

BIOCENTRIC ETHICS AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE GOALS OF BIOPOLITICS EDUCATION

[Professor Rusen Keles](#)

Director of Environmental Studies

Faculty of Political Science

Ankara University, Turkey

Eco-centric and anthropocentric approaches have been regarded so far as contrasting magnets, for understanding better the goals of environmental protection. These concepts have far reaching consequences for the education of Biopolitics. The purpose of this paper is to review them briefly and to see whether it is possible to have a synthetic understanding of these separate approaches.

Since the founding of the International University for the Bio-Environment (I.U.B.E.), in 1990, we have made several attempts to promote biocentric revisions in existing academic curricula at meetings in Athens, Rhodes and elsewhere. However, the realisation of such a goal requires, first of all, the existence of a legally established I.U.B.E. as an accredited educational institution. Although an important step has been taken here in Budapest, thanks to Dr. Laszlo Kapolyi and the System International Foundation, we still need to go much further to achieve the goals of the *Bio-Syllabus*,¹ summarised as:

- informing people of the basic concepts of biology, to bring out the understanding and appreciation of the bio-environment in their activities, and to expand their vision
- making accessible both the fundamental concepts of the bios theory and applied knowledge
- raising ethical consciousness and responsibility
- fostering new cultural concepts based on biocentric values and on the rights of all forms of life on earth
- increasing the understanding of the need for the harmonious co-evolution of the bio-environment and humankind

Concepts such as anthropocentrism and biocentrism have been taken up, so far, as being ethical approaches alternative to each other. Abandoning such a stand would have important consequences for the promotion of the Bio-Syllabus and its implementation by the I.U.B.E.

As is very well known, anthropocentrism assumes that nature exists to serve man. Both popular Western thought and most Western ethical theories can ultimately be reduced to matters of interest or concern to the human race. Even some religions tend to promote this human chauvinism. In the words of Lynn Whyte, "Christianity is known as being the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. It, in absolute contrast to the ancient paganism of Asian religions – except perhaps Zoroastrianism – not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."² To attribute value to things of nature based on whether or not they benefit human beings is to regard them as instruments of man's survival or well-being. This is the basis of the anthropocentric view which presupposes that the effects of our actions on non-humans are morally significant only if they have consequences for humans. Human chauvinist ideas expressed by Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, and even by Emmanuel Kant, are characteristically instrumentalist theories.³

Regarding our duties to animals, Kant had said that "As far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious and exist merely as a means to an end. That end is man."⁴ On the other hand, there is an eco-centric approach which reflects thinking from the view of an eco-system, according to which nature does have an intrinsic value. This is much broader than, and includes both, biocentric and anthropocentric views.

Eco-centric ethics is certainly a holistic rather than an individualistic ethics and, as such, it serves as a better reminder of our responsibilities to the natural world and to animals. It seeks to avoid the moral hierarchy implicit in traditional theories. It suggests giving moral consideration to non-living and non-human natural objects and ecological systems. The preservation of biological values and biodiversity is the main goal of this approach.

Since the primordial principle of ecology is holism, we can advance a third and more modern approach, using its unifying characteristics. To be more concrete and more realistic, it can be argued that a pure anthropocentric view can not be blamed. It is natural for humans to value other humans more highly than the rest of nature, as it would be logical for members of any species to view themselves as most valuable. It would be erroneous to insist that it is somehow wrong for man to exploit nature for "his proper ends." He must exploit nature to live. The problem lies in the difficulty to distinguish between "proper ends," which are progressive and promote human values, and "improper ends," which are regressive and destructive to human values.² We must recognise that an individual's well-being depends on the well-being of both its social group and its ecological and biological support systems.

From the standpoint of such an understanding, the one-dimensional thinking that created ecological scarcity and the destruction of biological support systems will no longer be tolerable.

There will be a decisive movement away from scientific reductionism which argues that nature is to be understood by dissecting it into its smallest constituent parts, towards holism, the contrary assumption that nature is best understood by focusing on the interrelationships making up the whole system. The living and non-living, human and non-human components of ecosystems are so interwoven into the fabric of nature that it is difficult to separate them.

Taking this brief analysis as a starting point, one can assert that biopolitics education is not only the environmental part of education which aims at teaching the facts about the environment. It is, at the same time, environmental ethics education which consists of teaching how to incorporate the facts as well as the values of the different organisms into ethical decision-making processes.

One of the resolutions of the B.I.O. Danube Conference held in Bratislava, in June 1997, was that increased support of the multidisciplinary activities of Biopolitics is needed. An important step to be taken in that direction is the introduction of a biocentric curriculum at all levels of education. The above mentioned issues should be taken into consideration in the development of curricula to be used for the training of future managers in the public and private sectors.

Another important point to remember is that the claims that science is ethically neutral or value-free may not be valid for a biopolitics education which directly affects human behaviour. The "education of educators" is an important requirement for biopolitics education programs, but it is not sufficient. Primary school children, the young, the public at large, must all be included. A well-known environmentalist had emphasised that the goal must be to train "environmental citizens."⁵ In other words, environmental education is no more and no less than "citizenship education," the development of personal commitment and social responsibility combined with a system-centred holistic view of man in relation to nature and the biological world.

Before concluding, it must be emphasised that unsteady values brought about by globalisation, rapid development of capitalism and selfish consumption patterns tend to damage the bio-environment tremendously. Although the concept of living in harmony with nature exists in many cultures, the main problem stems from the selfish and short-sighted behaviour of people, combined with a modern economic policy which does not value the bio-environment as much as it deserves, and, as a result, nature is not only exploited but also destroyed.⁶

The theory that salvation lies in changing the behaviour of human beings through genetic engineering, as is often suggested, seems to be very plausible. It reminds one the somewhat racist theory of "criminel-ni" – criminal born – expounded by the famous Italian criminologist Lombroso, who had assumed that criminals are born with an innate tendency to commit crimes. I believe, however, that actions hostile to the bio-environment, as expressed by various forms of vandalism, are rather the result of the national and international socio-economic and cultural conditions in which we live. This understanding makes our duty to reshape the *Bio-Syllabus* and to implement it with due care an extremely important one.

References

1. Vlavianos-Arvanitis A. and Oleskin A. (1992) *Biopolitics – the bio-environment – bio-syllabus*. Biopolitics International Organisation, Athens, 151 pp.
2. Murdy W.H. (1993) *Anthropocentrism: A modern view*. In: Armstrong S. and Botzler R. Environmental ethics divergence and convergence. McGraw Hill, New York
3. Routley R. and Routley V. (1995) *Against the inevitability of human chauvinism*. In Elliot R. (ed) Environmental ethics. Oxford University Press, Oxford
4. Singer P. (1977) *Not for humans only: The place of non-humans in environmental issues*. In: Goodpaster K.E. and Sayre K.K. (eds) Ethics and the problems of the 21st century. University of Notre Dame, London, pp. 191-206
5. O'Riordan T. (1976) *Environmentalism*. Pion, London, pp. 310-312
6. Macer D.R.J. (1998) *Bio-ethics is love of life*. Eubios Ethics Institute, New Zealand, pp. 106

Professor Rusen Keles is Director of Environmental Studies on the Faculty of Political Science at Ankara University. He has served as President of the United Nations Association of Turkey and, in addition to providing advisory services to local government agencies, he has also been a consultant to the Council of Europe and the United Nations. Recipient of the Abdi İpekçi Prize for Peace and Friendship, he has published more than 30 books and reports and is a member of a number of national and international organisations, including B.I.O. trustee