



## ‘MEANING CRISIS’ IN THE CONTEXT OF ENVIRONMENT: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** There is not any fixed meaning in any concepts in the subjects related to social sciences and humanities. Meaning given for any concept may depend on the context where that concept is constructed and discussed. The idea of ‘crisis of meanings’ therefore is considered as the one of the central point of philosophical analysis of phenomenological methods, Wittgenstein philosophical methods and deconstruction methods. The phenomenon, process and states of being related to environmental studies have been developed within the complex contexts. Similarly, the meanings of the context of environment too have gone into problematic situations. This leads to a dispute over meanings between environmentalist and philosophers within the same school of philosophers and among different schools such as western and eastern thoughts. This has led to cripple both the national and international programs and plans that have been applied to solve environmental problems and conserve the environment. The broad objective of this paper is to inquire the meaning crisis in the context of environment and to locate these issues to a practical and realistic in order to search a solution for the said crisis. Secondary data from literature review was the main source for this study. Technique of conceptual analysis used in the subject of Philosophy was employed to analyse the data. Complexity of the meanings in the concepts of environment can be reduced from this study by introducing universally acceptable meanings. These unique meanings will help to solve burning environmental issues in the contemporary world.

**Key Words:** Meanings Crisis, Environmental, Conservation, Sustainability, Conceptual Analysis.

### 1. Introduction

The Subject of Environment and Environmental Protection has become a crucially important branch in global policymaking lobbies today. This importunacy gets more attention in social and political sphere in the current global political debates as well. Therefore, the discussions of sustainability, environmental conservations and protecting biological diversities become key components of the international policy making endeavours (Barbour 1980)[1]. The mainstream conversationalists seem to use scientific tools (methods) to identify the environmental problems and to develop environmental management structures, the empirical data in this field shows that those identifications of problems and development of management structures

were not depending only on the scientific tools that were being used in this process. Those Data further suggests that the epistemological issues such as ‘knowledge’ and ‘meaning’ in the field of environment are also important components, which should be taken into consideration in the policy making process.

### 2. Objective of the Study

Objective of this study is to examine this ‘meaning crisis’ in the field of environment. Particularly, the study focuses on the meanings that were created through human-natural relationship on the one hand and the knowledge that was created on environmental conservation and sustainability on the other.

## Methodology

Methodologies, which are used in this study, are varied. Those include, (a) library data (b) conceptual analysis (c) contents analysis.

### 3. Research Questions

(a) Whether nature is a “socially constructed” phenomenon or a subjective presentation of objective reality, which exists outside human interpretation? (b) How could we be able to ‘grab’, ‘capture’ knowledge on nature? (c) What are the criteria for making meanings in the field of environment?

### 4. ‘Concept of Environment’ in the History of Philosophy

“Nature” and “Environmental thoughts” in Early Modern Philosophy were mainly related with Western thinkers who developed a ‘critique’ on Medieval Religious thoughts. There were different developments in these critiques by different philosophers. One important development in early Modern period is to “move out” knowledge from authoritative religious ideology. It aims to open and to create a new worldview, which has “human controllability” over their divine powers. This move also raises the basic epistemological questions such as “how we understand ourselves”, “whether human being is an autonomous being”.

Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626) in his book, *Advancement of Learning* (2000 /1605) developed an argument that “the objective of human knowledge should be of practical importance instead of being spiritual engagements”. The important issue that he suggested was to change the then existing understanding on nature and environment and to focus “using the nature” not for itself but for the sake of human beings. Bacon uses a new concept “Philanthropia” (Bacon, 2000: 1605) [2], which means, “love of humanity” to explain to this human centered new worldview.

Bacon argues that the means to overcome the “necessities and miseries of humanity” is to use nature by gaining knowledge of it

through observations and experiences. This helped to form a later developed concept of “anthropocentrism”.

Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650) developed a new understanding on the relationship between mind and matter (Descartes 1981 [1637]). As Bacon, he also questions the religious authority over human rationality. In his famous series of texts under the name of *Meditations*, Descartes outlines the new understanding on the world and Nature. He theorizes that the “nature” as we see it is a “fiction” which is “created” by our mind. So mental substance is the primary force in human understanding by which the material substance is ‘created’. This theory argues that nature (Environment) is mechanical in character. It is a “dead” domain that can be understood using mathematical and mechanical laws. Therefore, Descartes argues that the environment (animals or plants) can be “treated as an instrument to be exploited for human ends and human goals” (Descartes, 1981 [1637]) [3]. This worldview, scientifically backed by Bacon and philosophically by Descartes leads to late – Modern Philosophical and scientific developments of the world.

The Enlightenment project, development of new technology, political settings of nation-state and philosophical foundations of material relationship, which developed new ways of value based on capitalism, were the future results of these early modern epistemological developments. The nature and the way in which the human being deals with the environment completely took a new turn in this ‘new world’.

Immanuel Kant’s intervention into the subject of ethics and epistemology was considered as foundational work of the development of the subject of Environmental Ethics. He raised these issues through his famous outstanding three academic works namely *Critique of Pure Reason* (1788), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1790), *Critique of Judgment* (1790) [5].

Hegel in his *Philosophy of Nature* (1970 [1800]) [6] argues that “nature is more



rational than productive". He identifies that nature is not a mechanical but a rational process. Schopenhauer claimed in his *The World as Will and Representation* (1969 [1844]) [7] that, unlike Hegel or Schelling, the human individuals are less free from the natural determination. He maintains that the human actions like that of other living beings are (animal and Plants) ultimately determined by "will -to - life". More importantly the dialectical method that Hegel develops shows that "the relationship of 'humanity' to 'nature' is to be understood as a totality: the world is what it is as a result of its being lived in and transformed by humanity" (Soper 1986:24) [8].

Modern form of Environmental Ethics and Environmental Philosophy developed in the middle of the twentieth century. It is rooted in sense of crises occurred due to our way of life in the contemporary social and political setting. It alarms of global threats to the very existence of human beings. Since this Environmental problem in modern form relates to the continuation of "human understanding" and "history of ideas", it is more appropriate to examine it from a philosophical base.

### **5. Analytical Philosophical Position of Environment - Positivism**

A Common feature of Analytic Philosophical tradition relates of Modern ages Philosophical foundations. The discussion on the concept of Environment in this tradition therefore is connected to that philosophical foundation. Firstly, Analytic tradition considers the 'world view', which is based on the classical Cartesian dualistic approach on substance. This dualistic form suggests that the world consists of physical and mental substance. Secondly the Analytic tradition depends on anthropocentrism. Assumptions in anthropocentrism is that the consideration of the existence of all other beings is for "the consumption of human beings". Thirdly, the Utilitarianism on economic and ethical grounds is also a theoretical foundation of Analytic tradition. Fifthly this tradition approves the modern scientific method, which developed in the West with the

reductionist approach to warn human beings of the Nature. Creating "criterion" for the role of philosophy and searching for the "meaning" in given statements can be seen as the main function of the tradition of Analytical Philosophy. All aspects that are needed for human beings to lead a prosperous life are covered by this tradition. Culture, language, politics, economy, ethics and so on are the main areas that are taken into consideration by this school. Environment, natural world or the physical world have become one of the key segments in the subject of Analytical Philosophy. Analytical Philosophy has paid attention to four important areas of environment such as (a) Nature of environment, (b) Environmental problems, (c) Environmental conservation, (d) Sustainable use of natural resources. Overall objective of these four areas are either highlighting the importance of environment or to urge people to consider environment before committing any act that leads to destruct the equilibrium of the environment.

### **6. Continental Philosophical Position of Environment - Phenomenology**

Continental Philosophy provides more 'critical' and 'synthesis' arguments on knowledge and the way knowledge is gained. It analyses concepts and the statements in the light of human experience and the context its presents. They argue that the meaning of a philosophical-claim differs from what Analytical tradition suggests. Continental philosophy maintains that knowledge is something which 'constructs' meaning mainly dealing with the 'textual and contextual' reading of a given thing, focusing its context, space and time, language, culture and history. They also developed a critical way to understand how we gain knowledge. This second tradition, Continental Philosophy (Glendinning, 1999) [9] is involved more with 'inclusive' process of making 'meaning' in the knowledge seeking exercises. The Continental thoughts contrast with the Analytical epistemological position on meaning and the meaningful statements. More precisely, Continental philosopher Critchley Simon suggests that

the “philosophical arguments cannot be divorced from the textual and contextual conditions of its historical emergence” (Critchley, 1998) [10]. Irene J Klaver (2005) claims that the subject of environmental ethics developed in the context of Anglo-American philosophical traditions in later twentieth century and “remained mainly based on the analytical tradition while the areas of environmental philosophy mainly deals with the areas that the continental traditions suggested.

In this view analytical philosophy provides a philosophical defense of scientific truth and scientific methods via positivistic epistemology, while Continental philosophy is seen as more skeptical of sciences, especially in so far as they replace the world of everyday life experience with a skein of theoretical abstractions (Irene J Klaver, 2005) [11].

Michael E. Zimmerman observes the significance of the continental philosophical traditions readings on Environmentalism. He argues that within the continental tradition there are two approaches that we could use for ‘theorizing’ environmentalism. In the first approach, he says, “which has had mixed results, involves showing how the work of some leading thinkers – such as Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, or Heidegger – may be read as consistent with environmental practice and theory and the second approach applies to the contemporary continental theories, such as postmodernist theory to environmental practice and theory” (Zimmerman 2005) [12].

## 7. Contemporary Environmental Philosophy

Environmental philosophy in contemporary form developed in late 1960 as a process of (a) understanding the environmental issues (b) as a response concerning diverse queries and questions arise from naturalists, scientists, specialists in technological fields and policy makers (Brennan 2001: 372) [13]. In 1962 Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a book which documented issues and nature of the accumulation of

dangerous pesticides and chemicals in our food processing systems. This influential work raised very fundamentally important issues regarding an academic discipline that should address issues of environment and analyse the nature of such issues in order to find some solutions. This discussion was supported by the Paul Ehrlich works, *Population Bomb* which was published in 1968 (Ehrlich 1968) [14]. This discussion turned into a new area of the subject with the Historian Lynn White Jr. who published an essay on “The Historical Roots of our ecological crisis” *Science* magazine in 1967 [15]. He argued that the Judeo-Christian thought is responsible in forming a worldview, which destructs the environment. Richard Routley claimed that the narrow focusing on humans as only morally valuable thing on the earth is unjustifiable. According to him this narrow focus is a discrimination, which can be called as “human Chauvinism” (Routley 1973: 270) [16].

Philosophers who study more broad areas of the human-natural relationship took the philosophical roots developed on environmental studies. Many different theorists in philosophical and ethical domains enhanced this move. These trends spread between North American and European academia. As Andrew Brennan contends this development “environmental philosophy has explored new criteria of such considerability including being alive (Goodpaster 1978); being a community or holistic entity of a certain kind (Callicott 1980, 1987; Rolston 1994); being an entity or organism that has an end (or telos) in itself (Taylor 1981, 1986, Rolston 1994); being subject of life (Regan 1983); lacking intrinsic function (Brennan 1984); being a product of natural process (Rolston 1989, Elliot 1982); or being naturally autonomous (Katz 1997)” (Brennan 2001: 374) [17]. Beside these developments there are another philosophical intervention by Norwegian thinker Arne Naess who took a different path by introducing the idea of Deep Ecology (Naess 1973) [18].





The discussion on these philosophical ideas later influenced on developing research and publications on the subject, conference in academic level and policy level, and dialogue on environmental ethics. *The Journal of Environmental Ethics*, which was launched in 1977 under the editorship of Eugene Hargrove was instrumental in making new concepts and ideas in Environmental ethics and Philosophy.

In early 1990, the field of environmental philosophy was more clearly established with the new series of research under the leadership of Holmes Rolston iii. An initiative was formed under the name of International Society for Environmental Ethics (ISEE) and International Associations for Environmental Philosophy (IAEP). Philosophical journals such as *Organization and Environment* (1980), *Environmental Politics* (1990), *Environmental Value* (1992) were launched.

## 8. Epistemological Explanations on Environment

Epistemology is a main branch of philosophy, which focuses on the “area of knowledge” and on “how human beings acquires knowledge” (Russell). This section in philosophy is also called ‘theory of knowledge’. Therefore discussing the nature of knowledge, and the ways that human beings acquire that knowledge is vital in understanding the world. Hence, it is important to discuss epistemological roots in the Nature and Environment. Such a discussion helps to examine the human-nature relationship by elaborating questions like “how we create our epistemic system on the nature” and “what is the way that we value the non human substances in the environment”. Even though, Epistemology mainly deals with areas of defining knowledge and outlining the ways and means how we gain that knowledge, in the history of philosophy, it shows that this section of philosophy also engages in developing the ‘meaning criteria’ for logical thinking and the truths. Further, it defines philosophical concepts related to meanings and application of those in the historical contexts that are used for justifying the

knowledge. The broad objective of this paragraph therefore, is to discuss the Epistemological Explanations on Environment and to see the relationship between human epistemic process and the nature. Popular epistemological inquiries in environment can be formed as follows;

- (a) Meaning of the concept of environment
- (b) Crisis of the Meanings in the context of environment
- (c) Order of things in the modern world
- (d) Environmental crisis:
- (e) Epistemological understanding Environmental Ethics.

### 8.1 Meaning of the Concept of Environment

There are different meanings, which have been used to explain the concept of environment by different thinkers in the history of philosophy. Searching the ‘meaning’ for the concept of environment therefore is one of the main topics in the epistemological discussion too. This background paves the way to emerge different meanings for the said concept. Among them “the nature as totality”, “Dualistic World”, ‘Anthropocentric Ideology’ and “Bacon's Scientific Methods” are widely discussed meanings.

The concept of “the nature as totality” is based on the answers for the questions such as whether the term “environment” represents human + non-human entity as a whole or whether it represents only the non-human section of the world leaving the ‘human factor’ out of this domain. However, the central discussion of the concept of “the nature as totality” is to discuss the factor as to how to place “the human being” into environmental totality or “the natural whole”. On the other hand this concept argues whether, the human being and environment are in the same domain that is called environment or not. The answer for these questions relates to the concept of Cartesian Dualism and later developed concept of anthropocentrism, which led to industrialization and market economy.



This theoretical background helps to create a new social meaning given to the natural environment based on human centric principle, which is called “Anthropocentric World view”. This novel meaning leads to “reduce” human being to a super level in the hierarchy of the world. The development of this kind directs us to consider the environment as an entity, which is “isolated” from the human. This imagination is central and can be identified as one of the main epistemological bases to create another meaning for the environment.

Another important issue with regard to the meaning of environment is to inquire whether the “value” in environment is intrinsic or instrumental (conditional). It means to examine whether the environment has intrinsic “value in its own or whether the value is being conditional to the human interest. The issue of “intrinsic value of environment” versus “human centered value on environment” is a main debate in Environmental Ethics. According to some critics deviating the environment into commodities, which have just an “exchange value”, is the logical result of human centered value system on environment. This subversive attitude towards the environment and taking it as a “dead” material domain under the human’s authority is central in the discussion in environmental philosophy. The meaning given to the concept of environment based on this value argument has long a history in the philosophical debates.

After introducing the “Bacon’s Scientific Methods” into the epistemological world, the picture of science has been changed significantly. According to Bacon, the observational based understanding on the world develops a ‘new epistemological universe’ which has two important features: (a) Human sense as a means to gather knowledge (b) Physical environment as the base for such knowledge.

When taken into account the above two factors, knowledge should only be developed with the help of human sense

and that sense should be based only on the physical environment.

After popularizing the “Bacon’s Scientific Methods” among philosophers another meaning was given to the concept of environment. According to that, the environment is not a thing that can be explained through the metaphysical worldview, yet it is a physical source and a base for sensational foundation for experiment. This interpretation on environment led to consider that the environment is of source for human consumption. Descartes and Bacon’s new interpretations in philosophy develop a new meaning for knowledge. Knowledge in the first ground is an enterprise based on mental capacity of the human beings and in the second ground, that mental capacity of human being should engage with the human body, sensible to observe the world for creating ‘observable knowledge’.

The epistemological base for understanding the environment in later philosophy was based on these theoretical settings. All these views of Descartes and Bacon’s allow creating a new meaning for the concept of environment.

## 8.2 “Crisis of Meanings” in the Context of Environment

“Crisis of Meanings” refers in this study for discussing the different meanings given to one incident of things. Sometimes, different groups of people or within the different contexts they can give different interpretations for a single incident or thing. This background or “crisis of meanings” in general creates problems among philosophers and among general public when understanding the social and environmental phenomena and issues.

It is a widely accepted fact that, there is not any fixed meaning for any concepts in the subjects related to social sciences and humanities. However, when it comes to the context of environment and discussion of the environment, there are two positions in creating meanings, which can be identified. They are (a) Universalistic meanings of

environment (b) Contextual meanings of environment.

'Universalistic meaning' of environment can be identified in the Positivistic Philosophy in Analytic Tradition and 'contextual meanings' of environment can be traced to the Phenomenological and Deconstructive methods in Continental Philosophy.

#### *Universalistic Meanings in Environment*

The "Meaning" has become the important area of study in the Western Philosophy particularly within the Contemporary Analytical Philosophy in 20th century. Positivistic Philosophers in Analytical traditions who developed the "meaning criterion" for searching knowledge claim that the meaning would develop within the domain of "language". Further, they argue that language represents the "reality". According to the Analytical traditions, meaning of given things can be objectified and established with the physical domain. Fixed meanings for anything in the world were given by this tradition. Such trends of making meaning pave the way to emerge universal meaning related to socio-economic and environmental issues. This position helps to create universalistic meanings in the context of environment. Therefore, universally accepted meanings were developed related to environment and environmental issues such as, Defining environmental crisis, Identifying the root causes of environmental problems, Developing strategies for environmental conservations, Designing mitigation measures for environmental problems and Formulating environmental management tools.

#### *Contextual Meanings of Environment*

Contextual meanings of environment are centred within the several traditions of the Contemporary Continental Philosophy. It mainly argues against the epistemological foundation of Contemporary Analytical Philosophy. Meanings, according to the Continental Philosophy are based on the context. Generally, contexts vary temporally and spatially. Therefore, the meanings in the discussions of the traditions of the

Continental Philosophy also vary accordingly. For example, Phenomenological philosophy suggests that meaning is "intentional" into the given situation. Therefore, phenomenologists argue that the universalistic interpretations for any given meaning would not match with the respective "meaning" given by the Analytical Traditions.

The phenomenon, process and states of being related to the studies of environment have been developed within complex contexts. Similarly, the meanings of the context of environment too have gone into a problematic situation. This leads to a crisis between environmentalists and philosophers within same school of philosophers and among different schools such as Contemporary Continental Philosophy and Contemporary Analytical Philosophy. Therefore, it is difficult to find fixed or unique definitions or meaning for any technical terms or concepts that are discussed within the subject of environment. However, the Environmental Philosophers claim that it is a fundamental requirement to use fixed definitions to solve environmental problems and conserve the environment within the given context.

### **8.3 "Order of things" in the Modern World**

Philosophers who discuss on modernity and the modern culture had paid attention to the foundation of the modernity. Main feature of this development was to search a systematic arrangement to keep "things in order". That means, the modern philosophers argued that there is a logical sequence for anything to happen, exist or emerge. This is common for any phenomenon in natural or artificial world, physical or metaphysical world and living and nonliving things that exists on earth. This argument, which relates to the rational thinking and rationalization process, means the concept of the order of the things in modernity has the direct relationship with the history of ideas and social structure of power. However, the simple meaning of the concept of "order or things" is identifying the structure of social formation of

modernization projects. For instance, relationship between man and environment, which is described in the concept of order of things, where “nature” is considered as a *passive agent* where the “human being” is identified as an *active agent*.

Michael Foucault in his ground breaking work *Order of Things* (1966) [19] argues that knowledge is not “absolute” as Analytical Philosophy suggests and it is “contextual” which mainly includes the “observers interventions in to the observation”. According to Foucault there is a clear brake in the theory of knowledge in the sixteenth century between the knowledge of Classical Ages and modernity. As a result of this division, he argues that there are three areas of knowledge that we could identify in the history of ideas of human being. Those are (a) linguistic (b) economic and (c) biological areas of knowledge. These three areas have contributed to the development of modernity and the modern world that we experience today. The biological areas of knowledge in modernity, Foucault interprets, directly relate to the discussion of environmental domains. The knowledge which dominates the modern world putting ‘things in order’ by producing hierarchical structure where the economical and used values of things get priorities and the rest (including resources and beings in the environment) is treated as secondary stages.

## 9. Conclusion

With the conceptual and historical examination of the evolutionary process of the ‘idea of environment’, this study suggests the importance of understanding the ‘meaning crisis in context of the environment’ is more vital in policy making endures. While dispatching the ‘structural and phenomenological settings of our explanations and understandings of the environment, the study argues for a deconstructive methodical intervention into the existing debate in environment in general and environmental management in particular.

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