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# STUDIA ECOLOGIAE ET BIOETHICAE



23/3 (2025)

## Brief Historical Study of Environmental Thought. Review of Environmental Thought: A Short History by Robin Attfield

Krótkie studium historyczne myśli ekologicznej.  
Recenzja książki autorstwa Robina Attfielda pt. „Environmental Thought: A Short History”

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Received: 14 Nov, 2024; Revised: 30 Dec, 2024; Accepted: 10 Jan, 2025

In ancient and medieval periods, nature was seen mostly as a part of mystery by mystics and religious people, aesthetic by poets and men of letters, and beneficiary by all other people in general. During these periods, anthropocentrism may seem to have been endorsed by scholars, but in fact theo-centrism dominated, because God was at that time considered the real centre and purpose of all human and non-human activities. It was God who allowed humans to gently dominate the environment with the view to meeting their basic needs. It implies that a sort of dominion over nature was allowed to humans by religious and spiritual traditions of the world, however, from the very beginning, it was decidedly checked and balanced by the religious concept of human stewardship. Humans used to utilize the natural environment with respect and love. This continued till the times of European Renaissance humanism, when, along with the development of modern science and technology, a radical change occurred in human understanding of nature according to which scholars began to consider nature as matter. When nature began to be considered just as a material substance in

the modern scientific approach, modern humans were as if granted a license to ruthlessly exploit it only to satisfy their uncontrolled desires, and to do so they started to trespass on the right of non-human-animals and non-animal species to share the earth with humans (Sayem 2018; 2023).

The problem of modern and postmodern periods was that religious and spiritual views of nature were considered superstitions. Not viewed as valid grounds of knowledge, they were commonly ignored by modern scholars (Nasr 1976). Because of this, modern and postmodern people found it difficult to accept religious or spiritual views of nature, and they habitually disregarded them in their relationships with the natural world. When modern humans understood that science and technology alone cannot solve the present ecological crisis, they offered space for religious traditions of the world to convince humans to bring a pro-environmental attitude in their actions. Nowadays, some groups of prominent scientists even requested faith and spiritual leaders to work with them collectively to sustain the natural world (Sayem 2023). This sudden turnaround on the part of scientists

categorically proves that the perception of the environment by modern scientists based on the idea that nature works like a machine, i.e., as matter in motion, was wrong. In the place of a machine metaphor developed by physical scientists, biologists proposed another metaphor, namely, that of life, consciousness, community and organic idea of the environment to convince humans to adopt a gentler approach to nature. Now, with the latter metaphor, environmental philosophers, theorists, ethicists, scholars, thinkers, campaigners, activists, etc., are working to promote a pro-environmental atmosphere across the globe to control the present unprecedented ecological crisis including the climate change issues. Seemingly true, one can agree or disagree, the spiritual and religious perception of nature seems to have been revived today in a somewhat new form with that biological (especially ecological) science. The common point here is that both biology and religion see all elements of the environment as conscious and intricately interdependent. In this view, human existence is also completely dependent on this relationship. If, based on this understanding of the environment and human existential dependency on it, modern humans could radically reform their materialistic and mechanistic view of nature and, instead, accept the organic view of it, and work accordingly, we could hope for a world of sustainable environment and climate.

### **Introducing Environmental Thinkers with their Views of Nature**

The author attempted to trace the legacy of past views on the environment and its influence on our modern approach to nature. The book has briefly covered four historical periods, namely, ancient, medieval period, modern period and post-modern period. The author discussed how scholars of all these periods saw the environment and human relationship with it. At various periods of history, scholars adopted different approaches to nature from theocentric,

through materialistic-mechanistic to biocentric-eco-centric perceptions.

### **Environmental Thoughts in Ancient Period**

In the book, the author identified the Greek philosopher Aristotle as a thinker sympathetic to all living creatures, since in his wisdom, he could understand the deeper connectedness of all living creatures to one another. Hippocrates, on the other hand, had an insightful idea of the relation of animal and plant species with humans. Herodotus, in turn, understood climate as an influential factor on local culture. As Arthur O. Lovejoy put it, all beings have inseparable connectivity to one another. The philosopher first presents the concept of “the great chain of being”. Some stoic philosophers might seem to the author as viewing nature only from human-centred approach, though it cannot be completely anthropocentric because they recognized peoples’ right to fulfil their basic needs. Cicero protested against the cruelty of humans in Roman circuses. All the philosophers of this period are found as pro-environmental theorists because of their compassionate attitude to non-human animals, though they could not explore how the natural world exactly works in a very complex but interrelated ground, as today’s science does.

### **Environmental Thought in Medieval Period**

In medieval times, European life was influenced by Judeo-Christian traditions. During this period, human dominion over nature was very much appreciated by Christian scholars (St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Anselm, for example) as well as the Church. As the concept of stewardship was not highlighted then, people were not quite aware of this trusteeship of nature (Cobb 1972; Daly and Cobb 1989). According to environmental historian, Lynn White, Jr. (1967), this turned Christianity into an anthropocentric faith by distancing its followers from the natural world (Sayem 2021). Only few saints, for instance St. Francis and St.

Benedict, tried to convince people to be custodians of the natural world. However, in Islamic world, such dominion over nature is difficult to be found, because Muslim thinkers developed an integrated and holistic idea of nature and humans.

### **Environmental Thoughts in Modern Period**

The modern period challenged traditional understandings especially coming from revelations and explained these from their empirical grounds. In this period, scholars started to view the world from the materialistic and mechanistic perspectives. They denied the mystery and spiritual purposes of the natural world. Even philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant did not recognize ethical rights of non-human animals. Philosopher, Rene Descartes separated spiritual world from materialistic world and considered the natural world as the materialistic world (Sayem 2022, 179). Francis Bacon's theories marked the advent of applied science; and national governments began to draw huge financial benefits from the use of technology on nature. Bacon was first to propose utilizing modern science to establish human mastery over nature. In this sense, Bacon cannot be considered a pro-environmentalist scholar but rather a thinker whose stance was deadly against the interest of the environment. With the rise of applied science and technology, the Industrial Revolution emerged in Europe, bringing with it an unprecedented destruction of the natural world (Sayem 2023)

Sir Isaac Newton, with his laws of motion, explained how the materialistic universe works. Though Newton had a sympathetic attitude to nature, his motion theory led to viewing nature as matter that works like a machine, which gave rise to the mechanistic worldview. The materialistic and mechanistic approach encouraged national governments to exploit nature as much as possible for economic profits. Applied science allowed modern humans to gain remarkable benefits in terms of military power and prosperous economy, but these

advances were made at the cost of separating humanity from nature and destroying the balanced relationship with it. In contrast, modern biology opposed the mechanistic worldview by arguing that the world of animal and plant species does not work merely as a machine. With modern biology, modern humans started to understand that they are part and parcel of nature. Out of modern science disciplines, it was biologists who first postulated protecting the natural environment because of human complete dependency on it. According to evolutionary biologists, such as Charles Darwin and others, nature has no connection with God and humans are governed by natural processes. Though these scholars managed to bring the essentiality of the environment to the notice of humans, their purposeless view of nature was criticized by George Perkins Marsh, John Stuart Mill, and John Muir, among others. According to Arne Naess, Marsh, Mill and Muir promoted environmentally friendly relationship but they saw this relationship from an anthropocentric perspective.

The environmental thought gained more momentum when it came up with the term ecology coined by Haeckel, supported by Elton's notion of "food chain" and Thieneman's concepts of "producers, consumers, reducers, and decomposers". Environmental Philosophers' ideas such as Aldo Leopold's "land ethics", Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life", Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*, Arne Naess's "Deep Ecology", Holmes Rolston's *Environmental Ethics*, Lynn White's "the Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", and Peter Singer's "practical ethics", among others, were meant to convince modern humans to reform radically their attitudes to the natural world in order to sustain the environment. These scholars can generally be called as environmental ethicists, because they addressed the environmental issues from ethical perspectives. In their discussions, we see the trend to shift from biocentrism ("all living creatures have moral standard and



equal right to live”) to ecocentrism (“ecological wholes”), though these two trends can be criticized from some other perspectives by scholars. By their works, these visionary thinkers helped to develop green movements in different parts of the world under different names, such as, eco-feminism, environmental justice, green religions, biodiversity preservation, etc. However, unfortunately, despite these efforts we cannot get a satisfactory progress in environmental sustainability project notwithstanding the fact that the environmental crisis is widely discussed by governmental and nongovernmental bodies.

### Environmental Thoughts in Post-modern Period

When post-modern humans understood that they were also in an existential threat due to ecological destruction they started to talk about environmental sustainability propagating such concepts as environmental ethics, eco-theologies, eco-religions, environmental justices, environmental managements, etc., but unfortunately, they could not bring any radical change in their lifestyle to adjust to the natural environment. They are habituated to consumerist lifestyle that needs to be revolutionarily reformed if we really want to save ourselves and our life-supporting environment. However, instead of adopting biocentric and eco-centric approaches, postmodern humans should consider sustaining the environment by following a human existential perspective with its a new form of anthropocentrism. According to this view, the environment is being seen and valued from different perspectives in order to make humans conscious of their responsibilities to the natural world.

### Some points should be discussed more, and some other points should be included

The author failed to give equal importance to Asian and African environmental thought. He merely briefly touched on Islam and selected Muslim thinkers but did not expand on these in detail or compared with those he

focused on in his work. He even ignored religious and spiritual understanding of nature discussed by some famous postmodern theologians and religious scholars, for instance by John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Although, it might be expected in a work providing a historical perspective, the book failed to present a chronological narrative of how the environmental thought developed into the eco-centric approach to nature from a purely theocentric view of nature. Some postmodern environmental philosophers and eco-theologians propose a concept of an ecological civilization based on ecologically friendly principles, however, the book has missed this crucial point. Despite all these limitations, the work remains a remarkable source of knowledge on environmental thought throughout the periods of history.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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