

A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF TWO MORAL APPROACHES TO BIO-COSMOLOGY

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ABSTRACT. *Ecology, a new branch of knowledge has opened a unique moral outlook and duties of humankind to whole biosphere of our planet. This branch originates from biology a bit more than one hundred years ago. The main discovery of ecology is that the survival of mankind entirely depends on the undisturbed and balanced co-existence of the biotic community as a whole. Both from anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric points of view, therefore, human beings as moral agents have some duties to all forms of life either perceptible or imperceptible. Approximately, according to microbiologists, 35 to 40 millions of species live on earth in biotic community. So, ecology later on gives birth to bio-ethics and as a result the field of moral obligations has been extended. But the surprising fact is that the followers of Jainism, Buddhism and Vaishnavism of India were adequately aware of the animals' right to life thousands of years ago, particularly before the origination of ecology. But naturally two questions here arise: (i) What was the source of their moral understanding prior and superior to moral knowledge based on ecology? And (ii) What is it that makes the former knowledge superior to that of the latter? A comparative interpretation of the possible and decisive replies of the above questions is the aim of this paper. One of the pioneers of the contemporary movement for animals' right to life is Peter Singer, a moral philosopher of Australia. So, his ethics, particularly with regard to our moral responsibility to animals cannot escape our attention. His moral approach to living beings of the cosmos is very much rational as well as utilitarian. On the other hand, moral obligations to animals advocated by the theosophists of the ancient India are completely non-rational. The former is based on reason and as such it is rational approach, while the latter is based on the knowledge of self or soul and therefore, intuitive. In the concluding section of this paper I would like to assert that bio-ethics defined by Darryl Macer as love of life is a step towards the spiritual root found in the ancient scriptures of India but distinct from the rational approach of the West.*

KEYWORDS: *ecology, bioethics, moral, cosmos and theosophy.*

Peter Singer, a famous Australian Philosopher, is regarded as the pioneer of animal rights movement. Although he does not support animal killing, yet the titles of the chapters of his book (taken from the page of contents) such as 'Taking Life: Animals', 'Taking life: The Embryo and the. Fetus' and 'Taking Life: Humans' etc. – strikingly attract our sight. At the outset of presenting his view regarding animals right to life, I would like humbly to say that the repeated use of the term 'taking life' or 'killing' sounds psychologically unpleasant. The same thing appeared, on the other hand, differently in the book of Joseph Des Jardins. Instead of using the terms quoted above, he used the words such as 'responsibilities to animals', 'animal liberation movement', 'animal rights' and so on. This linguistic difference between the two thinkers, does not escape the notice of the readers. Although the comment that I passed above is of little significance as a criticism yet the repeated use of the term 'killing' obviously lessen the susceptibility of human mind, as well as the brutal action indicated by the word becomes almost usual and ceases to be sensational one. Human thought and the language as a medium of its expression, it is needless to say, deeply influence human nature and behavior.

It is to be noted that ‘Practical Ethics’ of Peter Singer was published in 1979 while Joseph Des Jardin's ‘Environmental Ehtics’ in 1997. In the next year (in 1998) Darryl Macer wrote a book on bioethics. We wonder when we see him to define, bioethics as *love of life*, because a striking difference in both terminology and attitude towards animals is explicitly expressed in this definition, which distinguished Darryl Macer from his predecessors as well as placed him on the same line of ancient spiritualists of India¹. It is, however, quite natural that this temporal difference has brought about a change in thought as well as terminological modification. The steps, which Peter Singer has undertaken against animal killing’ in favor of their rights and liberation in the modern West, is in deed praiseworthy. In his Practical Ethics Peter Singer used the term ‘animal’ in the sense of non-human animals. He has divided them into three classes namely (i) Person, (ii) Non-person and (iii) Non-sentient living being. Some animals such as chimpanzees, gorillas, orangutans and dogs etc. belong to the class of non-human persons. These animals are termed as ‘persons’ due to their certain traits of personality such as rationality, self-consciousness, autonomy and so on. They are also eligible to have, according to Singer, “a right to life deriving from their capacity to see themselves as continuing selves.”²

Their lives are of intrinsic value. So, it is wrong to kill them. Peter Singer says, “it seems that killing..... a chimpanzee is worse than the killing of a human being who, because of a congenital intellectual disability, is not and never can be a person”³.

The animals that are devoid of the traits of personality mentioned above belong to the second class. These animals are conscious and as such they are capable of having, the sensations of pleasure and pain. So, Peter Singer argues in favor of their survival simply on utilitarian ground. That is to say, if the amount of pleasure is greater or at least not less than the pain and sufferings that they have to bear to continue their lives, they ought not to be killed. But he neither admits the intrinsic values of nor their right to life. He says that they “do not qualify for a right to life”⁴ He also says, “When we come to animals who, ... are not self-conscious beings, the case against killing is weaker.”⁵ By referring to certain utilitarian viewpoints he says more, “the killing of non-self-conscious animals may not be wrong.”⁶

Besides the non-human persons and non-person conscious beings there are many living species including plants that Singer believes to be non-sentient. These living beings are useful for survival of other animals as well as for that of humans. Since they ore claimed to be devoid of consciousness, Singer again denies their intrinsic value of and right to life. According to him it is only sentience that can “suffice to place a being within the sphere of equal consideration of ‘interest’ does not mean that

¹ It is to be noted that the term ‘India’ is used to mean Indian sub-continent including our Bangladesh.

² Singer, Peter. (1995). *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge: University Press. P. 177.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 117–118.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 120.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 132.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 133.

the being has a personal interest in continuing to live¹. Nevertheless he does not seem to be cruel to them, because either to protect the beauty of nature or to keep up the ecological balance, which is ultimately necessary for human survival on earth. He says, "Where no one needs to destroy wilderness... the value to preserving the... areas of wilderness greatly exceeds the economic values gained by destruction."²

It is to be noted here that practical ethicists and environmentalists first broken down the narrow boundary of the Western human-centered ethics and extended the moral consideration for and responsibilities to non-human animals too, on the basis of ecological knowledge. As a branch of natural science ecology is born about one hundred and a few years ago. Later on, practical ethics derived its origin from ecological outlook; but not more than sixty years before. But to what extent can the ethical responsibility of man be expanded? What are those responsibilities? And what should be the nature of moral responsibilities to living beings other than humans? These are the questions that gave birth to controversy in moral philosophy in the West.

Peter Singer has chosen simply a negative aspect of moral responsibility of man to animals. And this is 'not to kill' them. This negative, approach in the sense of prohibition tends to be violated. He seems to be indifferent to positive duties of man such as health-care, medical treatment, etc. to non-domestic animals.

To him, however, killing non-human persons is wrong. And in favor of his moral view, we know, he followed utilitarian outlook, which he tried to support by reason. But Peter Singer is not one of them who advocate for animal welfare simply from anthropocentric consideration. The up-holders of this view believe that man's moral duty is to be extended only to protect the lives of those animals that are useful to man. They deny moral responsibility to and respect for the lives of those animals that do not serve human interest. Peter Singer's philosophy is above such a narrow attitude, rather he advocates for "the doctrine of the sanctity of personal life" instead of the traditional belief in "the sanctity of human life".³

Although he termed some animals as persons and admits their intrinsic value of life but he "suggested that the boundary of moral consider-ability be drawn somewhere between shrimp and oysters"⁴. That is to say, Singer allows us to eat oyster but not shrimp and others belonging to higher rank in sentience. Sometimes this boundary line is charged to be 'too inclusive'.⁵ But it is difficult to bring the charge of too inclusiveness until an acceptable criterion of evaluation is determined. For about forty million species of living beings are said to exist in the ecosystem on earth. We do not know which of those species are directly and indirectly useful for human survival. Ecology has not yet provided us adequate knowledge of whole ecosystem. So, even from anthropocentric consideration such a charge cannot be leveled against his view. But it can well be charged as arbitrary, because he fails to

¹ *Ibid*, p. 131.

² *Ibid*, p. 284.

³ *Ibid*, p. 117.

⁴ Jardins, J.D. (1997). *Environmental Ethics*, London: Wardsworth Pub. Com. P. 116.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 116.

give an acceptable explanation for it. Perhaps from all these considerations mentioned above, “some critics have come to believe that the animal welfare movement is not an adequate environmental philosophy.”¹ It is to be noted that the charge of inadequacy is brought against the contemporary animal welfare movement of the West – not of the East. Respect or love for animal life is not main theme for the Western utilitarian consideration. A utilitarian rather aims at the total amount of pleasure. As a result animals’ right to life does neither receive importance to a moral agent nor can it draw his kindness.

In 1980s Tom Regan, an American philosopher, advanced a step further with animal liberation movement. It is wrong in principle, according to him, to use animals for scientific research, commercial purposes as well as for recreational exhibitions. Recreational use of them as pets or in zoos may not be considered as bad from utilitarian point of view. Use of animals as food may also increase overall amount of pleasure to the meat-eaters. But Regan condemns all those activities in principle – not from utilitarian viewpoint like Singer. Regan believes that the principle, according to which moral agents are to discharge some moral duties to animals, implies that the animals do have their rights to live as well as not to be used arbitrarily by the agents. It is to be noted that Regan keeps up a distinction between moral agents and moral recipients. This distinction seems to disappear when Singer uses the term ‘person’ to refer to both humans and some non-human animals. Non-human person cannot act as moral agent. By moral agents, however, Regan means “competent adult human beings”².

Agents are free and rational and they can be held responsible for what they do. Moral recipients may be both human and non-human beings but not necessarily be responsible for what they do. Regan used the term ‘patient’ instead to ‘recipient’. The ‘moral patients’, however, are said to have moral standing. “They cannot act morally... but they can be acted upon morally or immorally.”³ Regan thinks that it is wrong in principle to treat either ‘agents’ or ‘patients’ as slaves or food or objects of entertainment. But one can ask, ‘Why?’ “Regan’s answer is that they (both agents and patients) are subjects-of-a-life.”⁴ ‘Subject-of-a-life’, according to him, does not mean all living beings. It has a restricted use that refers to a set of certain characteristics that “involves more than merely being alive and more than merely being conscious. To be the .subject-of-a-life is to have beliefs and desires, perception, memory and a sense of the future, including their own future, an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain, preference... and the ability to initiate action in pursuit of their desires and goals; a psychophysical identity over time...”⁵

According to the above description, *subject-of-a-life* refers to both humans and non-humans who are almost similar to Peter Singer’s *person*. For, the traits of personality that Singer points out, are: consciousness, self consciousness, rationality,

¹ *Ibid*, p. 119.

² *Ibid*, p. 113.

³ *Ibid*, p. 113.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 214.

⁵ Quotation is taken from Jardins’ *Environmental Ethics*, p. 1, 14.

autonomy, and the capacity to see oneself as a continuing self and distinct being with past and future etc.¹ These are more or less similar to the characteristics of a *subject-of-a-life* quoted above. But infants, and mentally incapacitated or comatose individuals lack the ability to understand and choose”² and they are called *moral patients*. If so, then how does Regan proposes to include them in the class entitled *subject-of-a-life*? It is, therefore, a clear case of contradiction. For, the characteristics of a *subject-of-a-life* that Regan points out clearly exclude moral patients from that class.

Moral theory of Tom Regan, however, is said to have based on *respect principle*, because this theory is intended neither to show compassion to lower animals nor to increase their pleasure; but to respect their lives, in principle, as our own. Des Jardins also likes to call this theory an *egalitarian theory of justice*,³ because lives of all who are said to have moral standing are of equal value. Justice demands that we treat individuals with equal respect. But some critics of Regan rightly suggest that the boundary of moral consider-ability is too restrictive, because his explanation of *subject-of-a-life* has made the line very exclusive.

From the above discussion, I think, it has become clear that although Singer’s concept of ‘person’ and Regan’s that of *subject-of-a-life* are almost similar, but the difference lies in their attitude to moral recipients. If Regan’s moral view can be termed as ‘respect-principle’, Singer’s view can very well be called as ‘pleasure principle’. There is another difference that lies in their notions of the extension of moral consider-ability and I have discussed it earlier. The main defects of the two views, on which now I would like to focus, are: (i) the approach of both of them is rational; and (ii) the dividing lines of moral consider-ability, in both views, seem to be excessively exclusive and calculated.

It is nothing but their rational approach is liable for the mathematical calculation. Although the theory of person of Peter Singer and the *respect principle* of Regan have admitted to expand the boundary of moral standing beyond humans yet the inadequacy of expansion is morally unacceptable. Singer’s definition of person painfully excluded human beings such as babies of one-year-old or below it, incurable patients and physically or intellectually or mentally handicapped humans from moral consider-ability. This is not all, he even proposes in the name of euthanasia or family planning, that they may be killed. Is the concept of moral consider-ability a short rug of winter that often is taken away keeping the bedmate’s body unwrapped?

Euthanasia cannot diminish total pain and suffering, rather it may cause dread, despair and a feeling of uneasiness to any man. The main theme of Singer’s ethics, however, lies in the concept of ‘person’. So, it needs to be examined thoroughly. According to this theory, lives of those humans and animals that cannot be termed as persons are devoid of intrinsic value. And killing of these non-persons is less wrong than that of a person.

¹ Peter Singer’s *Practical Ethics*, University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 131.

² Jardins, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 113.

³ *Ibid*, p. 114.

It is said earlier that Singer does not accept the traditional belief in special value of human life. This belief, according to him, originates from the bias to members of *homo-sapiens*. Any bias is, indeed, morally unacceptable. But Singer's theory of person seems to have failed to keep up a distinction between human person and non-human person. A human person is not only a moral recipient, he is a moral agent too. The latter (nonhuman person), on the other hand, can never be an agent. Peter Singer took an attempt to upgrade the lower animals to the rank of a human person, at least to equate their right to life. I have nothing to say against the attitude. But what I want to say is that if he could have overlooked the traits of personality and could come down a bit, even on utilitarian ground, to sentience or below it, to determine the border line of moral standing, I believe, reason would not disallow or frustrate him. More clearly I would like to say that life itself is of intrinsic value irrespective of any difference in bodily forms. And it is more rational to say that life is more valuable than non-living things. If so, then we can legitimately say that Singer's moral view is neither adequately rational nor does it originate from reason. His utilitarian consideration makes him believe so. It is obviously a clear case of rationalization.

Ideas and beliefs either moral or religious are not always, according to Thouless, formed out of reasoning. They may not be the products of logical deduction. In our practical life when our motivated actions encounter with universal moral principles inherited, we often put forth reason in favor of what we did or want to do. Thouless calls this process of reasoning 'rationalization'. He says,

“We may be able to give what we consider to be excellent intellectual reasons for our beliefs. They may merely be reasons the mind subconsciously supplies to justify it in holding beliefs which are really held on different ... grounds.”¹

The object of rationalization is to satisfy our own minds and that of others that our beliefs are really held on rational grounds. Rationalization is, therefore, a kind of deception. Thouless says that we are “guilty of the habit of making rationalization.”² It is, therefore, better to give up the methods of reasoning to determine moral responsibility to and the values of both human and non-human lives. It is rather wise to depend on profound feeling for them that springs from the ground of soul, what Kant calls *Fundus Animae* or 'Bottom of the soul'³ Rudolf Otto, a well known theologian of Germany also points “the ideas and value judgments of ethics... to a hidden substantive source... which because of the 'surpassing-ness' of its contents, must be distinguished from both pure and practical reason of Kant, as something yet higher or deeper than they.”⁴ G.L. Dickinson's comment with regard to moral

¹ *An Introduction to the Psychology of Religion*, University Press, Cambridge, 1956, p. 81.

² *Ibid*, p 88.

³ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, transd. by J. Harvey, Oxford University Press, London, 1957, p. 112.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 113–14.

knowledge is also noteworthy. Dickinson says, “Reason...does not determine directly what is good.”..... “the expanding nature of soul that seeks good.”¹

Now let us look to the East – to our subcontinent, to Jainism, Buddhism and the Vedanta – to know how these schools of thought taught us thousands of years ago when ecology was not born, to respect life of all creatures irrespective of humans and non-humans, sentient and non-sentient. The theosophists of Indian subcontinent do not recommend euthanasia and killing babies and they do not take those activities as the proper means to decrease the total amount of pains and sufferings of mankind.

Gautam Buddha propounded the eight-fold ways of quite annihilation of all sufferings. Jainism teaches mankind to avoid cruelty to all animals including man and to be kind equally to all of them. Through the principle of Tat Tvam Asi (That Thou Art) Chandogya Upanisada declares identity to all phenomenal selves irrespective of any form that they are to take. According to this principle there is no real distinction between human selves and the selves of non-human beings. The inner meaning that the concept bears is that one and the same *Atma* or Soul exists in each member of all species. The intuitive realization of this truth helps a man love everyone including all animals and plants as himself. But this rare realization is an outcome of a long spiritual practice – the success achieved in such training leads to a divine state of mind when an ascetic loses his sense of self identity and identifies himself with the One Self. And it is the concept of Sohoham (That I am) – the final stage of ‘Tat Tvam Asi’. J.B.S. Halden, as distinguished British microbiologist has also admitted the truth of this concept of the Upanishad. He says:

“The distinction between you and me or the nearest mosquito and me is nothing absolute either... Anyone who has the concrete and detailed notion of the unity of life, at which I have arrived after studying biology for sixty years, will at least have some respect for a life, including plant life.”²

Thus we come to know that the intuitive approach, in respect of animals right to life at which Indian theosophists arrived about more than three thousand years ago, is getting support by the contemporary ecological discoveries of the West. In spite of the fact Peter Singer *repeatedly insists*³ against the ecological view of attributing intrinsic value of and right to life to all living beings. He simply inquires of the reason of ascribing intrinsic values only to life of persons. But neither reason can be given nor is it at all required. It is as absurd to ask why the life of a person is intrinsically valuable; as to ask, why pleasure is good. Moreover, Singer himself is liable, we saw earlier, for arbitrarily accepting *personal life* as something alone intrinsically valuable. The charge of bias, therefore, can also be brought against him, as he himself has done against the advocates of *sanctity of human life*.

¹ Quotation borrowed from Toulmin’s, *The Place of Reasons in Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1964, p. 225.

² Quotation is borrowed from *Democratic Administration in the light of Practical Vedanta*, by Swami Ranganathananda, Sri Ramkrishna Math Press, Chennai, 2002, pp. 84–85.

³ *Practical Ethics*, pp. 280–284.

Singer's theory of person is purposely construed on utilitarian ground supported by an unacceptable process of reasoning to reject the intrinsic value of and to avoid moral responsibilities to animals other than persons. So, his theory seems to be deceptive. But it is not wise to determine values of self or life in terms of reason, because self or "life is larger than logic."¹ A.N. Prior says that life, love and lots of things are so profound that they elude the methods of reasoning. Intuitive realization of the truth of bio-centric egalitarianism, that ancient Upanishads have taught us, has also been admitted in the writings of ecologists Bill Devall and George Sessions:

"The intuition of bio-centric equality is that all things in the biosphere have all equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization within the larger self-realization."²

By 'larger self-realization' they intended to mean realization of the Real Self present in and identified with all phenomenal selves. And it bestows all-embracing nature of the Real Self upon a phenomenal one. The Real Self, according to the Upanishads, reveals itself in all forms of existence, living and non-living. And it is the Self to which an ascetic identifies himself by breaking through all the limitations of phenomenal self in ecstasy and declares *Sohoham* and finds no distinction between himself and others on earth. Isha Upanishad says, "One who beholds all living beings in himself and himself in all living beings, he cannot but love them all."³

Darryl Macer's definition of bioethics, therefore, calls upon our mind the truth of the above verse. We need now to explain more clearly what exactly the term *love* means according to the Upanishad. To love someone is to be identified with him/her. It is the essential core of bliss. Love consists in discovering oneself in the object of love. The profound truth reveals itself in the saying of Jesus Christ. He says, "Love thy neighbors as thyself". With an illustration Swami Vivekanda has also nicely explained the truth. He says, "None, O beloved, loves the husband for husband's sake, but it is for the sake of self who is in the husband, that the husband is loved; none, O beloved loves the wife for the wife's sake, but it is for the sake of the self who is in the wife that the wife is loved."⁴ If love is of this nature then in the act of love the distinction between the lover and who is loved would vanish. So, Darryl Macer's definition of bioethics and his concept of our moral responsibilities to all living beings remind us of the sayings of Indian theosophists once again.

¹ A.N. Prior, *Can Religion be Discussed?* Published in Flew & Mac-Intyre's *New Essays in Philosophical theology*, SCM Press, London, 1972, p. 3.

² *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered*, Salt Lake City 1985, p. 67.

³ Atul Chandra Sen (ed.), *The Upanishads*, Harap Prakashani, Kolkata, 2000, p. 13 (Ishophonishad, verse no 6).

⁴ Swami Vivekananda, *Complete works* 111, p. 92.