

Human-Nature Relationship: An Ethical Analysis of the Environmental Crisis

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Abstract

Contemporary environmental crises, ranging from climate change and mass extinction to widespread pollution of natural resources, stem from a profound gap between technical knowledge and moral will. This fundamental research, employing conceptual analysis and a comparative methodology, explores the philosophical roots of these crises in anthropocentrism and traces the historical shift toward biocentrism, ecocentrism, and the rights of nature. By introducing four analytical indicators—ontological basis of value, scope of responsibility, criteria of justice, and legalizability—this study provides a critical comparison of the major ethical frameworks and addresses the existing gap in integrating these frameworks with Islamic and indigenous ethical traditions. The analysis reveals that each framework offers distinct insights: anthropocentrism emphasizes human accountability, biocentrism extends moral consideration to all living beings, ecocentrism prioritizes the integrity of entire ecosystems, and the rights of nature movement seeks to translate ethical imperatives into enforceable legal norms. The findings indicate that solutions to the environmental crisis are not merely technological or legal but require a fundamental transformation in worldviews, responsible consumption patterns, and the acceptance of collective responsibility grounded in ecological citizenship and an ethics of care. The study emphasizes the necessity of integrating ethics, law, education, and civic action to foster a sustainable relationship with nature, while also drawing upon religious and indigenous wisdom as complementary resources for moral renewal.

Keywords: : Environmental Ethics, Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism, Rights of Nature, Intergenerational Justice.

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1. Introduction

The environmental crisis is one of the most complex challenges of the twenty-first century. Climate change, biodiversity loss, resource pollution, and ecosystem degradation demonstrate that industrial development has brought extensive consequences for life on Earth. Although scientific advances have provided technical solutions, the escalating trend of destruction indicates that knowledge alone is insufficient. A significant part of the crisis lies in human attitudes toward nature; if nature is perceived merely as a resource for fulfilling human needs, unchecked exploitation appears natural. Conversely, if nature is regarded as possessing intrinsic value, its protection becomes an ethical responsibility.

The emergence of environmental ethics as a distinct philosophical discipline in the 1970s marked a turning point in how humanity conceptualizes its relationship with the natural world. Thinkers such as Aldo Leopold, Holmes Rolston III, Paul Taylor, and Peter Singer have addressed this issue from different perspectives, formulating views such as anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) played a pivotal role in awakening public consciousness to the dangers of environmental degradation, demonstrating that human interventions in nature could have catastrophic and unforeseen consequences. Carson's work exposed the toxic effects of pesticides on ecosystems and human health, challenging the prevailing assumption that technological progress was inherently beneficial and calling for a more humble and precautionary approach to humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Despite the theoretical richness of each of these perspectives, few studies have examined the feasibility of practically integrating them within a "critical pluralist" framework and connecting them with the ethical capacities of Islamic and indigenous traditions. Furthermore, a systematic comparison of these theories based on objective indicators (such as legalizability or criteria of justice) is rarely found in the existing literature. This article seeks to fill this gap by presenting a multi-dimensional model for the ethical analysis of the environmental crisis.

2. Research Method

This research is fundamental in nature and employs the method of conceptual analysis. Data were collected through purposeful sampling from classical and contemporary texts in the field of environmental ethics and analyzed using a comparative approach across theories of anthropocentrism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, and the rights of nature. The comparative analysis of theories is based on four analytical indicators: 1. The ontological basis of value (intrinsic vs. instrumental value); 2. The spatial and temporal scope of responsibility (individual, collective, or systemic); 3. The criterion of justice (intra-human, intergenerational, or interspecies); and 4. The capacity for translation into legal and institutional language (the ability to be converted into law and executive procedures). The theoretical framework is developed around the concepts of "intrinsic value" and "ethical responsibility."

3. Anthropocentrism: Root of the Crisis or Inescapable Framework?

Anthropocentrism places humans at the center and measure of all values, with roots in Greek philosophy and particular interpretations of Judeo-Christian texts. Aristotle considered nature to serve human beings, and Descartes, through mind-body dualism, reduced nature to a soulless machine. Lynn White Jr. (1967) traced the environmental crisis to a worldview based on “domination and subjugation.” Anthropocentrism can be divided into two types: hard (purely instrumental value for nature) and soft (emphasizing human ethical responsibilities toward nature) (Norton 1984, 134–35). The main critique of the hard type comes from two directions: first, epistemological critique, which labels it “speciesism” (Singer 1975, 6); and second, practical critique, which considers it a primary cause of ecosystem destruction.

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1973) offered a more fundamental critique of anthropocentrism by distinguishing between “shallow” and “deep” ecology movements. According to Naess, the shallow ecology movement focuses primarily on pollution control and resource conservation for human benefit—an approach that remains trapped within an anthropocentric framework. In contrast, the deep ecology movement calls for a radical shift in worldview, recognizing the intrinsic value of all living beings and the interconnectedness of all forms of life. Naess argued that ecologically responsible policies must address not only pollution and resource depletion but also the deeper cultural, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions of the environmental crisis. This distinction has profoundly influenced subsequent debates in environmental ethics and continues to inform discussions about the limits of anthropocentric approaches to environmental protection.

To avoid one-sidedness, it must be acknowledged that even within the soft anthropocentric framework, Norton (1984, 138) himself argues that human rational and moral capacities are not a license for exploitation but precisely the basis of human responsibility, because humans, due to their understanding of long-term consequences, bear a heavier duty toward the environment.

Critical Assessment: Soft anthropocentrism attempts to strike a balance, yet it remains trapped in the instrumentalization of nature and fails to provide motivation beyond self-interest for environmental protection. The deep ecology critique, as articulated by Naess, suggests that genuine environmental responsibility requires a more fundamental transformation in how humans understand their place within the natural world.

4. Biocentrism: Extending the Realm of Ethical Value

Biocentrism extends intrinsic value to all living beings. Schweitzer with “reverence for life” and Taylor (1986, 45) with “intrinsic equality” and the rejection of human superiority expanded the boundaries of ethics. However, this view faces two serious critiques: the practical critique (which would render any human intervention in nature—including agriculture or construction—unethical), and the holistic critique (which argues it remains caught in excessive individualism) (Leopold 1949, 204).

Critical Assessment: Biocentrism represents a significant step forward in expanding ethical boundaries, but it is insufficient on its own for solving real-world ethical dilemmas and requires a holistic framework for prioritizing values.

5. Ecocentrism and the Land Ethic

Ecocentrism shifts the focus of value from individual organisms to the entire biotic community. Leopold (1949, 224–25), with his “Land Ethic,” emphasized extending the boundaries of the moral community to soil, water, and plants, formulating his principle as follows: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.” Rolston III (1988, 143) sought value in evolutionary processes and genetic diversity. The main critique concerns the danger of “biospheric totalitarianism” (the absolute prioritization of the whole over individual rights), but proponents respond that humans are also members of this community, and the health of the whole ultimately benefits all members.

Murray Bookchin (1980) offered a complementary perspective through his theory of social ecology, arguing that environmental problems cannot be understood or solved in isolation from social hierarchies and domination. Bookchin contended that the domination of nature is rooted in the domination of human by human, and that any genuine ecological transformation must address the underlying social structures that perpetuate both social and environmental injustice. This perspective highlights the interconnectedness of ecological and social concerns, suggesting that environmental ethics must be integrated with broader struggles for social justice and democratic participation.

Critical Assessment: Ecocentrism provides the richest philosophical foundation for environmental protection, provided it is safeguarded against ecological authoritarianism through a just legal system. The social ecology perspective reminds us that environmental ethics cannot be divorced from questions of power, inequality, and social transformation.

6. Rights of Nature: From Ethical Imperatives to Legal Requirements

Christopher Stone (1972) proposed the appointment of “guardians” for rivers and forests. Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2010) formally recognized the Rights of Nature in their constitutions, and the Whanganui River in New Zealand (2017) was recognized as a legal person. This movement faces challenges such as the anthropocentrism of existing legal systems and the difficulty of determining nature’s legal representative.

The environmental justice movement, which emerged in the United States during the early 1980s, has played a crucial role in highlighting the unequal distribution of environmental harms. The movement was galvanized in 1982 by mass protests against the dumping of toxic waste in Warren County, North Carolina, a predominantly low-income and African American community. Activists framed the campaign as an environmental justice initiative, linking environmental concerns with civil rights and social justice. This movement demonstrated that environmental problems are not merely technical or ecological but are deeply inter-

twined with issues of race, class, and political power. The concept of environmental justice has since been adopted internationally, influencing policy debates and legal frameworks around the world.

Critical Assessment: The Rights of Nature is a necessary ideal still in its early stages, and its effectiveness depends on shifting the balance of economic and political power. The environmental justice movement reminds us that any meaningful recognition of nature's rights must also address the disproportionate environmental burdens borne by marginalized communities.

7. Consumption Ethics and Individual Responsibility

Two approaches are in tension here: individualistic (emphasizing lifestyle change) and structuralist (viewing individual responsibility as shifting accountability from corporations to consumers) (Dobson 2003, 78). The concept of "ecological citizenship" bridges these two; it envisions a citizen who is not merely a green consumer but a member of a broader community (including future generations) who also participates in civic engagement (Barry 1999, 104).

Val Plumwood (1993) offered a powerful feminist critique of the anthropocentric and dualistic frameworks that have shaped Western philosophy and environmental thought. Plumwood argued that the domination of nature is intimately connected with the domination of women, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups through a logic of "mastery" that systematically excludes and devalues the non-human world. She contended that feminist theory has an important contribution to make to environmental philosophy by challenging these dualisms and offering alternative frameworks based on reciprocity, care, and connection. Plumwood's work has been influential in the development of ecofeminism, which seeks to understand and overcome the interlinked oppressions of gender, race, class, and nature.

Critical Assessment: Sole pressure on individuals is unjust, but denying individual responsibility deprives society of a primary driving force for transformation. Both levels must be addressed simultaneously. The ecofeminist perspective reminds us that environmental ethics must be attentive to the ways in which social hierarchies and cultural narratives shape our relationship with the natural world.

8. Climate Change and the Test of Collective Responsibility

Climate change is the most difficult ethical question due to its temporal and spatial scale, diffusion of agents, and asymmetrical impacts (Jonas 1979, 45). Young (2011, 151) distinguished between "liability responsibility" (which is ineffective) and "social connection responsibility." The principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" indicates the heavier obligation of developed countries in emissions reduction. Individual actions to reduce carbon footprints, though insufficient, provide groundwork for collective policymaking (Hourdquin 2010, 89).

Climate justice has emerged as a central concern within environmental ethics, highlighting the disproportionate impacts of climate change on vulnerable populations and developing countries. The environmental justice framework, which originated in struggles against environmental racism in the United States, has

been extended to the global scale to address the inequities of climate change. These inequities reflect historical patterns of colonization, exploitation, and unequal development that continue to shape the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens.

Critical Assessment: Climate change has laid bare the interdependence of humans and generations, making climate justice the focal point of contemporary ethics.

9. Religious and Indigenous Traditions: Ancient Wisdom in the Anthropocene Horizon

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, “preservation and stewardship” stand alongside “domination,” and Pope Francis (2015, 67) characterized the crisis as “structural sin.” In Islam, the human-nature relationship rests on foundational concepts: the noble verse “Do not cause corruption on the earth after its reform” (Qur’an 7:56) explicitly prohibits corruption on Earth. Furthermore, the concept of “succession” (Qur’an 2:30) signifies human trusteeship and negates absolute ownership. The emphasis on “prohibition of extravagance and wastefulness” in verses and traditions provides a precise framework for balanced resource consumption that aligns with sustainable development (Nasr 2006, 89; Qasemi 2015, 132).

The Qur’anic concept of *khilāfah* (stewardship) has emerged as a central framework within contemporary Islamic environmental ethics. According to this understanding, humans are appointed as God’s trustees on Earth, responsible for maintaining the balance of ecosystems and preventing environmental degradation. This concept is complemented by the principles of *amanah* (trust) and *mīzān* (balance), which together establish a comprehensive ethical framework for environmental stewardship. The revival of the *khilāfah* concept in recent decades represents an Islamic response to the global environmental crisis, offering a theological basis for environmental responsibility that aligns with sustainability. Islamic environmental ethics thus emphasize moderation, justice, and gratitude as guiding principles in environmental stewardship.

Indigenous worldviews, with concepts such as “Pachamama,” portray a participatory relationship with the Earth. These traditions often embody ecological knowledge and practices that have sustained human communities for millennia, offering valuable alternatives to the extractive and exploitative paradigms of modern industrial civilization.

Critical Assessment: In the Anthropocene, a simple return to archetypes is not possible, but critical engagement with these traditions can serve as an antidote to consumerist nihilism.

10. Education, Policymaking, and Business

Effective education operates at three levels: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Based on empirical findings in environmental psychology, direct experience with nature in childhood plays a significant role in shaping responsible attitudes in adulthood (Orr 2004, 87). In policymaking, traditional cost-benefit analysis neglects intrinsic values. In business, stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984, 62) extends corporate responsibility to the environment, but the phenomenon of “greenwashing” demonstrates that many claims lack substantive backing; models

such as the circular economy and Benefit Corporations (B Corps) represent more serious steps (Abedi 2019, 115).

The integration of environmental ethics into education, policymaking, and business practices is essential for addressing the multifaceted nature of the environmental crisis. Education must foster not only knowledge about environmental issues but also the values, attitudes, and skills necessary for ecological citizenship. Policymaking must move beyond narrow cost-benefit analyses to incorporate considerations of justice, sustainability, and the intrinsic value of nature. Business must recognize that long-term profitability depends on ecological sustainability and social responsibility.

Critical Assessment: Transformation requires a strategic triad: education that fosters connectedness, justice-based policymaking, and responsible business practices.

11. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the environmental crisis, at its most fundamental level, is a moral crisis, because it concerns the quality of human self-perception and our place within the web of life. The comparative examination of theories indicates a gradual expansion of the ethical “we” from humans to animals, to all living beings, and ultimately to the entire biotic community. Adopting a critical pluralist approach, the article emphasizes that while in various contexts one may draw upon soft anthropocentrism (to persuade policymakers) or biocentrism (to defend species), at the foundational level, Leopold’s “Land Ethic” remains the most effective philosophical framework due to its attention to the integrity and interconnectedness of life.

The research findings demonstrate that ecocentrism is superior to other theories across all four indicators: the basis of value, scope of responsibility, type of justice, and legalizability. However, ecocentrism must be complemented by insights from social ecology, ecofeminism, and environmental justice to address the social dimensions of environmental degradation. Deep ecology, as articulated by Naess, offers a powerful critique of anthropocentrism and calls for a fundamental transformation in human consciousness and values. Islamic environmental ethics, with its emphasis on stewardship, trust, and balance, provides a rich theological foundation for environmental responsibility that resonates with contemporary concerns about sustainability and intergenerational justice.

Ultimately, overcoming the current crisis necessitates a rethinking of human identity (transitioning from the “separate self” to the “self connected to the Earth”), reconstructing legal-economic institutions grounded in justice, and collective action within the framework of ecological citizenship. Redefining the human-nature relationship is not a utopian project but a rational and moral imperative for the survival of ecosystems and the continuation of life on Earth.

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