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On the role of intrinsic value in terms of environmental education

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Abstract

An understanding of instrumentally valuable nature resulted from anthropocentrism is incapable of producing long-term, real solutions to deal with environmental problems. It is obvious that these problems cannot be handled staying within the current understanding of nature-human relationship and without broaden the extent of ethics in a way to involve non-human entities. Human beings are prone to protect what they consider as intrinsically valuable. Further, they have a tendency to value the things around them and it can be improved. Thus, a big part of this can be succeeded through environmental education. Therefore, in this paper, I discuss the role of intrinsic value in terms of environmental education to handle the environmental problems, and investigate a new account of subjective intrinsic value about nature.

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1. Introduction

The recent increase in environmental problems forced human beings to search for a new environmental ethics to handle them, and for that reason to reconsider their relation with nature. It is recognized that, the technological and/or scientific developments, the governmental policies and/or legal restrictions are not capable of overcoming the environmental problems alone unless people change their prevailing attitude to nature. Because, there is no such a law that has control over every behaviour of human beings, and penetrates every detail of life; only ethics has such a power on human life.

However, the traditional account of nature is anthropocentric: that is, only human beings are intrinsically valuable. When we look at the history, we see two main approaches to nature in the Western culture that lies behind human-centered approach. According to the first one, nature is regarded as passive; therefore, people think they are the masters and possessors of nature. Since nature serves to man, he can use it as a tool, and can modify it in the way he wants. According to the second approach, nature has potential, and the task of man is to help it for actualizing itself by means of arts, science, philosophy, technology, etc. (Passmore, 1995). As a consequence of anthropocentrism, the main motive that drives people to protect nature was a fear of the depletion of natural resources and concern about the future of human race, etc. Nevertheless, it is obvious that, the growing amount of environmental problems cannot be handled staying within the current understanding of human-nature relation.

On the other hand, human beings unarguably have a tendency to value. They are inevitably valuing things around them: their families, works, hobbies, political views, religion, and foods they found delicious, etc. Thus, they can value non-human entities in nature as well as themselves. The controversial point is whether this valuation is

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intrinsic or instrumental. Intrinsic value is one of the most problematic and obscure concepts of value theory, in general, it is used in the sense of “in itself”, or “for its own sake”. It can be said that, if X is valuable for the sake of something else, it is instrumentally valuable, but if X is valuable for its own sake, then it is intrinsically valuable.

Why is intrinsic value important for nature and environmental education? Because, if nature has intrinsically valuable entities other than human beings, then, (contrary to present situation that people need to be justified their demand of non-intervene to nature) any demand of intervene to it would need to be justified (Callicott, 1999). The most powerful tool that may prevent the exploitation of nature is the intrinsic value that nature has, and the tendency of ability to value that human beings have. History showed us that human’s disposition of value-ability can be cultivated. For example, in earlier centuries, because of master-slave distinction among humans, not all people were regarded as intrinsically valuable. However, nowadays people harshly criticize such discriminations, and every person is regarded as intrinsically valuable. Further, as the time passes, our values change. We may devalue the things previously valued, also value the things previously devalued. For example, since marriage is not regarded as much blessed as before, nowadays living together as an unmarried couple is no more regarded as blameworthy or breaking up a marriage is not regarded as an offense. Therefore, at this point, education may have an important mission. Because, improvement of value-ability concerning non-human entities in nature can be succeeded largely through an environmental education. On the other hand, unless environmental education is based on a proper theoretical foundation, it will continue to fall short of introducing real, genuine solutions to environmental problems. In other words, during the construction of an environmental education program, if the intrinsic value of natural entities and nature itself is ignored, then that environmental education is condemned to be unsuccessful to realize its objective(s). For example, as a consequence of an environmental education grounded on anthropocentric approach, when it is to the benefit of human being, people more easily sacrifice or shut their eyes to extinction of an animal kind.

Now, even though the existence of intrinsic value is widely accepted, it is still a controversial issue whether this intrinsic value is objective or subjective. In other words, is the intrinsic value independent of the valuation of a valuer? To clarify that point firstly, I examine the objective account of intrinsic value and then the subjective account of value that I also defend.

2. Objective Intrinsic Value

Defenders of objective intrinsic value claim that it is independent from valuation of a human being. H. Rolston III. (2003), a vigorous advocate of objective intrinsic value, claims that in being a valuer, human beings do not cause the existence of the value in objects or events. Intrinsic value is not something gained; it is already possessed by the object itself. Therefore, it cannot be said that there were no value before humans came in. Values exist objectively; they exist independently of human beings. Further, he argues that human beings are not the unique valuer; animals, organisms, species, etc. can also create value, i.e., they are also value-able (Rolston, 1991). When we observe animals, we see that, animals defend themselves against any danger. Thus, it can be said that an animal values its own life for what it is in-itself. In addition, animals care for their young and nourish them, etc. Their young are valuable for those animals. For example, a mother cat is able to value its kitty (Rolston, 2003). Rolston claims that man’s function in value judgments is to reveal the value that is already possessed. Therefore, value needs only the consciousness of a valuer that comprehends and discloses its value. Humans merely shed light on them (Rolston, 2003); putting Rolston’s words, “we carry the lamp that light up value, although we require fuel that nature provides” (Rolston, 2003).

Additionally, human beings are not the only species that are intrinsically valuable because of a distinctive property, such as rationality. Non-human entities also have such distinctive properties that human beings lack, such as “the homing ability of pigeons, the speed of the cheetah, and the ruminative ability of sheep and cattle” (Boylan, 2001). These properties may also render these animals intrinsically valuable.

3. Subjective Intrinsic Value

Contrary to objectivists, I defend the position that, every value implies the existence of a valuing subject, who evaluates it. Valuation is not a human-neutral process. Since morality is an issue peculiar to humankind, whatever

has intrinsic value is related somehow to the person who evaluates it. Although values may not be directly related to human-interest, without existence of a human being we cannot talk about value. An intrinsic value or intrinsically valuable thing has to be valued by someone in order to be regarded as a value or valuable. Nevertheless, it does not mean that all values depend on human-interest. Valuation is an intentional act of the subject; but as Calliout stated it may not always be a conscious act. He gives the example of a philanderer; he may not realize the fact that he loves his wife until she leaves him (Callicott, 1999).

I claim that, although there are some intrinsic values in nature independent of usefulness of human-interest, their valuation is not independent of human beings. Rolston (2003) gives the example of a mother cat's caring of its kitty as a proof of the existence of an objective intrinsic value. However, since caring her young is something that a human being values, while observing the mother cat of caring its kitty, a person attributes the value to that relationship between them. In other words, the value this person ascribes to situation is the result of the reflection of human valuation. In this example, since caring the young is something valuable for human beings, a person regards the relationship between the mother cat and the kitten as intrinsically valuable; even he does not have any interest in them. Thus, the valuation here is independent of human interest but it is not human-neutral either; whole valuation process is human-related. Within a valuation, human beings can be a direct valuer or an indirect valuer. Since human beings are indirect valuers in the example Rolston proposed, it misleads us to the idea that these values exist independent of human moral reasoning. Human beings always involve in valuation, implicitly or explicitly, i.e., directly or indirectly. Because, without evaluation of a human valuer, one cannot plausibly talk about the existence of any value neither intrinsic nor instrumental.

Routley (1973) proposes a thought experiment known as "last person/man argument". In this example there is only one person left in the world. He knows that he will die soon. From an anthropocentric perspective, there is nothing wrong in destroying all plants and animals before he dies. Because, a world without human beings has no value. However, if you are also inclined to think that the last man does something morally wrong, then this argument can be evidence for of the fact that human beings value nature not only instrumentally but also intrinsically. The supporters of objectivistic intrinsic value propose "last person argument" as a challenge also to the subjectivist sense of intrinsic value. Because it is thought that, human beings' assigning value to the world in which they do not exist seems incompatible with subjectivism. However, I think, the last person argument can be merely an evidence for the existence of intrinsically valuable thing(s) in nature independently of human-interest. The last person argument can be a foundation for a non-anthropocentric ethics, but the argument does not say anything about the objectiveness or subjectiveness of intrinsic value. The important point missed is that, when you value something intrinsically, you do not damage it intentionally and not want to see its being damaged; rather you try to protect it. For example, a philosopher, who intrinsically values her/his books, does not think that after s/he is gone, they will lose their value, so all of her/his books can be burned. On the contrary, s/he believes that if s/he were alive s/he would find them valuable, thus, they continue to be worthy of their value. Besides, when a mother, intrinsically values her child, she is aware that the value she ascribed to child is subjective. However, she does not think that the child will become valueless with her death. This is the point that differs in intrinsic value from an instrumental one.

4. The Universality of Subjective Value

Now, it can be asked whether valuation is a human-related process, then what will save people from falling into the trap of an excessive amount of subjectiveness that may drag them into a moral solipsism. The answer is: the same *biogenetic structure* and the *psychological disposition* that human beings share.

Like anthropocentrism, the anthropogenic approach, I defend, accepts that value requires a valuer, in other words, value can be *generated* by human valuers *only*. However, different from anthropocentrism value is *not only* for humans. An anthropogenic value theory finds value only in the subjectivity of humans (thus it is subjectivist), but the problem of subjectivism (i.e. subjectivist relativism) which may emerge, can be handled by human biopsychological nature. According to such a biopsychological subjectivism, although intrinsic value is not an intrinsic property of objects, (since humans have a shared-tendency to attribute intrinsic value to objects) it is plausible to say that this value can be universalized.

Y. S. Lo proposes a dispositional moral theory substantially based on Humean principle that what is valuable/invaluable is people's approbation/disapprobation of an action/behavior/object (Lo, 2009). Concerning human beings' tendency to valuation Lo claims as follows:

People's evaluative dispositions are evolutionary and cultural products, and the products of personal history. They are not fixed absolutes but malleable to some extent. If T[†] is right in understanding value as fundamentally anchored by people's evaluative dispositions, then value can be created and relative values can become more universal, to the extent that people can cultivate, negotiate about, and converge in, their evaluative dispositions (Lo, 2009).

Biologic/evolutionary and also social changes that human beings have had until now, lead an increase in their tendency to value nature and also to protect what they value. Compared to before, they rarely sacrifice the things they value. For example, an arbitrary hunting is banned in many countries, and in the case of necessity, it is done as painlessly as possible.

Although the motives that lead us to seek a new environmental ethics may be anthropocentric, it does not necessarily follow that new ethics necessarily have to be anthropocentric. To make this explicit, I can appeal to Lo's (2006) dispositional moral theory. Lo, takes the Humean sense of justice as a model for her theory. Since the motive behind it is egoistic/self-centered, Hume regards justice as an artificial virtue. Hume says, although a single act of justice may be contrary to one's interest, in the long term, outcomes would be good for both society and for that individual. If every individual look out for his/her own interests, and does not pursue justice then the society will dissolve and people would become savage, misery, solitary condition that is the worst position for a society it can be imagined (Hume, 1939). Without a society, individuals are weak, they are not capable of doing all things alone and any particular skills they possess cannot reach the level of perfection. They are "constantly at risk of ruin and misery" (Hume, 1939). Therefore, Humean justice is not a natural virtue, i.e., it is artificial. Fundamentally, it depends on mutual convention of people at the formation of society. However, as much as people pursue it, it is internalized, cultivated and regarded as an intrinsic value as if it were a natural virtue. Consequently, people can generate intrinsically valuable environmental values to solve environmental problem with the help of a well-designed environmental education like Humean justice.

I think increase in people's experiences with nature and the reflections on it causes increase in knowledge about it and liability to value it. For example, we have tendency to be able to value our dog or cat more than a wild animal. Therefore, frequency of relationship affects value-giving ability. Consequently, it can be said that acquaintance can be fulfilled by an environmental education program.

One can be asked as to what can be the ground for the value that human beings subjectively attribute to nature/environment and to non-human entities in nature. I think, respect (for example, for their will to survive), admiration (for example, to stability and integrity of ecosystem, diversity, beauty, etc.), sympathy (based on feeling pain and pleasure) can be the reasons which are behind a valuation process.

5. Conclusion

The traditional western account of ethics is widely affected by religion (people behave in a good way, because God commands or they want to merit heaven, etc.) However, when ethics is separated from religion, what is left as the purpose of ethics is to *put social life in order*. Y. S. Lo states that "purpose of ethics is to answer how human beings can co-exist in sustainably happy and flourishing ways, and to assist them doing so." (Lo, 2009) I think, the definition should be reformulated in a way to include nature: the purpose of ethics is to answer how human beings and non-human entities can co-exist within nature in sustainably happy and flourishing ways, and to assist them doing so.

To sum up, a continual environmental ethics can only be anthropogenic. Further, I reject the objectivistic interpretation of intrinsic value, which claims the existence of value independently of human beings as valuers. I think valuation is a relational process between a valuer and the object to be valued. The worth of an object is the

[†]Lo defines T: X is (relatively/universally) valuable/disvaluable just if (some/all) human subjects are disposed, under favorable conditions {C}, to feel the sentiment of approbation/disapprobation toward X.

worth that it gained within a relation with the human valuer. Besides, trying to isolate an object from all relations may lead to an error in valuation; also, such isolation seems almost impossible.

Nature is a kind of community, and human beings are members of that community as well as plants, animals, etc. They are all dependent on each other for existence (Passmore, 1995). Further, “separation of self from nature that is the cause of environmental problems.” (Meyers, 2003) As being a member of it, man has no superiority over other members of nature; man does not have the right to reshape, exploit and/or transform nature. In a society, it is hard to mention goodness or badness of an act that solely concerns only one person, isolating him/her from other members of a society. Because interests of that person may coincide with the interests of another one. This approach is also applicable to nature-human relation. Since they are also members of the same biotic community, we cannot mention merely human’s interests without considering its relation to nature.

Huey-li Li claims, “recognition of the interdependence between humans and natural environment has been crucial to the development of environmental education” (Li, 1996). Environmental education programs mainly aim to change environmental attitudes, emotions and beliefs through increasing environmental knowledge. Therefore, the source and nature of the knowledge, which will be given through the environmental education, has a vital importance to reach the intended aim. Creation of non-anthropocentric intrinsic values in nature, and cultivation and internalization of them through a well-designed environmental education can lead to genuine environment friendly behaviours. Further, to reach the real and long-term solutions to environmental problems, first step aimed by environmental education should be creating awareness about the environment issues, and by means of that awareness improving the knowledge on environment. Because if we are not aware of the situation, we cannot focus on it and cannot change it.

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