

Topic 3

“Because a (narrower or wider) universal community widely prevails among the Earth’s peoples, a transgression of rights in one place in the world is felt everywhere...”

Earth: The Universal Community

When we heard about the destruction of tropical rainforests, the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef, or the melting of the polar ice caps, even though we might live thousands of kilometers away from the scene, some of us become shocked and horrified. Why? We are shocked about news of genocide because it’s a violation of human rights. We are shocked about news of sexual harassment because it’s a violation of woman’s rights. We are shocked even though they might happen so far away and those incidents might never affect us. Why are we shocked at destruction of the natural environment? Is this means that there exist “environment rights?”

In this essay I will reflect upon the concept of rights and put a new, environmental, perspective on the concept. The concept of rights, such as woman’s right or the right to vote, has emerged throughout history, starting from minor rights within small political entities in ancient times to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the 20th century. Concepts of rights have effectively granted equal opportunities to life, welfare, and political power. With equal opportunities, the need for war and violence has been greatly diminished. Therefore, the concepts of rights are propagated throughout society. In the modern era, the world has become more connected and globalized into what can be considered a “global community”. Those rights have perhaps become the rules of the global community. When any person breaks the rules of the global community, other members of the community become shocked at the diminishment of humanity. This led Immanuel Kant to write, “Because a (narrower or wider) universal community widely prevails among the Earth’s peoples, a transgression of rights in one place in the world is felt everywhere...” In this essay, I will defend Kant’s statement. However, I realized that there are some new perspectives that could be made to expand and strengthen his position. So, I will revise Kant’s statement to better fit the world in the 21st century. My argument is very comprehensive, so I will break my argument into three main parts. First, I will interpret and analyze Kant’s statement by highlighting the conceptual foundations of the statement. Next, I will go further by pointing out that Kant’s notion of the “universal community” is too narrow and thus should be widened to cover the “whole world.” Finally, I will synthesize the two previous parts and put an environmental dimension to Kant’s argument.”

(1)

Here, I will interpret Kant's statement along with its conceptual foundation. Basically, Kant states that a transgression (violation) of rights anywhere in the world will be felt everywhere in the world because the world is a "universal community." The first and most fundamental question to be asked and answered is that why do we feel shocked at any transgression of rights in the first place. A violation of rights might be happening to someone we do not know, but we feel shocked at the violation anyway. The answer to this question might be lying in David Hume's concept of sentiments and Charles Darwin's concept of social evolution.

David Hume argues that morality is created by "sentiments" such as sympathy, empathy, and love. Because we are able to empathize to other people, we are able to care for them; and thus, we must care for them. He further argues that **we can feel have sentiments toward each other people because those people are in the same "community" as us and those within the same community are usually interdependent and rely on each other.** The community can be any size, from a family to a whole nation state. Hume argues that morality emerges from the sentiments we have towards each other within the same community.

Charles Darwin later on develops the idea through the concept of social evolution. He argues that throughout history, communities have been expanding. As the communities expand, from a small tribe to whole agglomeration of nation states, morality of the community and moral consideration expands to cover the changing social structures and institutions as well.

In the past, morality and the sphere of moral consideration might only cover a member of a tribe. A member of a tribe might be ready to kill other people outside the tribe. In the modern world, globalization has brought the world closer than ever before, creating a "global community." Based on Hume's and Darwin's concepts, a "global morality" must emerge out of the social sentiments the community has created. In the 20th century, the global morality came into formal existence in the form of Human Rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights signals the maturity of the global community along with the "social sentiments" it created.

The Human Rights become a rule of the global community. **Any transgression to the global rule is thus parallel to a violation to a local rule.** Therefore, hearing about genocide in Myanmar is similar to hearing about a murder of a distant family member. Seeing the destruction of a city in a faraway war is similar to seeing a neighbor's house burned down by an act of arson. The reason that those occurrences generate similar reactions is because the social sentiments, and thus morality, have already extended to cover other members in the global community.

One might ask, "why do some people do not care about the death and misery of people in some countries." I will say that it is because the sentiments, such as empathy, of those people do not extend to cover the whole world yet. Their moral consideration might only extend to the people in the same country, race, ethnicity, gender, continent, political ideology, or religion as them. Therefore, we must promote the acceptance of human rights as the morality of the human race and the global community and also promote tolerance and multiculturalism in the world.

A transgression of rights therefore generates ripples of shock and horror throughout the world because we belong in the same “universal (global) community.” This led Kant to state, “Because a (narrower or wider) universal community widely prevails among the Earth’s peoples, a transgression of rights in one place in the world is felt everywhere...”

Hume, Darwin, and Kant have explained why a transgression of human right is felt everywhere; however, that still doesn’t explain why we are shocked at the destruction of natural environments such as forests, glaciers, or oceans. Some people, including me, may even cry when they see the bleached corals of the Great Barrier Reef or when they see an iceberg break off and melt into the ocean. Does this suggest that we might be in the same “universal community” as the environment?

(2)

Here, I will indeed argue that we are in the same “universal community” as the environment. Kant’s position is not complete because he only includes “rational beings” as the only agent that deserves moral consideration. This led him to believe that the universal community only includes rational human beings. However, the concept of community can be much more inclusive than that. I will point out that the natural environment where humans belong is very interdependent and interconnected, and thus should be considered a community.

It is well established in the field of physical geography and ecological science that the world is interconnected. (I will not mention the Gaia hypothesis of James Lovelock because the hypothesis might rely on unneeded metaphysical axioms that might ruin my argument, even though the Gaia hypothesis might be really helpful here.) Physical geography usually divides the Earth into four interlocking systems: the lithosphere, the hydrosphere, the atmosphere, and the biosphere where humans belong. Each system greatly affects the dynamic of the other. For example the global wind patterns, created by the sun’s energy, the presence of water bodies that provides moisture to the air, and local topography, shapes the local climate which in turns shapes the local vegetation and ecosystem. The “four spheres” are extremely interconnected that a change in one will affect all.

Humans belong in the biosphere, along with other plants, animals, and microbes. Since the biosphere relies heavily upon the other three spheres. A disruption of a process in one of the systems might potentially cause a catastrophe on the biosphere, especially humans. Moreover, most scientists and environmental ethicists agree that the natural world and nature’s environmental processes are more fragile than expected. Global Climate Change, Pollution, and Deforestation are prime examples of the fragility of the Earth’s systems and of the damage done to the environment by humans. Those environmental problems are created by the disregard and ignorance of humans towards the natural environment.

With the knowledge of Earth’s systems, we can now establish that we humans are in the same universal community since those within the same community are usually interdependent and rely on each other. Next I will discuss the implication of this realization.

(3)

We humans heavily rely on the natural environment to exist, survive, and thrive, and thus are in the same community as it. Drawing upon Hume's, Darwin's, and Kant's notion of social sentiments and the emergence of human rights as discussed in part (1), I will argue that granting rights to the environment, through the concept of expanding social sentiments, is not only required because we are living through an environmental catastrophe, but also because it is a "natural evolutionary possibility."

Humans reacted to the harm done to the natural environment since their social sentiments and moral consideration are expanded to cover the true extent of the universal community: the whole earth, including both living and non-living entities. **Thus the existence of environmental right will be similar to human rights since both rights seek to protect the transgression of social sentiments and moral consideration.**

Christopher Stone has already proposed that we should give "legal" rights and protection to nature. The rights of nature might be similar to rights of mentally handicapped persons where a protecting legal entity has the duty to protect the rights of the handicapped entity. We might do the same with nature by creating legal entity whose job is to protect the legal rights of the environment. Social sentiments towards nature already exist. Ethical theories regarding the environment already exist. The next step is to turn those sentiments into proper rights that is granted and defended. There are several reasons to grants such rights.

Firstly, one anthropocentric reason to regard the rights of nature is because disregarding nature would result in the misery of humans through pollution, natural disasters, and climate change which will cause tremendous economic harm. It is counter to both the interest of an individual (ethical egoistic perspective) and the interest of humanity (utilitarian perspective) to disregard the natural environments and any rights that might be associated with it. The concept of environment rights can be used in this anthropocentric mindset to guide economic and developmental decisions.

Secondly, J. Baird Callicott, defending Aldo Leopold's Land ethic, has proposed that one day human's moral consideration will extend to cover the environment since the wellbeing of the environment is a good-in-itself. The integrity, stability, and beauty of the natural environment are what we should aim for, especially if nature has some kind of intrinsic value. The concept of environment rights will protect any notion of intrinsic value, aesthetical value, or instrumental value that might be associated with the natural environment. The "rights" will protect those values regardless of whether they exist or not.

Lastly, when we consider the trend of the expanding sphere of social sentiments, morality, and moral consideration, we will find that granting rights to the environment is just a next step upon countless steps we have taken. Throughout the world, we have granted equal rights to people with different class, wealth, race, ethnicity, mental capabilities, nationality, political ideology, and religion. With the animal liberation movement, some might even have granted equal rights to being of different species. The next natural progression is toward the natural environment as a

whole. Properly granting rights to the natural environments would prevent needless transgression of those rights, and thus prevent any shock and horror people in the world might feel.

The emergence of “environment rights” now might just be similar to the emergence of human rights in the 20th century. **Both of them are driven by the same dynamic: the expanding sphere of social sentiments, morality, and moral consideration.** By combining both part (1) and (2), I can now state that, **“Because a universal community widely prevails among the Earth, a transgression of the environmental rights in one place is felt everywhere...”**

(Conclusion)

In this essay I have shown that Kant’s statement can be considered to be true and that it is grounded on Hume’s theory on sentiments and morality. However, I argued that Kant’s statement is still incomplete since it disregards the natural environment. I then point out that the whole earth, composing of the four earth systems, is interdependent and interconnected, therefore humans belong in the same community as the whole Earth. Since we are in the same community as the natural environment, expanding morality and rights to the environment becomes not only necessary but also expected. I have argued that properly granting rights to the environment serves to fulfill the social sentiments of the global community. I have also shown that there are several good reasons to grant rights to the environments. All of this goes to support Immanuel Kant’s statement about the transgression of rights.

My argument has explained why people reacted to a transgression of rights, such as the right to life or human rights even though the transgression might happen far away, in the first place. My argument has also explained why people reacted with horror when the natural environment gets harmed. My arguments also propose the existence of “environment rights” to exist alongside of human rights.

In summary, I have just defended and expanded Immanuel Kant’s statement.