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Sustainable development of the Arctic: A view from environmental ethics

In this paper I will argue that the principles of environmental ethics can make a substantive contribution towards sustainable development in the Arctic in the face of global climate change, if we are prepared to put some work into it, and take seriously considerations from a variety of angles from within this newly established field of applied ethics. I will argue that it is not a single principle, but rather a network of values and ideas working together that can create this positive contribution, and that a thorough, critical understanding of this network can provide a platform on the basis of which we could at least start a rational conversation among the key stakeholders who have a direct and critical interest in establishing what it would entail to ensure sustainable development in the Arctic in the context of the challenges of global climate change. Thus, I will argue in this paper that the complexity of the challenge will require a complex environmental ethics. The most important nodal points in this web of considerations, have to do with the following:

The history of the emergence of environmental ethics

Since its emergence in the 1970s in response to concerns about industrialization, pollution, nuclear war, the depletion of natural resources, the destruction of nature and ecosystems, the unjust distribution of the benefits and burdens of industrialized society, a continuously growing population and the ability of future generations to meet their needs, environmental ethics has gone through various stages of development, exploring a wide variety of intellectual avenues and value orientations. However, in all of its diversity, environmental ethics seems to have one central message: that current patterns of production and consumption in the world has put the flourishing, as well as the survival, of all life on earth under serious threat, and that something seriously should be done to reverse this trend. In its theoretical form all forms of environmental ethics entail, each in their own way, a search for a language, or a value theory that is profound

enough to articulate this message and support the practical task it alludes to (Rolston 1991; Attfield 1994).

Since its inception, one of the defining characteristics of environmental ethics is its suspicion and critique of instrumental value theory in which intrinsic or inherent value is reserved for humans (or for some humans, for that matter) only, leaving everything else with nothing but resource value: it has no value other than some kind of use value to humans. This view is challenged by many environmental ethicists who argue that humans cannot be the only morally valuable entities on earth, and that some intrinsic or inherent value can be discovered and appreciated in non-human entities – which not only include non-human living entities such as individual animals and plants, but also larger entities such as species, communities of life, ecosystems, and even non-living entities such as land, landscapes, regions, geographical formations, water cycles, carbon cycles etc.

From this perspective, different forms of animal, nature, wilderness, life or ecosystem oriented ethics were articulated, each emphasizing the meaning, significance and implications of acknowledging some inherent (non-use) value of parts or the whole of nature, generating still raging debates about the basis or sources of this inherent value: does it exist objectively, independently of all human valuing, or is this inherent value anthropogenically constituted by the very act of human valuing? While this ontological-epistemological debate about anthropocentrism and intrinsic value dominated much of the debates in environmental ethics during the 1970s and 1980s, the emphasis started to shift to a set of socio-ecological questions that are still hotly discussed to this day: should we at all accept the notion of an isolated and decontextualized nature “out there” that should be conserved, or rather work with the idea of interconnectedness in which entities become what they are because of their relationships with others – which implies, among other things, that humans and natural entities are not atoms interacting externally with one another, but mutually constituting one another, as nodal points in a web of life (Brennan 2009: 373; Naess 1973).

This last set of questions paved the way for a wide variety of concerns that currently preoccupy environmental ethicists, such as the restoration of damaged land, urban environments, pollution and resource depletion and their connections with poverty, dispossession, housing, environmental and economic policy, social justice (Brennan 2009: 376), and learning again how to live sustainably in a place. Similarly, more and more emphasis has been placed in recent developments in environmental ethics on participative decision-making procedures in which interest groups in local communities work together with authorities to find solutions to socio-environmental challenges within the contexts and time scales that they will be experienced – not only by humans, but also by other members of the community of life. Since these participative decision-making procedures are never politically or ideologically neutral, and since their success is never guaranteed because of asymmetrical power relations, some streams in environmental ethics also focus on radical ideology critique, as well as strategies to translate that into a fundamental transformation of society, including organisational forms, thinking patterns, and processes of identity formation and self-realisation. Within the latter context, the “environmental crisis” is seen as an opportunity to free humanity from the burden of a destructive praxis, and to start moving towards a cultural, political, social and economic revolution that may move us beyond our current predicaments.

Challenges related to the dominant decision-making model informing resource extraction in the Arctic

Much of the intellectual effort in environmental ethics is devoted to an analysis and critique of the dominant, decision-making model informing economic thinking the world

over: cost-benefit analysis. While cost-benefit analysis in its cruder forms is an easy target for the critique that its internal logic opens the way to any and all forms of environmental pollution and destruction, as long as this is offset by an aggregate of more gains than losses, cost-benefit analysis in its more sophisticated and refined versions are also not exempted from criticism, even if it is moderately successful in internalizing externalities in various forms of full-cost accounting. The difficulties that many environmental ethicists have with this model of decision-making, is that it allows for only one kind of value to be accounted for – resource or use value – while there are many other kinds of values that need to be taken into account when decisions are made about resource extraction and its transformation into commodities. The challenge is, therefore, how to make provision for these other kinds of values in economic policy and decision-making, if the dominant model precludes them from the start.

Environmental justice issues in the Arctic

Environmental justice issues emerge when the benefits and burdens of resource use, or of conservation, are distributed unequally within or between societies, regions, nations or generations. While examples of such unequal distribution are often fairly easy to point out, and while the excruciating details of many instances of such injustices are well-documented, the ethically vexing question that begs to be answered, is why it is at all possible that cases of environmental injustice continue to emerge in an apparently never-ending stream; and when they have been exposed and made public, why it is apparently so difficult to address and overcome these injustices – for instance to claim compensation for harm suffered, or restitution for past unequal treatment.

For the purposes of our discussion on the prospects of sustainable development in the arctic in the face of global climate change, it seems as if a special kind of analysis is called for (if it is indeed the case that people indigenous to the Arctic are suffering from environmental injustices): one that focus on the one hand on the social, political and economic processes and structures through which victims of environmental injustice are created; and on the other hand, the linguistic and symbolic strategies through which these injustices are legitimized, glossed over, and removed from the realm of public scrutiny, discussion and critique, and thereby reinforced and perpetuated. One task of such an analysis will surely be to expose these processes, structures and strategies, and to show the way towards effectively resisting them and subsequently moving on from what is exposed. Another task will entail devising strategies of assisting and supporting the victims of environmental injustices in the different phases of their exposure and resistance to it, as well as in the different stages of “rehabilitation” – which are tasks that in fact fall squarely within the realm of advocacy, or, if you will, environmental ethics in practice.

Fault lines in the notion of sustainable development

Given that the main characteristic of the world’s economic system seems to be that of un-sustainable development, and given that the term sustainable development can mean anything to anyone, it is important to ask serious questions about the concept of sustainable development itself, and how it is related to development in the Arctic. One of these questions that need to be asked, is how the notion of sustainable development can regain its critical, normative edge; and this in turn can be done by recognizing the fields of tension that emerge between different possible interpretations of sustainable development. These fields of tension are captured in the differences between weak and strong interpretations of sustainable development, egalitarian and non-egalitarian interpretations of it, bottom-up and top-down models of implementing sustainable

development, and narrower or wider interpretation of its scope, where narrower interpretations focus on nature conservation only, while wider interpretations view nature conservation as but one of many goals that should be pursued in sustainable development. (Jacobs 1999) Accordingly, a number of test questions can be formulated with a view to distinguishing between notions of sustainable development that leaves the world as it is, and notions of it that strive to make a difference. The questions include the following: What is so important that it should be sustained indefinitely? For the sake of whom or what should we sustain this valuable something? How should we do so? By making use of which kinds of knowledge? What are the appropriate indicators so that we can know if we move towards sustainable development or further away from it?

The characteristics of global climate change

The characteristics of global climate change makes it very difficult to develop an ethics of responsible action with regards to the mitigation of its causes and thus its intensity, and adaptation to its effects. Gardiner (2004; 2006) argues that these characteristics include a dispersion of causes and effects, the fragmentation of agency, and institutional inadequacy that plays itself out in both the global and intergenerational contexts, and that in their mutual interaction, these characteristics can place us in the untenable positions of resignation and inaction in the face of global climate change, or of having to make tragic choices in the process of defending ourselves against the negative effects of climate change. As such, these characteristics challenge our conventional modes of moral decision-making, and compel us to rethink our notions of responsibility, accountability, harm, justice, human rights etc.

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Having said this, and taking into account that life in the Arctic, like life in Antarctica, is lived at the margins of its very possibility (Rolston 2009), I conclude that the conventional values emphasized in environmental ethics (such as the inherent value of non-human entities, the beauty of nature, the ruggedness of wilderness, the flourishing of biodiversity, the resilience of ecosystems, respect for the community of life, the constitutive function of relations and differences, the transformation of society, the limitations of our knowledge, and the power of the precautionary principle, to mention a few (see Ten Have 2006)) can acquire radically new meanings and connotations if related to the challenges of sustainable development in the Arctic in the face of global climate change. We could choose to ignore these meanings and leave the world pretty much as it is, but we could also choose to articulate and explore these meanings with a view to acknowledging the scope and limitations of our knowledge, to sharpening our abilities to determine what the morally right things to do are, to determining what we can legitimately hope for, and thus contributing to changing things in the world, changing what we have become in this world.

Recommendations:

- When we deliberate on serious issues like sustainable development in the Arctic in the face of global climate change, we tend to go directly from problem formulation to policy proposals or action, without reflecting on the aims, the extent and the justification of these policies or actions. (Ten Have 2006)
- Fundamental ethical questions should be asked about the manner and language in which we formulate the challenges of sustainable development and global climate change, and link it to a particular region on the earth.
- Some of the questions that need to be asked in such a fundamental questioning are:

- What does the notion of sustainability and sustainable development mean?
- What is so important that it should be sustained indefinitely?
- For the sake of whom or what should we sustain this valuable something?
- How should we do so? By making use of which kinds of knowledge and which kinds of decision-making procedures?
- What are the appropriate indicators so that we can know if we move towards sustainable development or further away from it?
- How do the characteristics of global climate change affect our ability to appropriately interpret the conventional environmental values offered to us by environmental ethics?
- What difference, if any, do the characteristics of the Arctic make to our ability to appropriately interpret the conventional environmental values offered to us by environmental ethics?
- There exists a real danger that we can interpret sustainable development in such a manner that it makes no difference at all, leaving the world pretty much as it is.

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