Environmental philosophy is the systematic study of world-views, theories and principles related to human interactions with the natural environment as to their contexts and consequences. And as environmental ethics, it studies the value and moral status of the environment and its non-human contents. It forms a vast area for the guidance of individuals, corporations and governments in determining the principles affecting their policies, lifestyles and actions across the entire range of environmental issues. It is equally important for the appraisal of such actions, lifestyles and policies. We sometimes forget that we are not independent, lone existences on this planet. We live among a multitude of animals, plants and natural, inanimate objects. Our interaction with the non-human forms of life and with the environment in general constitutes a particular domain of morality that raises a number of ethical problems with which environmental philosophy and ethics is concerned.

Present-day environmental crisis has forced us to rethink our traditional attitude towards the environment or the nature at large. We are deeply concerned
with frequent changes in the climate and with the increasing global warming. To say, environmental issues, like the depletion of ozone layer, loss of biodiversity, extinction of species, global warming, population pressure, poverty, etc. are haunting the present-day world of thought. Scientists and technologists, economists and sociologists—all contribute their knowledge and energy in order to overcome this crisis. Philosophers, too, have their role to play, have their duties to serve. They are the suitable persons in framing adequate world-view through which these problems are to be looked at and solutions sought for.

Contemporary environmental philosophers point to speciesist anthropocentrism, which is embedded in our traditional attitude towards nature, and contend that our traditional anthropocentric attitude is the root-cause of this crisis. Present-day environmental ethics advocates for moral extensionism, speaks of biospheric egalitarianism (at least ‘in principle’), of rights of species, of ecosystems, and of future generations. As a matter-of-fact, contemporary environmental philosophy has developed by critiquing moral anthropocentrism. As based on this problematic outlook, many human practices, like cruelty to animals, destruction of natural habitats, endangering species, and disturbing ecosystemic balances, are now being criticised.
Moral speciesism or human chauvinism, with narrowness of vision, comparable to sexual, racial or national chauvinism, appears to be another name for anthropocentrism. Present-day environmental thinkers tend to rise above this traditional moral view-point, and this means, among other things, the admission of moral values for non-humans and interacting with them accordingly. This tendency has been steeped up by contemporary scientific, ecological findings, which undermine man’s narcissism as the centre of the universe, showing them instead a product of ongoing natural evolutionary process, having considerable affinities with other creatures, and to have vulnerable dependence on ecological conditions of natural existence. According to contemporary ecology, the human species occupies no special position on this planet, and this judgement naturally calls into question men’s prerogative to use non-human nature as ‘resources’ in whatever way they like. This also draws widespread moral intuition that nature, both with its biotic and the abiotic parts, has value in itself, that is, it has intrinsic or inherent value, irrespective of its usefulness to any other species, say, to the human race.

In this thesis of mine entitled *Anthropocentrism: A Study in Environmental Philosophy* we like to thoroughly review and scrutinize anthropocentrism. To be specific, our aim and objective is to review our traditional (speciesist) anthropocentric nature-view which is allegedly responsible for the present environmental crisis. But such a scrutiny will remain incomplete unless we take
into account other related normative theories. Anyhow, as men of philosophy, we
also like to suggest or mould an adequate nature-view. This will add something
new to the present corpus of knowledge and it will, expectedly, inspire us to get rid
of our speciesist mindset in our endeavour to overcome the imminent ecological
disaster.

A brief survey of literature on contemporary environmental philosophy
reveals that there are more or less three leading theories in this field. These are
Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism and Ecocentrism. (As Ecofeminism is a critical
discourse and as the thrust of my thesis is limited, we shall not give it separate
treatment here, although we refer to it as and when necessary.) Anyhow,
anthropocentrism is that point of view which promotes human interests even at the
expense of basic interests of members of other non-human species, or of the
environment in general. A way to overcome this anthropocentrism is the
recognition of moral value of life as such.

As a matter-of-fact, the progress of moral thinking may be depicted in the
form of an ‘expanding circle’. We know that moral obligation was initially
recognized toward a narrowly circumscribed group, later its scope was widened to
include more and more groups of beings within it. From a position that
acknowledged moral obligation only towards other male members of the same
tribe, the circle has gradually spread out to take in slaves, members of other tribes, women and children. From the 20th century onwards, proposals are gradually being made to include animals, plants, etc. in its fold. Recognition of moral status to sentient living beings and things is seen as a step forward in the history of moral development.

This expansion bid has resulted in Biocentrism, which promises to widen the scope of moral concern to include not only human beings but all living entities, including non-human animals, plants, etc. Paul Taylor, who is the champion of this biocentric thought, claims that all living things have intrinsic or inherent value and so they all merit moral respect. Respect for nature thus signifies a life-centered world-view of environmental philosophy. Sentientism, first mooted by Jeremy Bentham, and later elaborated by the animal ethicists, like Peter Singer, is a variant of biocentrism. If a being suffers, there can be no justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration, and, indeed, to count it equally with like suffering of any other being.

The admission of inherent value of ecosystems and other holistic entities, in addition to admitting moral value to the living individuals, is another antidote to anthropocentrism. This has culminated in Ecocentricism that casts the ethical net more widely, extending moral consideration to collective entities, like species,
habitats and ecosystemic balances as well. Ecocentrism is that holistic environmental theory, according to which not only living beings, but the whole ecosystem, including the abiotic part of nature, is worthy of moral consideration. The supporters of ecocentrism tend to resist the biocentrist’s exclusive concern for individual living organisms. Ecocentrism maintains that an adequate eco-ethics must take into account our relations with ecological systems, processes, along with non-living natural objects. The environmentalists who subscribe to ecocentrism contend that these things have inherent, and not mere instrumental, value. And so they owe a direct moral obligation to us.

All these mean that speciesist anthropocentrism enjoys a minority position in present-day environmentalism. We think that the view and attitude of anthropocentrism should be properly evaluated. As anthropocentrism was the dominant world-view, at least in the West, till the first half of 20th century, it stands in need of proper understanding and scrutiny. We are tempted to view the natural environment from our own human perspective. We have been habituated to think that it is human interests that really count in moral consideration. Philosophers have shown that this speciesist world-view of anthropocentrism has been the underlying cause of present-day environmental crisis. Sufficient works on integrated nature are due in this field. Hence, we feel it urgent to minutely review what exactly is objectionable in this anthropocentric worldview and moral attitude,
and what is not. In our conclusion we like to emphasize that if we want to overcome the defects of anthropocentrism, along with the duality of man and nature, we have to embrace some form of spiritualism where all duality would get dissolved in cosmic Self-realization. This is also necessary in view of the fact that mere admission of inherent or intrinsic value does not by itself guarantee our obligation to the non-human communities.

We proceed with this hypothesis that the lack of adequate understanding of our relation to the environment is at the root of all eco-problem. A minimum level of anthropocentrism is welcome, but the speciesism embedded in anthropocentrism is really problematic. We wish to confirm this by making a thorough scrutiny of leading contemporary theories and norms of environmental philosophy in general and anthropocentrism in particular.

We want to evaluate anthropocentrism, but we cannot accomplish it unless and until we take into account other normative environmental theories, like biocentrism, ecocentrism, etc. We think, in order to overcome the defects of anthropocentrism, along with the duality of man and nature, it is imperative to embrace some sort of eco-spiritualism.

We shall use different books, anthologies, journals and internet materials as our data base. Our study is explorative-cum-evaluative, and we shall follow the
qualitative research methodology, and follow the descriptive as well as interpretive methods. In preparing Bibliography we shall follow MLA format in general.

The chapters of the thesis are as follows:

Chapter-I: Genesis of Contemporary Environmental Philosophy

Chapter-II: Anthropocentrism

Chapter-III: Biocentrism

Chapter-IV: Ecocentrism

Chapter-V: Critique of Anthropocentrism

Conclusion

Our thesis begins with Chapter-I, which is an exposition of the genesis of contemporary environmental ethics and philosophy, both from the historical and thematic points of view. Historically considered, the questioning and rethinking of our relationship with the natural environment over the last sixty years reflected an already wide-spread perception in the 1960s. The initial works that drew our attention to a sense of crisis also include Rachel Carson's Silent Spring (1963) and Leopold's A Sand County Almanac (1949). Anyhow, thematically considered, we find more or less three types of environmental theories: Anthropocentrism,
Biocentrism, and Ecocentrism. But most environmental philosophers contend that a genuine eco-ethics is possible only when we can overcome speciesist anthropocentrism.

In Chapter-II we take Anthropocentrism as our topic of discussion. In environmental philosophy anthropocentrism, as already stated, stands for the traditional attitudes, values or practices which promote human interests, even at the expense of the basic, crucial needs and interests of other species or the nature in general. According to this view-point, the non-human nature acquires value in so far as it serves human purposes. Anthropocentrism thus makes ethics solely a human enterprise. There are various crucial implications of this anthropocentric view, which strongly influence the ways in which humans interpret their relationships with other species and ecosystems. We shall discuss all these with special reference to the *Genesis* of the *Bible* and its different interpretations. Although we are here concerned directly with moral anthropocentrism, we like to add a brief discussion on different other versions, like ontological anthropocentrism, epistemological anthropocentrism, etc. If we put the issue of development of modern anthropocentrism in thematic terms, we would find some characteristic strands of thought facilitating such a view-point. We shall also account for all such strands of thought which have also been instrumental in integrating anthropocentricity.
Chapter-III will be concerned with Biocentrism, a step forward beyond anthropocentrism. Biocentrism considers all living beings as having moral value and humans to be one among innumerable species of organisms that live on the earth. While anthropocentrism argues in favour of a world-view centering solely on humans and recognizes value only in human beings, biocentrism regards every living being on this planet as having intrinsic or inherent value. This latter view asserts that we have an obligation to the whole biotic community. This obligation is direct, not merely indirect obligation to the living beings via our obligation to humans.

Paul Taylor is the champion of this biocentric view of nature, to whom we owe for its classical version. Taylor made a comprehensive attempt to articulate and defend a biocentric position in the 1980’s. But the first life-centered concern in Western ethics is found, perhaps, in Albert Schweitzer’s Civilization and Ethics published in 1923. In addition to Paul Taylor’s view, we shall discuss the views of Albert Schweitzer, Robin Attfield, and Christopher Stone, though briefly.

Anyhow, the extension of the moral principle of equality towards non-human beings, especially to the relatively higher, sentient ones, was widely debated at the end of the 1970s. Some moral philosophers refer to the notion of rights and argued that animals, like humans, have certain basic rights, which we should take into
consideration. Some others, although refrain themselves from directly using the notion of rights, speak of animal liberation and animal welfare. All these have given rise to Sentientism, an off-shoot of Biocentrism, with emphasis on animal issues than the environmental ones. There are, of course, disputes about whether the ethics of animal liberation is consistent with environmental ethics. Anyhow, we shall add a discussion on sentientism in this chapter.

Chapter-IV will be on Ecocentrism. Biocentrism gives us an account of environmental ethics, according to which our ethical obligations should extend only to individual living beings. But the non-living part of nature or the abiotic features of the non-human world is equally vital for the life and well-being of living beings. Contemporary ecological findings have clearly illustrated that the division of the biotic and the abiotic is merely an abstraction. As such, the whole nature, comprising both the biotic and the abiotic parts, is to be recognised as valuable. This recognition has finally led us to the position of ecocentrism, according to which not only living beings, but the whole universe, including the abiotic part of nature, is worthy of moral consideration.

An early version of the western ecocentric view we find in Aldo Leopold’s ‘Land Ethic’. Aldo Leopold is an American forester who is regarded as father of ecocentric environmental philosophy. We shall first discuss the views of Leopold’s
Land Ethic in this chapter. Then, we like to take a synoptic view of the *Gaia* theory. According to Lovelock’s Gaia theory, the Earth's atmospheric condition is kept at a dynamically steady state by the presence of life. The whole world is regarded as a Superorganism. We also like to have a synoptic view of Holmes Rolston-III, which is sometimes referred to as Systematic Holism. In the later part we like to elucidate Arne Naess’s ecocentric philosophy of Deep Ecology. It consciously propagates a radical philosophy of nature, and simultaneously, introduces a new movement of environmental activism under the umbrella of ‘Deep Ecology Platform’. Naess identifies two different strands in contemporary environmental thought and movement. One he calls ‘shallow ecology’ and the other ‘Deep Ecology’. Naess’s Deep Ecology is perhaps the most popular form of contemporary ecocentrism. Deep Ecology is a radical and holistic environmental theory that brings thinking, feeling, spirituality and action together in defusing imminent eco-catastrophe. As the name ‘Deep Ecology’ suggests, it goes beyond speciesist anthropocentrism.

We shall also raise the issue that with a paradigm shift of ecology from the notion of nature as static equilibrium to the notion of nature as dynamic flux, Leopold’s proposal has been criticised as being outdated. Again, some thinkers, mainly the animal liberationists, have condemned the Land Ethic’s disregard for
the rights of the individuals as ‘environmental fascism’. We shall address all these issues.

In Chapter-V we shall take up the main thrust of this thesis, and that is a thorough scrutiny of anthropocentrism. We will argue that the blunt, unqualified criticism of anthropocentrism is not only conceptually unsatisfactory, it may also be counterproductive in practice. Again, what is unavoidable about anthropocentrism is precisely what makes ethics possible at all. It is a basic feature of the logic of obligation: if an ethics is a guide to action, and if a particular ethics requires an agent to take others’ ends into account for the purposes of action, then they become just that – the agent’s ends. This is a non-contingent but substantive limitation on any attempt to build a completely non-anthropocentric ethics. Values are always the values of the valuer, and as such, as long as the class of valuers includes human beings, human values are ineliminable. This ineliminable aspect is nothing wrong. We shall also explore what exactly is wrong with moral anthropocentrism. It should first be noted that what is problematic with anthropocentrism in environmental ethics is a concern with human interests to the exclusion, or at the expense of interests of other species of the biosphere. And the various illegitimate ways of giving preference to human interests are adequately captured by the terms ‘speciesism’ and ‘human chauvinism’. This is what is really wrong in anthropocentric environmentalism.
We like to emphasize in the Conclusion that, although minimal ‘perspectival’ anthropocentricity is unavoidable, anthropocentrism that breeds speciesism and chauvinism is to be shunned. Contemporary ecocentrism has shown that our human self in its deepest sense is not separate from the earth from which we have grown. To say the truth, anthropocentrism is objectionable when it emphasizes ‘humans first!’ regardless of the consequences to other non-human beings and the environment in general. We shall thus conclude that an ecocentric holism with some sort of spiritualism (may be, for example, Naess’s theory of Self-realization or Advaita theory of Samadarśana) is the only way to protect the nature with its diversity and richness.

Department of Philosophy

The University of Burdwan

Signature of the Scholar