

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE

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Abstract

Ecological justice is a growing field of philosophical study that examines the ethical and moral aspects of humanity's interaction with the environment. It is based on the principle that humans and nature are deeply interconnected, advocating for an equitable distribution of environmental advantages and responsibilities among all species, communities, and future generations. This perspective challenges conventional justice models that primarily focus on human interests, instead promoting a broader framework that recognizes the inherent rights of ecosystems, non-human entities, and those yet to come. Philosophical discussions on ecological justice highlight the necessity of scrutinizing economic systems, power structures, and technological advancements that contribute to environmental degradation. Drawing insights from diverse traditions such as deep ecology, ecofeminism, and Indigenous knowledge systems, ecological justice calls for a fundamental ethical shift toward sustainability, fairness, and environmental stewardship. By addressing the root causes of ecological destruction and fostering solidarity between human and non-human life, this concept advocates for transformative changes in societal values. These include preserving biodiversity, restoring ecosystems, and re-evaluating conventional notions of development and progress. Ultimately, ecological justice upholds the moral responsibility to protect the environment for future generations, providing a comprehensive framework for achieving a more just and sustainable world for all forms of life.

Keywords: *ecological justice, sustainability, interconnection, ethical shift, systemic change.*

Introduction

Ecological justice necessitates a fundamental change in how we view the environment and our relationship

with it. This transformation requires a deeper acknowledgment of the interconnectedness between human beings and other living organisms. Rather than adhering to an

anthropocentric perspective that prioritizes human interests, ecological justice promotes a more inclusive approach that recognizes the intrinsic value of all life forms. The planet, with its vast biodiversity and complex ecosystems, should not be regarded solely as a resource for human use but as a dynamic, interdependent system that sustains life in multiple ways. Therefore, justice must extend beyond human societies to encompass the well-being of the earth's ecological systems as well.

Consequently, the moral responsibility toward the environment extends beyond simply reducing harm; it also involves actively nurturing a healthy ecosystem capable of sustaining future generations. This commitment includes promoting fair access to natural resources, rehabilitating degraded environments, and establishing governance frameworks that prioritize the protection and respect of the natural world. Ecological justice emphasizes that human advancement should not be achieved at the expense of environmental destruction, nor should economic growth be evaluated solely by financial

gains, but rather by its effects on both human societies and ecological health.

The effects of environmental neglect are increasingly apparent through the rapid depletion of natural resources, biodiversity loss, and the worsening impacts of climate change. These ecological crises stem from economic models driven by neoliberalism and market capitalism, which have prioritized immediate financial gains over long-term environmental sustainability. The emphasis on individual profit has led to significant ecological imbalances that ultimately affect all forms of life. To address this, ecological justice advocates for systemic transformation, including the adoption of sustainable economic strategies, environmentally focused policies, and a profound respect for the planet's natural cycles. By committing to ecological justice, society can work toward a future in which both humans and non-human life coexist in balance with the earth.

Justice towards Eco-Centrism

Historically, traditional philosophy has focused on justice primarily in relation to human well-being, assuming that

humanity was the center of existence. This anthropocentric perspective resulted in the marginalization of other living beings and the environment. However, contemporary thought has moved beyond this limited view. Human survival is fundamentally dependent on the environment without a stable climate, clean air, and fertile soil, life cannot be sustained. As a result, critical issues such as climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss must be central to modern philosophical discussions. Justice, within this evolving framework, must encompass not only human society but also the natural world.

Additionally, disparities exist in the distribution of natural resources between wealthy and impoverished communities, as well as between urban and rural populations. For instance, the United States has recognized environmental justice as a principle that acknowledges the unequal allocation of environmental benefits and burdens. According to Kameri (24), this concept highlights how traditional environmentalism has often overlooked diverse local conditions and the struggles faced by

marginalized groups. Ecological justice advocates for a shift away from anthropocentrism toward an eco-centric or bio-centric perspective. In today's world, what is most essential is a "synergetic flourishing" that ensures a harmonious coexistence between human and non-human life.

Western moral-political philosophers such as Aristotle, Hume, and Rawls have traditionally viewed justice as the highest virtue in social and political institutions. As Fernandez (6) states, "justice may be considered the most important virtue of social relations and political institutions and the greatest of all virtues." This principle can serve as a basis for ensuring the fair distribution of environmental resources, guaranteeing justice for all people, regardless of caste or creed.

Aldo Leopold, a significant figure in environmental ethics, introduced the concept of the "land ethic," which emphasizes respect for all forms of life. According to Leopold, human actions are morally right if they preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. He argues that people must move away from exploiting nature for personal gain and

instead develop an attitude of ecological responsibility. By fostering a deeper respect for the land and recognizing its interconnectedness with all living beings, humanity can address the environmental crisis. The ongoing destruction of ecosystems is a result of society's flawed perception of its relationship with nature, highlighting the urgent need for a shift in both thought and behavior.

The responsibility for environmental destruction does not rest solely with governments; rather, it is a collective failure of humanity. The rapid degradation of ecosystems is accelerating species extinction, with climate change being a major contributing factor. A historical comparison can be made to the extinction of the dinosaurs, which ultimately led to the rise of mammals and, eventually, humans. However, if current destructive trends continue, human survival itself could be at risk. Cullinan argues that "humans are integral and inseparable from the earth system; social systems are inextricably embedded in the earth community, and governance must be consistent with this context because otherwise human

fulfillment is unattainable" (Warren 3). To achieve this transformation, Cullinan proposes "wild laws" legal frameworks designed to strengthen humanity's connection to nature and promote governance systems aligned with ecological principles. In today's world, there is an urgent need for a philosophical perspective that considers all life forms, rather than viewing humans as the ultimate center of existence.

Environmental Justice for the Future Generation

Linda Hogan's words highlight the deep connection between past and future generations: "All around me are my ancestors, my unborn children. I am the tear between them and both sides live" (Jamieson, 2000, p. 22). Our ancestors envisioned a future where their descendants could thrive, shaping the world we inhabit today. This perspective is reflected in the belief that future generations are already present within the land: "we say that the faces of the coming generations are looking up from the earth. So when you put your feet down, you put them down very carefully because there are generations coming one after the

other. If you think in these terms, then you will walk a lot more carefully, be more respectful of this earth” (Jamieson, 2000, p. 28).

However, modern industrialization and consumer-driven economies threaten this vision. The challenges of climate change, resource depletion, and ecological collapse emphasize the urgent need for intergenerational justice. Philosopher John Rawls, in his *Theory of Justice*, introduces the concept of the ‘veil of ignorance,’ encouraging individuals to consider their future selves and ask: if we were part of a yet-to-be-born generation, what kind of world would we want to inherit? This idea serves as a powerful foundation for ecological justice. Similarly, Bryan Norton, in *The Rights of Future Generations* (2000), advocates for the “preservation of options,” stressing that nature must be safeguarded not only for the present but for the well-being of future generations. By preserving the earth’s resources today, we ensure that those who come after us have the freedom to make their own environmental choices. This philosophy reinforces the notion that our ethical duty extends

beyond meeting our immediate needs; we are also responsible for protecting the rights of those yet to be born.

Stewardship Enriches Ecological Justice

The Māori tribes, or iwi, are the indigenous people of New Zealand with a deep, symbiotic relationship with the land, or whenua, that has spanned generations. Their worldview is centered on the concept of kaitiakitanga, which refers to guardianship and the responsibility to protect the natural environment. Māori tribes hold that the well-being of the land, sea, and all living creatures is intertwined with human welfare. Through traditional knowledge and practices, they have fostered a culture of ecological stewardship, emphasizing sustainability and respect for nature. Their ancestral connections to the environment are foundational to their advocacy for ecological justice, which is vital in modern conversations around environmental ethics and indigenous rights.

In Māori culture, tribal communities see themselves as deeply connected to nature, considering the Earth as their

mother and viewing lakes and hills as the resting places of their ancestors. They perceive nature as an extension of their family, where trees are regarded as fellow countrymen and birds as relatives. This interconnected worldview is captured by the term *whakapapa*, which represents the deep relationship between all living beings. Similarly, the Andean people regard celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars as their siblings. Historically, humans did not see the Earth as separate from themselves but as an integral part of their existence. They recognized that their actions directly affected the Earth, which they honored as a mother, fostering an interdependent relationship with nature. Rather than pursuing individual wealth, they embraced a collective responsibility to maintain harmony with the environment, practicing sustainable resource management and reciprocity with the natural world.

Vine Deloria Jr., in his influential work *God Is Red* (1973), examines the indigenous perspective on nature, emphasizing their holistic understanding of the environment and

their role as caretakers of the land. Many indigenous languages and traditions reflect this deep bond between humans and nature. For instance, in Mayan culture, a newborn's umbilical cord is buried in the family home, symbolizing a lifelong connection to the land. Such customs highlight the profound human-nature relationship. The Māori belief that "people belong to the Earth; Earth is not a possession of the people" (Jamieson, 2000, p. 25) underscores the idea that treating the Earth as a commodity is inherently unjust. The Earth is an essential part of human existence, just as human presence contributes to the vitality of the Earth. Aboriginal writer Bill Neidjie poetically expresses this inseparable connection:

"So I am saying now,
Earth is my mother or father...
Tree is mine.
In my body that tree."

(Jamieson, 2000, p. 25)

This perspective reinforces the idea that nature is not merely a resource for exploitation but a fundamental aspect of life that must be respected and preserved.

The Māori perspective on the Earth challenges the conventional notion of “stewardship.” Rather than positioning humans as the Earth's protectors, this worldview sees the Earth itself as the ultimate guardian, while humans serve as its caretakers. The concept of “guardianship” embodies a profound moral responsibility, recognizing humanity's obligation to nurture and respect the Earth as a being inherently connected to human existence. This perspective reflects a deep sense of indebtedness to nature. As Jamieson (2000) explains, “Guardianship is a moral responsibility, an appropriate response to a sense of beholdenness in the presence of genealogical relatedness. It is the acknowledgment of a people that they are held by and indebted to their affiliational ties with the nonhuman world” (p. 27).

However, with the expansion of Western ideologies, nature came to be perceived less as a partner deserving of respect and more as a resource for human consumption. This shift is particularly evident in the traditional Judaeo-Christian worldview, as described in the Book of Genesis, which presents a highly

anthropocentric perspective. While this framework emphasizes human stewardship over the Earth, it has also been used to justify unchecked exploitation of natural resources. Warren (2006) observes, “The traditional Judaeo-Christian view of the world, as described in Genesis, is extremely anthropocentric. It emphatically sets humankind out as separate from and superior to the rest of the living world. At its best, humankind's separateness leads to the notion of stewardship over other living things; at its worst, it is a justification for exploitation without thought” (p. 5).

This contrast between indigenous and Western perspectives underscores the need for a paradigm shift toward a more interconnected and respectful relationship with nature, where humans recognize their role as caretakers rather than rulers of the Earth.

Gender Equality and Ecological Justice

Patriarchal societies tend to emphasize individualism and dominance rather than cooperation. This perspective, deeply ingrained in patriarchal

ideologies, shapes not only human interactions but also humanity's relationship with the environment. Eco feminist scholars, including Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), argue that Western philosophy has fostered a dualistic way of thinking that separates humans from nature and mind from body. This artificial divide has contributed to the subjugation of both women and the natural world, treating them as inferior and subordinate to men. Women were historically perceived as secondary to men, just as nature was viewed as a resource to be controlled and exploited.

This binary perspective normalized exploitation, prioritizing utility over respect. As a result, both gender inequality and environmental destruction became systemic issues. Eco feminist thought advocates for a more interconnected and reciprocal worldview, where gender equity contributes to ecological well-being. Women, who have traditionally played central roles in managing natural resources and family welfare, can significantly impact sustainability when given equal rights and opportunities. Achieving ecological

justice requires dismantling hierarchical structures that have historically marginalized both women and nature.

Capitalism has further reinforced this imbalance by commodifying both people and the environment. In a capitalist system, relationships are often transactional humans are seen as economic units, and nature is reduced to a resource for exploitation. This framework fosters a competitive mindset that pits individuals against each other and humanity against nature. However, gender equality challenges this exploitative paradigm. When women have equal rights, access to resources, and opportunities for leadership, oppressive systems of dominance weaken, allowing for a more just and sustainable society. A truly inclusive society does not tolerate oppression whether based on gender, class, or caste and ensures dignity and fairness for all.

Women are also disproportionately impacted by climate change, as they frequently bear the responsibility for managing households and securing essential resources like food and water. Environmental challenges such

as droughts, water shortages, and failing agricultural systems place additional stress on women, making gender equality a critical factor in addressing ecological crises. Thus, achieving true ecological justice requires recognizing the interdependence of gender and environmental equity, ensuring that both women and the natural world are protected and valued in the pursuit of sustainability.

Ecological Justice with Good Governance

While societal progress and economic growth are inevitable, their direction and sustainability largely depend on the governance structures and policies in place. In an ever-evolving world, policies must be designed to address the needs of all members of society, particularly marginalized groups such as women, children, and economically disadvantaged communities. These vulnerable populations often bear the brunt of environmental crises, as their livelihoods are directly tied to natural resources. Whether through deforestation, pollution, or climate change, environmental degradation disproportionately impacts the poor,

leading to displacement, economic hardship, and, in extreme cases, the disappearance of entire communities.

For this reason, governments and institutions must prioritize ecological justice in their policymaking. Vandana Shiva highlights this connection by stating, “When the land is destroyed, people who are dependent on the land are also destroyed” (Shiva, 2005, p. 103). Effective governance must ensure that policies are equitable, inclusive, and considerate of both human and non-human communities. This requires long-term environmental planning that integrates sustainability into every aspect of decision-making.

Additionally, David Held asserts that “A just society is one that integrates ecological concerns with the principles of fairness and equality” (Held, 2006, p. 41). Achieving ecological justice necessitates a balance between economic progress and environmental responsibility, ensuring that development does not come at the expense of the most vulnerable. Policymakers must commit to frameworks that protect both people and the planet, fostering a future

where sustainability and equity go hand in hand.

Conclusion

Ecological justice integrates the principles of environmental ethics and social justice, promoting sustainability, equity, and responsibility toward future generations. It calls for a fundamental shift from an anthropocentric perspective to an eco-centric one, recognizing that the well-

being of all life forms is interconnected. Achieving this requires policymakers to implement sustainable practices while addressing systemic inequalities that harm both nature and marginalized communities. As stewards of the Earth, humans must embrace a mindset of preservation and respect rather than exploitation. By aligning ecological and social justice, we can foster a more just, balanced, and sustainable future for all living beings.

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