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A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: AN EXAMINATION OF PRAGMATIC RATIONALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

This dissertation's central objective is to substantiate the pragmatic approach as a valid methodology in modern environmental ethics. Environmental ethics is the study of the moral relationships between humans and non-human animals, as well as the valuation of nature. Conventionally, the history of modern philosophy is regarded as beginning in the 17th century with the contributions of Francis Bacon and René Descartes. In this work, however, the term "modern" refers to the 20th- and 21st-century phenomenon of environmental ethics. This dissertation has three aims. First, it examines the role of reason in modern environmental ethics. Rationality is one of the most debated topics in philosophy and environmental ethics. This work assumes that hegemonic rationality is the root cause of environmental crises. Consequently, procedural pragmatic rationality can function as a framework within environmental discourse. Second, the thesis refutes the misconception of environmental pragmatism as presented by Lars Samuelsson, presenting environmental pragmatism as a legitimate environmental philosophy. Samuelsson argues that the stance adopted by environmental pragmatists has led environmental philosophers away from theoretical debates and falls short of being considered legitimate philosophical discussion. However, in light of the current ecological crisis, the need for practical, immediate solutions to address pressing environmental issues is paramount. Thus, this study advocates for environmental pragmatism as a robust ethical framework for environmental issues. Third, the text examines the application of Richard Rorty's philosophical concepts of Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity to sustainability. Despite the fact that a number of scholars have thoroughly examined the notion of sustainability as a means of addressing environmental issues, their efforts have frequently fallen into technological fix and the perpetuation of unrecognized anthropocentrism. Rorty's philosophical framework, as outlined in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, offers a new interpretation of sustainability as an adaptable practice rather than an adherence to unchanging, universal principles. Methodologically, the study employs a pragmatic philosophical approach. This method is used to evaluate the practical relevance and usefulness of various theoretical frameworks and perspectives for addressing the research problem. Thus, combining pragmatic rationality, which is procedural, with Rorty's concepts of Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity promotes environmental pragmatism as a useful framework within the context of modern environmental ethics.

1. Introduction

Environmental philosophy is a broad subject, encompassing ethics, aesthetics, and political philosophy, as well as epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, and history of philosophy (Jamieson, 2008: ix). However, environmental ethics is a systematic study of human beings' moral relations to natural environment. It assumes that ethical norms can govern human action towards the natural world (Desjardins, 2013:17).

It is an environmental crisis that inspired the development of environmental philosophy in the 1970s. A few philosophers studied human obligations to nature, focusing on environmental ethics. The earliest work in environmental philosophy fits within environmental ethics. The field is Anglo-American, drawing on the legacy of ethical theory inherited from modern European and North American philosophy ((Callicott & Frodeman, 2009: xv).

The theory of environmental ethics deals with questions like: What are these norms? To whom or to what human beings have responsibilities? How are these responsibilities justified (Desjardins, 2013:17). Similarly, (Palmer, 2002) claims that environmental ethics is centered on the following questions: what is considered valuable and where does that value come from? These questions raise some challenging and concerning issues. Even though some disagree, but environmental ethics should include other environmental members. In line with this, Gudorf & Huchingson argue that we should extend moral consideration beyond humans to the entire ecosystem (2010:3).

Katz & Light (1996) observed, even though the environmental ethics has made progress in examining moral relationships among humans, animals, and other species, the field has faced a challenge: It has not made changes in the real world. Also, despite the fact that environmental ethics has put forth alternative models for valuing other environmental entities, challenging the premise that humans are at the center of the moral world, however, it has been condemned for being more of a philosophical exercise in value clarification than being practical (Andrew & Katz, 1996; Voinov, 2020).

Despite its controversial positions, environmental ethics has much to offer as an applied discipline. Nevertheless, the result of the philosophical work must lead to practical solutions for

the environment. This is what gives rise to environmental pragmatism. According to environmental pragmatists, environmental ethics itself must develop a methodology of environmental pragmatism — driven by the recognition that theoretical debates are problematic for environmental policy development (Katz & Light, 1996:2). In this work, I adopted this line of thought.

2. Problem Statement and Objectives of the Study

The environment and its constituent parts are important to us in many ways. First, we live off them because they sustain our existence. Second, we live in them, and they serve as homes and familiar places where everyday life takes place and contain both personal and social histories. Third, we live with them; our lives take place against the backdrop of a natural world that has existed before us and will continue to exist beyond the life of the last human being, a world that we enter and for which awe and wonder are appropriate responses (O'Neill et al., 2008). Thus, living from, in, and with the environment requires some guiding principle to govern our actions. The mainstream environmental philosophers have developed some overarching principles to guide our actions, while environmental pragmatism has rejected such an overarching principle, arguing that it is not necessary to have such a principle, since such guidelines are not effective

Environmental philosophers agree that natural ecosystems are limited in their ability to produce essentials such as clean air and water, food, fertile topsoil, and a stable climate. We must recognize that natural ecosystems have limited capacity to assimilate waste, recover from disturbance, and support human survival. They are more fragile than previously understood (Desjardins, 2013:17).

Also, some scholars argue that we risk the world and ourselves unless we change the way we live. We need to change the way we live because of the growing environmental disaster, and there is a strong case to be made that if we fail to alter the way we view the relationship between humans and nature, we will never be able to make the required changes (Reitan, 1998:3). While there is still significant disagreement among environmental theories, most environmental theorists have reached an important consensus: we should respect nature. But how do we value nature is a rigorous task (Williams, 2019:7). Such theoretical tensions highlight the need for a practical framework, which this dissertation seeks to address.

This dissertation aims at examining environmental ethics from a pragmatic viewpoint by focusing on rationality and sustainability. Reason has been used as a privilege of human beings over other creatures in mainstream environmental ethics. Because humans are endowed with the capacity to reason, they are considered morally. In contrast to this view, some non-anthropocentrists, Peter Singer and Tom Regan, claim that reason should not be a criterion for moral consideration, rather they provide the capacity to feel pleasure and pain and to be a subject of life as criteria of moral standing ((Regan, 1983; Singer, 2002). This thesis presents a pragmatic form of rationality that can be applied to resolve the above arguments.

Moreover, the concept of sustainability seemed relevant. To avert environmental crises, many disciplines present sustainability as a permanent solution. However, the concept of sustainability falls into the trap of technological fix and unrecognized anthropocentrism. Hence, sustainability concept should adopt pragmatic method to solve ever-changing environmental problems.

Therefore, in my study I principally employed a pragmatic approach to the study of modern environmental ethics, emphasizing the issues of rationality and sustainability. In more detail, the subject matter pertains to: firstly, to demonstrate the importance of pragmatic rationality in modern environmental ethics; secondly, to show environmental pragmatism as sound environmental philosophy; and thirdly, to evaluate the sustainability from Rorty's perspective of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.*

3. Structure of the Study

This dissertation has seven chapters. The first chapter dealt with the study's background, the problem statement and objectives, theoretical framework, and organization of the study. Chapter two outlines overview of modern environmental ethics while the third chapter presents environmental pragmatism as the sound environmental philosophy. Fourth chapter provide a critique of Lars Samuelsson's concept of environmental pragmatism. Chapter five provide pragmatic form of rationality and its practical implications. Sixth chapter four will critically evaluate sustainability using the philosophical concepts of *Rorty's Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. The last chapter gives a summary of the major arguments and conclusions of the study.

4. Summary and conclusions of main chapters
4.1.Chapter 2: Overview of Environmental Ethics

In this chapter, I looked at the overview of contemporary environmental ethics. The modern environmental ethics can be approached from two perspectives: anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric. The anthropocentrists posit that only humans possess intrinsic value, while non-anthropocentrists have sought to identify the underlying causes of environmental issues by drawing upon a range of ethical traditions (Evans, 2005, p.vii). Despite their divergent perspectives on the moral standing of other environmental elements, there is a consensus among environmentalists that these elements are deserving of moral consideration.

The question of who is worthy of moral standing is a fundamental inquiry that leads to the concept of value. In the domain of environmental ethics, values are predominantly classified into two distinct categories: intrinsic and extrinsic. The former signifies value in its own right, while the latter represents value that is contingent on a specific purpose. From the standpoint of anthropocentrism, human beings are considered to possess moral worth, whereas other entities are regarded as having instrumental value. Non-anthropocentrists, however, posit that the natural world possesses inherent value that is not contingent upon human existence.

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that nonanthropocentrism manifests in various forms, encompassing two primary orientations: individualism and holism. According to the doctrine of individualistic nonathropocentrism, individual non-human beings, such as animals and plants, are regarded as morally valuable entities. Animal liberationists and biocentrists exemplify individualistic non-anthropocentric beliefs. Nonetheless, from a holistic, non-anthropocentric perspective, moral consideration is attributed to ecology in its totality, encompassing species, ecosystems, and the biosphere. Consequently, early environmental philosophers were successful in their efforts to assign moral worth to environmental entities. Additionally, they were able to identify the root cause of environmental problems.

Nonetheless, in the 1990's, environmental pragmatist philosophers initiated an examination of the works of early environmental philosophers. Mainstream environmental ethics, as theorized by environmental pragmatism, has been shown to have inherent flaws, primarily due to its theoretical nature. However, it should be noted that environmental pragmatists did not entirely

reject theoretical discussion. Instead, they argued that endless theoretical debate cannot alleviate current environmental challenges.

4.2.Chapter 3: Environmental Pragmatism as a Sound Environmental Philosophy

In the third chapter, I have defended environmental pragmatism as the genuine environmental philosophy. Environmental pragmatists seek to tackle mainstream environmental problems using the model of philosophical pragmatism. Environmental pragmatism is a viewpoint that prioritizes lived experience while challenging foundationalist conceptions of knowledge and value. Foundationalist theories recognize some significant ideas or values as basic or given and then support additional beliefs, values, or principles while taking these fundamental foundations into account. In contrast, environmental pragmatism, founded on the notion that ideas, programs, and proposals should be helpful, workable, and practical.

In this chapter, I have also discussed moral monism and moral pluralism in the context of environmental ethics. The main approaches in mainstream environmental ethics (anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism) are represented by moral monism. For instance, anthropocentrism, the concept of humans as the primary focal point of value, is a central tenet of this approach. Also, in the domain of non-anthropocentrism, biocentrism posits that all forms of life possess inherent value, independent of their utility to humans while ecocentrism, on the other hand, underscores the significance of the entire ecological system, encompassing natural processes, interactions, and the non-living components of organisms.

However, according to pluralists, a single ethical theory is inadequate to address the variety of scenarios and ethical relationships with humans and nature that are present. From a pluralist perspective, a single ethical theory cannot be developed to appeal to all individuals and thereby garner support for environmental change (Chatterjee, 2017, p.32). Thus, moral pluralism emerges as a relevant theoretical framework, given the limitations of moral monism in addressing the complexities of moral issues in a rapidly changing global environment. Moral pluralism is based on the notion that there is an absence of a single, all-encompassing moral theory or principle that can be applied appropriately in every morally challenging situation. Pragmatism acknowledges the existence of authentic distinctions in moral scenarios (Parker, 1996, p.31).

Pragmatists are in favor of value pluralism, which is the idea that there are different legitimate values. They tend to reject hierarchical perspectives in which a single value can justify all the others. This phenomenon can be attributed, at least in part, to the foundational perspective held by pragmatists concerning values as constructs that emerge through the dynamic process of valuation (Hourdequin, 2015, p.242). Therefore, I contended that this pluralistic orientation offers a more realistic and context-sensitive foundation for environmental ethics. Multiple moral frameworks are acknowledged as legitimate by environmental pluralism, which avoids the reductionism inherent in monistic theories and better reflects the complex moral terrain in which real environmental decisions are made.

4.3. Chapter 4: Critique of Samuelsson's Views

In order to demonstrate the validity of environmental pragmatism, an argument is developed against Samuelson, a critique of environmental pragmatism. Samuelson posits that environmental philosophy should persist in its engagement with theoretical debate, as it is of philosophical interest. From his perspective, any philosophy that does not address the issue of intrinsic value is not considered to be philosophical. Instead, further discourse on the matter is warranted, despite the acknowledgment that this pursuit may introduce certain impediments to the implementation of environmental policy. He asserts that environmental philosophy should be concerned with theoretical debates even though it introduces impediments to policy development. Samuelson advanced the argument that environmental pragmatist assertion constitutes an exaggeration in two respects. Firstly, it overstated the practical importance of environmental pragmatism. Secondly, it understated the theoretical importance of intrinsic value. However, I have examined Samuelsson's critique underestimates the practical urgency of environmental decision-making and overlooks the extent to which pragmatic approaches can engage meaningfully with theoretical concerns without being constrained by them.

Also, he elaborates on this assertion, underscoring the theoretical nature of philosophy and asserting that areas of philosophy such as epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of language bear little direct practical significance. It is possible for them to persist in their intellectual pursuits without first ascertaining the practical utility of their studies. In the event that this is the case, environmental philosophers who are interested in the possibility of inherent value in nature should be permitted to carry out investigations without first demonstrating its

practical usefulness (Samuelsson, 2010, p.410). However, this position risks isolating environmental philosophy from the very real and pressing challenges it seeks to illuminate, thereby overlooking the necessity of bridging theoretical inquiry with practical environmental action.

Moreover, Samuelson argued that philosophy is essentially a theoretical discipline, and its areas, such as metaphysics, epistemology, and aesthetics, have little direct practical significance. He also claims that individuals with critical skills, such as astrophysicists, psychologists and linguists, who do not priorities the conservation of nature, should be permitted to engage with environmental philosophy.

Indeed, I am in agreement with Samuelsson's assertions regarding the necessity for a more inclusive environmental philosophy that incorporates the insights of professionals from diverse fields, including astrophysicists, psychologists, and linguists. These disciplines, I posit, possess the critical faculties necessary to evaluate and address environmental challenges. Moreover, environmental ethics concerns the empirical sciences, including ecology, psychology, human physiology, and sociology. However, it has to be noted that environmental ethics, from its inception, has been inherently multidisciplinary in nature. Despite its initial categorization as a subfield of philosophy in the 1970s, the field of environmental ethics has since grown to encompass a diverse range of academic and non-academic scholars from a variety of backgrounds. For instance, Rachel Carson, who authored a highly influential book entitled *Silent Spring*, was a biologist. In addition, Lynn White, a historian, authored a significant article entitled "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." Overall, these examples demonstrate that environmental ethics is strengthened by its openness to interdisciplinary engagement, which continues to expand and enrich the field's conceptual boundaries.

In short, it has been contended that Samuelsson's argument is not valid for there is a clear distinction between downplaying the theory in its entirety and identifying the theoretical debate that hinders the basic policy imperative.

4.4. Chapter 5: Pragmatic Rationality in Environmental Ethics and Its Practical Implications

The discourse surrounding rationality has been the subject of debate within the context of environmental ethics. One perspective posits that rationality is a uniquely human attribute. A number of philosophers posit the argument that rationality is a human privilege, and that it is an ability that is exclusive to humans. For instance, Rene Descartes claims that animals are devoid of rationality. He perceives animals as merely mechanical entities. However, when the term "machines" is employed, it is not merely a reference to mechanical devices, but rather to machines crafted by the divine hand, thereby implying a significantly higher order. These machines possess significantly more complex internal mechanisms compared to those developed by human engineering.

Immanuel Kant shares the view that rationality is an essential characteristic of human beings. He asserts that they have their own objectives. This prompts the significant question of the purpose behind the existence of animals. However, the application of such inquiries to human beings is trivial and devoid of meaning. Animals lack the capacity for self-awareness, rendering them as mere means to a higher purpose, which is ultimately defined by the human condition. This implies that rationality is the primary marker of moral status. However, this view is limited because it empowers human beings to intervene with nature without limitations.

This rationality-centred view has been widely challenged in contemporary moral theory. For instance, proponent of animal liberation (Peter Singer) and rightists (Tom Regan), despite the criteria they establish to substantiate their claims, vigorously contend that moral standing should be conferred upon animals. Singer employed the concept of capacity to experience pleasure and pain as the criterion for moral consideration. In contrast, Regan utilized the concept of the subject of life as the criterion for moral inclusion. Consequently, they reject the notion that reason is the exclusive or privileged basis for moral consideration (Regan, 1999; Singer, 1999). This is crucial milestone at least in extending moral standing from human beings to animals.

Furthermore, Paul Taylor (1986), an American philosopher and one of the most influential proponents of biocentrism in environmental ethics, takes this critique further by rejecting rationality as a morally relevant criterion altogether and extending intrinsic value to all living

beings. This demonstrates the fact that we should extend moral standing to all living beings, regardless of whether they are rational or not. While certain limitations exist, I agree with Taylor on two points: the moral extension and the inevitability of some degree of destruction in the pursuit of personal and cultural values.

In a similar vein, this critique is deepened by Plumwood who argue that Western conceptions of rationality themselves are structurally exclusionary, dualistic, abstract, and detached from ecological and lived contexts. She shifts the discussion from the ethics of moral considerability to a broader questioning of how reason has been constructed to justify human beings' privileged status. Plumwood contends that even though current state of environmental problems is caused by reason, she asserts that reason can play a pivotal role in this rethinking, but it must be a self-critical, benign reason (Plumwood, 2002, p.8). This indicates that the notion of rationality goes beyond merely justifying human beings' exclusive privilege; rather, it is structurally deeply rooted. I am in agreement with Plumwood on the idea that if we can understand reason's structural problem, we will be able to identify its root cause and deal with its consequences.

Furthermore, Plumwood contends that the responsibility for the contemporary global environmental crisis lies with humans and that a clear and appropriate response is imperative. Indeed, technology provides the means necessary for sustainable living on and with the planet (Plumwood, 2002, p.8). Plumwood's argument is predicated on the premise that the problem at hand is not confined to a mere augmentation in knowledge or skills. Instead, an eco-culture is required that not only allows us to assess and fully understand the non-human realm and our dependence on it but also allows us to make the best choices about how we live with and affect the non-human world. It is within this trajectory that the need for a notion of pragmatic rationality emerges: a form of rationality that procedural while avoiding the exclusions, abstractions, and hierarchical dualisms characteristic of the dominant rationalist tradition.

Pragmatic rationality is a form of rationality that is experimental, context-sensitive and deliberative, and which is aimed at resolving concrete problems rather than settling ultimate metaphysical or moral disputes.

The present study posits that Plumwood's conceptualization of rationality can serve as a foundational framework for this endeavor. Among other environmental philosophers, I preferred

Plumwood because she offers a profound critique of how reason has been constructed and employed within Western thought. Furthermore, she not only critiques the traditional form of rationality, but also suggests that it could be repurposed in a non-exploitative way.

The pragmatic form of rationality can be applied to resolve the aforementioned argument. Pragmatic rationality can be utilized as a technique for reconciling divergent viewpoints, values, and methods in environmental ethics. Accordingly, I argued that pragmatic rationality is not only theoretically important but practically viable. To indicate the practical validity of pragmatic rationality in chapter five, I used the issue of biological diversity conservation as the case study. Biological diversity refers to the variety of living organisms from all sources—land, marine, and other aquatic ecosystems—and the ecological complexes they form, encompassing diversity within species, between species, and among ecosystems. The issue of biological diversity conservation is problematic in environmental discourse. That is why on the one hand the claims of biodiversity conservation claims that all the species have moral right regardless of their usefulness. However, such argument is debatable. Therefore, I presented pragmatic rationality as the procedural guide which is iterative, contextual and situational.

4.5. Chapter 6: Application of Rorty's Ideas to Sustainability

The current concept of sustainability emerged in the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (UNEP, 1972, p.1) and popularized in 1987, with the World Commission on Environment and Development — also known as the Brundtland Commission (Brundtland, 1987, p.8).

The literal meaning of the word sustainability is the ability to sustain, perpetuate or persist. Also, it is an ecological term used to characterize the long-term diversity, stability, resilience, and productivity of biological systems a prerequisite for the survival of humans and other animals. Furthermore, sustainability has been accepted as a common policy objective as the environment and social equity have gained prominence as global issues. Accordingly, the term, together with its derivatives, is used in many ways. These include sustainable development, sustainable living, sustainable future, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability, among many others. (Kopnina & Shoreman-Ouimet, 2015, p.3).

The issue of sustainability has begun to play a vital role in environmental policy decisions because it suggests that humanity can restore or repair the natural environment. For example, there is a push for planting trees to reverse the greenhouse effect. Developers must restore previously degraded areas in exchange for building permission. This notion of humanity's obligation to restore natural areas and entities, species, communities, ecosystems, is morally good. But it seems problematic. Regarding this, Katz (1997) in his book entitled *Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community*, argues that the concepts of environmental policy and ethics are a distortion of reality and a misunderstanding of humanity's place in the natural world. He believes this concept has two problems. First, it views human science and technology as the solution to natural processes. Second, it is anthropocentric, meaning that "restored" nature is created for human needs — the deceptive dream of human domination over nature. Finally, humanity will "restore" and repair the degraded biosphere (Katz, 1997, p.95). From this, it can be logically concluded that sustainability falls into the trap of a technological fix and unrecognized anthropocentrism. In this thesis, I draw on Katz's arguments to support my critique of the sustainability framework.

In this chapter, to address the problem of sustainability I used Rorty's book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) to add an essential element given the dynamic and complex nature of global environmental problems. Accordingly, I have explored how *Contingency, Irony* and *Solidarity* can provide a more flexible and responsive framework for sustainability. Through the acceptance of the subjectivity of our views, the avoidance of dogmatism through irony, and the building of community bonds, we can create sustainable practices that are more appropriate to an uncertain and changing environment.

Rorty borrows the definition of 'liberal' from Judith Shklar, who states that libertarians are individuals who consider cruelties to be the most terrible of all. He combines this with the term 'ironist' to designate a person who has confronted the contingencies of one's most central

convictions and desires – a person who is sufficiently historicist and nominalist to reject the idea that these convictions and desires point back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among these unsubstantiated desires their own hope that suffering will be reduced, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings will cease (Rorty, 1989, p. xv). I have argued that it is possible to contextualize Rorty's views of liberal ironism — the hope that suffering will be reduced, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings will cease. This can be expanded to include not only human suffering but also the suffering of nonhumans and ecosystems. Accordingly, the liberal ironist would recognize that the desire for environmental sustainability is not based on an objective or absolute moral truth, but rather on a contingent hope for a future in which environmental crises and the exploitation of nature by human beings are minimized.

Moreover, Rorty claims the idea of human solidarity is something we make, not something we find. By understanding solidarity as an evolving, historical invention, we can expand our sense of "we" to include those who are marginalized. Our motto should be an inspiration for inclusiveness, not a search for moral foundations. Rather than grounding politics in "common humanity," we should use philosophy to adapt our moral thinking to challenges, building on inclusive, democratic societies. In this way, our focus is on moral growth, not the search for moral foundations (Rorty, 1989, p.196). Furthermore, the notion of solidarity is an evolving, contingent, and historical invention by which we can expand our sense of the "we" to include other environmental entities.

5. Conclusion

In a nutshell, this thesis proposes the utilization of a pragmatic rationality that is procedural, incorporating Rorty's concepts of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* to sustainability, thereby advocating for environmental pragmatism as a constructive framework within the context of contemporary environmental ethics.

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