

Call from the future: An environmental approach

Puja Raj

M.Phil Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract

The most essential thing around us is the Environment, the atmosphere it provides us to live in, the air to breathe in, the food to survive and many more. As Human beings, we are privileged to utilize all the resources around us to make the best of its use. However, in order to satisfy our needs and wants for today, we are overruling the world while ignoring the 'tomorrow' of other species, inhabitants as well as of future generation. We name our greed as need and continue to plunder, nonetheless we are destroying our own world for tomorrow as well as affecting the survival of non-human beings. The effects of deforestation, pollution, climate change are less likely to affect today, but would enormously affect future generation and their survival. My paper is contented to provide some inevitable connection between some of the major issues of today with their possible effect on future generation.

Keywords: future generation, obligations, climate change, wilderness, genetic modification

Introduction

The Future is, though uncertain, yet a luxury everyone plans for. At a personal level, we do savings; with health and security, there is insurance; at the family level, one goes with mutual investment and at the state or global level, there are plans and policies. However, when it comes to an environmental problem and biodiversity sustenance, future concern takes a lot more than just planning, policies or strategies. It needs actions to be taken in form of preservation, conservation, reduction in overconsumption of resources, increasing balance between environmental sustainability and economic growth, and turning many more environmental policies into action.

Human actions are, indeed, the reason behind various environmental problems. Nevertheless, it is crucial to identify what environmental problems we, human beings, inflict on the environment and what would be the necessary steps to deal with them. Environmental problems seem to be varied in their extent, influence and following damages. From air pollution to global warming, from deforestation to the wilderness, from technical development on plants and animals as biotechnology to their potential risk, all are to be undertaken by environmental problems with ethical perspective, which will be further justified in the paper. Although biotechnology is more of scientific and technological development, through this, genetic modification of plants and animals pushes this topic under environmental ethics.

This paper is aimed to unfold and uphold various arguments supporting the obligations that present generation owes to the future generation, numerous harms human beings have posed to future people by degrading the environment and also the required actions to be taken to protect the environment and future generation from further harms and threats. Out of several environmental problems, I will mainly discuss the future impact of 'climate change', 'wilderness' and 'genetic

modification', and how these problems have potential to push a greater harm to the future generation. Moreover, I will attempt to justify why at all we need to protect the environment for future generation, regardless of technological benefits. This paper, precisely, stretches the moral considerability from non-human nature to not-yet-born generations.

Obligations to Future Generation

As a rational citizen, we all seek development- development for oneself, for society, country, ecology etc. In this emerging world of technology, new methods and machines are invented and discovered to ease out human life. Of course, behind all these innovations and technologies, human effort and intellect pay off, but costs of all these actions are pushed onto non-human nature and future generations. Our actions always have a certain impact and thus we are liable for that. Undoubtedly, most of the developments and strategies are anthropocentric, which ultimately affects nature and environment around us and will continue to do so in future. According to Tim Mulgan, "If we measure the moral significance of an action by the number of people it affects and the impact it has on them, then our obligation to future generations deserve to be the central topic of moral philosophy ^[1].

Different moral and ethical concepts have given different reasons to support or criticize our duties to future generation. The basic one is about the intergenerational justice of equity and fairness. According to John Rawls's theory, future generations are members of our extended moral community, thereby "we have obligations at least to do no damage to the potential interests of future generations ^[2]. This

¹ Mulgan, Tim; *Future People*, Oxford New York, Oxford University Press, 2006; page -1

² Frederickson, H. George; "Can Public Officials Correctly Be Said to Have Obligations to Future Generations?"; *JSTOR*

intergenerational justice includes environmental responsibility and resources planning while minimizing the injury to future people.

Moral intuitionism says that “our descendants deserve a world that we have tried to make better”^[3]. A striking feature of moral intuition obligates us to not cause any unnecessary harm to future generation. Our actions do have their effect, especially in the days that follow. And being rational agents, we have stout obligations to ensure a better life for future people. According to the Contract theory, the way present generations have received benefits from their ancestors, they have obligations and duties to their descendants or future people regardless of been asked for. Through intergenerational ethics, each person deserves the same opportunity. Thus, according to Ronald M. Green, it is the duty of present people to ensure temporal equality^[4].

Utilitarianism demands for ‘the greatest happiness for the greatest number’. Indeed, including future people is a greater number which extends morality and responsibility towards them. Moreover, Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative maintains that it is ethically wrong to use other persons as a means to one’s ends rather than treating them as ends in themselves. In case of duties to future generation, it is unacceptable to use future persons as means to the ends of present people.

All different ethical theories extended the morality and responsibility to future generation because there is an evident reason to believe that current generation can benefit or harm future generation. And particularly in the case of environmental sustainability, human beings have already degraded the environment to an extent that now it gravely needs to be preserved or conserved.

Harms Done So Far

Some of the grievous environmental problems are done “...when the same resource is used both as a source and as a sink”^[5]. This attitude toward nature has caused water pollution (using the river as a water supply as well as sewer), air pollution (using air for breath and polluting it by releasing carbon dioxide), deforestation (using woods for several benefits and lowering the number of forests) etc. We as human beings didn’t leave anything untouched in nature. We have been over-consuming the natural resources causing scarcity of non-renewable resources. We continued degrading water resources. With increasing number of cars and massive consumption of fossil fuels emission of carbon dioxide has caused global warming. We have almost rebuilt the wild nature for human recreation and called it Wilderness. Human beings with technological development have also modified or in some cases, hampered the genes of plants and animals. And

these actions have irrevocable effects. At most, these environmental problems affect the quality of life of human beings. Thus by any means, actions of present generation would lead to harmful and worse future. Future people are, undoubtedly, at stake and we would be responsible for such harms.

Climate Change and the Future Generations

Climate change is the common concern of mankind which has its initial root cause in human action. Climate change is caused due to massive consumption or overconsumption of fossil fuels. Emission of greenhouse gases from human activity has already begun to deplete the ozone layer. Ozone depletion exposes living things on the earth to the level of ultra-violet rays, which have life-threatening effects. Due to continuous depletion in the ozone layer, ultra-violet rays reaching to earth’s atmosphere is causing global warming and thus leads to the climate change. This climate change is affecting the quality of life of human as well as non-human beings and will continue to do so in future. The adverse effect of this climate change has already begun to affect biodiversity and has a potential for future catastrophe.

Although current generations are yet not ready to reduce the consumption as they don’t have any big threat as such for them, non-human nature and the descendants will suffer the most from global warming. Global warming is causing glaciers to melt, increasing the sea-level, and bringing unprecedented effect. With the research and deep studies, it has been predicted that due to climatic change, there are plausible chances of the more upcoming cyclone, tsunami, tornado and other natural catastrophes. Increase in sea-level would damage the nuclear research centers in the coastal areas, devastating the whole population living nearby.

Climate Change is also becoming the cause to uproot people from their home in lest of disaster. According to Amitav Ghosh, climate change is not only a threat to nature but also a threat to culture^[6]. Climate change has a foreseeable threat in a way that “...we are bequeathing to the future generation the most extreme and rapid climate change to have occurred since the age of dinosaurs”^[7]. As Allen Thompson adhered, Moral issues concerning global warming or climate change is not an event caused by one individual or event; rather generations of human being are responsible for this^[8].

Strong and forceful actions are needed to be taken to mitigate the climate change, or else it might push the threat beyond recovery for the future generations. Different policies and strategies have been implemented by United Nations, the European Union and other developed countries to curb the global warming. However, conservation and less consumption seem to be the only possible way out of it.

(<http://www.jstor.org/stable/976431>); 1994; Accessed on- 10-03-2017; Pp-459

³ Kristin Shrader-Frechette, “*Environmental Justice: Creating Equality, Reclaiming Democracy*”, New York, Oxford University press; 2002; page-97

⁴ Green, Ronald M.; “Intergenerational Distributive Justice and Environmental Responsibility”; *JSTOR*, (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1297701>); 1977; Accessed on 10-03-2017

⁵ Jamieson, Dale; *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction*; Cambridge, New York; Cambridge University Press; 2008; Page no.-14.

⁶ Ghosh, Amitav; *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*; Haryana, India; Penguin Books India, 2016

⁷ Jamieson, Dale; *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction*; Cambridge, New York; Cambridge University Press; 2008; Page no.-10

⁸ Thompson, Allen; “Responsibility for the End of Nature: Or, How I learned to stop worrying and love Global Warming”; *JSTOR* (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339169>); 2009; Accessed on 29-07-2016, pp-96

Wilderness and Future Generation

Human beings, wildlife, and environment are the integral parts of the ecosystem. Since ever human life and nature are intertwined and interdependent. However, according to Judeo-Christian views, human beings are sent to earth as the son of god and the rest of the wildlife are just to satisfy the human needs and desires. Yet, the recent philosophy and ethics argued for the inherent value of environment. One view is totally Anthrocentric- giving priority to human interests, while another is Ecocentric- putting ecosystem at the center of moral concern. According to Michael R. Conover and Denise O. Conover, between these two paths, lies the “responsibility to manage the wildlife resource for future generations”^[9].

Wilderness has emerging definitions. For Puritans, Wilderness meant as a term of abuse, which was a symbol of fear, despair, barren and desolation. Wilderness was a demeaning place “...to which one came only against one’s will, and always in fear and trembling”^[10]. However, in the twentieth century, US Wilderness Act 1964 defined wilderness as a place “...where man himself is a visitor and does not remain”^[11]. This definition entails wilderness as the ‘landscape for tourists’, ‘a place of recreation and adventure’. To some, wilderness means pristine nature, totally untouched, free by human beings. Some included indigenous people as a part of the wilderness.

Although nature as pristine is not there, still people go and enjoy the nature, experience it by preserving wilderness. Nevertheless, preserving wilderness has many internal problems. Sometimes, it favors protecting endangered species, in doing so it allows getting rid of things which threaten its existence. At another instance, wilderness favors biological diversity and thus promotes increasing number of animals which might ruin the landscape. Moreover, as humans stepped into wilderness, many a disease which was earlier confined to forest-animals were transferred and migrated to cities and other areas. After coming in human contact, these viruses of different disease spread soon. One such example is HIV/AIDS. Yet, whatever we define as wilderness is different from the natural wilderness. We take it as we have shaped it in culture. Thus the concept of wilderness is only in our mind. It is not natural but cultural.

Human beings, initially, grew in wilderness, but now we have created civilization that loses wilderness. Due to over-population, it is not possible to resettle wilderness. Nevertheless, preserving wilderness is one solution. It requires deep reflection and respect toward all plants, animals and other non-human nature. As there come duality in one’s mind toward nature, it leads to use and abuse. The Environment has been degraded, resources have been over-consumed which will lead to temporal injustice. These actions, if not

constrained now, can lead to unprecedented damage. Nature has to be preserved for its own sake, but as there are economic interests and over-population, it seems implausible. Nevertheless, as we are responsible for degradation of nature, it is our matter of concern to protect the nature and resources and preserve wilderness for future generation. As adhered by Michael Conover and Denise Conover, the way children cannot stand and work for themselves, we are obligated to protect the interests of future generation^[12].

Genetic Modification (GM) and Future Generation

Later twentieth century has been very fruitful for technological and scientific development. Biotechnology came up with new inventions. One of such inventions was genetic modification of plants and animals. This modification in plants was centered to improve the quality and resistance of seed from crop failure. With developing research, seeds developed the resistance from pests, insects, weeds, drought, cold, disease etc. and research is still going on. Genetic modification surpassed the hybridization of seeds in a shorter span of time. Genetic modification in animals was done to look for the cure and resistance from disease infected by animals.

These researches of genetic modification are sponsored by big companies, who later use such research in their products to influence market at global level. However, many seed companies of genetically modified crops were stand accused of forcing GM seeds in market without properly researching and evaluating the plausible risks to human health and environment. Genetic modification is altering the genes or DNA of one species with another to have effective results. Although discovery has made impossibility as possibility, there is also a worry about their pace of application. In its early days, genetically modified crops showed best and efficient results. But a few years later, those crops faced a major failure and risked lives of million people. BT Cotton crop failure in 2012 in India is one instance when thousands of farmers lost their lives.

Genetic modification is already in operation and seems difficult to ban altogether. Also, there is no going back to ground zero for it. These unavoidable risks with irrevocable mistakes of genetic modification grasp the moral concern from environment and future perspective. Moreover, genetic modification does not only affect future but also causes soil and environmental degradation, animal humiliation and threat to human health. This invokes degradation in the quality of life. As GM companies focus basically on their own self-interest with biotechnology, companies reap the benefit whereas the world bears the risk.

Positively, genetic modification has come up with many cures, but potential cost is higher than the potential benefit it provides. The unknown or worse results of biotechnology are main concern will harm future and nature around us. Genetic modification has modified the nature for human benefit. However, this modern biotechnology is not wrong in itself,

⁹ Conover, Michael R. and Denise O. Conover; “For whom do we manage Wildlife: The resource, Society, or Future Generations?”; *JSTOR* (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3784194>); 2001; Accessed on 10-03-2017, page- 675

¹⁰ Cronon, William; “The Trouble with wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”; W. W. Norton & Co.; 1995; page no.- 70

¹¹ Sarkar, Sahotra; “Wilderness preservation and biodiversity conservation—keeping divergent goals distinct”; *JSTOR* (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/bisi.1999.49.5.405>); 1999; Accessed on 10-03-2017, page- 405

¹² Conover, Michael R. and Denise O. Conover; “For whom do we manage Wildlife: The resource, Society, or Future Generations?”; *JSTOR* (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3784194>); 2001; Accessed on 10-03-2017, page- 677

rather of the dire consequences which are unknown. Despite the safety and accountability issue, genetic modification would possibly lead to global drought, loss of genetic diversity, harmful and indestructible weeds.

Although there are no certainly known future effects, genetic modification has a major risk to its applications. Genetic modification cannot be altogether ripped off, but it needs proper research and evaluation of potential risks and harms before flooding up with an application. Also, certain past instances should be kept in mind as there was a good start, but its future effect came up worse and harmful. Thus the cost of current generations is pushed on to the future generation, and we stand responsible.

Conclusion

One of the much-needed obligations to future generation obliges us to care for the environment to endorse conditions of better living for the community of the future. As human activities are putting strains on the natural functionality of ecosystem, community of future people, who haven't participated for such damage, have to face the consequences. In most cases, present generations are not even bothered to care about future generation harms as we are unaware of the identity of possible victims. Nevertheless, Ethicists believe that for ethical evaluation of an act, the identity of victim does not matter. If any innocent has to face the costs of someone's hasty actions and behavior, there is ground for complaint. Likewise, if the future generation will have to bear the costs of our damage to environment, we stand blamable. Our obligation to future generations asks us to do nothing to jeopardize the very existence of future generation. Thus, working for the better quality of life for future generation requires formulating strategies and policies for eliciting environmental concern, strict environmental laws, constraints on over-consumption, balancing economic growth and development with environment and ethics, efficient use of resources, reducing level of carbon footprints, protecting future resources, changing regulations and environmental policy with regard to preservation and conservation. But above all, it requires the implementation of such activities. Moreover, we need to educate near-term future generations about the environmental concern so that the process and progress for environmental improvement don't stop and be stretched to further future.

Obviously, obstacles in form of economic interests and personal aspirations are there. But these interests cannot unbind us from our interpersonal responsibilities. Human beings are, after all, bigger player in influencing the world around.

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