

# A comparison of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism philosophy essay



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In the modern world today, environmental ethics is becoming a very sophisticated issue due to the widely held ethical viewpoints. They vary from one particular group to another. Unfortunately, this influences most of the policies made in respect to environment. Given that they act as the windows through which a particular group will view reality then they cannot be a mutual consensus on the conclusions drawn. What is important is to strike a balance or reach a synthesis on the diverse held positions.

Anthropocentrism is one of the ethical view points that shall be considered in this study and how it contrasts to ecocentrism. For some, the whole issue of environmental ethics is human centered and any assumption is justified on how much it can promote human interests. On the other hand, policies and decisions are justified and okayed if and only if they support nature and not limiting it to man.

## **Introduction**

Whenever a group of people are involved in making policies with respect to ethics, there is always a dispute due to diversity of opinions. This diversity become or serves as the window throw which the participants use to see reality. A country like Australia which is involved in coal mining process is not immune to ethical conflicts among stakeholders. They will have different ethical opinions in respect to the effects the coal mining activity has to the environment. Inasmuch as it is seen as a beneficial economic activity to Australia others will regard it as an activity threatening the environment and even push for its eradication.

This study will analyze the various environmental ethics viewpoints and ethical positions supporting it. In particular, it will look at the

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anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. It will also explore the different ethical positions namely, deep ecology, social ecology, human welfare ecology, developmentalism and cornucopian. This shall be illustrated by practical examples in the general environmental realm and also apply them to coal mining activity in Australia.

## **Coal Mining in Australia**

Coal in Australia is mined in every state and territory of the country. It is used to generate electricity and is exported. 75% of the coal mined in Australia is exported, mostly to Eastern Asia. In 2001/01. 258. 5 million tones of coal were mined, and 193. 6 million tones exported. Coal also provides about 85% of Australia's electricity production[1]. Coal plays a major role in the economy of Australian country and it continues to be regarded as a major economic activity in the future. ' The 1960s saw oil eclipse coal as the World's most used primary energy source, however the relative abundance, reliability and low cost of coal have ensured that it remains the most commonly used fuel source for electricity generation both in Australia and internationally'[2].

The following diagram shows the major export countries for Australian coal[3].

Major Export Markets For Australian Coal (2008-2009)[11]

**Country/Area**

**Million Tons Coking**

**Million Tons Steaming**

**Million Tons Total**

**Rank**

**% of exports**

Japan

43.3

61.5

104.8

1

39.8

Korea (ROK)

15.1

27.9

43.1

2

16.3

Taiwan

6. 1

20. 0

26. 1

3

9. 9

China

15. 5

9. 5

25. 0

4

9. 5

India

23. 8

0. 9

24. 7

5

9. 4

Europe

18. 6

2. 3

20. 9

6

7. 9

## **Environmental Ethics and Natural Resource Policy**

Notwithstanding the fact the economic benefit of coal in Australia and in deed across the world it has ethical implications. There are ethical viewpoints that across the realm of anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. These viewpoints influence a lot on how an individual will view the world. These view points become the spectacles through which stakeholders see reality just as how an individual with black glasses will see the world around him as black or darkened. There can always arise a dispute between a person with glasses whenever s/he argues that the world is black as this argument will not be tolerated by the person who sees reality with naked eyes. The main aim is to establish who sees reality as it is and without prejudice or bias. This is the same danger with the different viewpoints mentioned above. Unfortunately or fortunately, this viewpoints influence policy-making especially on natural policies.

Policy making in the realm of environment may differ due to different interests of the individuals concerned. Some individuals are fundamentally

interested in the welfare of the human person. They will regard anything else as of no value and elevate the human being. Man is regarded as the measure of all things. On the other hand, other individuals do not see the specialty in man amidst other creation. For them, they consider every bit of nature as important. Anthropocentric point of view is much concerned on how nature affects humans. They will be quick to rule out a default in the world that negatively affects the lives of people and besides, advocate for what is promoting human life.

' Arne Naes holds that the green movement is a movement where you not only do good for the planet for the sake of humans but also for the sake of the planet itself. That's to say that you start from the whole of the globe and talk about the ecosystems, trying to keep them healthy as a value in itself. The core principle of social ecology is that ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems. Ecological problems cannot be understood, much less resolved, without facing social issues. The root causes of environmental problems are such as trade profit, industrial expansion, and the identification of " progress" with corporate self-interest'.[4]

The theory of anthropocentrism says that the world exists for humanity. Believers in this Philosophy would say that humans can rightfully try to benefit as much as possible from the environment.[5]

Looking at this different environmental view points and the ethical positions related to them there exists a challenging ecological dilemma. From an anthropocentric point of view, where the world exists for humanity's sake, man has enjoys freedom to use what surrounds him as s/he wishes. In this

case, policy-makers who are advocates of anthropocentrism will have man's interests as the top agenda. For example, in the case of Coal mining in Australia, the government will value those aspects that are beneficial to the Australians. If the coal mining has damages on the earth or causes pollution but it happens that the implications are not severe to the people then the government will not be hesitant to put in place measures that can stop the activity. On the other hand, if the government is guided by an ecocentric standpoint, it will be quick to pass policies that will ensure that the coal mining activity is stopped despite its significance to the people. In modern times, environmental issues are becoming a major concern and especially on its influence to humanity. The efforts to have a better ecological framework are all about man's welfare. Inasmuch as much emphasis would be put on the well being of nature, it is almost an intuitive fact that everything endangering the lives of human beings is to be done away with. Nature cannot be good if it is of no value to man. However, man cannot live comfortably if nature fails to provide him with necessary needs. It is an indisputable fact that man cannot survive without food, clothing and shelter. These needs are not within his being but they are acquired from nature. This is a great affirmation of the ecocentric viewpoint and in a special way the deep ecology position. Here, despite man being the most intelligent being and in control of his immediate nature it cannot be ruled out that nature lesser than him is of no consequence. Hence, the moderate ecocentric assertion that all species have intrinsic value. Everything in the universe cannot be underrated whatsoever for by virtue of its being it serves a purpose. This purpose can directly benefit man or can have an indirect impact. For example, water is very important resource for the well being of

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man and other plants. In fact, every creature that has life needs water to sustain itself. Water is very vital resource to the agricultural sector where man derives above all food. Agricultural activities create food both for animals and man. Water as a natural resource has got benefits that cut across eight-percent of the natural endowments. Not only is man depending on water but also the surroundings around him such as plants and animals. This supports strongly the human welfare ecology which advocates for the good use of environment for our well-being. A policy to ensure that water is well managed and utilized is a good thing. Other IBM efforts are similarly aimed at preserving and protecting clean water for drinking, bathing, electric power, industrial manufacturing, food and irrigation of crops. In New York, for example, the Beacon Institute for Rivers and Estuaries is working with IBM to deploy the river and Estuary Observatory Network (REON), with floating sensors along the Hudson River as part of a monitoring and preservation study.[6]

Biodiversity is a non-renewable resource which is important for the survival of humanity.[7]

Human activities contribute to the destruction and loss of biodiversity which leads to negative ecological consequences. Approximately 40, 000 species are lost each year. Firstly biodiversity provides an actual and potential source of biological resources: secondly, it contributes to the maintenance of the biosphere in a condition which supports life and biodiversity; and thirdly, for ethical and aesthetic values.[8]

Considering the above mentioned hypothesis, developmentalism since nature cannot be elevated due to its contribution to human kind. It is clear that whatever is found in the environment serve as an end in itself.

Everything enjoys finality by virtue of being there in the world and does not owe it being to anything else. Environment cannot be made to work for man nor can man make environment work for him. It can only work for him if it has that as its intrinsic finality. For example, there so many animals in the world among which man can kill for some food, say, meat. But there are those animals that s/he cannot feed on no matter what. For example, why cant man feed on cats or mouse or lion? This is because they lack that finality. But this should not mean that cats or lion or mouse do not have a role to play in the environment as developmentalism holds but they serve other purposes that are beneficial to man and to the environment.

Technology cannot replace the importance of environment to mankind. In other words, it cannot be a second environment in the world of mankind. For example, coal mining requires a lot of machinery for extraction and to make the whole process easier, however what about the air pollution caused by the smoke evolving from the exhaust pipes? There will be no point in time that we will have technology replacing the natural dynamics of environment. Recently, there was a concern on global warming. Technocrats have confessed that despite the efforts put in place, the universe still records high cold temperatures.

The mineral resource sector is critical to Australia's economic and social well-being.'[9].

From a developmentalist point of view coal mining as a natural endowment has instrumental value given that it contributes positively to the economy and social well-being of Australians. If a policy were to be passed regarding whether to carry on with the coal mining activity and the participants held different ethical views then such conclusions would draw: Coal mining benefits the people of Australia so why bother about the pollution caused through the mining activity? Others would argue that since it is causing a great danger to the environment let stop the activity? Such opinions will draw from anthropocentrists and ecocentrists respectively.

## **Conclusion**

Environmental Ethics, due to the plurality of ethical viewpoints is an area that raises a lot of controversies. It is very difficult to come to an agreement during deliberation on what policies to put in place as far as environment is concerned. In fact, an analysis of ethical issues in any discipline is always faced with difficulties that emanate from diversity of opinions. I believe that there is no opinion or school of thought that can be absolutely true. Every standpoint suffers certain prejudices or bias. The best thing is to consider each case and make a synthesis. Only in that manner can one arrive at a proper view of things. In our case, anthropocentrism and ecocentrism have got certain aspects that are appealing but on the other hand there are those aspects that cannot be acceptable. The problem arises when each viewpoint goes to the extremes instead of taking a moderate stand. In my opinion, all the ethical view points are valid but need to be complimented by the others.