



The Holistic Ethics of Sustainability

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Abstract

This chapter raises the question of an ethical model for continuous mixed forestry. From individualistic to holistic approaches, the question of the dignity or integrity of plants is discussed. This approach has been regulated in the constitution of Switzerland for many years. The problem is that the word "dignity" contains too many uncertainties to be exactly described.

Another approach to forest ethics is social- or Christian ethics. This approach emphasises the position of the human being as guardian of creation and his task is to take care of animals and plants for the common good. The holistic model stresses the interconnectedness of all living beings and their social obligation towards each other. It can be found even in some statutory provisions, for example in § 1 of the German Federal Nature Conservation Act. There, goals of nature conservation and landscape management are that (1)... nature and landscape have to be protected because of their own value and as a basis for life and health of people in responsibility for future generations. The holistic model fulfils all expectations and demands for a sustainable world. It also contains the more individual aspects of plant dignity or integrity and social (Christian) ethics, and is the optimal approach for the realisation of the "continuous mixed forestry" model with all its requirements for ethically responsible, sustainable forest management.

Keywords: Holistic Ethics; Sustainability

Introduction

"Our earth is breathing - and this is manifold. Its thin envelope of air pulsates to the beat of different rhythms: When in the spring (in Europe for example) the nature thrives, the CO₂ content of the atmosphere decreases, because the fresh green sequesters carbon. In autumn the fallen leaves decompose and release greenhouse gas. Something similar happens when methane that rises from thawing Siberian swamps and flooded Asian rice fields, only to be slowly reduced in the atmosphere [1].

But there are also other rhythms: the breathless tide around the globe, the ocean currents and ice ages in the rhythm of millennia, the sudden impact of human activities, seeing the Earth from space. Thus, the director of the Earth Science Advisory Board of the European Space Agency called on the Living Planet Symposium in Edinburgh 2013 or a global Earth Management System to be created to control the "breathing" of the earth as a whole [1]. This shows that a holistic understanding of the earth exists in the natural sciences and that nature in general, especially trees and forests, plays a central role in the earth's 'breathing'.

Wilhelm Bode describes this function of the forests very strongly in his and he suggests a specific silvicultural management system that is environmentally and economically effective. The subsequent question is an ethical justification for his model of continuous mixed forestry. This question was investigated by ethicists from various points of view, from plant or forest ethics to social and other religious ethics, and environmental ethics. This is a field of applied ethics which deals with the questions of moral obligation and responsibility to the forest.

There are many approaches (philosophical, economic, theological, historical and psychosocial) but they are generally immature and come in for significant resistance. But the holistic view on ethics of sustainability is perhaps the most important theory compared to the ethical value standards that have been discussed in relation to forests from many angles, from individualistic to holistic. It is impossible and not necessary to Rather than dealing with all of them, I want to tackle the most important theory that ultimately leads to the holistic view.

Dignity and integrity of plants

An important aspect of the European discussion, especially in the German-speaking countries of Switzerland, Germany and Austria, is the responsibility for the creation of forest ethics in the individualistic context of the independent dignity of plants, just as humans and animals are invested with dignity. While human dignity is generally accepted and the dignity of animals is increasingly theoretically recognised, the dignity of plants is much harder to recognise. The ethicist who will concede dignity to plants will be asked if we are no longer allowed to pluck leaves from trees or harvest what we farm because plants would be damaged.

Opponents of plant ethics referred to the idea as groundless and absurd, although recent studies speak of a “plant soul” [2]. Gill, for example, refers to studies on different plant species, among others, mimosa, showing that they have a nervous system, a short-term memory and a musculoskeletal system [2]. In contrast, scientists deny these features for plants. Thus, Birnbacher, a bio-ethicist, and others, notably Peter Singer, measures the moral status of living beings based on their neuronal equipment. “Plants are not capable of suffering, this are plants cannot specifically evade any pain stimuli and no physiological evidence of a mental life of plants exists’ [paraphrased].” [3]. In this respect, a claim to protect each ‘individual plant’ seems unrealistic, especially as protection of plants has been anthropocentrically regulated for food, medicine and aesthetic value.

This is why we have so far failed to develop generally accepted criteria for the use of plants in the context of genetic engineering interventions. However, the dignity of the creature had been regulated in the Swiss Federal Constitution. The concept of the creature includes animals, plants and other organisms. The constitution has regulated the protection of plants comprehensively by the conservation and protection of biodiversity, the protection of the species, and the commitment to take into account the dignity of the creature in dealing with plants.

Although Switzerland governed the dignity of the creature in the constitution in 1992, Swiss commissions and academies have attempted to flesh out the concept of plant ethics [3-5] with success. With the introduction of Article 24 novies SBV, the Swiss Federal Constitution gives a general objective standard which includes humans and the environment and has to ensure the protection of the dignity of creatures. Plants are explicitly mentioned [7].

The question which arises is whether plants are so directly protected for their own sake or only in relation to humans. Direct protection could constitute an obligation to respect the dignity of the plant [7]. This protection is not absolute but can be seen in certain limits. Thus, an intervention may be justified by overriding legitimate interests, because otherwise the cultivation of plants or their harvesting could be problematic. Adequate nutrition must also be secured. On the other hand is the formulation that plants may not be “arbitrarily” damaged. There is still a lot of uncertainty between these two poles.

Odparlik justifies protection of plants with the “own good” principle of vegetable organisms [7], i.e., that plants can be regarded as living beings that ‘are created for their own prospering’ with an individual value. This ‘own good’ should be taken into account in dealing with them. This means that humans, as rational and moral beings, are obliged to pay attention for the plant’s own sake and to treat plants properly without doing this only for our own interests [7]. What does that really mean?

There are different views. A plausible approach, which was proposed in an alternative formulation in the discussions on Article 24 novies for the Swiss Federal Constitution, is to refer to the concept of freedom from bodily harm or the (vulnerable) integrity of living beings that need to be protected [8]. Integrity is more understandable for the natural sciences. In the French version of the Swiss Federal Constitution the concept of ‘dignity of creature’ was therefore replaced by ‘intégrité organisés vivants’ [7,9]. Integrity is not to be equated with the term ‘own good’, but to be understood only as a basic condition for the realisation of one’s own good [7], so that the ‘own good’ is to be preserved in its integrity’. Thus, Odparlik concludes: ‘Insofar as... (the morphological species concept) is able to receive and convey information about the way in which organisms are assigned to their characteristics or their descent of a certain species, it may be helpful to make a statement prior to an interference in a particular plant, whether as a result the impairment of their integrity is to be expected and, if so, to what extent’.

This raises the fundamental question of whether the concept of ‘dignity’ in connection with plants is in order here at all, or if the concept of the integrity of living organisms is to be preferred, so a different and more determinable concept should be applied [10]. This seems to be a more plausible approach as it escapes the dif-

difficult discussion about differentiating the concept of dignity which is already 'loaded' by the extension to animals.

This argument may have its place if it applies to genetic manipulation of individual plants, or maybe a larger group. In the case of forests it is difficult to argue with the terms 'its own good or integrity, because the tree crops have just been set to fulfill their purpose of supplying wood after a certain time. Therefore, it is useful here to choose a more comprehensive approach that involves the whole environment, that is, humans, animals and plants, from the perspective of sustainability and the precautionary principle. Also the argument from Kallhoff regarding the 'prosperity' of plants as such is still less comprehensive. However, she essentially extended this approach beyond the individual plant or species when she formulated: 'The prospering of plants should be respected morally and anthropogenic changes in the vegetative nature should also be evaluated to determine whether they allow or harm the growth of plants [11].

Social or Christian ethics

Social ethics, likely the most intensively discussed ethics model for forests in Germany, are focused on the social (Christian) conditions of a good life. This includes sustainability as important for the further existence of humankind. Thus, Social ethics are not primarily focused on single people with their isolated activities but on the cooperation of responsible people or groups. And these responsible people, the citizens, should be enabled by governments and different law systems to co-operate together as citizens who take care of their own assets (in this case forests) in a sustainable manner. From the Christian point of view this model takes into account that all life, including plant life, is given by creation and should be protected as an important part of it.

This approach is represented by Hangartner [12] in Germany, who assumes that the biblical story of creation isn't separate from the creation of humans, but we are understood to be a part of the whole. The creation is then entrusted to human beings for our 'rule', but only in the sense that we have to maintain it and keep it. Hangartner says that human beings are 'delegated', appointed by God as the guardians of the world [12]. This means that we are responsible for ensuring that all creatures, including plants, obtain

their intended place on earth. In this way, we are obliged to preserve the 'common good of creation'. The 'delegation' of human beings is so important that it becomes the fundament of human life [12]. This enables living beings - including plants - to reach harmony between man and, ultimately, the whole of creation [12].

According to the understanding of Hangartner, in contrast to individualistic reasons for the dignity and intrinsic value or integrity of plants, as regulated on a general level by a constitution, the social and ethical approach goes far beyond this when it seeks to involve creation as a whole, the common good and human responsibility, and to create a qualitatively different framework for plant and forest ethics. If creatures, animals and plants are to receive their allotted place, this approach goes beyond a static structure to an organic structure, such as Alfred Moller formulates specifically for the forest.

On the way to holistic forest ethics

Alfred Moller is regarded as the founding father holistic ethics for forests in Germany [13]. Turning away from the classical theory, he demanded the move to thinking back to the 'continuity of forest organisms. He stressed the self-life of the forest, biodiversity and forest aesthetics, in short, the sustainability of all forest functions. This raises the thought of continuous mixed forests.

One of the most important pioneers of this is Aldo Leopold who lived about a hundred years ago in the USA and was influenced strongly by German forestry, where they faced the 'Försterwald' (clear cut forest) critically. In his essay entitled 'Land - Ethics', he assumes that ethics should be extended times of ecological crisis: 'Land ethics merely extends the boundaries of the community and includes soil, water, plants and animals, that - combined - is the country. (...)Land ethics of course cannot prevent change, management and exploitation of natural resources, but in fact, it reaffirms their right to continued existence, and that, at least in some places, in their natural state. Land ethics transform the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to a simple member and citizen in it. This requires respect for his fellow man and also respect for the community as such [14].

Thus, Leopold returns from the dominant understanding of nature in Europe from the time of the Renaissance, according to

which nature is more or less understood as a machine and that all physical processes can be causally explained mechanically, including the human body [15]. The animated organism becomes a clock mechanism without intrinsic value, judged by its functionality, i.e., for precision and efficiency. In a nutshell, this is the philosopher Christian Wolff with the words: 'A machine is a composite work whose movements are due to the nature of the composition. The world is like a composite thing, the changes are founded in the nature of the composition. And therefore the world is a machine'.

When nature is but a lifeless thing which is used to satisfy human needs, then man only occurs as an outside observer to nature [15]. Or as Kant formulates it: 'Man rises infinitely above all other living beings on earth. He is one by rank and dignity entirely separate entity of things as it is the unreasoning animals with which you can switch and control at will [15].

In the meantime, at least in Europe, a 'reverse perspective' (Kather) held the view that nature is the foundation of our culture. It is increasingly understood as an organism in which humans are interwoven. We and all other living beings are connected like threads in a network in the biosphere. According to this understanding, it is fitting to preserve the habitat of all species if you want to protect the organism as a whole. With every dying species the stability and regeneration ability of an ecosystem are decreased until it eventually collapses: 'Every species depends on other species for food and for providing its habitat. Thus, species are connected to each other like branching rows of dominoes. Just as toppling one domino in a row will topple some others, so too the extermination of one species may lead to the loss of others, which may in turn push still others over the brink. [...] Nature consists of so many species, connected to each other in such complex ways, that it's virtually impossible to foresee where the ripple effects from the extinction of any particular species may lead [16].

As a result, the understanding of nature as an organism and the embedding of the human being in it, leads to the conclusion that the entire biosphere claims its share of respect against the encroachments of the people, the share of respect 'that everything deserves that bears his purpose in itself, that means all living beings [17,18].

Holistic forest ethics and Indras net

'Indra's Net' is a powerful metaphor for this discussion. Indra was the God of the universe according to the Vedas (a large body of knowledge texts originating in the ancient Indian subcontinent

and composed in Vedic Sanskrit, which constitute the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism). Indra has an infinite net which contains shiny and translucent gemstones in each of its many nodes. In their cut facets all other gems are reflected, as is the entire network. Indra has infinitely released this net from his sky palace on Mount Sumeru in all 10 directions of heaven so that it encompasses the entire universe. This means that in every appearance, every thing, every being, all other things are present. Part and whole contain and penetrate each other. Nothing in the universe exists which does not have the whole universe within it. If only one thing disappears from the whole, so the whole is not the same as before. Thus, the interconnectedness of all living beings and their social obligation towards each other will be emphasised, and plants are not excluded.

In this holographic reality and cybernetic model, the reality is an extensive net of relationships. The whole of nature is a concrete object of our respect, an infinitely differentiated system including the ecosystem and the higher biosphere. In this context, acting sustainably means taking responsibility for the consequences of our decisions, for everyone else and for nature, in the present and future.

This also means that human beings are responsible for everything, including human beings. My self and my life are not separable from the suffering and happiness of our world, nor from the life and death of plants, trees, animals, the suffering of people, or from the conditions that underlie all. This means recognising global human society as what it is and living what it is: a network of infinite interconnectedness with each other.

Christianity and Buddhism share the common belief that the world is a gift to the people and the Earth is God's cosmic body, so it is a very sensitive organism. Human beings must be assigned to it and listen to it with mindfulness. Thus, human beings can win a new relationship to the world. We should feel that all life and the world belong together, that they are dependent on each other and that we must be reinserted into the net of the living, he must serve this network in charge of all life and the world (Kaupp).

The environmental crisis is caused not only by technical imperfections or political mistakes, it is rather 'an expression of our damaged, unhappy relationship to ourselves, to others and generally to reality altogether' (Litsch). Mindfulness of ourselves, nature and things is therefore a central rule for a good life according to both Christian and Buddhist ethics.

An approximation to it can be found in some statutory provisions, for example, in § 1 of the German Federal Nature Conservation Act. In it, goals of nature conservation and landscape management include [...] nature and landscape have to be protected because of their own value and as a basis for life and health of people in responsibility for future generations.

To return to forest ethics: the realisation of the continuous mixed forestry model would fulfill all the requirements of ethically responsible, sustainable forest management. This centuries-old successful forest management method would ensure the preservation of biodiversity to better address climate change and eventually be able to generate maximum returns from the forest.

On the philosophical-ethical level the model of continuous mixed forestry is universal for all countries with such forests. (Rain forests need their own special arguments and are not included in this model.) The possible mutual agreement of all involved parties for this model would have to be found on the general political-legal level. And finally, on the casuistic level there would be no problem in organizing continuous mixed forestry combined with an effectively working foundation.

Conclusion

The continuous mixed forest model inserts forest management in the natural system cycles of the biosphere and leads to cybernetic self-optimisation of forest culture through the biological 'maturity' of the permanent community of forest living. This economically and ecologically optimal design of economic forests can be understood as the realisation of the biblical mandate to the people, and from the ethical side perspective, to soothe the earth in a responsible and permanent way and to preserve it for future generations.

Thus understood, the term sustainability used by Bode is simultaneously comprehensive and ethically charged. It is a holistic view of creation, and of the relationship between human and nature. If the forest is expected to develop as the continuous model, it means that responsibility for the design of its environment, which is given to humans as decision-makers, is used by them and they are thereby in accordance with ethical value standards to maintain, develop and make the natural environment permanently useful.

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