

PAPER

Revisiting eco-ethics and econ-ethics

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ABSTRACT: Modern humanity can survive only if traditional ethics are extended to include eco-ethics and econ-ethics. Success or failure in developing and implementing these new ethical constructs will affect the fate of our species *Homo sapiens* and that of millions of other forms of life. In the long run failure to accept and apply eco-ethics and econ-ethics would reduce the capacities of Planet Earth to support life.

KEY WORDS: Ethics · Ecological dynamics · Guidelines for human behaviour and responsibilities · Need to further develop ethical constructs

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INTRODUCTION

Ethics have a long history. Their origins date back to the birth of human consciousness: the awakening of creativity and abstract thinking, the roots of faith and religion, the evaluation and organisation of human activities. As humanity itself, ethics are subject to evolution. Over thousands of years different traits of traditional ethics have evolved, guided and controlled by religion, philosophy and politics.

Traditional ethical traits focus on inter-human relationships and relations between humans and supernatural phenomena (spirits, gods). They have led to anthropocentric and geocentric models of our world – models that do not sufficiently acknowledge the realities around us. The models overemphasise the importance and the positive sides of our species *Homo sapiens*, as well as the role of Earth in the Universe. We now know: *H. sapiens* is not the centre of Earth, and Planet Earth is not the centre of the Universe. *H. sapiens* is one species among many millions and part of the life process like any animal, plant or virus. Earth is one planet among billions in our galaxy, and there are billions of such galaxies.

In order to survive and to maintain healthy ecosystems we must correct our ethical views as our scientific knowledge increases. There is need for continuously adapting and extending ethics and thus developing updated guidelines for human behavior and for safeguarding our progress on dangerous roads into the future.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ETHICS IN SCIENCE

Ethics are a principal characteristic of humanity. They set us apart from other forms of life. Even though religious people often view ethics as an eternal entity not subject to change, ethics do change in concert with the human group that developed them and for which they serve as guidelines.

Science increasingly affects human societies. This growing power of science entails the growing significance of ethics in science. Scientists must assume responsibility for their activities and discoveries. The need for more attention to ethical consequences of scientific progress has been emphasized by the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize winner Professor Sir Josef Rotblat. In the Nature World Conference on Science 1999, Rotblat said: 'Academies of Science should explicitly include ethical issues in their terms of reference'.

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Similarly, a letter from EEIU Fellow Professor Rene Kirchmann addressed to EEIU Vice President Academician Professor Gennady Polikarpov quotes Rotblat as saying: 'Every Academy of Science throughout the world should set up a mechanism for studying and monitoring the ethical problems arising from modern science' (see [EEIU Letters and Discussions 10.06.99](#)).

In essence, Rotblat calls, and rightly so, for science to control science.

I call for science to assist in further developing ethics, to provide it with a broader basis. New ethical constructs must incorporate new scientific insights and thus assist in defining, controlling and practising sustainability of the overall system Nature plus Humanity. This can be achieved only if ecological science enters the scene, if we develop and implement eco-ethics and econ-ethics.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ECO-ETHICS AND ECON-ETHICS

Eco-ethics as introduced and defined by Kinne (1997, 1998, 2001, 2002) refer to the principal importance of ecological dynamics for all forms of life on earth. Ecological dynamics are the cradle, evolutionary motor, directive force and overall supporter of life as we know it. Hence, progressive deformation of ecological dynamics and ecological systems – ecosystems – due to human activities demand ethics to function as controlling force.

In the 2001 and 2002 [EEIU Brochures](#) I have outlined the *concepts and theses* of eco-ethics. Comparisons between ecology and economy led to the concept of 'econ-ethics'. Econ-ethics stress the fact that our economies cannot continue to thrive without ethical guidelines. Human economic activities strive to maximise the exploitation and use of nature's resources for our own ends. Increasing intensities of such use cause a multitude of problems. The central aim of econ-ethics is to assess these problems and to offer sustainable solutions. Econ-ethics attempt to analyze the driving forces behind our seemingly boundless drive to egoistically exploit our environment, and to assess needs and means for correcting that drive. In essence, econ-ethics call for restraint in the exploitation of nature, better integration of human economic activities into ecosystem dynamics and more respect for the health of ecosystems.

Since dynamic forces of ecosystems determine creation, evolution and death of all forms of life on earth they also influence the behavior of these life forms. This statement includes, of course, our own species. In this sense econ-ethics is a specific expression of the more general term eco-ethics.

The significance of eco-ethics has recently received additional attention by EEIU Fellow John Cairns in his publication '[A declaration of eco-ethics](#)' (2002). Among other things Cairns writes: 'We acknowledge that our spirituality had its genesis in nature and vow not to profane it by destroying its source. People who would argue that spirituality comes from a higher power doubtless believe nature does also, so the source is identical' (p. 80). Cairns continues: 'We pledge to honor every individual, institution and organization that practices eco-ethics and value this attribute more than material possessions' (p. 80).

Failure to adequately accommodate ecological science in modern ethical constructs does not only impair nature's capacity to support life. Ultimately it will initiate a global catastrophe of gigantic dimensions. This enormous danger is being recognised by more and more people, and it frightens them. Their fear fuels a revolution in our thinking and belief, and in the ways we see ourselves and the world in which we live. Above all, the fear alerts something very important – something that over the centuries has been put to sleep by religious teachings (which place responsibility with a Higher Being): our willingness to accept and practice responsibility for our own deeds.

CONSEQUENCES

We must re-examine our activities, beliefs and aims in the light of eco-ethics and, in a concerted effort, build a new conceptual house for humanity. Ways of accomplishing this are indicated above, outlined in the [Brochures of the Eco-Ethics International Union](#) (EEIU; www.eei.org), in the Union's publication organ [Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics](#) (ESEP; www.esep.de) and in John Cairns' ESEP Book [Goals and conditions for a sustainable world](#) (2002).

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