influential basic norms of deep ecology include Self-realization and biocentric equality. Then, Naess and George Sessions summarized the eight basic principles of deep ecology in April 1984. Therefore, this paper will analyze deep ecology in order from Self-realization, biocentric egalitarianism and eight principles.

2.1 Self-realization

Deep ecology criticizes the basic hypothesis of anthropocentrism and believes that it is necessary to reform this value through a self-realization. As Bill says, "Deep ecology understands that some of the 'solutions' of reform environmentalism are counter-productive. Deep ecology seeks transformation of values and social organization" (Bill 303). It would be easier to understand the "Self-realization" from Gandhi's life and thoughts. Gandhi is one of the most influential Biocentrists in the last century. He combines his belief with practice, which so called the quest for truth. Through the process of quest for truth, human generally may improve many situations, such as the story of the freed India's colonization by Britain, and so on. In Gandhi's view, desire from selfishness is an internal form of violence, and the most perfect vision of truth needs to be realized by a complete realization of non-violence, which is not only toward human beings, but also toward all living beings. The realization of non-violence in negative form lies in not harming, while the positive form lies in the largest love and the greatest charity. According to Nolt wrote in his book, Gandhi holds that "to see the universal and all-pervading spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself, which requires the identification with everything that lives" (Nolt 163). In Gandhi's view, all living beings are the manifestations of Truth, which is based on a metaphysical belief in the absolute oneness of life. On the other hand, the more selfish we are, the more likely we are to have the illusion that we are separate from other living beings. However, the more we realize that we are one with them, the more we will understand the Truth. Gandhi spent his life explaining how he practiced the realization of the complete nonviolence by eating only fruits, nuts and goat milk in his ordinary life, so as not to harm animals and plants as much as possible. He calls this process "experiments of Truth".

Arne Naess is one of Gandhi's most inspired people. As Nolt says, "Naess developed his own environmental philosophy incorporated Gandhi's ideas that moral maturation amounts to increasing identification with all that lives" (Nolt 163). Naess named the process of increasing identification by Self-realization. It is important to note that Self here is capitalized, which means that Self not only means people, but also includes other beings related to people. As the scope expands, we will realize that their goods are also our goods in the process of Self-realization. As Naess says, "One Self is that with which we identify" (Nolt 163).

From the above analysis, we can see that Naess's Deep Ecology pursues a deeper thinking, through constant awareness of our integration with other creatures to return the greatest love to nature, and not to harm other beings as much as possible. However, the self of the modern West often only means human beings themselves, and the protection of the environment is also based on an anthropocentric view of human-centered thinking. We only regard nature as an instrumental value. We protect her in the short term because of the scarcity of resources, and in the long run because of the consideration of our future generations. Such a way of thinking doesn't seem to be enough to improve the environment today when materialism prevails, because people generally may encounter the "Collective Action Problem", which means that if no one else takes action and my own actions may not change anything, therefore, I don't take action either. In this way, environmental damage will become more and more serious, and the idea of anthropocentrism has its limitations. But if we break the human-centered way of thinking, endow other beings with an intrinsic value, try not to harm them, pursue the idea of achieving the greatest biological integrity, realize that they are inseparable from us, and break the illusory boundary between people and others, we may achieve a better protection toward nature.

2.2 Biocentric egalitarianism

As Nolt says, "The connection of Self-realization to environmentalism lies in that it sees moral significance in all living beings" (Nolt 164). All living beings have moral significance, namely moral status which means they should be included in our moral consideration. Naess embodies this moral consideration in advocating a "biospherical egalitarianism", which he holds all living beings have an equal right to live and blossom. Deep ecology as a global movement, which based on the Self-realization to regard the concerns of other creatures as our own. For example, we need to protect forests from pollution through the process of self-realization, realizing that we and all living beings in the forests are in one, which is what Gandhi called the "oneness of life", so we will choose to protect forests from pollution, just as we want to protect ourselves. From then on, it can be found that the way of thinking that forest creatures are in the first place comes from a metaphysical belief, that is, the oneness of life. Naess' biocentric egalitarianism' assumption is this: as a being with interests goods of my own, I have a right to live and flourish (Nolt 164). However, the "I" here is not only concerning people, from the above analysis, we may notice that Naess is trying to break the boundary between human and nature through the Self-realization process, where the "Self" is also capitalized, including not only people (I), but also nature. In other words, this is combining with the principle of "I should treat the interests of others as my own". Therefore, it can be inferred that all living beings have the equal right to live and flourish.

From the above analysis, on the one hand, Naess wants to break down the anthropocentric way of thinking through Self-realization, on the other hand, by putting forward a assumption that almost no one can deny, which is "All living organisms, not just sentient ones, have goods of their own." This assumption does not depend on human values and cognition and together with the right to exist and blossom, which makes our thinking not only limited to people, but break the tradition of anthropocentrism, then start thinking about our relationship with other living being. Besides, the principle of "I should treat the interests of others as my own" breaks the view of anthropocentrism that nature is only endowed with the instrumental value. Because nature does not exist only as a tool for human use, but also as an intrinsic value for other living beings. To explain according to Gandhi's metaphysical beliefs that is the "oneness of life". According to another biologist called Taylor who generalizes Kant's humanity formulation of the categorical imperative to justify the way of thinking all living beings just merely as means is immoral. Firstly, as Kant says, "to treat humanity, whether in yourself or another, as an end and never merely as a means". Then, Taylor argues that we should treat all living being as ends and never merely as means (Nolt 169). However, first of all, Kant did not include the irrational living beings in the scope of moral considerations. Secondly, instrumental value is a neutral value. The key problem is to see how people use it. If people use it with a moral attitude, it can generally be used well.

2.3 Eight Principle

Arne Naess and George Sessions summarized the essence principles of the deep ecology in April 1984. In total, here is the eight principles of their hard working. Bill Devall and George Sessions generalizes the eight principles as follows:

The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.

Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.

Human have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.

The flourishing of human life and culture is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires a decrease.

Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive and the situation is rapidly worsening.

Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.

The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.

Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes. According to the first principle, Deep ecology emphasizes both human and non-human prosperity have their own value, which is different from the instrumental value of human to non-human beings. The value based on the assumption of all living beings have goods of their own. The second and the third principle illustrates that the way to realize this value lies in the diversity and richness of life forms, while emphasizing that human beings have no right to reduce this diversity, because this diversity is also where this value lies. According to Taylor, it would be immoral if people destroyed this diversity, which means people still use ecology as a tool. The fourth principle is the most criticized one, but because human beings are increasingly dominating other lives, especially in the current era of industrial development and consumerism, in developing countries, the environmental impact caused by the waste of resources by everyone is even serious to the individual. On the other hand, human domination can also destroy species diversity. The fifth and sixth principles illustrate the limitations of current policies and practices and the seriousness of the current situation, so reform is necessary. The seventh and eighth Principles emphasize the importance of changing human values, learn not to rely on material satisfaction, so as to be able to realize the great difference between big and great. Finally, they call on all of people to participate in the global movement of Deep Ecology.

3 Main Critiques

Although we understand ethical thought in Deep ecology in the analysis, some people point out that deep ecology may face some problems in theory and practice. The first is the criticism of Biocentric egalitarianism. From Watson's point of view, "If man is a part of nature, a nonprivileged member of a bio-spherical egalitarianism, Then the human species should be treated in no way different from any other species" (Watson 237). However, as the fourth principle says, "The flourishing of human life and culture is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires a decrease." The contradiction is that there is always a trade-off in life. In Nolt's article, he takes the problem of tending a garden as an example to describe the contradiction. If we want a good harvest, we have to limit the interests of insects. As Nolt says, "Promotion of some interests comes always the expense of others" (Nolt 165). Naess' notion of equal rights is difficult to advance this point in harming the interests of others, because protecting some interests means infringing on other interests. The first problem is how to achieve equality in trade-offs situations. Gandhi did not talk about rights at this point but practiced how to minimize harm to nature through his own actions.

The second problem is as Nolt says, "Self-realization carries the risk, moreover, of leading us not to deeper truths, but into a web of anthropomorphic illusions" (Nolt 165). Because in the process of pursuing oneness of life, people are more and more aware of this unity, and take it as a starting point to protect living beings, not polluting living beings, protecting them is like protecting human themselves. The process of endowing intrinsic value seems to be the personification of nature, which is based on a metaphysical belief. Besides, Deep ecology possibly to impose their will on others in the process of Self-realization, not only humans, but also non-human beings. The critical concern here is that Self-realization may slide towards self-reinforcement, eventually leading to a dominant consciousness being imposed on others. Even if it seems to Gandhi that such a situation can only occur in the utmost humility, it makes sense to worry about it.

The last critique is concerning the biocentric position, Watson's argument is: If we view the state of nature is undisturbed only when curbing their natural behavior, then we are assuming that human beings are apart from or above nature (Watson 238). However, this is a typical anthropocentric thinking. But the main idea of Naess's deep ecology is that human beings realize the unity between us and the ecology and give the ecology a equal rights for sustainable development. With the development of industrialization and the prevalence of consumerism, anthropocentrism ethics usually fails to make people realize the importance of ecology, for example, it is not enough just to save resources. We need to avoid harming ecology (e.g., not building nuclear power plants, dams, etc.).

4 Conclusion

As the representative of biocentrism, deep ecology considers that the thinking mode of anthropocentrism is the major

cause of many kinds of environmental problems and anthropocentrism is not enough to solve the increasingly serious ecological problems. Therefore, deep ecology provides a metaphysical consciousness such as the oneness of life realize through the way so call Self-realization. Besides, deep ecology provides the biocentric egalitarianism value of equality rights to live and blossom toward all living beings. However, in this process, deep ecology has its own problems. For example, absolute equalitarianism would be in trouble if it could not be equally balanced in value with other species. All in all, Deep ecology provides us with a new moral level to think about environmental ethics.

Funding

This paper is a phased achievement of the key research project of the Qiannan Prefecture Federation of Social Sciences, "Research on Countermeasures to Promote the Income Increase of Farmers in Qiannan Prefecture"(Project No.: Qnsk-2023-004).

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