

# The Value of Nature and Human Responsibility in Contemporary Environmental Philosophy

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## Abstract

This paper delves into the values of nature and human responsibility in contemporary environmental philosophy analyzing their practical applications in environmental ethics policy regulations, cultural education and other aspects. By summarizing the practices of environmental philosophy in China it highlights the importance of values of nature and human responsibility in addressing environmental issues and promoting ecological civilization construction. At the same time the article identifies the challenges existing in practice and proposes corresponding policy recommendations aiming to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for achieving harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

**Keywords:** environmental philosophy, natural value, human responsibility, ecological civilization construction, sustainable development

## 1. Foreword

With the increasingly serious global environmental problems, reflection on human attitudes and behaviors towards nature has become an inevitable topic. Contemporary environmental philosophy, as a discipline that focuses on the relationship between humans and nature and explores environmental ethics, has gradually received widespread attention (Yunzhen & Guolin, 2024). This article aims to explore the value of natural responsibility and human responsibility in environmental philosophy, and analyze their important roles in current environmental governance and ecological civilization construction. This article attempts to provide theoretical basis and practical guidance for solving environmental problems and promoting sustainable development by re-examining the value of nature and deeply analyzing human responsibility. Firstly, this article will provide an overview of the development history of environmental philosophy, elucidating the research background and significance of the values of nature and human responsibility (Qiulin, 2023). Next, this article will delve into the connotation of natural value and its position in environmental philosophy, as well as the specific manifestations of human responsibility.

## 2. An Overview of the Development of Environmental Philosophy in Contemporary Times

### 2.1 Origin and Development of Environmental Philosophy

The origin of environmental philosophy can be traced back to the mid-20th century when global environmental pollution and ecological destruction became increasingly severe prompting people to deeply reflect on traditional development models and the relationship between humans and nature. As an independent discipline environmental philosophy gradually took shape under such circumstances.

Early environmental philosophy was primarily influenced by ecology and ethics, with scholars beginning to pay attention to the impact of human activities on the natural environment and proposing moral requirements for protecting the natural environment. The publication of the American marine biologist Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" in 1962 is recognized as a landmark event that marks the beginning of the development of

environmental philosophy, as it brought to light the disastrous impact of chemical pesticides on the ecological environment (Cheng, 2022).

After that, the formation of environmental philosophy progressed through several phases. In the 1970s, the initial concern of environmental philosophy was the practices related to the thought process and the themes like, Ann Naiss “Deep Ecology” and Holmes Rotherhams “Environmental Ethics,” affirming the worth of nature and the right of nature. In the 1980s, environmental philosophy began to pay attention to environmental justice issues, exploring the fairness of environmental resource distribution.

## 2.2 *The Main Schools of Environmental Philosophy*

**Humanism:** According to this school of thought, humans are the most important beings on earth and that the rest of the natural components should be subservient to human needs. It focuses on the distinctiveness of the human intellect and potential and promotes the reasonable exploitation of natural assets (Chunyi, 2022).

**Biocentrism:** Biocentrism extends moral considerations to all living beings, believing that each living being has its own value and rights and should not be used as a tool for human purposes.

**Ecocentrism:** Ecocentrism further expands the scope of moral concern, believing that the entire ecosystem has value and emphasizing the integrity and stability of the ecosystem over individual species.

**Deep Ecology:** Deep ecology, proposed by Ann Nais, advocates that all life forms have the right to survive and develop, emphasizes the importance of biodiversity, and criticizes the excessive consumption and materialism of modern society.

**Sociobiology:** Sociobiology holds that environmental problems are inseparable from social problems. It advocates solving environmental crises by changing social structure and values, and emphasizes the combination of social justice and ecological sustainability.

**Ecological feminism:** Ecological feminism combines feminism and environmentalism, believing that the oppression of nature and the oppression of women have similar roots. It advocates rebuilding social and ecological balance by respecting women and nature (Mu & Hu, p.79, 2022).

**Environmental justice theory:** Environmental justice theory focuses on social inequality in environmental issues and advocates that everyone, regardless of race, class, or gender, has the right to a healthy environment.

These schools have their own unique perspectives and theoretical frameworks, but their common goal is to promote a more harmonious and sustainable way of life by re-examining the relationship between humans and nature.

## 3. **The Evolution of Values About Nature and Human Responsibility**

The evolution of the value concept of nature and human responsibility has gone through three main stages from ancient awe to modern conquest and then to contemporary coexistence.

The Industrial Revolution brought in anthropocentrism, where nature was seen solely as an object to be manipulated by people. At this stage, the meaning of the value concept of human responsibility changed to focus on economic development and domination of nature (Chao, 2021). This set of values propelled technological developments but at the same time resulted in wastage of resources and deterioration of the environment.

During the second half of the twentieth century, environmental problems intensified, and people began to rethink their attitude towards nature. In this respect, new value concepts of nature and human responsibility have emerged. The understanding is finally slowly cultivated that nature is not only a deposit of materials, but also a supplier of ecosystem services, and the responsibility to protect and restore nature lies on humans. This new value concept focuses on the sustainable development and ecological justice whereby society and individuals should coexist with nature instead of exploiting the natural resources.

Modern environmental philosophy has even further developed this concept, not only providing such theories as ecological holism and deep ecology but also extending human obligations to include the entire ecosystem, emphasizing the equal value of all life forms, and highlighting humanity’s role and responsibilities within the Earth community. This evolutionary process reflects the continuous deepening of human understanding of nature and profound reflection on the consequences of one’s actions (Wang, p. 54, 2020).

### 3.1 *The Connotation and Classification of Natural Value*

The connotation of natural value refers to the ability of nature to meet the survival and development needs of humans and other organisms, as well as the inherent attributes and functions of nature itself. Natural value is not only reflected in providing material resources and services for humans but also includes the stability of ecosystems, the maintenance of biodiversity, and satisfaction at the aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual levels. The classification of natural value can be approached from different perspectives, with the following being the main

three classification methods:

First according to the nature of natural value it can be divided into intrinsic value and instrumental value. Intrinsic value refers to the value possessed by nature itself independent of human existence and evaluation emphasizing the autonomy of nature and the inherent dignity of living beings. Instrumental value refers to the usefulness of nature to humans that is the value of nature as a resource and service provider. This value is relative to human needs.

Second, according to the functions of natural value it can be divided into economic value ecological value and environmental value. Economic value refers to the direct use value of natural resources such as food water resources minerals etc. as well as indirect use value such as soil fertility, climate regulation etc. Ecological value emphasizes the role of natural ecosystems in maintaining biodiversity and ecological balance including ecological service functions such as water conservation, air purification etc. Environmental value encompasses the satisfaction of human aesthetic leisure and spiritual needs by natural landscapes.

Finally, according to the time scale of natural value, it can be divided into short-term value and long-term value. Short-term value is usually related to current human interests, while long-term value focuses on intergenerational equity and the long-term health and sustainability of the Earth's ecosystem.

To sum up, the connotation of natural value is rich and diverse, and its classification reflects the deepening of human understanding of nature and the recognition of the responsibility of nature conservation.

### *3.2 The Importance of Natural Value*

The importance of natural value is self-evident, as it is the foundation of human survival and development, and plays a crucial role in maintaining the health and stability of the Earth's ecosystem. Firstly, natural value is the cornerstone of life support systems, and natural resources such as water, air, soil, and biodiversity provide necessary conditions for human survival; Any destruction of these resources directly threatens the well-being of humanity. Secondly, natural values play a crucial role in the economic sector, with natural resources serving as raw materials for many industries and ecosystem services supporting agriculture, fisheries, and tourism, which have a direct impact on economic growth and employment. In addition, the value of nature is equally important for cultural and social development, as natural landscapes and wildlife are not only sources of inspiration for artistic creation, but also indispensable components of human spiritual and cultural life. In addition, natural values provide abundant resources and examples in education and scientific research, promoting respect for the environment and the spirit of scientific inquiry (Zijia, 2020).

### *3.3 The Relationship Between Natural Value and Human Development*

The relationship between natural values and human development is inseparable, with a dynamic connection of mutual influence and constraints. On the one hand, natural values provide material and non-material resources for human development, and are the cornerstone of social progress and economic growth. Human beings obtain food, energy, and raw materials from nature, which directly promotes the process of industrialization and modernization. On the other hand, the human development model has profoundly influenced the protection and preservation of natural values. Unreasonable development practices may lead to resource depletion and ecological degradation, thereby weakening natural values and posing a threat to human sustainability. Therefore, human development must be based on respecting natural values and promoting the harmonious integration of economic activities and nature conservation through green development strategies. This means that while pursuing economic growth, attention should be paid to ecological protection, maintaining biodiversity, and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources (Jichuang, 2019).

### *3.4 The Construction of Human Responsibility*

The connotation and characteristics of human responsibility refer to the obligations and duties that humans undertake when facing natural and social environments. This responsibility is conscious, meaning that humans should proactively recognize the impact of their actions on the environment; universal, implying that all human members should take on the responsibility of protecting the environment; and dynamic, as human responsibilities evolve and adjust with changes in environmental issues. In terms of characteristics, human responsibility manifests as moral self-restraint, legal compliance, and active participation in social practices (Xiaomei, 2016).

The evolution of the concept of human responsibility has progressed from the natural worship of primitive society to the land ethics of agrarian society, then to the conquest of nature in industrial society, and finally to the sustainable development philosophy of modern society. This process reflects humanity's re-evaluation of its role and capabilities, as well as a profound understanding of the value of nature. In early times, the concept of responsibility focused more on the direct impact of individual actions on the group; whereas in modern times, responsibility has expanded to encompass concern for the entire ecosystem and future generations.

The principle of human responsibility and the principle of environmental ethics are interrelated. Environmental ethics assumes that human beings have a moral obligation to care, preserve, and sustain the environment, and encourage the preservation of species' diversity. This responsibility stems from appreciation of the inherent value of nature as well as the appreciation of the future welfare of the human race. Ethics on the environment prefer the fact that the responsibility that is inherent on people is to comply with the needs of the people and not violate nature. Thus, the concept of human responsibility defines the responsibility of a practitioner in environmental ethics to take action for the preservation of the environment for the sake of future generations.

In short, human responsibility is the essence of the environmental ethic, which involves responsible actions with regards to understanding of the value of nature in order to preserve the environment and optimize interaction between man and the environment. This concept of responsibility not only calls for the people to be morally awakened but also enshrines environmental respect and protection in the law, policies, and our lives.

### *3.5 The Value Integration of Nature and Human Responsibility*

The value of nature and human responsibility is one of the topics explored in today's environmental philosophy, which focuses on the idea of a combined and coherent concept of nature's value and people's obligations. It is a conception that embodies an appreciation and recognition of nature and at the same time indicates the function and importance of man in the natural world. Nature can also be valued for its ability to supply ecosystem services, promote biological diversity, and feed human spirit and culture. The concept of integration of human responsibility means that nature has value on its own, but it also means that preservation of the natural environment and achievement of balance in ecosystems is impossible to avoid in human activity. This integration demands reconsideration of the development models in practice, thus advancing a sustainable lifestyle in harmony with nature. In this process, humans are not conquerors of nature but the protectors and active members of the biosphere. Because there is a balance between economic development and environmental conservation, we should use human intelligence but at the same time, keep natural laws intact. This integration of values is also seen in the reflection and critique of concepts of conventional development and consideration of the interests of future generations. It requires us to consider long-term impacts in decision-making, ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources and leaving an ecological legacy for future generations—A healthy and resource-rich world. Therefore, the integration of the values of nature and human responsibility is not only an innovation in philosophical philosophy but also an ethical principle guiding our actions. It calls for us to jointly take on the responsibility of protecting our Earth under the backdrop of globalization, promoting harmonious coexistence between humans and nature through concrete actions. This integration represents a transcendence of anthropocentrism, a profound understanding and response to the value of nature and human responsibility, pointing us towards a path of sustainable development (Weibo, 2007).

### *3.6 The Practice of Natural and Human Responsibility Value in Environmental Philosophy in China*

The value practice of nature and human responsibility in China's environmental philosophy has gradually formed and developed on the basis of traditional ideas of harmony between heaven and humanity, combined with modern environmental protection concepts. In practice, China actively explores the transformation of environmental philosophy into concrete action guidelines and policies to achieve harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

First, our country has established the strategic position of ecological civilization construction at the policy level incorporating the value practices of nature and human responsibility into the overall layout of national development. By implementing sustainable development strategies and promoting green development, our country has achieved a series of accomplishments in protecting the natural environment and ecosystems. For example, the implementation of projects such as returning farmland to forests and returning grasslands to grasslands has effectively restored the functions of ecosystems.

Second, our country continuously improves relevant laws and regulations on environmental protection within its legal system strengthening the legal protection of natural values. Through the formulation and revision of laws and regulations such as the Environmental Protection Law and the Wildlife Protection Law our country has gradually established a relatively complete environmental protection legal system providing a legal guarantee for the value practice of nature and human responsibility.

Furthermore, our country vigorously promotes environmental ethics education in the field of cultural education to enhance public environmental awareness and sense of responsibility. In school education and social publicity, the importance of respecting nature and protecting the environment is emphasized, fostering citizens' green lifestyles and consumption habits. The popularization of this cultural education has laid a solid mass foundation for the value practice of nature and human responsibility (Guangyi, 2004).

In addition, our country actively explores green transformation in economic development to promote the optimization and upgrading of industrial structure. By developing a circular economy, promoting clean energy,

and reducing pollutant emissions, we strive to achieve the coordinated unity of economic development and environmental protection. These practices demonstrate our country's engagement and initiatives in the pursuit for the value of natural and human duties.

In sum, the value practices of nature and human responsibility in our country's environmental philosophy are manifested on many levels of policy making formulation, legal protection of the environment, cultural enlightenment, and economic development, hence creating a full and multilayered environmental protection system. This realistic action not only enhances the quality of the ecological environment of our country, but also offers Chinese experience and ideas to the international society for environmental conservation.

#### 4. Conclusion

The value concept of nature and human responsibility is one of the key tenets of modern environmental philosophy stating that people should appreciate nature, preserve the environment and reach concord with nature. This value orientation is fundamental to dealing with any environmental issues of the world. China has made remarkable progress in the implementation of environmental philosophy in the formulation of policies and regulations, the enhancement of legal systems or the dissemination of cultural education and the reform of development models all show that China has deeply comprehended and practiced the value of nature and human duties. It is crucial to note that the implementation of the value of nature and human responsibility is paramount to the development of ecological civilization and sustainable development. It is only by constantly enriching this value and translating it into practical actions that we can pass on a green and harmonious living environment to future generations.

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