

STERBA ON RECONCILING ANTHROPOCENTRIC WITH NON-ANTHROPOCENTRIC ETHICS

JAGAT PAL

There is a controversy in contemporary environmental ethics between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric ethicists. Anthropocentric ethicists hold the view that the members of all species are not equal. Human beings are superior to the members of all other species. Non-anthropocentric ethicists do not subscribe to this view. According to them, the members of all species are equal. Human beings are not superior to the members of all other species. Sterba James P. has tried to reconcile both the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric views of environmental ethics in his essay entitled "Reconciling Anthropocentric and Non-anthropocentric Environmental Ethics"¹ by formulating three basic principles which he calls the principles of environmental justice. He claims that all his three principles taken together strike the right balance between concerns of human welfare and the welfare of non-human nature. His three formulated principles are

(1) *A Principle of Human Defense* : Actions that defend oneself and other human beings against harmful aggression are permissible even when they necessitate killing or harming individual animals or plants or even destroying whole species or ecosystems.

(2) *A Principle of Human Preservation*: Actions that are necessary for meeting one's basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings are permissible even when they require aggressing against the basic needs of individual animals and plants, or even of whole species or ecosystems.

(3) *A Principle of Disproportionality* : Actions that meet non-basic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against

the basic needs of individual animals and plants or of whole species or ecosystems.

The purpose of this paper is to show through analysis that Sterba has not succeeded in reconciling of both the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric views of environmental ethics because his all three principles do not strike the right balance even when we take them together between concerns of human welfare and the welfare of non-human nature as he claims because of the following reasons.

The first two principles, namely, the Principle of Human Defense and the Principle of Human Preservation hold good only when it is logically assumed that the defense and preservation of human lives are morally more valuable than the defense and preservation of non-human lives regardless of their differences. The reason is simple because once we logically assume that the defense and preservation of human live are morally more valuable than the defense and preservation of non-human lives regardless of their differences, it automatically follows from this that whenever there is a conflict between them, the defense and preservation of human lives always logically supersede or outweigh the defense and preservation of non-human lives. And this Sterba cannot logically assume because assuming this would amount to mean denying that all species are equal. And to say this amounts to mean saying that human beings are superior to the members of all other species. But since the very fact that Sterba assumes that all lives are equal², he cannot logically say that the defense and preservation of human lives always supersede or outweigh the defense and preservation of non-human lives when there is a conflict between them without weighing their relative moral values. But since he says it, therefore his both the principles, that is, the Principle of Human Defense and the Principle of Human Preservation cannot be said to be logically consistent with the general moral principle of species equality.

Sterba claims that the principle of species equality does not invalidate the Principle of Human Defense and the Principle of Human Preservation because the principle of species equality does allow for human preference in the same way as the principle of human equality allows for self preference³. But his this line of argument, I think, does not hold much water simply because it always begs the question : what are those

characteristics which make human defense and preservation of lives morally more valuable than the defense and preservation of non-human lives? This question Sterba cannot brush aside just by saying that the defense and preservation of human lives are morally more valuable simply because they are the lives of human beings. If he says so, it would amount to saying that he does not accept that all species are equal which he assumes. Not only this, it would also amount to assuming that human lives by virtue of being lives of human beings always morally supersede non-human lives in all circumstances whenever there is a conflict between them regardless of their basic needs. And this Sterba cannot logically assume even if he wishes because assuming this would amount to rejecting the Principle of Disproportionality which he advocates in order to reconcile both the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric views of environmental ethics.

In fact, when Sterba says that all species are equal, he does not say on the ground of this because they have same traits of character. He rather says that all species do not have same traits of character. They have distinctive traits of character which the members of other species lack⁴. Since he says that all species do not have same traits of character, therefore the distinctive traits of human character such as rationality and moral agency cannot be used as a logical ground to justify that human lives are morally more valuable than the lives of non-human nature. The reason is simple because if we accept that the defense and preservation of human lives are morally more valuable than the defense and preservation of non-human lives on the ground of this because human lives have distinctive traits of character which non-human lives essentially lack, then we also will have to admit on the same ground that non-human lives are morally more valuable than human lives because they also do possess the distinctive traits of character of their own which human beings essentially lack. We cannot say that the defense and preservation of human lives are morally more valuable than the defense and preservation of non-human lives because they have the distinctive traits of character but the defense and preservation of non-human lives are not morally more valuable than the defense and preservation of human lives even though they have the distinctive traits of character of their own because to say this amounts to making a self-contradictory statement. The reason is that because what

constitutes a good ground in one case to say that the defense and preservation of human lives are morally more valuable than the defense and preservation of non-human lives also constitutes at the same time a good ground in another case to say that the defense and preservation of non-human lives are morally more valuable than the defense and preservation of human lives unless we logically assume that the distinctive traits of human beings are morally more valuable than the distinctive traits of non-human beings on an a priori ground which Sterba cannot assume even if he wishes. Because assuming this amounts to denying the principle of species equality. And if he denies the principle of species equality, he cannot claim that the principle of species equality does allow for human preference in the same way as the principle of human equality allows for self preference as he does. He cannot logically accept both the theses in the same breath because acceptance of one logically prevents him from accepting of another. So if he says that the distinctive traits of human beings make human lives morally more valuable than the distinctive traits of non-human lives, then he will have to admit that all species are not morally equal. And if he admits that all species are not morally equal, then the quest of his reconciling of both the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric views of environmental ethics simply does not arise at all. His whole effort is futile. Not only this, if all species is not equal and human beings are superior to the members of other species, then treating of them equally would also amount to doing some injustice against human beings. And to do so is not only irrational but also is highly immoral because the principle of moral equality demands that equals must be treated equally and unequal differently.

Furthermore, if all species have life and life as such is considered to be something intrinsically valuable, then all lives must get same treatment no matter what they are simply because they have intrinsic value of life. If this be so, then to give preferential treatment to the defense and preservation of human lives over the lives of non-humans would amount to favoring them over non-humans even though they have the same intrinsic moral value of life which human beings have. And to do this is to do injustice against the members of non-human species which any consistent theory of morality cannot logically allow. But to say all this, however, does not

amount to saying that the members of all species cannot be treated differently even when they have morally relevant differences between them. If there are morally relevant differences between them, surely they cannot be treated in the same way. We have to treat them differently. If someone does not do it, he or she is moral fanatic and moral fanaticism is not praiseworthy. The reason is simple because morally relevant differences do constitute good ground to say that they do not belong to the same logical type. If this be the case, then the principle of species equality does not logically rule out preferential treatment when there are morally relevant differences between them. So if human beings are given preferential treatment over non-human beings, it must be done on a morally justified ground. It should not be done on an arbitrary ground. And this is possible only when the defense and preservation of human lives possess relatively moral overriding features and not otherwise. If this be the case, then whenever there is a conflict between the defense and preservation of human lives and non-human lives, we must defend and preserve only those lives which have moral overriding features no matter whose lives they are for to be a consistent moralist. The reason is that because moral overriding features logically restrict the permissibility of doing certain action to the members of those who belong to the category of overridden.

If it is said that all lives although are intrinsically valuable but are not equally valuable, then there has to be some criterion (or criteria) by means of which one can distinguish and decide which life is to be preferred to which when there is a conflict between the two lives. In other words, we always need some criterion (or criteria) to account for the preferential treatment to the members of one category over the members of another category. The criterion of gradation of value surely cannot be traced in the notion of intrinsic value itself because there is nothing in the notion of intrinsic value on the basis of which one can do moral gradation between two different kinds of life when all lives are considered to be intrinsically valuable regardless of their specific distinctive traits of character. Even if we admit for the sake of argument that the notion of intrinsic value does admit the gradation of value, still we need some criterion to assess and evaluate their degrees of intrinsic value. And whatever the criterion we may choose to assess and justify their different degrees of intrinsic value,

we must apply it consistently to all cases which fall under the domain of its jurisdiction. If their degree of difference of value does not consist in the notion of intrinsic value of life itself but consists in their basic needs of life, even then we need some criterion to assess and justify the degrees of value of their basic needs of life. In fact, we cannot say it that the criterion of gradation of value of life consists in the notion of basic needs of life itself because there is nothing in the notion of basic needs of life on the basis of which we can claim that human basic needs of life always morally supersede the basic needs of non-human life whenever there is a conflict between them. For example, if the preservation of life is considered to be one of the basic needs of all species, then it is a basic need of all species no matter whether they are human species or non-human species. If this line of my argument is valid, then surely we cannot do any moral gradation of the values of their lives just by referring to the notion of the basic needs of life. We will have to find out the criterion of moral gradation of the values of their lives outside the very notion of the basic needs of their lives. Unfortunately, Sterba nowhere in his whole article mentions any criterion of moral gradation by which we can judge and decide whose basic needs are to be preferred to who when there is a conflict between human and non-human basic needs of life.

No doubt, Sterba is right when he says that all species are equal does allow to treat them differently in the same way as all humans are equal allows to treat them differently⁵. But he forgets that it does allow only when there are morally relevant differences between them and not otherwise. The reason is that because morally relevant differences do constitute good ground to treat them differently. That is why in such cases moral agents cannot be held to be guilty of doing something against the spirit of the principle of moral equality because whenever they do it, they always do it on some moral good grounds which justify their actions. It goes against the spirit of the general principle of moral equality only when there are no morally relevant differences between them and not otherwise. So if the basic needs of all species are equally significant from the moral point of view because of being life-preserving basic needs, then their basic needs affected by an action are to be taken into account and given the same weightage without any prejudice irrespective of whose needs they

are. We cannot say that the basic needs of human beings are morally more important than the basic needs of non-human beings on the ground of this because they are the basic needs of human beings unless we further assume that human basic needs themselves possess relatively more moral values than the basic needs of non-human beings. In other words, unless we logically assume that human basic needs themselves possess moral overriding features, we cannot say that they have more moral values than the basic needs of non-human beings and moral overriding features cannot be determined in advance independent of the particular environmental conditions of species in which they live. The reason is that because moral overriding features are relative features of morality. What constitutes moral overriding feature in one particular condition of environment may or may not constitute moral overriding feature in another particular condition of environment. If this is true, then self-regarding basic needs may or may not morally override the basic needs of others. This argument holds good not only in the domain of human beings but also in the domain of whole biotic communities. If whatever I have said so far is correct, then from this it is quite evident that the Principle of Human Defense and the Principle of Human Preservation cannot be said to be valid Principles of environmental justice at all as Sterba says because they fail to strike the right balance between concerns of human welfare and the welfare of non-human nature.

Sterba cannot say to avoid the problem that although all species are equal but humans are more equal than non-humans. If he says so, it would amount to making a self-contradictory statement because the notions of equality and more equality are not mutually compatible notions. In fact, his both the principles, that are, the Principle of Human Defense and the Principle of Human Preservation involve human bias. If human beings consume oxygen and release carbondioxide which plants consume and plants release oxygen which human beings consume without which they cannot survive at all, then to say that actions that are necessary for meeting the basic needs of human beings are permissible even when they require aggressing against the whole species of plant is not a logically viable principle at all because it is self-defeating. It defeats the fulfillment of even the basic needs of human beings. In other words, it is logically impossible to act on both the principles, that is, the Principle of Human Defense and the

Principle of Human Preservation without violating anyone of them. The Principle of Disproportionality, no doubt, can be said to be a valid principle of environmental justice simply because the basic needs of life always morally override the non-basic needs of life when there is a conflict between the two irrespective of whose needs they are. But when we take this principle along with other two principles which Sterba advocates to reconcile both the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric views of environmental ethics, we find that they fail to strike the right balance between concerns of human welfare and the welfare of non-human nature as he claims. Even if we assume for the sake of argument that the members of all biotic communities do not have lives of equal value, still from this it does not follow that the defense and preservation of human lives are always morally more valuable than the defense and preservation of non-human lives. The reason is that because some human lives do have less value than non-human lives. For example, an infant born baby without a brain surely cannot be said to have the same value of life which a well trained and healthy adult tiger does have. If this be the case, then surely the lives of some animals have a greater value than the lives of some human beings. If this line of argument of mine is valid, then to say that all the three principles taken together strike the right balance between concerns of human welfare and the welfare of non-human nature is absolutely wrong. The reason is that because what justifies to say that the life of an infant born baby without brain falls drastically below the quality of life of normal (adult) human life also justifies to say that some human lives fall drastically below the quality of life of normal (adult) animal life. We cannot say that it justifies in one case but does not justify in another case unless we commit the fallacy of inconsistency because what constitutes a good reason in one case also constitutes a good reason in another case since the cases are exactly alike.

In fact, Sterba's both the principles, the Principle of Human Defense and the Principle of Human Preservation, it can be said very well that they are human-centric principles. They are not eco-centric principles at all because they favor the defense and preservation of human lives over the lives of non-human species. This Sterba himself admits because he says that "if we were to prefer consistently the basic needs of the members of other species whenever those needs conflicted with our own (or even if

we do so half the time), given the characteristic behavior of the members of other species, we would soon be facing extinction, and fortunately, we have no reason to think that we are morally required to bring about our own extinction. For these reasons, the degree of preference for our own species found in the above Principle of Human Preservation is justified even if we were to adopt a non-anthropocentric perspective"⁶. So if the Principle of Human Defense and the Principle of Human Preservation are formulated keeping in view the interest of one's own species, that is, human species at the cost of the interest of non-human species or ecosystems, then how can Sterba say that they strike the right balance between concerns of human welfare and the welfare of non-human nature? But since the very fact that he says it, therefore his account of environmental ethics cannot be said to be a rational account at all. Because any rational account of environmental ethics always demands that all species must be treated in the same way unless they are relevantly different, that is, different in ways that morally justify treating them differently. And this demand Sterba's account of environmental ethics does not fulfill because he has failed to maintain consistency by not following the same criterion in reconciling of both the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric views of environmental ethics. His whole analysis, therefore, could be said very well to be motivated by human biases.

In view of the above mentioned arguments we can, thus, say that Sterba has failed to reconcile both the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric views of environmental ethics. His all three formulated principles are not the principles of environmental justice at all. They are human-interest preserving principles.

NOTES

1. *Ethics In Practice : An Anthology* Edited by Hugh LaFollette, Blackwell Publishers Limited, 1997, p. 64.
2. *Ibid.* P. 648.
3. *Ibid.* P. 646.

4. *Ibid.* P. 644.
5. *Ibid.* P. 648.
6. *Ibid.* P. 647.