



Marcin Leźnicki

Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0002-0855-146X

e-mail: lemahr@umk.pl

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/RF.2020.027>

## Environmental Ethics – Genesis, Development, Directions

Environmental ethics,<sup>1</sup> as an independent discipline of knowledge, i.e. conscious of its research distinctiveness, was born in the 1970s in the United States. Its emergence was preceded by dynamic changes in the world, including the acceleration of civilisation related to rapid scientific and technological progress, particularly visible in the areas of biochemistry, biotechnology, biocybernetics, molecular biology, microbiology, chemical technology, and genetic engineering. The development of the said research directions has forced scientists, including ethicists, to consider the possible threats which the unrestrained development of civilisation supported by scientific and technological potential may bring, ultimately leading to a global ecological crisis, including ecological (environmental) doom. This, in turn, was seen, *inter alia*, in the change in the character of the environment undergoing various modifications, the progressive elimination of biological species, the destabilisation of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, potential nuclear annihilation, and, more broadly, the growing crisis of the epoch in which we live, as a post-modern era

---

<sup>1</sup> The terms synonymous with “environmental ethics” include “ecological ethics”, or “eco-ethics”, or “ethics for the protection of the natural environment”. In the following text, for the sake of order, only the term “environmental ethics” will be used.

of acceleration driven by blind turbo-capitalism<sup>2</sup> and tools of economic rationality (including, among others, the market).<sup>3</sup>

An attempt at a systemic understanding of the risks listed above has been made, both theoretically and practically, within the framework of environmental ethics, as a discipline of knowledge autonomous of traditional ethics, from which, it admittedly emerges, yet cannot ultimately be reduced to it. It should be noted that the identified practical risks were associated

[...] with the ecological crisis and the questioning both of the ways in which nature has been processed to date, and also of the possibility of continuing the current, globally dominant direction of civilisational development; [in turn] the theoretical risks [were the consequence of] questioning, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of the former “patencies” in our understanding of our relationships and links with nature. For here, the conviction of the fundamental otherness of man, his incomparability with the rest of nature and his autonomy of existence, as well as his unlimited possibilities of transforming nature and shaping his own destiny, has been challenged. The dogma of man’s exclusivity in possessing [...] self-awareness began [...] to crumble. With regard to nature, the belief in the inexhaustibility of its resources [as well as] the belief that continuous scientific and technical progress will lead to man’s control of nature has been called into question. The belief in the possibility of achieving a fully objective and axiologically neutral knowledge of nature, in the ethical neutrality of science and technology and in human interference with nature has also collapsed.<sup>4</sup>

In this perspective, environmental ethics has emerged and started to develop dynamically, with the aim of normalising the relationship between man and the natural environment, taking into account the equivalent welfare of nature and man as well as future generations.<sup>5</sup> As Eugene

---

<sup>2</sup> Among the works devoted to the issue of the global capitalist system as turbo-capitalism are, inter alia, studies by Edward Luttwak or Andrzej Szahaj. See Edward N. Luttwak, *Turbokapitalizm. Zwycięzcy i przegrani światowej gospodarki* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2000); Andrzej Szahaj, *Neoliberalizm, turbokapitalizm, kryzys* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Książka i Prasa, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> The market in a free market society has begun to function as a tool to regulate and deregulate changes occurring in the world (in the economy, culture, and society), as well as a mechanism for effective motivation, generating choices and stimulating various expectations, including wishes, desires, and whims. See Lech W. Zacher, “Trwały rozwój – utopia czy realna możliwość?”, *Problemy Ekorozwoju/Problems of Sustainable Development* 3, 2: 63–68.

<sup>4</sup> Zbigniew Hull, “Język ekofilozofii”, in: *Filozofia, Etyka, Ekologia. Profesorowi Włodzimierzowi Tyburskiemu w darze*, ed. Adam Grzeleński et al. (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2015), 624.

<sup>5</sup> The findings of environmental ethics are a reference point for emerging legal documents (acts) devoted to the implementation of the sustainable development

Hargrove points out, the ethics thus understood were to transgress “its traditional boundaries by attempting to extend the collection of objects of moral importance to include certain classes of non-personal beings, such as animals, plants, inanimate beings, and entire ecosystems”.<sup>6</sup> To put it simply, an equivalent subject of moral reflection for environmental ethics (as opposed to traditional ethics) has become, alongside man, the natural environment itself and its components. Environmental ethics, as a new and autonomous field of moral reflection, was thus intended to break the deadlock in which traditional ethics, practised exclusively in an anthropocentric paradigm and not going beyond it, found itself. The interest of the traditional directions of ethics in environmental issues, as Marek Bonenberg has observed

[...] was born out of the realisation of the fact that man, despite his progressive independence from the natural world through the creation of his own civilisational structures, continues to be considerably connected to the biological environment, and this connection is so strong that actions which have a direct negative impact on the state of the natural environment sooner or later bring specific – also negative – consequences for people themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of the premises traditionally accepted in ethics, owing to which, the natural environment could be considered morally relevant, they have all been consistent with one thing. They emphasized the importance of recognizing the natural environment as an essential means, allowing humans the acquisition of strictly defined goods, such as the ability to sustain one’s life and health in the finest possible condition, proper development through material and non-material values, or the ability to satisfy deeper aesthetic, cognitive, or spiritual needs. Ultimately, the natural environment was supposed to enable a human to reach personal excellence. In turn, by remaining an area of human activity, it has been playing an intermediary role between humans, and as such has been the subject of an unfading interest to traditional ethics. In other words, the ethics of the traditional actions of the human subject vis-à-vis the natural environment were not neutral in a moral sense, primarily because they could (or did) ultimately have a direct or indirect impact

---

strategy. This includes the 1987 Bruntland report (Gro Harlem). In this document, we can read that our actions should be conducive to “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (see: Raport Brundtland 1987, 12).

<sup>6</sup> Marek Bonenberg, *Etyka środowiskowa. Założenia i kierunki* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1992), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, 15.

on the psychophysical well-being of humans living in the natural environment.

The anthropocentric orientation of traditional ethics indicated by Mark Bonenberg can also be seen in the ethical views represented by the precursors of environmental ethics, including, *inter alia*, the ethics of care (fraternity or kinship with animals) of St. Francis of Assisi, the concept of non-violence (*ahimsa*) postulated by Mahatma Gandhi, and even in Albert Schweitzer's ethics of reverence for life.

Each of these authors calls for an end to the cruel treatment of animals, including the abuse and killing of animals, for protection of the vegetation that is being degraded and, more broadly, for a halt to the devastation of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. However, they do so within a strictly defined perspective. According to St Francis of Assisi, refraining from these practices is intended to sensitise man to nature as a manifestation of the divine act of creation and our role in it. Man who treats animals with cruelty and destroys the natural environment created by God, not only denies his humanity, but forgets the role that God has entrusted to him, that is to say, that of the gardener, who is to look after and cultivate Eden rather than destroy it.<sup>8</sup> The morally reprehensible behaviour of man in relation to the work of creation, including, for example, harming animals, may also give rise to analogous attitudes towards other people and ultimately harm the abuser himself. It should be mentioned that a similar idea is also expressed by St Thomas Aquinas. Mahatma Gandhi, in all probability referring to Brahmanism (which includes Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism) and the subsequent Hinduism, postulated the principle of doing no harm to all living beings (including sentient and non-sentient beings, as is the case with insects), *i.e.* *ahimsa*. It prohibited the use of violence against animals, advocating respect for them, and vegetarianism (veganism). Ultimately, the principle of *ahimsa* (with its four complementary principles close to the Jainists, including Gandhi)<sup>9</sup> was supposed to lead its followers out of the circle of *sansara* and to achieve a state of liberation, *i.e.* *moksha*. Unlike St. Francis of Assisi or Mahatma Gandhi recommending respect for nature as a path to salvation or achieving a state of liberation, Albert Schweitzer in his ethics of reverence for life stresses the need to embrace in sympathy all living beings, including plants and animals). For until man, as the doctor of Lambaréné pointed out, learns to respect all forms of life and to limit

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. (Ch. 2, 15), in: *Biblia, Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu*, ed. Rev. M. Peter, Rev. M. Wolniewicz (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Święty Wojciech, 2009), 9.

<sup>9</sup> These principles governing human life at the individual and social level include *satya* (ordering abstinence from lying), *asteya* (ordering abstinence from theft), *brahmacharya* (forbidding adultery) and *aparigraha* (urging abstinence from possession of unnecessary things).

environmentally destructive activities, he will not achieve peace. Our well-being ultimately depends on the well-being of the natural environment, to which we are closely linked.

At this point it should be made clear that even though each of the pioneering environmental ethics mentioned above was practised in a traditional anthropocentric paradigm that was close to traditional ethics, they should not be reduced to it. Environmental ethics theorists, such as Schweitzer, distanced themselves from traditional ethics, emphasising in their actions its deficiencies.<sup>10</sup> The point here is not to deliberately ignore the role or influence of traditional ethics on environmental ethics, but to point out the distinctiveness of the subject of interest of both. While the focus of traditional ethics was primarily on interpersonal relations, the problem of human references to nature was marginal for traditional ethics. Such an approach entailed specific consequences. As a result of the failure to develop a satisfactory and, at the same time, coherent catalogue of principles (including norms and values) defining human behaviour towards the natural environment, a sharp increase in anthropopressure was observed<sup>11</sup> leading to the degradation of nature and, ultimately, a global ecological crisis.<sup>12</sup> This, in turn, contributed to criticism, or even (among others, in the opinion of Peter Singer), of the collapse of traditional ethics<sup>13</sup> which assume the hegemony of man over the surrounding natural environment.

For a better understanding of environmental ethics critical of traditional ethics, it is worth recalling the position of Hans Jonas. The author of *The Principle of Responsibility* notes that while once

[...] all relations between man and the non-human world, i.e. the entire techné sphere (with the exception of medicine) was ethically neutral – both with regard to the object and subject [of] human activity: with reference to the subject, because it interfered only marginally with the intrinsic nature of things and thus did not pose a permanent threat to the integrity of its object – the natural order as a whole; with reference to the active subject, it was ethically neutral because techné, as a kind of activity, considered itself to be a specific tribute to a necessity and not an indefinite, self-founded progress towards a fundamental human goal requiring

<sup>10</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *Życie* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1974), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Ryszard Janikowski, *Zarządzanie antropopresją. W kierunku zrównoważonego rozwoju społeczeństwa i gospodarki* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Difin, 2004), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Helena Ciążęła, Wioletta Dziarnowska, "Człowiek wobec przyrody", in: *Wobec zagrożenia globalnym kryzysem ekologicznym. Technologiczna korekta czy aksjologiczna przebudowa?*, ed. Helena Ciążęła et al. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej, 2010), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Singer, *O życiu i śmierci. Upadek etyki tradycyjnej* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1997).

in its course the utmost human effort and care. The real vocation of the human being [was] realized outside this sphere.<sup>14</sup>

In view of the above, human activities relating to non-human objects (i.e. the natural environment as a whole) did not constitute a sphere of real ethical importance.

However, with time, i.e. with the post-modern era of acceleration, the situation radically changed. This epoch emerged as a result of the changes taking place in the modern world more rapidly and abruptly and, at the same time, in an unpredictable, fast-changing, and largely chaotic manner. As a result, the reality around us (socio-natural) ceased to be as stable as the one we dealt with in modernism. Instead, it became labile, fluid and uncertain, and remains so.

The changes taking place in post-modernity were influenced by technology which, as noted by, inter alia, Hans Jonas, "introduced measures so new in terms of their scale, objects, and consequences that the ethical framework of the past is not able to embrace them".<sup>15</sup> Interference with the intrinsic nature of things has led to a disruption of the natural order (or even an ecological crisis), including the destabilisation of social metabolism, i.e. the idea that

all societies must be organised in such a way as to be able to maintain the exchange of energy and matter with their natural environment and at least satisfy the basic biological needs of their members. [The sustainability of societies was thus dependent on the sustainability of the environment and was to consist in] securing for themselves locally or regionally limited natural resources and then making appropriate use of them in the consumption process.<sup>16</sup>

The level of permanent human interference in the natural environment upset the ethically neutral system between them, revealing the subtlety of the biosphere at risk of destruction, in both dimensions – macro (a good example of which is the greenhouse effect) and micro (to mention the extinction of plant and animal species or the discussed problem of ecosystem depletion). What is more, the actions of the human subject far exceeded the need, still permitted in modernism, to meet decent needs, revealing with doubled force the immodest face of mass

---

<sup>14</sup> Hans Jonas, *Zasada odpowiedzialności. Etyka dla cywilizacji technologicznej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Platan, 1996), 27.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Dariusz Pieńkowski, Eugeniusz Kośmicki, "Trwała konsumpcja jako wyzwanie dla XXI wieku", in: *Człowiek, zwierzę, cywilizacja. Aspekty humanistyczne*, ed. H. Korpikiewicz (Poznań: Wydawnictwo ProDruk, 2001), 236.

consumption remaining at the service of the global free market economy, which is a self-founded progress that has become an end in itself.

It is worth adding that as a result of the transformation of modern society into a post-modern one, the hitherto unknown expansion of the catalogue of human needs occurred, going far beyond the acceptable limits known to the modernists (and in earlier epochs, beginning with the hunter-gatherer era). At the same time, there was a shift in human involvement from the area of satisfying needs that were not of an abstract nature to the area of practical fulfilment of abstract needs, as pleasures or whims. These, in turn, were to serve the purpose of self-fulfilment, self-creation, or the building of a crisis-ridden, unstable, episodic, and thus discontinuous personal identity of a human being.

The above-described interference by man in the natural environment changed, and certainly should change, as the supporters of environmental ethics have stressed, our relationship with the natural world (i.e. non-human) from an ethically neutral one, as the supporters of traditional ethics saw it, to an ethically committed one, to mention, for instance, the global responsibility ethics of Hans Jonas, according to which man's control over nature compels us to take responsibility for it in the ethical dimension.

Unlike anthropocentric and individualistic traditional ethics, the subject of morality for environmental ethics thus becomes any grouping of individuals into an ecosystem whose well-being is of paramount importance. With this in mind, Marek Bonenberg, among others, following Tom Regan, stresses that

[...] the collection of objects having significance – the moral status is broader than the collection of persons (including those belonging to future generations) and also includes non-personal beings, with individual objects as well as certain larger systems being included. From this point of view, the moral meaning of acts which degrade the environment as a whole or elements thereof and thus harm individual non-personal entities – plants, animals, and possibly inanimate objects – has no bearing on whether or not those acts affect humans in any way.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, it should be added that environmental ethics, transcending the traditional boundaries of ethics, does so in two places, i.e. in the above-mentioned area, as well as in the time aspect associated with it. Indeed, it analyses the distant consequences of our actions over time for human and non-human beings that currently exist, as well as those that have not yet occurred and, in the case of animated structures, have not been born. Proponents of environmental ethics therefore assume the

---

<sup>17</sup> Marek Bonenberg, *Etyka środowiskowa. Założenia i kierunki*, 17.

long-term perspective of assessing the impact of our actions, which cannot be reduced to the “here and now” as is the case with traditional ethics. In the case of traditional ethics, the good and evil that needed to be addressed were either in the practice of the action, or in its direct range. They were not therefore the subject of far-reaching planning. Proximity to objectives was both temporal and spatial. The effective range of action was small, the time range of anticipation, setting goals and responsibilities was short, the control of the circumstances of action was in principle limited. The appropriate (and at the same time repetitive and typical, in both the individual and collective context) conduct took place within a short period of time, based on simple and direct determinants of the right conduct. Traditional ethics, as opposed to environmental ethics, were therefore essentially the “here and now” ethics. The far-reaching effects of changes in the world were not considered within its framework, but were at most linked to the working of Providence.

In contrast to traditional ethics, environmental ethics, faced with the global consequences of the progressing environmental crisis, including the degradation of the natural environment, the depletion of natural resources, or even the destabilisation of ecosystems, has begun to consider the long-term consequences of unprecedented activities which have become human participation, actions about which our experience to date (e.g. in terms of controlling the circumstances of action) cannot tell us anything, the effective range of which is inconceivable, while the temporal range is in the end unpredictable. The good and the evil that our action should take account of are, as advocates of environmental ethics agree, outside the practice of our direct action, or in its far, undefined, and unpredictable reach. At the same time, the criteria for proper conduct, which are not simple, unchangeable, or straightforward, as in the case of traditional ethics, have changed, and are now complex, variable, general, and labile, such as the era of post-modern acceleration in which we live and the processes that are taking place within its framework that are distressing for the environmental ethicists. These have directly contributed to the environmental crisis, which threatens to destroy the global ecological balance and puts the future of mankind at risk.

Environmental ethics, mindful of the above-mentioned risks, which have been greatly influenced by the development of the neoliberal free market economy in conjunction with the unrestrained technological progress characteristic of the post-modern era, have focused on finding, constructing and morally justifying such general and practical rules of action in the relationship between man and the environment as will not only avert the environmental crisis but also enable present and future generations of people and nature, of which we are an integral part, to prosper.

However, in order to find or construct rules of practical action for the proper implementation of our moral obligation to protect the environment, we must, as stressed by the supporters of environmental ethics, refer to knowledge (which justifies it). What is more, having appropriate knowledge becomes a primary necessity and, at the same time, a moral obligation necessary for the achievement of the objective of protecting the natural environment by all people, not just scientists or environmental crisis experts. After all, in the past, it took the will alone, and perhaps rather little, not broadened and not specialized knowledge, to fulfil one's moral obligations – to recall Immanuel Kant, who noted that “[...] in moral matters human reason can easily be brought to a high degree of correctness and accomplishment [...]”.<sup>18</sup> Today, the extent of our impact in the world has changed, including the impact of people on the environment and the scale of the growing environmental crisis. In view of this, environmental ethicists have begun to emphasise not only the priority of knowledge, but the fact that it must be equivalent to the causal extent of our action. They also noted that the gap

between the ability to predict and the power to act creates a new moral problem. The striking superiority of the latter makes the recognition of what we do not know become the other side of the obligation to know, and thus part of an ethics that must be guided by the self-control of our excess power. No previous ethical system, in turn, had to consider the global conditions of human life and the distant future and even the existence of the human race.<sup>19</sup>

Knowledge, which is thus used to define and justify variable and labile criteria for proper conduct, has thereby gained a position which it did not have in traditional ethics.

In this regard, it should be noted that the task that environmental ethicists have set themselves was not fostered by the aforementioned dynamic development of the free market economy and the birth of the accelerated mass consumption that it promoted. The latter has to a large extent led to a severing of the bond between man and the natural environment, which is treated in a similar way to man, in a utilitarian and instrumental manner. The proponents of a free market economy, including accelerated mass consumption, unlike environmental ethicists, who call for the urgent need to implement sustainable consumption, have failed to see the need to supplement economic development indicators with a balanced environmental criterion, defined by socio-natural welfare.

---

<sup>18</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Uzasadnienie metafizyki moralności* (*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*) (Kęty: Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki, 2013), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Jonas, *Zasada odpowiedzialności. Etyka dla cywilizacji technologicznej*, 32.

They have further forgotten that man, as a biological being, cannot fully fulfil himself outside the natural environment.

Ultimately, the era of post-modern acceleration supported by the potential of the free market economy has led to the disintegration and pluralisation of our lives, social instability, and the progressive alienation of the individual in the face of an atomised society and, more broadly, the social and natural environment. These processes occurred in the wake of the break with the notion of an individual's strong connection to society, more broadly to the world, still close to the modernists, which was ultimately reduced to the individual "self". Society has thus ceased to be seen as a cohesive, unchangeable, and sustainable object, or as an inseparable community of interests and individual aspirations. Such a community is not even to be found in the immediate surroundings, i.e. in the local environment. The individual is thus condemned to an independent search, not only for a subjective identity, but for a place for himself in an unpredictable and contradictory world, subjected to illusory reduction. As advocates of environmental ethics stress, despite apparent independence from nature, or its reduction by means of the technosphere, people still need nature for their physical as well as psychological development.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the question should be answered as to what environmental ethics with a vital interest in repairing the relationship between man and the environment and saving it might offer us. Since it is not a homogeneous direction, but one that is present in at least several different varieties, we can distinguish (after their classification) three main ethical positions<sup>21</sup>, i.e. anthropocentric, holistic, and biocentric.

Anthropocentric and the most conservative environmental ethics, represented by, inter alia, John Passmore, William F. Baxter or Brian G. Norton, while proclaiming the need to take care of the natural environment, point out, first of all, the benefits which result from such action for man himself. Such an attitude is often described as anthropocentric or homocentric.

Anthropocentric ethics proclaims the conviction that only members of the human species possess properties that are essential for moral behaviour (reasonableness, sense of responsibility, freedom of will and action). In this ethics, it is the interests of the human species that count above all. It is primarily concerned with the well-being and prosperity of man and

---

<sup>20</sup> Bill Devall, George Sessions, *Ekologia głęboka* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Pusty Obłok, 1994), 234–235.

<sup>21</sup> It should be stressed that there are many characteristics, including types of environmental ethics. The following text proposes the already classic typology of environmental ethics by Alan Marshall. See: Alan Marshall, "Ethics and the Extraterrestrial Environment", *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 10, 2 (1993): 227–236.

these values are subordinated to the welfare (equilibrium) and survival of the environment and the living organisms that constitute it. [...] We may have obligations that relate to the natural ecosystems and biocentric communities of the planet, but these obligations are in all cases based on the fact that how we treat these ecosystems and communities of life can only affect the realisation of human values and rights. However, we have no obligation to support or defend non-human living beings, regardless of this fact. Remaining within the anthropocentric convention, environmental ethics, as a component of general ethics, proclaims the need to protect nature and respect it as a manifestation of protection and respect for man.<sup>22</sup>

As can be seen from the characteristics set out above, ethics so oriented should not be classified as environmental ethics in the strict sense. At most, it should be regarded as a development of traditional ethics. Nevertheless, in the literature on the subject, it is discussed alongside or together with other directions of environmental ethics without drawing this distinction. The described state of affairs is also influenced by theoretical problems related to the impossibility of completely eliminating the anthropocentric approach in environmental ethics. According to a significant proportion of researchers, such attempts were and are doomed to failure. Assuming that they are right, non-anthropocentric environmental ethics lose their *raison d'être* and can be reduced, either to one of the specific (practical) ethics or to the traditional ethics developed on environmental considerations. This, in turn, may raise the question as to whether it makes sense to develop it further. The fundamental problem which arises in the case of anthropocentric ethics is the fact that they are only a continuation of the tradition of Western rationalism, according to which only a rational person using the achievements of science and modern technologies can protect us from an environmental crisis. Supporters of anthropocentric ethics also ignore and challenge ethical positions which point to the urgent need to create an environmental ethics separate from traditional ethics. This environmental ethics would recognise the natural environment and non-human beings as self-contained objects of morality with an inner value of existence. Because of this value, they should be respected and protected, and not because of the primary, pragmatic and economic interest of man. It is important to realise that behind the pragmatic-economic indications of environmental protection, as a source of renewable raw materials, genetic material, therapeutic compounds, etc., there is ultimately the neoliberal free market economy.

---

<sup>22</sup> Włodzimierz Tyburski, "Etyka środowiskowa a paradygmat antropocentryzmu", in: *Ekofilozofia i Bioetyka. VI Polski Zjazd Filozoficzny*, ed. idem (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Top Kurier, 1996), 67–68.

Holistic environmental ethics (appearing in several varieties, e.g. as ecological ethics or community ethics), inter alia represented by Aldo Leopold or John B. Callicott propose the defence of the rights, not only of individual animated beings, but also, and perhaps most importantly, of the harmonious whole they create, pointing out that all forms of life are intrinsic values contributing to the richness and flourishing of all life on Earth, which ultimately has an overriding value. The supporters of holistic ethics strongly emphasise the close link between all the structures that make up an organic whole on a planetary scale, known as the community of life. This approach is described as holistic. It should be added that the foundation of holistic environmental ethics is a speculative cosmology, called (as is the case, for example, with Henryk Skolimowski) eco-cosmology. This in turn was founded in the work of the aforementioned author<sup>23</sup> upon seven pillars, i.e. the anthropic principle (according to which the physical properties of the universe determined the emergence of intelligent forms of life, including our appearance on the earth for which we are responsible), and the concept of evolution (as a complex and not accidental and therefore deliberate creative process of becoming, as Teilhard de Chardin has already pointed out, increasingly complex forms of consciousness). The third pillar is initiated by John A. Wheeler's theory of the participatory mind, according to which "[...] the mind is present in all the products of our knowledge and all the images of the world".<sup>24</sup> Thus, with the help of our minds, we co-create the world and participate in it. If we combine the concept of mind with the anthropic principle and the concept of evolution, we can therefore say that our mind is the result of the process of evolutionary growth of consciousness, until reaching self-consciousness, which has become participatory consciousness, or participatory mind. Its presence imparts an ethical meaning to human presence in the world. The idea of a participatory mind "[...] not only allows us to look at the cosmos in a new way, but also offers a higher quality of freedom and human dignity. In order to satisfy our participatory mind, we must co-create with the world. The awareness of the creative power of our mind only underscores our responsibility for our own lives, for the fate of the Earth and the universe. The cosmos is responsible for our birth and now we are responsible for its fate".<sup>25</sup> The idea of the participatory mind leads Henryk Skolimowski to the fourth pillar, which is the hidden order underlying the holistic concepts. In its case, it is assumed that the whole universe (including

---

<sup>23</sup> John B. Callicott developed and systematised holistic (or holistic-systematic) ethics initiated by Aldo Leopold.

<sup>24</sup> Henryk Skolimowski, *Filozofia żyjąca* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Pusty Obłok, 1992), 27.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, 27.

all its constituents) is interconnected and mutually, reciprocally defined. In simpler terms, the universe, including the natural environment, is a single, cumulative and coherent, even if diverse, system linked by a network of interrelationships that we should be aware of and care for. Violation of any of its components will spontaneously disrupt the whole. Hence the idea of responsibility promoted by Henryk Skolimowski. The fifth pillar of holistic ethics is the theology of hope. The author of *Living Philosophy* stresses that hope is

the condition of all meaning, of all aspirations, of all action – this is a fundamental attribute of humanity. [...] Eco-cosmology is an affirmation of the universe; hope is part of this affirmation. Thus, hope appears as an inalienable dimension of those interpretations of the cosmos in which human life makes sense, just like the universe around it.<sup>26</sup>

One might add that hope is essential for the better understanding and acceptance of the previous pillars. The next, i.e. the sixth pillar, is reverence for life. It is the consequence of

our realisation of the astonishing magic of evolutionary development. For when [we] realize the magnificence of the architecture of the universe, the complexity of the tapestry of life woven by evolution, the uniqueness of the power of the human mind, and the alignment of all these factors into a single magnificent symphony, all we may feel is respect and admiration for this work. [...] There is no logical necessity to describe the world in terms of reverence. And yet, to a mind sensitive and understanding of the worship of life, it appears as a natural recognition of the miracle and beauty of life itself. The reverential attitude may therefore easily be extended to other species and other people: it is part of our overall vision of the cosmos and all its creations.<sup>27</sup>

It is therefore advisable to treat reverence, not even as a manifestation of an incidental feeling for the other (man, animal, plant, nature in general), but as a permanent form of co-sensibility, or as a wide-ranging empathy that allows us to understand, in equal measure, other people, as well as the natural environment or the universe of which we are an integral part. Finally, the last, seventh pillar is eco-ethics, as the culmination of the overall ethical concept. It is, as Henryk Skolimowski notes,

a historical necessity resulting from the plan of the universe created by the anthropic principle – through creative evolution, a participatory mind, to flourish in the form of reverence and empathy. This new intelligent reading of the universe allows us to see reverence and eco-ethics as partners

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 29–30.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 30.

acting together with the anthropic principle at the level of *homo sapiens moralis*. The anthropic principle acting intelligently in an era of ecological crisis is becoming eco-ethics.<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, eco-ethics is to instil in people values such as respect for all life; responsibility for the other person and the natural environment, more broadly the universe; moderation in action, which should not be conducive to satisfying human interests alone; and finally, the pursuit of wisdom (knowledge) to enable us to function better in the world and prevent its degradation. The ecological man, in line with what has been said above, does not have a distinguished position in the natural environment (as the proponents of anthropocentric ethics have claimed), but becomes the custodian of “[...] the treasury and the museum created by evolution”.<sup>29</sup> Nor are the values to be safeguarded by it treated as originating from God or from human giving, not resisting the many vagaries, but as having their source in the very nature of the evolutionary process, in the process of the continuous emergence and development of species linked together by, not only a biological, but also a moral bond, even though we are characterised by different sensitivity.<sup>30</sup>

Biocentric environmental ethics, represented among others by Peter Singer, Robin Attfield, Tom Regan, or Paul W. Taylor, assumes that humanity is “mature” to extend the notion of individual (human) rights to other beings, including non-human life forms. These undeniably include animals. In the case of plants as well as inanimate structures, the discussion remains open. However, rights are derived from the conviction that every living organism, as well as the complex of organisms, has its own, innate and inalienable interests, defining its welfare (well-being) and internal value, which make it a fully-fledged subject of morality. Although the positions of biocentrists differ from each other to a certain extent, as is the case with P. Singer’s or R. Atfield’s concepts, who base their theories on a theory of interest that is close to theory of interest under American legislation, as opposed to T. Regan’s concept based on the theory of rights or P.W. Taylor’s concept of respect for nature, it is still quite easy to identify the elements that link and consolidate them.

The aforementioned authors agree that the moral criteria should be based on the ability of all sentient beings to experience both pleasure and distress. If, therefore, animals have this ability, we should, out of necessity, have them protected by law and consider them as objects of morality. On the other hand, all biocentrists agree that species differences are irrelevant, because what matters is only the ability of the living structure

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, 31.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, 111.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, 112.

to feel pain and suffering, which also cannot be denied in animals. In the context of recent research, this may also apply to plants, although not all biocentrists agree on this matter. The father of biocentric ethics is Jeremy Bentham, who, in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, expresses the hope that

[...] the day comes when the rest of living creatures will be given rights that the hand of tyranny may have deprived them of. [And he goes on to add, may] the day come when all consider that the number of legs, the hairiness of the skin, or the ending of the os sacrum, are also not convincing arguments to allow a sentient creature to suffer torment. What could be the underlying reason for setting an impassable limit? Is it the ability to reason or perhaps the gift of speech? However, an adult horse or dog is incomparably smarter and more capable of communicating than a child who is a day or a week or even a month old. Suppose, however, that it is not. What would it help? The question is not whether animals can reason or speak, but whether they can suffer.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, biocentrists in their biocentric view of nature (based on knowledge of the ecology of systems) agree that people are as equally members of the community of life as non-human beings. Secondly, they note that our planet's ecosystem is the sum of complex elements that are interconnected, dependent on each other, and function properly in relation to each other. Thus, their disruption threatens to disrupt the whole of the planet. Thirdly and finally, they add that every biological organism should be recognised as the teleological centre of life, which has the unquestionable right to self-creation in the most appropriate way for itself. Thus, they rule out the claim that man, by his (bio-psychological) nature, is a superior being to others. They refer to such a claim as species chauvinism, species egoism, or species bias.<sup>32</sup> For skills specific to our species, such as rational thinking or aesthetic creativity, which do not occur in animals in the same intensity as in humans, may be superfluous to animals as biocentrists suppose. In their case, other qualities are more important, such as speed for the cheetah, sight for the hawk, or dexterity for the chimpanzee. These qualities, in turn, are not something that we can see in humans. The conviction that human beings are morally superior to other animated structures cannot be maintained also on account of the fact that non-human beings have not been endowed with

---

<sup>31</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *Wprowadzenie do zasad moralności i prawodawstwa* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PWN, 1958), 419–420.

<sup>32</sup> The concept of speciesism was used for the first time by Richard D. Ryder in his work on invasive experiments on animals. Peter Singer, who uses it in one of his most famous books on the liberation of animals from human supremacy, contributed to its dissemination. See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review–Random House, 1975).

the qualities of moral subjects, such as free will or practical reasonableness. It is therefore impossible to compare them with each other. It is also ultimately difficult, as the biocentrists add, to defend the theory of the privileged role of man arising from his innate value being humanity itself. In the end, biocentrists also reject this theory as well, advocating for an earthly community of life.

The article describes the transition that has taken place between traditional ethics and environmental ethics. Owing to the fact that they constitute innovative disciplines of knowledge, discussions on their place and importance are ongoing. In turn, environmental ethics themselves are confronted, *inter alia*, with the recurring question of whether, in order to solve environmental problems, some new ethics, apart from traditional ethics, is needed, or whether the approaches proposed in the framework of biocentric environmental ethics are superior to those proposed by supporters of holistic ethics, while being aware that representatives of anthropocentric ethics also participate in the competition. Finally, these are questions about whether they are all sufficiently well proved or rather declarative. And lastly, these are questions about what is to be encompassed by the moral scope of environmental ethics, apart from people and animals.

## Bibliography

- Arnould Eric J., Craig J. Thompson. 2005. "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research". *Journal of Consumer Research* 31: 868–882.
- Bauman Zygmunt. 2006. *Globalizacja. I co z tego dla ludzi wynika*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Bauman Zygmunt. 2006. *Płynna nowoczesność*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Beck Ulrich. 2004. *Spółczesność ryzyka. W drodze do innej nowoczesności*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Scholar.
- Bentham Jeremy. 1958. *Wprowadzenie do zasad moralności i prawodawstwa*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PWN.
- Bonenberg Marek. 1992. *Etyka środowiskowa. Założenia i kierunki*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Carr Jasun D., Melissa R. Gotlieb, Nam-Jin Lee, Dhavan V. Shah. 2012. "Examining Overconsumption, Competitive Consumption, and Conspicuous Consumption from 1994 to 2004: Disentangling Cohort and Period Effects". *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 644: 220–232.
- Ciążela Helena, Wioletta Dziarnowska. 2010. "Człowiek wobec przyrody". In: *Wobec zagrożenia globalnym kryzysem ekologicznym. Technologiczna korekta czy aksjologiczna przebudowa?* Ed. Helena Ciążela, Wioletta Dziarnowska.

- nowska, Włodzimierz Tyburski, 7–15. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej.
- Devall Bill, George Sessions. 1994. *Ekologia głęboka*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Pusty Obłok.
- Dhar Ravi, Klaus Wertenbroch. 2000. "Consumer Choices between Hedonic and Utilitarian Goods". *Journal of Marketing Research* 37: 60–71.
- Eriksen Thomas H. 2001. *Tyrania chwili. Szybko i wolno płynący czas w erze informacji*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Esposti Piergiorgio D. 2015. *Hyperconsumption*. The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies. 1–2.
- Giddens Anthony. 2008. *Konsekwencje nowoczesności*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Giddens Anthony. 2009. *Europa w epoce globalnej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Gleick James. 2003. *Szybciej. Przyspieszenie niemal wszystkiego*. Poznań: Zysk i S-ka.
- Hull Zbigniew. 2015. "Język ekofilozofii". In: *Filozofia, Etyka, Ekologia. Profesorowi Włodzimierzowi Tyburskiemu w darze*. Ed. Adam Grzeliński, Piotr Domeracki, Ryszard Wiśniewski, 621–639. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK.
- Janikowski Ryszard. 2004. *Zarządzanie antropopresją. W kierunku zrównoważonego rozwoju społeczeństwa i gospodarki*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Difin.
- Jonas Hans. 1996. *Zasada odpowiedzialności. Etyka dla cywilizacji technologicznej*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Platan.
- Kant Immanuel. 2013. *Uzasadnienie metafizyki moralności*. Kęty: Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki.
- Luttwak Edward N. 2000. *Turbokapitalizm. Zwycięzcy i przegrani światowej gospodarki*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie.
- Marshall Alan. 1993. "Ethics and the Extraterrestrial Environment". *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 10, 2: 227–236.
- Pieńkowski Dariusz, Eugeniusz Kośmicki. 2001. "Trwała konsumpcja jako wyzwanie dla XXI wieku". In: *Człowiek, zwierzę, cywilizacja. Aspekty humanistyczne*. Ed. Honorata Korpikiewicz, 231–252. Poznań: Wydawnictwo ProDruk.
- Ponthiere Gregory. 2011. "Existence and stability of overconsumption equilibria". *Economic Modelling* 28: 74–90.
- Raport Brundtland. 1987.
- Schwartz David T. 2010. *Consuming Choice. Ethics in a Global Consumer Age*. New York: Plymouth.
- Schweitzer Albert. 1974. *Życie*. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX.
- Singer Peter. 1975. *Animal Liberation*. New York: New York Review–Random House.
- Singer Peter. 1997. *O życiu i śmierci. Upadek etyki tradycyjnej*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Skolimowski Henryk. 1992. *Filozofia żyjąca*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Pusty Obłok.

- Slater Don. 1997. *Consumer Culture and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Szahaj Andrzej. 2017. *Neoliberalizm, turbokapitalizm, kryzys*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Książka i Prasa.
- Toffler Alvin. 1998. *Szok przyszłości*. Poznań: Wyd. Zysk i S-ka.
- Tyburski Włodzimierz. 1996. "Etyka środowiskowa a paradygmat antropocentryzmu". In: *Ekofilozofia i Bioetyka. VI Polski Zjazd Filozoficzny*. Ed. Włodzimierz Tyburski, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Top Kurier.
- Zacher Lech W. 2008. "Trwały rozwój – utopia czy realna możliwość?". *Problemy Ekorozwoju/Problems of Sustainable Development* 3, 2: 63–68.

## Summary

The article discusses the origins of environmental ethics, including the process of its emergence from traditional ethics. At the same time, the differences between both types of ethics have been pointed out, taking into account a separate understanding of the subject of morality, the temporal aspect (i.e. the long-term nature of ethical analyses in environmental ethics) and the importance of knowledge underlying human activities, which is pointed out by advocates of environmental ethics. Moreover, the authors present the most important directions of environmental ethics, including its anthropocentric, holistic, and biocentric varieties.

**Keywords:** environmental ethics, traditional ethics, anthropocentric ethics, holistic ethics, biocentric ethics