

ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

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Summary

The root of the environmental crisis is closely related to ethics. Albert Schweitzer, thinking of the environmental crisis as a cultural crisis, proposed an ethic of reverence for life. Aldo Leopold believed that the popular values of philosophy should be changed to rebuild a human nation with completely new values, while Holmes Rolston argues that an ethics of nature is needed that is concerned not only with the welfare of humankind but also of all other things, including the environment. Thus, a moral theory concerning the environment is required.

The environmental crisis has become a problem that threatens human survival. Besides political, economic, and technological causes, the environmental crisis is fundamentally a crisis of worldview and values. Its ethical and religious roots are the more fundamental, touching the deep level of human ideology.

1. Ethical Challenges of the Environmental Crisis

Traditional ethics is concerned only with the welfare of humans, and is the ethical study

of relationships between humans. Traditional ethics is not interested in life and nature; nor does it suggest that human environmental behavior should be ethical. This has caused humans to plunder nature.

1.1. Albert Schweitzer: The Environmental Crisis Is a Cultural Crisis

Albert Schweitzer, a founder of environmental ethics, first suggested the ethic of “reverence for life” in the 1920s. Having seen hundreds of thousands of people and many wild animals killed in the fighting during World War I, Schweitzer believed that this was a cultural crisis, because our culture did not really have an ethical function, which is indispensable; still people did not give much thought to our cultural decline and how to resolve the situation.

Schweitzer attributed the cultural decline to material development exceeding spiritual development, which upset the balance between the material and the spiritual. Inventions and discoveries had enabled us to control natural forces by unusual means, and at the same time totally changed the survival relationship between individuals, social groups, and states. We overestimated the material achievement of civilizations, and overlooked the significance of spiritual civilization. Schweitzer believed that philosophy was responsible for this, because philosophy had been isolated from real life and could no longer point people in the right direction. Our mistaken worldview had put us in a speeding ship with a damaged engine that was out of control and heading for disaster—a total decline of civilization.

In order to rescue ourselves from the cultural crisis, Schweitzer suggested that an ethics be established that revered life, recognizing the integrity of human life and morals. The goal was to realize development and to create various values that were beneficial to the greater development of the material, the spirit, and ethics of individuals and humanity. The nature of civilization was two-fold. Civilization included the control of wisdom over natural forces, and the control of wisdom over human beliefs and will power. However, the latter was more important, because control of wisdom over natural forces did not necessarily lead to improvement; it had inherent problems. Conquering nature enhanced human strength, but could also be used for evil.

Only the control of wisdom over human beliefs and will power could prevent humans from perpetrating evil. Therefore, Schweitzer believed that in order to revitalize culture, people’s worldview must be revitalized, because only a worldview could give us a correct sense of direction. He stated that we should urge modern humans to consider what we are in this world, what plans humanity should have for itself. Only when humans were fully aware that their existence was meaningful and valuable could the necessary spiritual development be achieved to allow us to return to civilization. Schweitzer believed that reverence for life was ethical behavior, not economic behavior.

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Biographical Sketches

Mouchang Yu, born in 1935, got his bachelor's degree from Wuhan University in 1962 and his master's degree from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Since then, he has worked on natural dialectics in the Institute of Philosophy. Professor Yu is currently a professor, doctoral supervisor, and president of the Chinese Society for Environmental Ethics.

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