The ethical lag regarding the environment and how to address it through education in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

First I explain the need for environmental ethics in general and in Malaysia in particular. We have been severely lagging ethically regarding the new capabilities and responsibilities we have in affecting the environment in many ways, last not least through our life styles. Therefore it is important to develop environmental ethics education based on both philosophical and religious ethics. A major challenge is to move between tradition and modernity and in an ethical spectrum ranging from theocentrism to enlightened anthropocentrism. Unsustainable patterns like overconsumption and overpopulation have to be addressed as well as the role of active citizenship. Recommended educational approaches include critical thinking, multiple perspectives learning and the learning of values.

Key words: Environmental ethics; ethical lag; education; philosophy; religion; Malaysia

1. Why has environmental ethics become necessary?

People used to worry not about what they did to the environment, but what the environment did to them: The more we go back in time, the more people lived at the mercy of the environment, threatened by the powers of nature on which they had little influence. Traditional ethics has worked on the assumption that the effects of our actions are minimal or negligible and therefore ethically neutral. But this has dramatically changed with modern technology that enables us to intervene in nature in ways not previously possible. Today we live in a world where nature has become something we have grown out from, something that we can control, use and transform. Now the environment is in urgent need of ethical consideration:

> "Until recently our effects upon the natural environment were regarded as morally neutral since nature, we assumed, was both impersonal and too vast to be injured by our interventions, or else, at the very least, we were quite unable to foresee the harm resulting from our dealings with nature. Now, of course, we know better. We know that we can cause massive and permanent damage to natural landscapes, resources and ecosystems. Not only do we know that we can cause these insults, we also know how we can cause them, and how we can prevent or remedy them. Knowing all this exacts a moral obligation to act with care, foresight and, at times, with forbearance and constraint" (Partridge, 1980).

Modern humans, having developed an industrial, technocratic, man-centred civilization that has resulted in a crisis of environmental destruction need to make a conscious effort towards understanding the natural environment, our place within it, our responsibilities toward it and to act accordingly. For the survival of nature and mankind such an ethics has become necessary. However, traditional ethics leaves us ill-equipped to account for these new responsibilities. This gap or ethical lag is particularly large in countries like Malaysia that have only recently made this development within a short period of time and with very little change in traditional ethics. Malaysia is a country with a first world infrastructure and a third world mentality, lamented former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi.

Basically, ethics determines what constitutes a good life by addressing questions of right and wrong, making good decisions, and the character traits necessary to live a good life. Ethical standards are also incorporated in law. Laws move with the culture and prevalent moral principles. Environmental ethics has emerged as a special type of philosophical and religious ethics that tries to determine the right way of acting in relation to nature. It refers to the natural environment and therefore can also be called ethics for nature, or if we think of nature as a big ecosystem, ecological ethics. With global warming and more frequent environmental disasters, there has been an increase in environmental awareness, initially in the West and recently also in economically and democratically emerging countries like Malaysia. However, awareness is not enough. In order to close the ethical lag not just environmental education is needed, but environmental ethics education with a behavioural impact.

2. Ethical challenges and conflicts

Environmental ethics involves the study of principles concerning obligations to current human beings *and* towards future generations and non-human species.

The ethical conflicts are not so much about whether we should protect the environment or not, (nobody really likes the destruction of the environment), but they are about how far we should go in protecting the environment, especially when it comes to changing life styles or sacrificing some of consumer choices. People tend to avoid these consequences through diffusion of responsibility in a similar way as in the more widely researched phenomenon of bystander passivity. Some argue against such inconveniences that still not enough is known about long-term effects on the environment of many human activities e.g. on global warming. The complexity of these issues keeps many people confused. Obviously, a comprehensive gathering of scientific facts is also necessary in order to answer such questions: How real and dangerous is global warming? How important is biodiversity, the maintenance of an ecosystem, the rainforest, etc.? And then these issues have to be related to the deeper philosophical and religious questions regarding man's place in the natural world which leads to decisions about maintaining/adjusting/overcoming the prevalent man-centred view of nature, educational decisions and to practical choices in our lives. In order to develop a new sustainable world-view we might have to connect the scientific data with the reasoning of philosophy and the values of religion.

Not only have environmental threats led to what German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1986) called "risk society", but as human activities had an increasingly uncertain and possibly irreversible impact on the environment there is also a risk to misjudge the situations in the above scenarios, e.g. due to a lack of data or difficulty to interpret the data. Therefore a "precautionary principle" has been proposed first by the philosopher Hans Jonas and later in UNESCO COMEST´s Precautionary Principle Report (2005) defined as follows: When human activities may lead to morally unacceptable harm that is scientifically plausible but uncertain, actions

shall be taken to avoid or diminish that harm. Morally unacceptable harm refers to harm to humans or the environment that is:

- threatening to human life or health, or
- serious and effectively irreversible, or
- inequitable to present or future generations, or
- imposed without adequate consideration of the human rights of those affected.

From an ethical point of view, the precautionary principle shares with sustainability the principle of intergenerational justice, which can serve as an argument to preserve free space for decisions of future generations.

3. From "the more the better" to "less is more"

It is still widely assumed that environmental education is supposed to raise awareness about pollution and that industry is the main culprit. However, the more serious truth is that we are not only polluting the earth, but we are also consuming and overpopulating it. In fact, all environmental problems can be traced back to these two issues: overconsumption and overpopulation. This is why we need, first of all, an ethics of consumption and an ethics of family planning, both emphasizing quality over quantity.

a. The ethics of consumption

The creation of more sustainable relationships between humans and the natural world requires the transformation of the culture of consumption and the generation of sustainable lifestyles and communities based on needs rather than wants. People should reflect upon the life cycles of their consumer products. To meet the growing needs and wants of an equally growing population (another major problem for the environment), industries are needed. Industries release their waste and cause pollution. Also, products have to be transported, often long ways. In short, the impact of our lifestyle on pollution goes beyond the waste we directly throw away. Global consumption expenditures have quadrupled over the past 40 years and patterns of consumption have become increasingly unfriendly to the environment. "How much we need" is often constructed in relation to others in our society and influenced by advertising. Measures like the 3R (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) are important. But they will only really work, if they become deeply engrained in people's minds and their construction of identity. And that is why campaigns are not enough, but educational initiatives are needed at all levels. Sometimes creative or even artistic forms of recycling are practiced and taught, e.g. school classes are given plastic bottles, which they turn into beautiful vases, penholders, etc. However, more important would be to focus on simplicity and practicability in daily life, like advice regarding the reusability of those bottles. Or instead of sophisticated recycling systems rather simple and more accessible ones would be more effective.

An obvious issue in South East Asia is the ubiquity of waste: on streets, public places, along country roads, in rivers… Discarded by individuals, small businesses, even industries. This is so prevalent that taxis and busses often have a sticker inside, telling their passengers: "Do not throw trash out of this car!" One might think at least those transportation companies are concerned about the environment. In reality, they are only concerned about those things hitting other cars - which could get them into trouble. This throw away mentality appears to be based on old habits formed at times when consumption patterns were more simple and natural like: eating a fruit, throwing the seed on the ground and it grows beautifully into a new tree. Industrialization and modern consumer culture did not have the time to evolve slowly and gradually, resulting in traditional throw away habits

being transferred into modern consumer culture. This applies also to wrapping materials, which used to consist of decomposable banana leaves and now they are paper and plastic.

In Malaysia's agricultural sector we have seen expansion at the expense of the rainforest, the promotion of monocultures and intensive practices which require large amounts of fertilizers and pesticides polluting either the soil or the water in case they enter the water supply. Consumer alternatives can be organic products or home grown vegetables and fruits. Also, Malaysia's growing meat consumption should be addressed, as meat production is inefficient and detrimental for the environment (not to mention issues of animal welfare and human health).

Generally, the promotion of living with low levels of consumption leads not only to more harmony with nature but it contributes to the spiritual development of individuals and the welfare of society - two aspects that can serve as connection points with traditional morality. However, reducing consumption is not easy to achieve as it goes against the general tendency of capitalist consumer society and its incessant stimulation of wants through advertising.

Again, traditional ethics is lagging behind: we see it in a defensive posture i.e. defending traditional values in sexual morality, etc. but not responding to the changes that have occurred that would require moral thinking going beyond the subsumption under old principles.

b. The ethics of family planning

Already 1968 American biologist Paul Ehrlich warned in *The Population Bomb*, that the growth of the human population has become a threat to planetary life-support systems. Since then this problem has become more evident and the development of an ethics of family planning to address overpopulation is necessary. This requires quite a moral turn around from traditional cultures and religions that suggested "the more children the better". That made sense in an empty world where untamed forces of nature threatened human existence and survival and the mortality of children was high. In today's world of improved life chances and extended life spans the human species has reached overpopulation, i.e. it exceeds the carrying capacity of the earth, especially in combination with high consumption levels which are targeted globally, also by the huge populations of China, India, Indonesia which so far have been on a low consumption level. The figure to be concerned about is population multiplied by per capita resource use: There is a growing imbalance between expanding human populations on one hand and availability of resources required to support them on the other hand.

In birth rates too a shift from quantity to quality is recommendable, less is more: more in terms of quality for the families, for society and the environment (cf. the successful development of China, with its regulated birth rates). And this is also the more ethical choice. Traditionally rooted people in the third world tend to disagree on this. They often respond with statements like "Children are a gift of God" insinuating that contraception and family planning would be sinful or at least selfish ways to interfere with God's order. However, we do not live in an empty world anymore, simply enjoying God's blessings. Whether we like it or not, we have greatly transformed, exploited and overpopulated the world and continue to do so, which prompted Arnold J. Toynbee to the amazing comparison: „We have been God-like in our planned breeding of our domesticated plants and animals, but we have been rabbit-like in our unplanned breeding of ourselves."[i]

4. Environmental responsibilities of universities

Universities are increasingly examining their own responsibilities to help societies towards a more sustainable development. At Talloires, France in 1990, a global conference of university presidents issued a declaration of environmental commitment which has received the support of more than 100 universities from numerous countries including Malaysia. A follow up conference at Halifax, Canada, in l991, the specific challenge of environmentally sustainable development was addressed. A commitment has been made to teach and practice sustainable development principles, to increase environmental literacy, and to enhance the understanding of environmental ethics among faculty, students, and the public at large. In Malaysian universities, there are now numerous environmental studies courses in science and engineering contexts, and there are currently five environmental ethics courses: in the MARA University of Technology (two courses), Sultan Idris Education University [ii], University Putra Malaysia and the University of Malaysia Sabah. All these courses have been set up in different contexts and with different approaches. Most Malaysian universities have green campus initiatives, recycling initiatives, etc. and there is an environment related community service project run by the National University of Malaysia. In Malaysia and Indonesia such initiatives can build on the "gotong royong" spirit, a traditional form of community volunteerism that has both social and economic aspects. It is traditionally practiced during harvesting, house-building, celebrating weddings, where one is expected to help another and it can easily applied to environmental projects.

5. Environmental ethics in Malaysian universities

Teaching entire environmental ethics courses depend first of all on the target group:

> (1) Specialists, scientists and professional groups (professional ethics)
> (2) A general audience

Specialist target groups are more common; what they need is professional environmental ethics, e.g. in engineering, business, agriculture, etc. I will not discuss these very diverse courses here but focus on the general category. In this category belong courses within Moral Education Programmes that educate teachers for Moral Education. The fact that they become teachers can be more or less neglected for the instructional design of this course regarding the scope of environmental issues.

While other courses face the task of integrating ethics into often science based environmental courses, the task here is to integrate environmental issues into a moral education framework. A basic decision is: philosophical or religious ethics? In Malaysia philosophy does not exist as an academic discipline. Nearly everything is based on religion (Islam) which permeates all aspects of academic life. However, moral education is (at least in theory) based on philosophy. In religious classes only Islam is taught in schools, Non-Muslims attend moral education classes. To educate teachers, some moral education programmes in universities have been established.

Students in national universities are ca. 75% Muslims. However, moral education graduates will be teaching adherents to the other religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Animism…; which ones concretely cannot be predicted. As the religious situation is that complex one should think that philosophy comes as a blessing. However, Malaysian students are not accustomed to philosophical thinking and it is not easy to guide and motivate them in this direction. Also, the usual textbooks, especially Pojman (2006), turned out to be too difficult and too voluminous. Therefore, my personal solution was to reduce the philosophical

approach to the very basics and to focus on a practical "Going Green" approach based on Riley (2007)[iii] and documentaries, especially Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth". I have also included a multi-religious approach, covering the concepts of nature and the relationship between humans and the environment in local religions (which includes the major world religions). Religions can be influential in making people consider their lifestyle choices and in shaping their attitudes and behaviours towards the environment. They can move us beyond prevalent modern beliefs and attitudes in which the human species only is highly valued and the focus is on short term benefits.

6. Religious perspectives on the environment

When we attend our usual religious services in mosques and churches, the environment is hardly ever addressed. Religion certainly plays a major part in the ethical lag and it has to be part of the solution that requires efforts from all sides. There is a lot of potential for pious people to be motivated to behave in environmentally friendly ways through religious leaders. This has been recognized by some environmental organizations. For example, in Malaysia the WWF has set up a coordinated programme with mosques for the protection of animals and the prevention of poaching (tigers, turtles…).

In America Hitzhusen (2007) criticised public education for being too secular in their approach towards environmental values which he says, develop more easily within students' pre-existing value system, especially among conservative religious citizens. In Malaysia, these thoughts are even more valid as public education has not been secularized as in the West. Besides, care for the environment has been included as one of the principles of Islam Hadhari (Civilisational Islam) promoted by former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi.

The current ecological crisis is connected with a moral crisis or even a spiritual crisis in human beings and the solution ultimately rests with the cultivation of people's moral sensibility and maybe the spiritual regeneration of human beings. The Asian religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Animism, etc. - have a reverence for life based on the belief that we as humans are a part of nature closely interconnected with all life forms. For Muslims and Christians humans stand out from the rest of nature: they have a special role to play as God's stewards/khalifah on earth. Without going into details, without addressing the differences between Christianity, Islam, etc., suffice it to say that humans are expected to manage the earth with responsibility in the direction of God and to some degree to future generations.

Today's challenge for religions is to help mankind to move beyond the purely instrumental man-centred view of nature and to embed the natural environment and its intrinsic value into their religious teachings. Individual wants should be reduced and supplemented with concern for the natural environment and concern for the needs of others and sharing of the products of development. We deal with entities appropriately when we balance their intrinsic and their instrumental worth.

But as mentioned before, moving beyond the man-centred view of nature cannot mean abandoning our dominance of nature; for most of us this is unthinkable. Our dominance can only be controlled or domesticated. Pope Paul VI said already 1970 addressing the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization that it took millennia for man to learn how to dominate nature, according to the first book of the Bible, and that the hour has now come for him to dominate his domination; which requires no less courage and dauntlessness. To "dominate his domination" means not giving up domination or going back to being less dominant or less modern, but exercising the power of dominion responsibly, as stewards.

Gunn and Walker (2003, 32f.) deplore not only the destruction of nature, but also the destruction of nature based cultures and religions through mindless "missionary" activities and other disrespectful and discriminating behaviours towards those who live in harmony with nature should stop. For those who have gone through the civilizational processes of despiriting and devaluing nature and developing monotheism, capitalism etc. there is no way back. There is only a way forward towards the development of environmental ethics, both within (mostly secular) anthropocentric perspectives on the one hand, and within theocentric religious perspectives on the other hand. In the latter, animals, plants, etc. have value to God apart from their value for humans because humans are related to all God's creations; there exists a kinship of all creatures. However, monotheists still warn people to be careful not to worship the Earth or anything on it, for that would be close to idolatry. Such people often fail to see the presence of God in those created beings and just fail to realize that true idolatry is in the world of our artefacts, human creations made into values that displace the pre-eminence of God. We find this especially in the consumer world: Many are worshipping consumer brands today, but very few have spiritual connections to trees; unfortunately, some would say as the split between sacred and profane has certainly contributed to the crisis as Gunn and Walker (2003) as well as many other have pointed out. Most moderns might are not able to (or don't want to) revive a sacralised view of nature which is done in some neo-pagan groups in the West. Going deeper than stewardship and more viable in connecting tradition and modernity are attempts to develop an orientation towards nature or a relationship with nature as proposed by Martin Buber, mystics of various religions and deep ecologists.

7. Critical thinking and multiple perspectives learning

But besides taking the religious approach students also have to learn to reflect critically (we might say philosophically) on basic ethical assumptions underlying various actions: Is it a concern for human well-being? For sentient animal species? For all animals? For all life? Or, even more broadly, for ecosystems? Which things count ethically?

A comprehensive review of the various philosophical positions regarding these and other issues can be found in Krebs (1997). Students should be exposed to various ethical perspectives on human interactions with nature. They should learn to understand environmental issues and to weigh various sides of them. This can help students become more tolerant of the views of others. The focus is not on defining a correct decision; it is about the process of decision-making by balancing benefits, risks and duties. In my own classes I am not advocating a particular viewpoint. This might look like relativism I believe it is better than indoctrination as it helps students to explore controversy, unconventional ideas and new possibilities. According to Judy Rogers and Jane Shepherd from RMIT University (Australia), the desire for consensus and agreement:

> "leads to the imposition of a particular moral and ethical agenda based on defining 'right' and 'wrong' behaviours and ideas. Values, life experiences and concerns about sustainability and environmental ethics are lost in the quest for a common, shared vision which potentially has more to do with the teacher imposing a particular viewpoint than with the student. This effectively closes down debate and inhibits student's potential for transformative learning experiences (…) We argue that contestation, debate and divergent opinions should be actively encouraged to create a learning environment that values differences rather than seeks similarities. This sets up the circumstances not only for potential transformations in individual thinking but importantly an ethic of openness to diverse points of view and experiences." (Rogers and Sheperd, 2009, 225).

This openness can also help teachers to be sensitive to their students' cultures and to practice culturally responsive pedagogy. However, students have to be guided in the right direction if they are not able to overcome gross misperceptions. For example, there tends to be a lack of awareness regarding modern throw away culture, confusing going green with going clean (e.g. McDonalds) which might be caused by tradition based ignorance or by exposure to green washing initiatives of such companies.

Desired learning objectives have to be abilities in various domains of learning: not only content learning, i.e. mastery of a body of knowledge, but also practical or psychomotor skills (e.g. in investigating and documenting environmental problems), critical thinking and multiple perspectives learning, problem solving, team work and communication skills, information management and free-choice learning skills and social responsibility. This enables people to make their own decisions, to take responsibility for their own lives and to act with consideration towards others and the environmental public good. Also it promotes self-confidence among students and the democratisation of moral authority by not just leaving it to authorities to decide what is right and what is wrong - for modern citizens this is the task of all. Finally, this can create the bottom-up component in overcoming the ethical lag. The choice is not just between tradition and modernity. It is possible to adopt tradition critically and dynamically, overcome dogmatic and authoritarian shackles and develop a form of modernity that might be called authentic or alternative as it does not just imitate the West.

8. The learning of values

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), 2005-2014, promoted values-based learning and aimed at the integration of the principles, values and practices of sustainable development.

Malaysian researchers Fattawi Mokhtar and Mohd Nor Mamat (2009) also advocate a holistic approach covering all cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains. In their study of environmental ethics courses in Malaysian universities they criticize that lecture and discussion are still main activities, even though they are suited most for knowledge-dominant courses. Moral courses are among value-dominant courses that should prioritize value or attitude effects. Their findings of best practices include religious elements, practical contents and environment related activities which have positively affected students´ attitudes towards the environment. The authors also build on Smith and Ragan's (1999) three key instructional approaches:

- demonstration of the desired behaviour by a respected role model
- practice of the desired behaviour, often through role playing
- reinforcement of the desired behaviour.

Their suggestions to implement these approaches include a "teaching through model" concept:

"Teachers or lecturers must apply in themselves as models to be practiced or followed. It may be supported with other co-curricular activities to enhance inculcation process better and faster. The philosophy of co-curricular activities must not be separated or isolated from academic objectives, especially for affective domain." (Fattawi Mokhtar and Mohd Nor Mamat, 2009, 3)

Generally, attitude change is greater for messages delivered by a source that is high in credibility as well as likability. Therefore the lecturer is usually a suitable role model: by practising and demonstrating green living in his/her personal and professional life. In my case students see me coming to class by bicycle, and I share my

ways of green living and ethical decision making. I also point out how we can go green in the classroom, e.g. with energy efficient use of the air conditioner, skipping the plastic wrap when submitting assignments etc.

Finally, it is now widely acknowledged that learning extends well beyond formal education: learning which occurs in less structured contexts may make an important contribution to the development of individuals (Pitman, Broomhall, McEwan and Majocha 2010), free-choice learning (Falk and Dierking, 2002) may be conducive to civic participation. Therefore co-curricular activities, study trips and participation in environmental projects and programmes can be good opportunities for practice and reinforcement, especially when done in partnerships with environmental organizations.

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Notes

[i] Actually we tend to be God-like more generally in the control of nature and even the control of human nature through biotechnology which might lead us to a „posthuman future" (a book title by Francis Fukuyama) in which humans, as part of nature, end up becoming objects of their own design and fabrication, by deforming and changing the very fiber of the human being. This poses again immense new challenges to human dignity. In addition to stewardship for the natural world that God gave us we have to be responsible to God for whatever world we design and create and for its harmonious integration into the natural world.

[ii] This course is not taught anymore as an independent course, some contents are being integrated into another course.

[iii] This has been a relatively random choice; there are numerous practical books that can serve that purpose.