

Environmental Ethics – Human Life and the Environment

Michael Cheng-tek Tai.Ph.D.

Dean, College of Medical Humanities & Social Sciences
Chungshan Medical University. Taichung. Taiwan.

Outline:

I. Introduction

1. “ Everything that was created was very good”
2. What has environment to do with human life ?
 - a. Descarte’s Cartesian Dualism
 - b. Psychosomatic Model
 - c. psycho-social-environmental Model
3. The Mutuality between Man and Environment

II. The Relationship between Man and His Environment

1. Harmonious Relationship: man in peace with nature
2. Tensed Relationship: man in exploration of nature
3. Conflicting Relationship: man in manipulation of nature
4. Deteriorating Relationship: man re-mapping and re-creating nature

III. What Went Wrong with Man’s Relationship to Nature ?

1. Man’s pride of being in charge
2. Misinterpretation of man’s role in nature
 - a. as a conqueror
 - b. as a steward
3. Lacking of an Ethics of Man to Nature
 - development of human ethics:
 - a. Individual to Individual
 - b. Man’s duty to society
 - c. Morally neutral
 - d. Where is our relationship to the environment ?

IV. New Awareness and New Ethics

1. New Awareness
 - a. Man is a part not above ecosystem
 - b. Man is a steward to the earth
 - c. Man is a finite being
2. New ethics
 - a. Responsibility VS Right
 - b. Responsibility endows Rights



c. Responsibility means accountability and commitment

d. A Sustainable Development

i.. conservation

ii. preservation

iii. reverence of nature

V. Conclusion:

Man, the Order Observer

Man, the Nature Manipulator

Man, the Guilt Confessor

Man, the Earth Keeper and Restorer

I. Introduction

What has environment to do with human life ? The traditional understanding dating back to the time of Rene Descarte, the answer was no. According to Descarte's Cartesian dualism, mind, emotion or even environment were separate from human body unable to effect human health. (1) The factor of illness was simply biological, for instance, bacteria or virus infection or vitamin deficiencies. This biomedical understanding of health soon gave way to a new model called psychosomatic which defined health and illness from the interaction of psychosocial and biological factors. With the discovery of electricity and the onset of atomic age, scientists in modern time realized that not only human life is influenced by biological factor but also by social, psychological and even environmental factors. (1) The environment in which human resides plays an important role in health of a person definitely affecting the fulfillment of an individual life.

Is our environment in a good condition to fortify a good life for humankind ? It has to be according to the Book of Genesis because the creation in God's eyes is Good. The Psalmist also portrays the ideal picture of the earth like this (2):

The grass to grow for the cattle,
And plants for man to cultivate
That (God) may bring forth food from the earth
And wine to gladden the hearts of man
Oil to make his face shine
And bread to strengthen man's heart
The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly
In them the birds build their nests
The stork has her home in fir trees...

Isaiah even projected a harmony between people and their environment that they
Shall plant vineyards and eat their fruits...

They shall not labor in vain
Or bear children in calamity
The wolf and the lamb shall graze together...
They shall do no evil or harm in all holy mountain

.....

The wofle also shall dwell with the lamb
The leopard shall lie down with the kid
The calf and the young lion and the fatling together
A little child shall lead them ...(3)

Where is this beautiful harmony ? why don't we seem to see it ? What has gone wrong ?

II. The Environment

During the 60s, there was a popular song called Strange Days in which they sang:

“ What have they done to the earth?
What have they done to our fair sister ?
Ravaged and plundered,
And ripped her and bit her,
Stuck her with knives in the side of the dawn,
And tied her with fences and dragged her down.” (5)

The devastating state of our environment is obvious everywhere in the world today.

Almost half a century has passed since this song was written, has our relationship with nature improved ? Are we taking care of our environment in a more careful way ? The recent report from Tuvalu, an island nation in the Pacific indicated that our relationship with mother nature has not only not improved, on the contrary, it has been worsened. Stories from the Sea published by the Council of World Mission reported (6) : “ the Pacific region has always been prone to extreme weather events like tropical cyclones ..but a more recent and equally threatening environmental phenomenon is sea water intrusion. This is the entry of salty water rising through cracks in the atoll, infiltrating the fresh water and surfacing on low-lying areas.” Finding the source of this problem, it has been discovered that greenhouse gases blanketing the earth, trapping the sun's energy has caused the warmer air to hold more water with heavier rainfalls that changes wind patterns and its circulation in the oceans. In turn it forces the rising temperatures that causes the ice in the Arctic and Antarctic to melt. The result is the rise of sea level between 10 and 20cm in the 20th century and the prediction is a likely rise of a further 15 to 90cm by 2100. The

warming of the earth affects not only the island countries of the Pacific, the tsunami disaster in Indonesia and the Katrina Hurricane that devastated New Orleans, USA, were all the results of environmental change. The Kyoto Protocol which aims to deal with greenhouse gases by cutting back emissions, principally carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous-oxide is one of the human attempts to repair the damage caused by humankind yet many countries still burning fossil fuel despite the prediction that further temperature rises will be the result. The nature is groaning and warning us that something must be done in order to prevent cosmetic catastrophe.

III. What is wrong with our relationship to nature ?

Richard Means in his article “ Why Worry About Nature” quoted Albert Schweitzer :” The great fault of all ethics hitherto has been that they believed themselves to have to deal only with the relation of man to man.” (7) In other word, the ethics of man to nature has been missing. The ecologist Aldo Leopold divided the history of moral judgment of human relations into three stages(8):

The first stage of moral judgment is represented by the Ten Commandments. The emphasis of this stage was on the individual’s relationship to other individuals. In the second stage, moralists began to stress men’s duty to society as distinct from their duties to particular individuals. The third stage can be called as morally neutral because men do not feel morally guilty if they maltreat the land, extract from it whatever it will produce and then move on to fresh fields and pastures new. This stage of moral neutrality is even more obvious in the wake of breakthrough of biotechnology beginning from the last decade in 20th century, e.g. the biotech to deploy stem cell for medical technology. We will extract stem cell from fetus and let the potential life wither without feeling any guilty as long as it can yield some benefit to humankind. This utilitarian mentality has permeated in almost all of scientific fields assuming that any progress in biotech research can be justified as long as it promotes health and longevity. The sense of duty toward fellowmen and society are missing. John Passmore said it is human arrogance that takes nature for granted and treats nature as a captive to be raped rather than as a partner to be cherished. This arrogance must be changed and a new awareness and ethics developed for a harmonious human-nature relationship.

IV. A New Awareness

“ The ocean born
The ocean died
The Lord gave; man has taken away
Cursed be the name of man..” (9)



This epitaph carved on a tombstone at the Oceanside in California laments the human arrogance toward nature. How widespread is this human exploitive mentality on earth ? Some argue that the native culture in North America or in Africa basically are environmentally concerned and compatible because they see nature as mother thus pinpointing the finger toward the developed nations as the source of our environmental problems. This may be true that some cultures are more ecologically minded than others yet when we look at China, a developing nation, we are alarmed by the tone carried by their leader, for instance, the familiar rhetoric of Mao Tse-tung during the fifties was that nature must be defied and conquered. The famous slogan “ Chairman Mao’e thoughts are our Guides to Scoring Victories in the Struggle Against Nature” (10) was self-evident that humankind attempted to explore nature at any price. Human must realize that there is no further frontier here on earth for him to explore. New awareness is needed for him to live in harmony with nature. To implement this awareness three themes are presented here for consideration:

1. Man is a creature and thus a part of ecosystem: Man is proud that he is a tool-using, thinking animal. He calls himself the crown of all creation, a homo-sapient as being able to reason. Man indeed is the only creature that survives not only by instinct but also by will and reason. Yet human is one of the organisms living within a limited world. He shares with all creatures fundamental biological needs for water, air, food and mineral. He will perish once his time is up and dies returning to nature just like any other living things. As such man is a part of ecosphere.

In the distant past, human recognized that he was a part of natural ecosystems. Under this circumstance, humans blended well with their ecosystems, fitting into natural flows of energy and materials in a harmonious way. They were not manipulator but simply taking their places within the universe. All were perfect until man started exploited nature for his own benefit and since then we live in tension with our supporting ecosystems. Living things live and move within definite limits. In no way can they use more energy, more food and more nutrients than are available. They must live within their means. The awareness that human is part of this ecosystem not taking the earth for granted is absolutely necessary.

2. Human is a steward to the earth: Who is man on earth ? Is he the master ? Some historians accuse man as he assumes that he is in charge of the earth with the right to subdue it. The key word in debate is “ dominion” or “ stewardship”. Lynn White, Jr, in his famous article on ‘ The Historical roots of our Ecological Crisis’ published in 1967, argued that the crisis in ecology is Christianity’s fault because Christianity taught that man had dominion over nature and man has treated nature in a destructive way (11). But when meditating more deeply, we found that in the Garden of Eden God gave evergreen herb as food to every creatures of the earth not only for men alone When God flooded the earth he took pains to ensure the preservation of every creature as much as men. After the flood he instructed every type of living

creature not man alone to be fruitful and multiply upon the earth. The co-called covenant of the rainbow was a promise not only to Noah and his descendants but to every creature of the earth. From this we find that dominion cannot be understood as governing with force and cruelty but in the manner of a good shepherd anxious to preserve the earth in the best possible way. Man must treat nature with an overwhelming respect. We may cut down a tree to build a house or to make a fire to keep the family warm. But we should not cut down the tree just to cut down the tree. Besides, men have a responsibility to make sure that the nature is preserved not devastated. Francis of Assis' addressing of birds as his brothers reflected this stewardship that men must not see himself as conqueror of the earth but as a steward to preserve the nature.

A Chinese book published in Taiwan in 1985 entitled *Between Ecology and Theology* (12), advocated the importance of this stewardship. The author said: "Man is created in the image of God and as such he is unique yet he is also united to all other creatures through creation. Being made in the image of God means that responsibility is given. Besides his responsibility to God, man also has a responsibility to nature including to his fellowmen, other creatures and earth. Man has been commissioned to be a steward of nature with no sovereignty over nature or any other man.

3. We are finitude: G.P. Marsh's *Man and Nature* (13) was the first work to describe in detail about man's destructiveness out of his ignorant disregard of the law of nature. Darwin's theory of natural selection that sets the tone of "the survival of the fittest" motivated human kind not only to struggle against nature in order to survive but also to demonstrate his superiority by so doing. Freud even suggested human community to take up the attack on nature, force it to obey human will under the guidance of science (14). Yet In creation story, God reminded Adam and Eve by pointing to the Tree of Life: you can eat all the fruits in the garden except the fruit of life. The day you touch it you will die." Why did God create such a tree?" An temptation to Adam and Eve? No, it is a reminder to human kind, that we are finite. We cannot do whatever we wish to do. There is limit set and we are but a finite creature.

These awareness must challenges us to develop a new ethics that is not only ecologically but also spiritually based on a value that speaks of man's responsibility toward himself, toward nature, toward other fellowmen and toward God.

M.C Tai argued that our ecological crisis is derived not only from air pollution, water pollution or the over-exploitation of nature, but also from the contamination of human hearts. The devastation and the broken down of a harmonious balance between man and nature are convincing proofs of this spiritual pollution. In order to restore a harmonious relationship between man and environment, a new ethics based on the above mentioned awareness must be developed.

V. Developing of a new ethics

Ethics involves relationship, either it be socially oriented, relationally stressed, ecologically concerned or bio-medically involved. Relationship always is involved with more than two parties, one initiates and the other responds yet standing on an equal term. Without a response, no relationship is established. Ethics thus must be understood in terms of responsibility. The recent development of ethics however tends to emphasize more on the right than the responsibility. Using bioethics as an example, we see how responsibility is neglected in today's ethical discussion. Autonomy has been regarded as one of the major bioethical principles, if not the most important. Can a person speak of right without willing to fulfill his duty ? Using Taiwan as an example: Taiwan has implemented a successful universal health insurance since 1997. All medical expenses are insured including prescribed medicine. Patients now demand that medicine be prescribed regardless if they need it or it. Physicians, for the sake of keeping a good relationship and respecting patients' will, often give in. The National Health Insurance is on the brim of bankruptcy because of the huge unnecessary prescriptions and hospitalizations. Do patients follow the instruction given by their doctors to take medicine as prescribed ? The survey has shown otherwise (15). A misuse of right can cripple a well intended health care program. In the same token, when we explore nature without giving proper care to it, or in other word, developing irresponsibly, we will suffocate nature and cause its death.

There are two views in terms of human relationship to nature, anthropocentric and wholistic. The former sees man as the master of universe with right to treat nature in whatever way he chooses. This view has been dominant in history and at times being regarded as a catalyst to technological development. The latter, however, emphasizes man's responsibility toward nature. Man has no dominion over nature, instead he is a steward to serve and manage nature with care. Is man to blame for the ecological problem we face ? Some will blame not man but economics and technology for suburban sprawl, the breakdown of the family, pollution, waste and the atomic bomb...etc. Charles Reich, however said in his book the Greening of America :“Modern society makes war on nature. A competitive market uses nature as a commodity to be exploited—turned into profit. Technology sees nature as an element to be conquered, regulated , controlled...(16)” The problem indeed is not economics or technology. The tides of oil that increasingly wash up on miles of beaches near shipping lanes are no the product of technology, they are the result of a complex of decisions which begins with an individual's desire for cars. Our problem is the contamination of human heart whose insatiable desire and disrespect of nature created the ecological crisis.

The new human ethics governing human behavior must stress a responsible stewardship aiming to develop an appropriate technology which is conducive to decentralization, compatible with the laws of ecology, gentle in its use of resources and designed to serve the human person instead of making him the servant of machines and that place people more with in touch with the physical sustenance of their life in the bounty of the earth and the sun. This model of technology has been reflected in Noah's ark that is used to hold life up in a flood. On the contrary, Babel is an excellent emblem of irresponsible inappropriate technology for its only purpose is to lift its builders for their own glory. The ark uses human creativity to identify and preserve nature, the tower of Babel uses those same power to lift human out of nature. This new ethics of responsibility emphasizes on accountability and commitment. Responsible persons conscientiously and consciously commit themselves to a task or form of life and readily accept accountability for it success and failure. A responsible human will not destroy or torture other living things under his control, even a tree, a wolf or a cow are not to be ignored. For a sustainable future, this ethics of responsibility cannot be neglected. We have no right unless we are committed to be responsible of what we do. Applying this ethics to our environment it emphasizes on three things: conservation , restoration and preservation. Conservation is to save, restoration to amend what has been broken and devastated and preservation to protect anything from distinction.

VI. Conclusion

Man's relationship to nature has changed from harmony to hostility to man's attempt to re-design nature's formation and order. When man lived in harmony with his environment, everything was regarded as good but when man started manipulating nature, the relationship turned sour and now human kind tries to re-design nature, for instance, the genome projects going on everywhere and the work on cloning to fool natural procreation process, would the relationship get better? Witnessing the natural disasters human experienced in recent years, it is time that we learn the lesson and confess that we are after all only one of the creatures on earth and take up our duty as stewards to make sure that the harmony which man and nature used to mutually enjoy can be amended. Human life and the environment are not two separate things. They share the common destiny. A new ethics that is based on accountability and commitment must be revitalized so that life can be preserved and beauty of natural environment restored..

References:

1. Sheridan CL, Radmacher SA: Health Psychology. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 1991: 29

2. ibid: 31
3. Psalms 104
4. Isaiah 11:6-9
5. From “ Strange Days” by “ The Doors”. Elektra EKS 74014. Copyright, Polydon Records Ltd
6. Carlin J: Global Warming: A Battle for Survival. In Inside out, London :Council for World Mission. April/May 2005:10-13
7. Schaeffer FA: Pollution and the Death of Man. Wheaton Ill: Tyndal House, 1970:17
8. Passmore J: Man’s Responsibility for nature. London: Duckworth, 1974:5
9. Schaffer F.A. op.cit: 10
10. Rhoads M: Man and Nature in China. See Passmore J: ibid: 27
11. White L Jr: The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis. Science. 1967. See www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/lwhite.htm
12. Tai MC: Between Ecology and Theology. Taipei: Yiongwang, 1985: 98
13. Marsh GP: Mand and Nature. Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press, 1967:43
14. Freud S: Civilization and Its Discontent. New York: Penguin Modern Classis, 1984:11
15. Tai MC: Value Neutrality and a Bioethics of Conscience in Tzu Chi Med J 2005. 17.No.5
16. Reich C: The Greening of America. New York: Randons House, 1970:28-29

