

COMMENTARY: Biophilia for happiness and environmental ethics

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Abstract

The increasing awareness of the public about the role of human activity in environmental problems such as “climate change”, together with the lack of a firm socio-political response to contain these problems, have created an opportunity to introduce environmental ethics as the forerunner of bioethics. Economic prosperity has a world-wide demand but an understanding of the instinctive bond of human nature with the living systems may improve other aspects of human wellbeing such as happiness; as such, happiness can be achieved not just by economic development but also through the enhancement of our innate love for life and living systems. Biophilia may be the missing key of environmental ethics for elaboration on the lifestyle changes needed in the pursuit of happiness. The experience of Bhutan with its innovative measure of “Gross National Happiness” based on human development and environmental conservation provides a good example in the Asia Pacific region. However, as long as environmental conservation is not regarded as a common moral value for all peoples and cultures around the world, the socio-political pressure for change may not be enough to protect our ecosystems and their life support systems.

Keywords: Asia Pacific region, Bhutan, Bioethics, Biophilia, Ecosystems, Environmental ethics, Environmental problems, Gross national happiness, Happiness

Introduction

The failure of regulatory mechanisms to contain harmful human interference in ecological systems, such as the pollution of the Earth’s atmosphere with increasing levels of greenhouse gas emissions, is associated with neglecting the ethical value of the environment and/or giving priority to the socio-political impacts of economic development. Our best hope to reverse the current levels of environmental pollution and degradation is through an education that can motivate environmentally informed citizens to pursue conscientious choices in life. Advances in environmental sciences have informed many people about the delicate life support systems on Earth, but the socio-political motivation to do something about it has been rather limited, and environmental ethics may be our last hope. In that sense, environmentally hostile human activities leading to ecological degradation would be considered as having negative ethical value and would lead to condemnation as with any socially immoral act. However, the continuation of anthropocentric trends in our value system suggests that our moral values especially in the area of ethics of life and living systems need to be refocused on the environment.

The use of the term bioethics goes back to 1927, by Fritz Jahr who was a pastor, philosopher, and educator (Sass, 2007 and Goldim, 2009). In an article that he published in a German magazine called “Kosmos” (*Bioethics: A Panorama of the Human Being’s Ethical Relations with Animals and Plants*), he suggested a bioethical imperative with the same implications of Immanuel Kant’s universal moral imperatives, which would be extended to include all forms of life. However, this article was largely forgotten and the evolution of the term bioethics took place in the medical field. Thus, for a long time the concept of bioethics mainly evolved in the biomedical context and the term bioethics was used mostly in reference to medical issues. The evolution of bioethics through the 1970’s and 1980’s resulted in its current inclusion of the three main areas of “medical ethics”, “ethics of biotechnology” and “environmental ethics” (Bryant, 2005). Although the bioethics education has traditionally been based on medical ethics, many concepts of medical ethics have been gradually integrated into medical practice laws & regulations. On

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the other hand, most legal frameworks proposed so far to contain harmful human interference in ecological systems, such as increased CO₂ emissions, have failed miserably. This failure of regulatory mechanisms reflects an unbalanced value system which assumes economic development is more important to our happiness than the environment. Education can help correct this value system and the concept of biophilia may be the keyword to strengthen the status of environmental ethics (Oskamp, 2002). This article was mainly authored to examine such a possibility.

Some philosophers have considered happiness to be the major purpose of living a life, while others believe there are other inherently good things that motivate people in their lives and may not necessarily lead to happiness, such as knowledge, friendship, and even beauty. This is especially an important point in environmental ethics because the issue of whether the environment has intrinsic value as well as instrumental value remains controversial for many critics. Does the environment have value mainly because it is an instrument to provide for our needs and enable us to attain happiness through its consumption? Or is it possible that the beauty of the environment and the knowledge hidden in its complex networks and systems carry intrinsic values that are also important? Is there a morally unacceptable limit to environmental damage caused by the instrumental use of the environment and its resources? And what if protecting and conserving the environment can help with a more sustainable pursuit of happiness for more people?

Methodology

We have searched for and collected empirical evidence in literature to support the hypothesis that caring about the natural ecosystems can improve human well-being, particularly happiness. Our assumption is that happiness represents a basic concept that can influence policy-making for the betterment of human wellbeing in more fundamental ways, as compared with conventional measures such as economic prosperity; therefore the experience of the small country of Bhutan in South Asia became especially relevant to our study.

We searched the literature using well-known academic search engines for the keywords happiness, environmental conservation, environmental ethics, and biophilia. The biophilia hypothesis is technically difficult to investigate based on limited empirical evidence available; this is related to the intuitive nature of this hypothesis and its reliance on observations over relatively small samples as compared with the majority of human population who live under the influence of many confounding lifestyle and socioeconomic factors associated with modern civilization.

We also realized the difficulty of doing analytical research using a very general concept such as happiness; one solution was to use the linguistic differences of the English term with its counterparts in the Japanese language.

Findings

What kind of empirical evidence can be collected to support the biophilia hypothesis? It appears that some researchers have already collected the needed evidence. For instance, Roger Ulrich has published a research article in which a statistically significant association was found between having access to natural sceneries & the well-being of a group of patients who were recovering from a specific surgical procedure (Ulrich, 1986). In further studies performed by Ulrich & other researchers, access to natural views was shown to be associated with a reduction of stress and anxiety, and an improvement of symptoms such as a feeling of boredom; productivity was also reported to have increased significantly.

It has been said that: "Everyone wants a room with a view" (Clay, 2001); we are all familiar with the fascination of humans with natural views and a desire to look at sceneries that are not artificial. How is that natural scenes are simply taken as beautiful? How is it we enjoy watching these scenes and feel happy about spending our time in time or

watching them? One reason could be that the human mind evolved over millions of years and thousands of generations in natural settings that were needed for human survival, and may now be still important for mental health and a feeling of fulfilment that they used to provide for our ancestors (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989).

E. O. Wilson offered an intuitive answer to this puzzle through a book he published in 1984 under the name “Biophilia”. In this book he explained how views of nature could have positively influenced our physical and mental health. Wilson defined biophilia as our natural inclination to focus on life & living systems. He hypothesized that the human brain should have evolved in a setting that provided strong inclinations towards nature, because that would improve the chances for survival & reproduction (Wilson, 1984). The central pillar in Wilson's biophilia hypothesis is that the gradual evolution of humans in nature established an innate inclination towards living systems and the processes that supported them. This claim has been supported in various researches; an increasing body of research has demonstrated the improvement of mental health following human exposure to natural views and living environments (Gullone, 2000).

The small country of Bhutan in South Asia with a population of about 716,000 in an area of 38,394 sq km provides a good example of national policies based on happiness. Since the late 1980s, the Bhutan government has focused its policy-making on preservation of the cultural traditions and natural ecosystems for the ultimate purpose of improving the Gross National Happiness (Uddina, 2007). The government’s objectives of development mainly consist of improving the emotional wellbeing of the population (reflected in their qualitative happiness), preserving the nation’s cultural heritage, and protecting its environmental and natural resources (Royal Government of Bhutan, 1991). Bhutan was ranked eighth in an international comparative study on subjective wellbeing which included 178 countries (White, 2007). The interesting fact was that Bhutan was the only developing country that had made it to the top 20 of the list, and also was the happiest country in Asia.

Discussion

What is the value of the environment? Even if we disregard the intrinsic value of the environment due to the controversy surrounding it, the instrumental value to humans is still more complex than simply providing material resources for economic development; this value may refer to the supplying of resources, as well as amenity value, aesthetic value, and possibly an innate human need (biophilia). If there is an innate human need for the living environment, true happiness may not be achieved without fulfilling this natural need. Therefore, disregarding the controversy over the instrumental vs. the intrinsic value of the environment, we may still demonstrate that the environment is so close to us that environmental conservation and our happiness are intertwined. The biophilia hypothesis first suggested by E. O. Wilson makes its mark here when it proclaims that our innate love of life and living systems is based in our genes, and our happiness cannot be achieved without this innate love and need. So can humans pursue happiness in the natural environment? Is there some empirical evidence to support such a claim?

We also need to define the philosophical meaning of the term happiness because the general concept of happiness in the English language may be too broad. “Happiness” may refer to a temporary emotion of joy, or to a mood which persists for a longer period of time; it can be about an outlook for the future, achievements of the past, or satisfaction over a current situation; it can be a feeling within an individual, or be reflected from members of a group and how they relate to one another. The discipline of psychology has revealed that three components - physiological, cognitive and cultural- shape our primary emotions including joy and happiness. For example, as an emotion, the feeling of happiness in an individual is obviously under the influence of one’s subjective appraisal of the situation; optimism can

improve happiness while pessimism can cause anxiety and unhappiness. As a positive emotion, happiness motivates people to struggle in life, and in this sense, pleasure and happiness have often been mentioned together. In a deeper sense, happiness may refer to a feeling of satisfaction that one may perceive when one is moving towards self-actualization, the way Abraham Maslow described in the pyramid of needs. In this view, happiness is a relative concept as it depends on how people perceive their success in realizing their needs, desires, and internalized values relative to the external demands and limits that are set against them. Perhaps this is why contentment has been considered as a necessary element for lasting happiness; learn to be content when facing shortages.

In languages other than English, there may be various words to refer to each of these meanings. The vocabulary of a language may affect how we think about the concept represented by the used terms (Tohidian, 2009). Therefore when discussing happiness in a certain language the special linguistic implications of the term as used in different contexts need to be considered. An example is in the use of the word 幸福 (koufuku) and 幸せ (shiawase) in Japanese which convey a deeper meaning as compared with 嬉しさ (ureshisa) and 喜び (yorokobi). This helps avoid a confusion of the term happiness as used by philosophers with for example momentary feelings of joy and pleasure including “chemical happiness” induced by drugs. The human pursuit of happiness should reflect on this deeper and more lasting sense of human needs rather than his unsustainable achievements.

However, our modern ways of living based on the industrialized Western culture is in contrast to our evolutionary history (Simaika and Samways, 2010). Evolutionary psychologists have warned us that if the current trends of environmental destruction continue, they can also raise significant challenges to our mental and psychological health (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowd, 2007). Caring for the environment brings about happiness (Grinde, 2002) and happiness can be achieved not only by economic development but also by the innate love of life & living systems.

The environmental perspective of the Bhutanese plan is unique in the way that everyone’s wellbeing is seen as depending on the preservation of the environment, and not just the future generations. Preservation of the environment implies the conservation of natural resources such as forests, water resources, as well as the wildlife and their natural habitats (Uddina,2007). The emphasis is no longer on production and consumption, but more on a sustainable relationship with one’s environment and culture for attaining a more important goal of “happiness”. The emphasis of policy-makers is on the well-being of the citizens rather than their possessions; and this is the primary reason that they substituted the Gross National Product (GNP) with their own innovative indicator of Gross National Happiness. They believe that if a goal such as happiness can be stated from the beginning, it is possible to plan the appropriate policies to achieve it, and that is why happiness needs to be stated frankly. There is no doubt that Bhutan over the last few decades has improved significantly in a lot of different measures of health and well-being of its people. However, the experience of Bhutan is still rather more like “research in progress” and even if it is proven to be a success in long-term, there is no way to guarantee that other countries can benefit from the same policies (Revkin, 2005). Nevertheless, a number of developed countries including the U.K. and Canada have already started to look into the social changes that can be made with this kind of change in perspective.

Happiness can be achieved through an understanding of the instinctive bond of human nature with the living systems; it can be based on our innate love of the living environment, rather than the concretes of economic prosperity built on the ruins of the environment. However, as long as environmental conservation is not regarded a common moral value for all peoples & cultures around the world, the pressure for change will not be enough to push for strong and effective action. Nevertheless, an increasing awareness of the public about the adverse impact of environmental degradation on human life has created an opportunity to introduce environmental ethics as the forerunner of bioethics. By introducing the environment in our value system as a moral good by itself, not a commodity for consumption, we

may provide a new policy perspective that looks at the environment as a necessary element for human wellbeing. Happiness is the policy perspective that was selected by the government of Bhutan and some empirical evidence to support that has already been attained. We must follow the impact of similar environmentally friendly policies in other developing and developed countries to see whether they can protect the environment and as such improve their nation's overall wellbeing and happiness, as well.

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