

CONTENT, CONTEXT AND CARE IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Conteúdo, contexto e cuidado na Ética Ambiental

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Resumo: Em questões ambientais, a relação dos seres humanos com a natureza é vista como um problema ético importante. Isso gerou várias posições éticas como antropocentrismo, biocentrismo, ecocentrismo e similares. Sobre a relação do homem com o animal, B. G. Norton menciona que animais em “contexto” devem ter prioridade em relação a animais em “conteúdo”. Norton nomeia animais domesticados e animais selvagens mantidos em cativeiros como animais em “contexto”. Ele sustenta que devemos cuidar dos animais domesticados na medida em que temos um contrato hipotético com eles (Norton, 2003). Ao mesmo tempo em que concordamos com a posição de Norton de cuidar dos animais domesticados, defendemos que sua compreensão do contrato e sua subsequente compreensão de “cuidado” como derivando de um valor instrumental dos animais reflete sua posição de um antropocentrismo fraco. Neste artigo, defendemos que uma ética do “cuidado” é mais significativa quando emerge de uma perspectiva não-anthropocêntrica que trate o outro como valioso intrinsecamente.

Palavras-Chaves: Conteúdo, Contexto, Valor intrínseco, Pragmatismo, Cuidado animal.

Abstract: In environment related issues, the relationship of human beings to nature is seen as an important ethical issue. This issue has resulted in various ethical positions like anthropocentrism, biocentrism, ecocentrism and like. On man's relationship with animal beings, Bryan G. Norton mentions that animals in 'context' should be given priority over animals in 'content'. Norton brings the domesticated animals and captive bred wild animals under the 'context' animals. Norton maintains that we should take care of the domesticated animals as we have a hypothetical contract with them. (Norton2003) While we agree to Norton's position of taking care of the domesticated animals, we maintain that his understanding of contract and his subsequent understanding of 'care' as stemming from an instrumental value of animals reflects his position of weak-anthropocentrism. In this paper, we claim that a 'care' based ethics is more meaningful when it emerges from a non-anthropocentric perspective that treat the other as intrinsically valued.

Keywords: Content, Context, Intrinsic Value, Instrumental value, Pragmatism, Animal Care.

The relationship between man and nature begins from the very beginning of the human civilization. Human beings eat fruits, roots for food and use branches, twigs, barks, brush of trees for different purposes. Again some animals have been used for meat while some other animals use to plough, ride or to pull carts. In this way human beings take a centre stage of ruling, dominating or domesticating other natural resources and animal species. The attitude according to which human being thinks that human being is the most powerful and superior among all creatures and can use all the natural resources including different species led them to the anthropocentric position. This anthropocentric attitude in fact brings whole ecological crisis to the human civilization. In this line some scholars even

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say that root cause of this ecological crisis is Judeo-Christian religious doctrines. (White 2001).

Against this anthropocentric position, there is the emergence of nonanthropocentric position that includes biocentrism and ecocentrism. Biocentrism argues for the rights and protection of the animals. Philosophers like Peter Singer appeal for the welfare of animals based on sentience, that is, their capacity to feel the pain. (Singer, 2003) Tom Regan appeals for the rights of animals based on those animals being the 'subjects of life'. (Regan 2004) According to these set of thinkers, animals have sentience and life quality like human beings, so these species should not be treated 'merely as means'. Another biocentric philosopher Paul Taylor argues for the respect of the biotic community: "every species counts as having the same value in the sense that, regardless of what species a living thing belongs to, it is deemed to be *prima facie* deserving of equal concern and consideration on the part of moral agents" (Taylor, 1986, p. 12). Thus, these thinkers go beyond the anthropocentric position in human beings' relationship with nature. They include the animal beings as well for moral consideration that makes their position to be biocentric. Some other philosophers like Leopold (Leopold, *The Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, 1949), Naess (Naess, 2001), Callicott (Callicott, 2009) appeal for preserving the ecosystem as a whole including living and nonliving objects of the nature. They try to value the entire eco-system as a whole and aim to protect it for the intrinsic value of the ecosystem; thereby making their position ecocentric. Against these biocentric and ecocentric perspectives, Bryan Norton argues for environmental issues from a pragmatic perspective. In one of his arguments on the humans' treatment of animals, Norton mentions that human being should give more care for the animals which are closer to them than the other wild animals. (Norton, *Searching for Sustainability: Interdisciplinary Essays in the Philosophy of Conservation Biology*, 2003). Norton explains that in an environment, a lot many contents including wild animals, birds, domestic animals, plants and other artifacts are present. As human beings our relationship with such objects is inevitable. Our association with the animal beings, according to Norton, should be determined based on the distinction of whether that animal is in a 'context' one or a 'content' one. Norton suggests that all animals that are related to human beings in one way or the other need to be protected and taken care of. But on the basis of available resources one may not be in a position to care for all animals as it involves considerable spending. In such a scenario Norton comes up with the distinction of 'context' and 'content' animals.

Norton points out that all species in a wood are not related to human being. Norton maintains that animals and beings which are related to humans can be categorized as 'context' beings. Animals and beings that are not in any way under the direct purview of humans are 'content' beings. "The context in which we interact with domesticated animals implies a contract to look after them. No such contract exists with wild animals; for this reason, we have no moral obligation to individual members of wild species who remain in their natural habitat" (Norton, *Searching for Sustainability: Interdisciplinary Essays in the Philosophy of Conservation Biology*, 2003, p. 383). These context and content distinctions corresponds to the domesticated and wild animals. Norton says the animals that are in human community demand more care than the wild one. This type of animal care in the human community is kind of 'contract'. (Norton, *Searching for Sustainability: Interdisciplinary Essays in the Philosophy of Conservation Biology*, 2003). In other sense domesticated animals are in a contract with humans and therefore, it is human's responsibility to take care of them.

Norton's understanding of prioritizing animals is based on the bearability of cost. Norton understands the 'care' for animals in terms of the 'contract' we have with them. He takes up an instrumental value of animals. He thus makes a distinction that some animals are useful for human beings and therefore they need more care. Some other animals are

not related to human beings; therefore, human beings are not obliged to take care of them. For him, the notion of protecting all animals merely based on intrinsic value as the monists insist is not only possible but also irrelevant from the context of human being. (Norton, *Toward the Unity among Environmentalists*, 1991) Norton alleges that monist positions in environmental ethics, particularly, non-anthropocentric positions, are contrary to human experience and doesn't have practical utility as it lacks flexibility. According to him, mere thinking that all animal species have value on the intrinsic nature is irrelevant and ineffective. "Mere ideological environmentalism ... is ineffective, because it leaves no room for flexibility and for learning from experience". (Norton, *Sustainability: Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*, 2005). Norton's view was echoed by Robinson as well when he emphasized on the context. Robinson agrees with Norton that "weighting of different values will depend on the specific circumstances and contexts, and indeed it is this tying to 'place' and a specific context that characterizes pragmatism. In a particular context, certain values will have greater value and power than others". (Robinson, 2011, p. 962)

Norton's position is true to the extent that animals in 'context' demand more care than the animals in 'content'. "I have argued that it is mainly the context, and not the content, of our interactions with animals that determines our moral obligations to them, and I have argued that our obligation to wild animals generally emerge at the population level, where our policy decisions affect large trends in ecological systems and the processes that sustain them." (Norton, *Searching for Sustainability: Interdisciplinary Essays in the Philosophy of Conservation Biology*, 2003, pp. 383-384) Norton's position implies that animals and natural objects demand care in a sustainable way at least for the sake of the future people but still contextually bounded animals and natural objects deserve more care than the one which is beyond human proximity. Human deals with nature in a context and this context factually extend moral obligations. "Humans can't and ought not to take responsibility to avoid deaths of individual animals in the wild....I suggest it is not this content of animal experience but the context in which we encounter it that determines the strength and type of our obligations to animals and other natural objects." (Norton, *Searching for Sustainability: Interdisciplinary Essays in the Philosophy of Conservation Biology*, 2003, p. 379).

For Norton and some other pragmatists an abstract kind of intrinsic value can't do anything to the preservation as it is not practical and flexible. For him, every natural entity should be preserved for use in a sustainable way as far as possible so future generation can use such resources for their own benefit. Thus, he subscribes to a position called weak-anthropocentrism. For him, then, any practical sense of environmental protection should necessarily come from a weak anthropocentric position that considers protecting and conserving those natural objects that has an instrumental value by fulfilling the humans' present and future wants.

One of the major issues with Norton's position is that he subscribes to a weak-anthropocentric position, which may perhaps make him to exclude certain moral considerations human beings have from the intrinsic value perspective. In fact, there are several criticisms from the nonanthropocentric camp against Norton's position. Holmes Rolston III, J. B. Callicott and others attack his failure of admitting intrinsic value of things or species. J. B. Callicott says that intrinsic value is the key of ethical foundation of environmental philosophy and this basic principle can't be avoided (Callicott, 2009). Another environmental philosopher Laura Westra criticized Norton's weak-anthropocentric approach and argues that ecological sustainability depend more profoundly on intrinsic value of nature rather than future generation. As Westra says, "we need to expand our consciousness, our understanding, and our respect as required to include these processes and causal link. The holistic position would thus extend Norton's argument to all future generations to human life and non-human life." (Westra, 2009, p.

64). Brian K. Steverson (2009) also argues and supports the deep ecology's principles as more satisfactory as it coheres with the intrinsic value of nature compared to the weak-anthropocentric approaches.

Moreover, not all pragmatists need to subscribe for an instrumental value of nature. It need not be the case that environmental pragmatists should be always subscribing to one or the other forms of anthropocentrism - a strong or weak form? Why pragmatists cannot be ecocentrics or biocentrics? The ecocentrics or biocentrics can also be deciding, sometimes going against their will based on the demands of the situation. Perhaps, Naess did something like that. In relation between man and nature there may arise some situations or conflicts where man has to decide for killing or exploitation of other species for the sake of humankind. "In principle reality praxis necessitates some killing, suppression or exploitation." (Naess, 2001, p. 147). More so, some pragmatists do appeal for intrinsic value for pragmatism, for example Ben A. Minteer's article 'Intrinsic value for pragmatists' appeals for an intrinsic value position. (Minteer, *Intrinsic Value for Pragmatists?*, 2001)

As it is not necessary that to be a pragmatist one has to be anthropocentric, this gives all the more reasons to question Norton's understanding of care for context animals. Norton's understanding of 'care' with respect to 'context' animals from a weak-anthropocentric position, raises an important question on the ethics of 'care' when we treat the other as a means for our welfare? Does an ethic of care treat the other merely as a means? Norton's position overpowers the intrinsic value of nature and this brings several critical questions in environmental ethics and animal care. Does the element of 'care' for animal beings from the weak-anthropocentrism and ecocentrism be the same?

We claim that care from the intrinsic value perspective and the care from the instrumental value perspective differ in kind. Norton by talking of 'care' from an anthropocentric position has diluted the ethics of care. Care from the intrinsic perspective implies the unselfish motives of the concerned human whereas care from the instrumental perspective ushers the selfish and interested motives. Care demands extension of love or sympathy to the vulnerable without any expectations. Care ethics emerges from extending love and sympathy. It presents in caring of the dearest one or to the particular others with whom a concrete relationship have been built. More often the 'other' is vulnerable and weak. (Held, 2006). Norton's position might be true that animals which are in human domain or in human community demand more care because they are in relationship to man. But, to presume that care is given to domesticated animals because of their contract with humans is to take a superficial understanding of the element of care. Norton understands our relationship with domesticated animals as an outcome of a hypothetical contract, a kind of give and take contract or agreement. Ethics of care is far more profound and deeper than an understanding of care because of contract as Norton perceives.

We take the position that value of 'care' and 'duty' will be more expressed when a person takes the other as an 'end-in-itself' than as a 'means'. We subscribe to the position that value of care is more pronounced when the other is treated for its intrinsic value than for its instrumental value. We agree to Norton's position of context, but a question remains why it has to be done from an anthropocentric view point? So, Norton's position of care for the 'context' animals could be more emphasized by him by taking an intrinsic value than an instrumental value. By taking the intrinsic value position, he can extend the scope of protection of the 'content' animals as well, when there is the possibility of protecting them. If he takes an instrumental value, then it becomes hard for him to justify the reason for protecting them, unless somewhere he shows that protecting some animals is useful to human beings, a weak anthropocentric position. Norton's animals care can be more meaningful in terms of care ethics, provided it incorporates the intrinsic value of the

nature. Care ethics from the non-anthropocentric perspective is deeper in perception and wider in range than the care ethics from the anthropocentric perspective.

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