

Ibrahim Özdemir, *The Ethical Dimension of Human Attitude towards Nature – A Muslim Perspective*, Insan Press, Istanbul, 2008. (188 pages).

As the author of this work indicates in his concluding section (p.171) his main objective was to explore the “philosophical and ethical dimensions of environmental problems”. He argues that there is “a direct and strong relationship between environmental problems and our understanding of nature” and that our relationships with “natural objects” depend on how we understand and conceptualise the natural world.

In his introductory chapter Özdemir defines the ethical dimensions of our current environmental problems and argues for the formulation of a new ethical theory in the face of, by all accounts, impending planetary disaster. He reminds us that specifically environmental legislation and institutions did not appear until the 1970’s mainly as a result of the ozone layer depletion crisis. The emphasis then was on technical solutions with the ethical position largely being ignored. Past ethical formulations were human centred and what is now needed is an earth centred ethical paradigm. Özdemir thus inclines to the view that the present environmental crisis is due largely to an ethical position that is fundamentally anti nature.

In his second chapter the author reviews the philosophical approach to nature from Greek times to the Enlightenment and argues that the genesis of the present environmental crisis could be located in the seventeenth century when the traditional or religious assumptions, which were dominant in that time, were replaced by the so-called scientific world view (p.41). He reviews Descartes’ dualism, Francis Bacon’s conceptual changes in approaching the scientific method and Newton’s mechanistic interpretation of the natural world to make his point and from which to posit a fresh perspective.

There is also a cursory examination in this chapter of Lynn White’s now famous essay (p.45) on “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” where White attributes the extreme anthropocentrism of Christianity to our current environmental crisis. There is also a brief examination of the Islamic position both as seen by Christian theologians and Islamic scholars (Iqbal, Nasr, Manzoor, pp.48, 49) where the former impute their anthropocentrism also to Islam and the latter argue the case for an Islam that is inclined to be organic and holistic.

In his third chapter, Özdemir discusses the challenge of the environmental crisis to ethical philosophers and theorists, a challenge that has loomed large as this crisis began to emerge. He observes that there is a close relationship between our understanding of nature and how we treat it; that our values are shaped by how and what we conceive the universe to be and our place in it; that traditional (that is post seventeenth century) ethical theories (p.90), which had a monopoly until the early twentieth century, considered the natural world outside the human sphere only to have instrumental or utilitarian value. The discourses on environmental ethics in moral philosophy are a post modern phenomenon and began to emerge with the realisation that natural phenomena are interdependent and interconnected entities.

This chapter also contains two sections on the current ethical responses to the environmental crisis, the first based on the anthropocentric position (p.108) and the second on the ecocentric approach (p.116). In his critique of these two positions he argues that they are by and large exclusivist in their approach; the former with its emphasis on the human and the latter which tends to favour the natural world at the expense of the human. The author seeks a more inclusive and holistic approach.

We learn in the fourth chapter from Özdemir's investigation that environmentalists consider an ethic without a metaphysical foundation "nonsense" (p.139). Additionally the emerging post Cartesian scientific world view now asserts that metaphysics is fundamental to every branch of science. The traditional Western scientific world view is now seen as one of the major causes of the environmental debacle we now confront and it still wields an influence that will take decades to shift. There is however change afoot with the emergence of the new physics that appeared with the Quantum revolution in the early part of the last century. The clockwork world of Newton is now being replaced by an organic view of nature that is both interdependent and interconnected.

Into this flux steps Alfred North Whitehead mathematician and philosopher who's Organic Philosophy of Nature (p.143) now appears to produce the ethical foundation for post modern environmentalism. Whitehead's ideas stem from his understanding of the nature of matter which quantum physics provides and he reinterpreted these new scientific discoveries in a way that directly undermined the Newtonian position. The door has been opened to a new way of seeing the world.

In his concluding section in chapter four, Özdemir presents us with an Islamic position on environmental ethics and citing the Qur'an he points to the following as a basis for an ethic based on this teaching: Everything in the natural world is a sign (aya) of God's creation; the human purpose is to worship Him and be grateful for His provision; human beings are exhorted to treat the earth with respect; everything was created in good measure and due proportion. Although it could be said that the Qur'an is inherently environmental it is a puzzle that the environmental language in these passages is not overtly articulated at any level when it is taught by Muslims. This area of enquiry is an obvious candidate for discussion in another place but could it be that the overt articulation of this environmental language was not necessary as the aspiration of Muslims is to emulate the behaviour (Sunnah) of the Prophet which was inherently conservationist in all aspects of his life?

This work by Özdemir is not as esoteric as the title suggests as he deals with an issue that fundamentally effects our everyday actions. We behave as we think and our thoughts are guided by what we are taught and this influences the way we relate to the natural world and our attitude to existence. When we refer to the natural world do we stand apart from it or do we consider ourselves interwoven into its fabric? Are we subject or object? Are we both? Or none of these things? It would seem that the Cartesian dualism by objectifying the natural world and placing us outside it as dominators of it has put our entire civilisation in a state of terminal collapse.

The modern identity it is said took shape with the emergence of philosophical ideas of the seventeenth century. In an interesting observation Özdemir states that this identity also defined “for its possessors all other non-western societies and civilisations on the basis of a modern, Western world view” (p.87). The possessors of this world view, unlike previous epochs, were able by their technical superiority to coerce all other traditions by conquest, conversion and indoctrination to a new world order underpinned by this ethic. Although much that is good has appeared in the past three hundred years or so, the sum total of this despoilment of nature is climate change which is threatening the very civilisation that this modern identity has created.

It would be interesting to speculate on what might have been had the roles been reversed. That is, if Islam or the other Eastern Traditions had imposed their hegemony on the West in a similar manner. Clearly the ethics that underpinned these traditions would have provided a more benign and respectful attitude to the natural world and we may have been saved from the pain of environmental collapse. An area for more study perhaps?

Özdemir is Professor of History of Philosophy at Ankara University in Turkey and this reviewer is encouraged by his approach and hopes that other Muslim intellectuals would put the Western world under scrutiny as he does. One also hopes that future writers in this genre would follow his example and avoid the biases and prejudices of past orientalist writers as he himself does.

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