
Aristotelian Virtue Ethics: Environmental Practices of People

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ABSTRACT

Human is the only being living on earth that is responsible for the destruction of the environment because of his ability to exploit the natural resources beyond the limits of safety. Meanwhile, environmental situation nowadays assessed as “alarming”, the growing environmental awareness about global problems and issues especially in school is evident, lack of adequate environmental literacy and virtue ethics towards the environment is an obstacle to reach its goal for achieving sustainability. Proper education and awareness campaign or symposium regarding the importance of the natural resources to the students are vital to this endeavor. Virtue ethics is now widely used as an alternative to Kantian and consequentialist ethical theories. However, moral philosophers have been slow to bring virtue ethics to bear on topics in applied ethics. This philosophical study found out that a lot of environmental problems due to human activities affect the environment. However, it could not be solved solely by one person but altogether. Thus, integration of virtue ethics within the framework of environmental education is an essential in school science curriculum with equal standing. Inculcating Aristotelian virtue ethics at an early stage of human development, their environmental attitudes and behaviors, their level of knowledge and views about the environment will change.

KEYWORDS: *virtue ethics, education, philosophy, Aristotle, environment*

INTRODUCTION

Most of the environmental issue that the people experienced today is the harmful effects of human activity itself on the biosphere. As our environment changes, there are massive attack of natural disasters and tragedies, warming and cooling periods, different types of weather patterns, and many more. With these environmental problems, we are in the state of planetary emergency that we are require an urgent attention to the various issues carefully and seriously (Gahlawat, 2015).

Human is the only being living on earth that is responsible for the destruction of the environment because of his ability to exploit the natural resources beyond the limits of safety. For instance, the pollution, global warming, over population, natural resource depletion, waste disposal, climate change, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, ocean acidification, ozone layer depletion, acid rain, water pollution, urban sprawl, public health issue and genetic engineering are the result of human practices that affect future generations (Ranga,2015).

Since environmental crises threaten the whole system of nature, changes in moral principles, attitudes and environmental education are very important. What this study highlights, is the impact of environmental attitudes and values on human behavior with nature and it has been endeavored to emphasize on the change in environmental practices to follow Aristotelian virtue ethics. According to Manisonet,al. (1980) that philosophy can help to solve

environmental problems in various areas, as it stimulates the formation of new social consciousness, focused on the necessity to overcome environmental contradictions related to cultural attitudes of the past, it contributes overcoming narrow-mindedness of some academic positions, one-sidedness of spiritual and practical orientation of Man in his relationship with nature, fragmentation of opinions.

Meanwhile, environmental situation nowadays assessed as “alarming”, the growing environmental awareness about global problems and issues especially in school is evident, lack of adequate environmental literacy and virtue ethics towards the environment is an obstacle to reach its goal for achieving sustainability. Proper education and awareness campaign or symposium regarding the importance of the natural resources to the students are vital to this endeavor. Similarly, the necessity to integrate environmental awareness in school as an implication of environmental concepts, laws and principles, best practices, the value of conservation and protection of natural resources to be part of the application of different aspects of education. Through science education must find out ways to develop and support positive environmental behavior but should foster virtue ethic among students.

Human behavior and attitudes are important to our environmental future. Where can we find guidance for this behavioral change? Despite the long history of classical philosophy’s approach to ethics, we face many complicating factors when trying to apply classical philosophy to environmental disputes. First, the individuals affected might be non-human and thus “non-standard” to classicists. Second, we might not be dealing with humans or discrete natural objects but with more theoretical constructs such as an ecosystem. Third, even if we focus strictly on human needs, some of the individuals we should consider might not yet exist, as when we try to take into account the values, needs, and preferences of future generations. Finally, the harm we are trying to improve or avoid could be the cumulative result of many individual acts over several human generations. That is, we may not perceive the ethical import of our negative impacts at a small scale until we are faced with their cumulative dire consequences.

Virtue ethics is now widely used as an alternative to Kantian and consequentialist ethical theories. However, moral philosophers have been slow to bring virtue ethics to bear on topics in applied ethics. Although environmental ethicists often employ virtue-oriented evaluation such as respect, care, and love for nature and appeal to role models such as Henry Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson for guidance, environmental ethics has not been well informed by contemporary work on virtue ethics. As such, Sandler demonstrates the many ways that any ethic of character can and should be informed by environmental considerations. He also develops a pluralistic virtue-oriented environmental ethics that accommodates the richness and complexity of our relationship with the natural environment and provides effective and guidance on environmental issue.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This philosophical study described the relevant facts, ethical questions, and draw preliminary conclusions about Aristotelian virtue ethics of several environmental issue especially the environmental practices of people. Specifically, it sought to answers to the following questions:

1. What are the common environmental practices of people nowadays?
2. What are the environmental impacts of the human practices to the environment?
3. How could Aristotelian virtue ethics be connected and applied in changing human behavior towards environmental practices?

By the use of word “ethics” in this paper is meant the field of philosophical inquiry that examines concepts about what is right and wrong and when responsibility should attach to human actions that cause harm.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This philosophical study is intended to integrate Aristotelian virtue ethics in teaching science education curriculum towards environment based from the identified practices and environmental awareness of people. The results of this study could be the eye opener of the curriculum policy maker to develop the curriculum with equal footing relevance to environmental virtue ethics in education. Moreover, it played important roles to emerge Department of Environment and Natural Resources to campaign and encourage people to work hand in hand in preserving and conserving our environment for future generation.

SCOPE AND DELIMITATION

This philosophical study focused on persuading people to look at Aristotelian virtue ethics to at least solve or minimize the damaging effect of human activities towards the environment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Aristotle claimed, that plants exist for the sake of animals and all other animals exist for the sake of human beings. We can make use of plants and animals and indeed minerals and other inanimate things without limitation and with that bountiful nature would turn to destruction. Our power over nature, we have discovered, is much more limited than we supposed when we first got modern science going, mostly because, as we discovered rather recently, our knowledge and understanding of the biosphere is in its infancy.

Is a virtue ethics thus reconfigured human-centered? Virtue ethics concerned with what the human beings should be and what we should do. But any normative ethics is concerned with the rightness or wrongness of human actions, with what we human beings should do and be and there is nothing in the environmental ethics literature that calls for a new ethic to suggest that there is anything wrong with that. Aristotelian philosophy attempted to identify the characteristics of human being is different from other species with a specific role to fulfill.

Hill (1983) argues that neither utilitarianism nor deontology can account for the wrongness of wantonly destroying a living thing such as a tree. But when he moves on to account for its wrongness in the virtue ethical terms of proper humility and arrogance, his discussion disconcertingly parallels Kant's account of the wrongness of inflicting gratuitous suffering on animals. And this is notoriously human-centered. Kant held that the animals' suffering was incidental. What is really wrong with cruelty to animals is that it leads to cruelty to one's fellow human beings. Hill, similarly, holds that what is wrong with lack of proper humility in

regard to nature is its dangerous tendency to lead the agent to treat other persons disrespectfully.

In my own view, the virtues that Aristotle regards include those related to thinking and those that relate the character, the moral virtues. It could be said that Aristotle's virtue ethics could be useful when dealing practical ethics. However, even we have the potential to develop moral and intellectual virtues, in present time, we could say that only few could achieve this as not everyone's virtues developed enough to apply to a moral dilemma. For example, where we brought up and the environment we live in could influence our potential to be able to achieve.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Virtue. As used in the study, it refers to a certain good character of a person.

Ethics. A term used as belief about what is moral and immoral.

Environment. This term refers to the natural world.

Practices. In contextual view, this term refers to the habitual work or performance of a certain individual.

People. A term which denoted as to group of individual living in a community that are united by a common culture, beliefs, and traditions.

THE SOCIAL ISSUE

Environmental issues may present themselves as temporary or permanent changes to the atmosphere, water, and land due to human activities, which can result in impacts that may be either reversible or irreversible. Rapid changes in societies concerning technology and economy have raised new issues related to human interaction with environment that question philosophy and ethics (AbediSarvestani and Shah Mansour, 2008).

'We have seen the devastating effects of some of the mining operations: the spillages of mine tailings in Boac, Marinduque, in Sipalay and Hinobaan, in Negros Occidental, in Itogon, Benguet, and mudflows in Sibutad, Zamboangadel Norte. The adverse social impact on the affected communities, especially on our indigenous brothers and sisters, far outweigh the gains promised by large-scale mining corporations. Our people living in the mountains and along the affected shorelines can no longer avail of the bounty of nature.' Statement of Catholic Bishops of the Philippines, 1998

Mining for example poses tremendous risks to life and limb, not only to miners but to the community as well. Countless accidents have happened and have affected thousands of miners in our country, directly or indirectly caused by hazardous mining operations. There is a very high social cost of mining and the impact on the society is immeasurable (Colena, 2006).

Another is the mismanagement of solid waste disposal, that is, the discarding of unwanted objects or substances that negatively impact the environment. People live nearby bodies of water throwing garbage anywhere. This causes floods and clogged in the waterways system.

In 2000, Philippine Republic Act 9003 or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Manual, one of the salient point is the mandatory segregation of solid waste mainly; (a) organic, (b) recyclable, and (c) residual. The increasing population in the community will result to the increase in volume of waste disposal. If the disposal of the waste generated will not be properly handled and managed it will cause pollution. Connected to this problem of waste disposal is air and water pollution. It is typically associated with byproducts of major industry, chemical solvents used in factories, drainage from mining operations, and smoke from coal-powered electrical plants, oil spills, agricultural fertilizers, insecticides and herbicides. Worse yet is radioactive material from nuclear power plants, which poses a double threat.

In addition, the shrinking of ecosystems resulted from growing human population and industrialization are agricultural expansion, new roads construction, and urban sprawl which considered as the primary cause of habitat destruction leading to species extinction. As we all know that genetic diversity is critical for the continuation of any ecosystem, where species are mutually dependent each other for survival especially for food sources. Thus, eliminating a few critical links in the food chain can have widespread consequences. Another environmental issue is the global warming of the earth's atmosphere which threatens to a rising sea level, turn tropical areas to deserts, and countless species extinction. Scientists said that global warming is a human-caused phenomenon due to great emission of excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere from burning of fossil fuels.

While these activities make the scenery look ugly, in most cases they cause no actual damage to the environment itself. The more serious environmental problems go beyond our human sense of beauty and involve harm: there is a body count, such as dead animals, destroyed habitats, endangered species. Even when some human activity genuinely harms the environment, a distinction must be made between the scopes of its impact, particularly whether it is local or global. A polluted stream will typically effect the environment only within its immediate area. Other problems, though, such as global warming, impact much of the biosphere is the thin layer of life that covers the surface of the earth, in contrast to the earth's lithosphere (rock), hydrosphere (water) and atmosphere (air).

Though we must all deal with the effects of these environmental concerns, people living in conditions of hunger and poverty in the developing world are at the greatest risk. The vast majority of people in hunger and poverty live in rural regions, relying heavily on agriculture, with their well-being closely tied to the natural environment. They are extremely vulnerable to extreme weather like droughts and flooding – exacerbated by climate change – and bear the burden of climate change (because they account for 80 percent of world population) though their carbon footprints are the smallest (World Bank World Development Report 2010).

THE PHILOSOPHY

Virtue theory is one of the oldest moral theories in Western philosophy, having its roots in ancient Greek civilization. The Greek term for virtue is *arete*, which means “excellence.” Greek epic poets and playwrights, such as Homer and Sophocles, described the morality of their heroes and antiheroes in terms of their respective virtues and vices. Their characters’ successes and failures hinged on their virtuous or vicious character traits. For example, in

Sophocles' tragedy Oedipus Rex, King Oedipus's life crumbles after he unknowingly kills his father and sleeps with his mother. These tragic acts themselves, though, are a consequence of his character flaws, particularly pride and overconfidence. With this, Aristotle's account of virtue is found in his work *The Nicomachean Ethics*, which he named in honor of his son Nicomachus (Feiser, 2017).

The first involves establishing the fact that we all strive after an ultimate good that defines who we are. For him, the subject of ethics is an attempt to discover this goal, and he argues that our ultimate good is happiness (in Greek, *eudaimonia*). But human happiness is different from the contentment that dogs experience, for example, and our happiness is unique to our specific human construction and purpose.

The second component in Aristotle's discussion involves discovering our uniquely human purpose by analyzing our uniquely human psyche. The psyche has an irrational element that is similar to that found in animals and a rational element that is distinctly human. The highest aspect of the rational part is calculative in nature and is responsible for the uniquely human ability to contemplate, reason logically, and formulate scientific principles. At the other extreme is the nutritive faculty, the most primitive and irrational element of our psyche, which is responsible for our physical nutrition and growth. This element is present in all life forms, and not just in humans and other animals. However, this faculty is rationally guided in humans since we have the distinct ability to control these desires with the help of reason. For example, animals have no capacity to control their anger while we do when we follow our reason. The human ability to properly control these desires is called "moral virtue" and is the focus of ethics.

The third and final component in Aristotle's discussion involves describing the moral virtues themselves. He makes three general observations about the nature of moral virtues. First, he argues that the ability to regulate our desires is not instinctive; rather, it is learned and is the outcome of both teaching and practice. Second, he suggests that desire-regulating virtues are character traits, or habitual dispositions, and should not be seen as either emotions or mental faculties. Third, he notes that moral virtues are desire-regulating character traits that fall at some mean between more extreme character traits. If we regulate our desires either too much or too little, then we create problems.

Aristotle offered the view that morality consists of developing virtuous habits that regulate the desires of our appetitive nature. Most virtues are at a mean between two vicious habits and our practical wisdom guides us in developing moral virtues by gradually informing us of our ultimate function and showing us the best means of attaining it.

Philosophers during the middle Ages adopted Aristotle's view, although virtues were reduced to a secondary status by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophers. Grotius argued that Aristotle's doctrine of the mean fails since some virtues, such as religious worship, actually require extreme behavior. Kant criticized that some virtues—such as cool-headedness—might become vices if they are not guided by higher moral principles. Mill argued that morality involves judging a person's actions and not a person's character.

Contemporary discussions of virtue assess the relative merits of virtue-based versus rule-based morality. Care ethics, which emphasizes the female capacity of nurturing, tells us that there is a moral need to care for people who are in situations of vulnerability and dependency. Many defenders reject the rule-based approach to ethics and that virtue theory is the best way

of understanding the moral capacity to care. We can distinguish between strong virtue theory, which rejects all rules, and weak virtue theory, which involves some rules. Aristotle himself is a weak virtue theorist, and weak virtue theory sidesteps many common criticisms against virtue theory in general. In any case, virtue theory is only one of many approaches to moral philosophy, although virtue theory is uniquely suited for teaching morality.

APPLICATION OF THE PHILOSOPHY TO THE SOCIAL ISSUE

What happen if people continued its practices in damaging our environment? As to the application of Aristotelian philosophy to education is concerned, this investigation found out that environmental problems are considered as the result of human behavior and human decision making. Changes in human activity and decision making are thus necessary to improve the environment. Studying the causes of environmental degradation and measures protection and improvement, the Aristotelian philosophy contributes to the expansion of human freedom through values formation towards nature and towards other people. All virtues are neither “good” nor “bad” in the deontological sense of categorical imperatives. Virtues are not duties we must practice. As Aristotle pointed out that all virtues in excess or in defect become vices.

When applied to environmental practices of people, virtue ethics argues that human beings should live in accordance with certain types of environmental virtues, example love, generosity, patience, simplicity, and others. For instance, a person may practice the virtue of simplicity by carefully evaluating how they use goods and services and looking for ways to “do more or less”. The practice of these virtues both creates and marks the person who is virtuous towards the environment. In virtue ethics, the weighing of values is not an act-based, but a “character-based”. Meaning, specific environmental actions are not necessarily right or wrong; instead of focus is on becoming a certain kind of person that will in turn treat the environment in accordance with environmental virtues.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATION

This philosophical study found out that a lot of environmental problems due to human activities affect the environment. However, it could not be solved solely by one person but altogether. The way of proper utilization and preservation of environmental resources can lead to enhance sustainable development in which teachers must take a lead in the development of environmental virtue ethics among the school children which play a vital role in protecting the world environment and its resources. The strengthening in-depth understanding of environmental ethics to the learners from an early stage of their formal education will create a positive impact to the environment. Thus, integration of virtue ethics within the framework of environmental education is an essential in school science curriculum with equal standing. Inculcating Aristotelian virtue ethics at an early stage of human development, their environmental attitudes and behaviors, their level of knowledge and views about the environment will change. This environmental virtue ethics in science education must become a process in all stages of life and practice environmental laws and policy implemented by the government.

With this, it can be recommended that an immediate solution and action to the world’s environmental issues is not too late, policy makers and environmentalists often advise

pursuing each of these paths, with hopes that technological improvements. The practice like of using renewable resources which can be continued without depletion is the one of the goal of sustainability.

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