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PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Abstract: The history of mankind and the related history of the philosophy of nature demonstrate that, throughout centuries, people have always focused on the pursuit of understanding the world which they live in as well as the laws that govern it. The traditional philosophy concentrated on ontology and metaphysics, but with the development of civilisation as well as scientific and technical progress, it significantly expanded. The development of civilisation and its growing needs resulted in the increased anthropopressure on the natural environment, which caused significant changes. Civilisation and environmental threats, which mankind began to be aware of as late as in the last century, have also become the subject of considerations of contemporary philosophers. The pro-environmental and pro-ecological ideas that emerged in response to these threats often have their origins in philosophy. One of such ideas, which has now been firmly established legally, politically and socially, is the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development for modern human is not only an idea, but it forms the basis of specific laws, policies and actions aimed at the survival of the human species.

This paper presents examples of philosophical views on the idea of sustainable development – its origin, development, extent and perspectives.

Keywords: philosophy of nature, ecophilosophy, sustainable development

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Introduction

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, human becomes increasingly aware that the natural environment which he lives in is becoming more and more endangered and its condition is constantly deteriorating. The ecological situation of the world in a global perspective is getting more and more difficult, and it can even be calamitous locally. This is confirmed by numerous reports (e.g. WCED, 1987), publications (e.g. Naess, 1984), as well as expert opinions prepared by authoritative and interdisciplinary groups of specialists and reports on the state of the world endorsed by international organisations and associations (e.g. Roma Club, IUCN, WWF, FAO, WHO). The evidence data (WCED, 1987) presented in these documents on the extent, nature and rate of adverse changes in the natural environment as well as their further effects point out the increasing negative impact of the deteriorating quality of the environment on our daily lives. It is more and more frequently that we observe and experience the direct effects and consequences of: unfavourable climate changes, degradation of water, soil and air, extinction of species, reduction of the global acreage of forests and melting of glaciers. These processes and their clearly noticeable effects have increased their pace and extent over time. These issues are no longer only scientific disputes and “hot” media topics, but they are becoming an element of social considerations and discussions. The dominant view is that anthropogenic factors, i.e. human activity deprived of a sense of responsibility and harmful to the natural environment, are responsible for the current state of the environment and the changes taking place in it (Tyburski, 2017). Numerous interdisciplinary scientific studies, expert opinions and reports of international organisations analysing these factors clearly indicate the need for radical and quick actions that should reduce the adverse effects of anthropopression and introduce new solutions to improve the existing situation. The implementation of these activities should be based on the idea of international solidarity, a sense of responsibility and cooperation as part of the global improvement of environmental conditions (Gawor, 2006).

An extremely important role in the overall process of limiting the destruction of the natural environment and implementing the activities aimed at its improvement is played by the philosophical thought supported by the humanities derived from it (Tyburski, 2017). It forms the basis for a discussion on the causes and conditions of the current ecological crisis. It also covers the historical course of changes in human consciousness and culture, concerning the perception of and attitude towards the surrounding natural environment. As a result, using the potential not only to shape awareness, but also to create motivation for action, philosophical considerations provide arguments and reasons to create pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. This is confirmed by the idea of sustainable development accompanying modern men in almost every aspect of their life.

This research paper presents selected examples of philosophical views on threats to the natural environment (1) and the idea of sustainable development, which is the foundation of specific activities aimed at improving the relationship between humans and the environment (2).

Material and methods

The review nature of this paper determined the selection of the research methods, such as a query and synthesis of selected secondary source materials, the choice of which was dictated by an attempt to broadly cover the issue of environmental protection and the related idea of sustainable development. The paper discusses the issue of natural environment protection from the perspective of the development of philosophical thought focused on its cognition and understanding of the rules prevailing in it, as well as the place and role of human in its development, followed by the philosophical determinants of the emergence and development of the concept of sustainable development and its impact on the contemporary world.

Results and discussion

The oldest discipline of philosophy is the philosophy of nature (initially, it formed unity with natural sciences), because the first philosophers (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Leukippos and Democritus) chose the broadly understood nature and the laws that govern it as the human subject of their considerations. The main issue they tackled was the origin and principles of things (“the problem of elementarity”), i.e. the determination of the basic kind of matter constituting the main component of all things in nature as well as its features and properties. The concepts they formulated were based on their immediate sense experiences, which they supplemented with certain metaphysical assumptions. The derived speculations were only slightly (or not at all) susceptible to empirical verification (Łukasik, 2010).

The issues related to the protection of nature were considered by the Roman Stoic – Seneca. In his opinion, the world was a unity built of matter, which was in constant motion and undergoing constant changes. The effect of this unity was the existing nature, and all living things were its changing parts. These metamorphoses followed the law of nature, which was the only natural and common rule on Earth. For human, it was the foundation of all rules that should be followed. Human himself was nothing special and was only part of nature. His reason and intellect did not constitute any argument to act superior to other parts of nature. However, as he used them, he should act in such a way as to live in the greatest possible harmony with the world around him. He should treat it as an obligation, and when using the resources of nature, he must be guided by real needs and was not allowed either to change nature freely or destroy it. Seneca also argued that morality resulted from the laws of nature and that due to its unity, it could not apply to one species only. Ethics should therefore include all creatures that are entitled to equal treatment, and cruelty to animals and plants is as immoral as to other people (Kiełczewski, 1993).

The publication of the significant and revolutionary works of Copernicus, Galileo and Newton contributed to the emergence of modern natural science from the philosophy of nature. The previous dominant model of contemplative and speculative discovery of the natural environment (Plato, Aristotle) was supplemented and, over time, replaced by the experimental (Bacon) and mathematical (Newton, Leibniz) ones. It

turned out that the more effective way to learn and describe the mechanisms prevailing in the environment is to use the experiment, experience and mathematical description of phenomena (Łukasik, 2010). This led to the development and formation of natural sciences that had emerged from the philosophy and made it possible to get to know nature more precisely and more reliably (Lemańska, 2007).

In the mid-twentieth century, the philosophy of nature exhibited a much greater interest in the issues of the condition of the contemporary natural environment. This was due to the intensifying global ecological crisis and the related environmental threats. Nature was no longer perceived as something obvious, understandable, subject to human and serving as an endless source of raw materials for the creation of subsequent products of technological craftsmanship. It formed the grounds for a specific revision of all dimensions of human-nature interaction in contemporary philosophy. This reorientation of the subject and tasks of contemporary philosophy of nature aimed to create new directions and principles for its transformation and use, i.e. the management of its resources. This resulted in the emergence of a new area of philosophical reflection and inquiry in the early 1970s – ecophilosophy. The development of this new philosophical doctrine proceeded in many ways, depending on the direction of its ecophilosophical deliberations. These included: a new philosophy of nature (e.g. Naess, Böhme), a practical philosophy of nature (e.g. Meyer-Abich) or an ecological philosophy of nature (e.g. Skolimowski) (Hull, 2011).

In the 1970s, the Norwegian physicist and philosopher Arne Naess (1984; 1989), faced with an increasingly noticeable environmental crisis, created a new line of philosophy called “deep ecology”. According to its assumptions, ecology could not deal only with the elements, systems and functioning of the environment, but it should consider the effects and consequences of human impact on it. It is necessary to make people aware that the survival of the human species is very closely dependent on the survival of other species, so every effort should be made to stop their extinction. In order to improve the relationship with the environment, human should reject the belief in the uniqueness of human species, i.e. the basic thesis of an anthropocentrism strongly established in European culture, which alienates man from the surrounding reality. It should be replaced by a new rule of conduct – *ecosophy*, the foundations of which are commonly present in nature and result from the innate “wisdom” of terrestrial species living in a harmonious system and having the ability to complement each other in maintaining balance at all levels of ecosystems. Human should also reject morality limited only to other representatives of his species, because the realities of the current state of the environment require the introduction and observance of a modified ethics, the centre of which is no longer created by the human himself, but broadly understood life (Kiełczewski, 1993). The foundations of such ethics were created already in 1949 by the American forester and ecologist Aldo Leopold, who in his book “A Sand County Almanac” used the term “Ecological Conscience” and formulated the main ethical principle of his ethics of the earth (Ganowicz-Bącznyk, 2015). “A thing is good when it aims to protect the integrity and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong to do the opposite” (Leopold, 2012).

The American chemist James Lovelock published in 1979: *"Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth"* (2003), in which he presented his holistic concept of the biosphere – Gaia's theory. According to this theory, the Earth (Gaia, in Greek mythology is the goddess who emerged from chaos and was the mother of the first gods, i.e. the primeval source of all life) is a living organism that has a self-regulation mechanism consisting of elements constituting its organs. These organs are elements of the biosphere that are of particular importance for the entire system of life on Earth as well as its functioning and balance. Their destruction may cause temporary disturbances in the functioning of the existing system (e.g. climate change, natural disasters, species extinction). However, this will never lead to the complete destruction of life on Earth. As a whole organism, the Earth has defence mechanisms, as evidenced by the catastrophes that have already been encountered in history, which changed the living conditions on its surface. Nevertheless, there have always been species that can adapt to the new reality. The extinction of the human species for Gaia (Earth) is therefore irrelevant, because its primary goal is its own survival. Therefore, the main reason for human concern for the best condition of the surrounding natural environment is survival of the species - very weak, playing only a minor role in nature. Protecting and caring for Gaia's vital organs (plants, animals, ecosystems) is a human responsibility, because their survival is tantamount to maintaining the present system of nature and, consequently, its survival (Kiełczewski, 1993).

Sustainable development is a term originally derived from forestry. It was a method of forest management allowing for logging without forest destruction. The author of this term was a high-ranking official of Augustus the Strong – Hans Carl von Carlowitz, who also defined the long-term use of nature, with a simultaneous emphasis on activities aimed at preserving its resources (Lusawa, 2009; Walszczyk & Walczak, 2014). Currently, this term was first used and redefined in the report *Our Common Future* prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) led by Gro Harlem Brundtland (Pawłowski, 2006). It was applied in practice during the Earth Summit which was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, by signing an action programme for the 21st century known as Agenda 21 (Gawor, 2006; Skowroński, 2006; Lusawa, 2009; Walszczyk and Walczak, 2014).

Sustainable development is aimed at the development of human civilisation while maintaining good condition and proper functioning of the natural environment. It is to be facilitated by complying with environmental aspects when planning and implementing regional, national and even global socio-economic development. This will require changes in the current way of thinking and taking account of activities carried out in order to visibly and permanently improve the condition of the natural environment, affecting the quality of life not only today, but also for future generations. This should be implemented thanks to the growing, broadly understood, ecological awareness and the re-evaluation of the existing materialistic priorities of the development of civilisation (Haines-Young, 2000; Antrop, 2006; Pawłowski, 2006; Skowroński, 2006; Sztumski, 2006; Szaniawska, 2010). The very concept of the idea of sustainable development and its potential effects became the subject of numerous

philosophical disputes from the very beginning of its implementation (Gawor, 2006; Sztumski, 2006; Piątek, 2007; Fiut, 2009; Hull, 2010).

According to Gawor (2006), the idea of sustainable development is a kind of postulate of a qualitatively new civilisation, and its philosophical implications lead to a new stream of social philosophy with an almost global reach. Its main thesis is ontological monism, which requires the perception of reality as a dynamic ontic unity. Man, together with the social world he has created, cannot be treated as autonomous and independent from the natural world, because he is an integral component of the biosphere and has built asymmetric, close and inseparable relationships with it throughout history. This thesis is complemented by the thesis about the rationality of human nature, which is manifested in the progressive process of learning about the principles of functioning and the complexity of the world. This results in the increased level of education, technical and technological progress and a new approach to moral issues. Simultaneously, global awareness is stimulated and an imperative is formulated regarding responsibility for the present and future condition of the natural environment affecting the quality of life for future generations. In addition, the philosophical assumptions of sustainable development are axiologically enriched with values related to three spheres of development – social, economic and environmental ones. These spheres frequently merge or penetrate each other, creating conditions for better stimulation and greater range of activities carried out within them. The concept of sustainable development is therefore based on values that are rudimentary for the human social world (pacifism, freedom), teleological values for all forms of life (dignity, egalitarianism, life, justice) and instrumental values in achieving the assumed goals – community, responsibility and moderation. The presented philosophical premises and the resulting values constitute a strong theoretical background and provide specific arguments confirming the necessity and the effectiveness of the implementation of the concept of sustainable development by enriching social and economic development with environmental aspects.

Conclusions

The development of philosophical thought over the centuries has largely concerned aspects of the natural environment. While getting to know the surrounding reality, man tried to investigate the essence of its origin, functioning and its goal. The development of civilisation, science and technology was accompanied and supported by the evolving philosophical thought. The philosophical theories and doctrines developed over the centuries often referred to the issues of the natural environment as well as the place and role occupied by man in nature. They were a response to the changing reality and the level of human intellectual development. However, through anthropopressure, the development of civilisation led to unfavourable transformations and changes in the natural environment. This situation has forced people to revise their world view regarding the surrounding environment and change from the role of the manager and dominator to the role of its guardian as soon as possible. Contemporary concepts that

are not only ecological, but also ecophilosophical, help both in fulfilling this task and in everyday life. Understanding and accepting the requirements and realities of the current situation and the new role of man in the environment becomes an indispensable argument in the discussion about the future, not only of mankind, but all life on Earth.

One of the arguments in this discussion is the implementation of the idea of sustainable development. This concept is based on supporting socio-economic development with environmental aspects and it aims to improve the quality of human life in the context of improving the condition of the natural environment. The activities carried out within this concept are strongly supported in its theoretical basis by philosophy, mainly by its trend referred to as ecophilosophy. The philosophical doctrines and theories developed as part of ecophilosophy turned out to be very useful in implementing the concept of sustainable development and carrying out its practical activities. Their development and multiple aspects prove the complexity of environmental problems faced by modern man, challenges that the entire humanity is facing and what may await it in the future. From this perspective, on the one hand, the proposed concept of sustainable development is purely ideological or even utopian, but on the other hand, it becomes a concrete and necessary task for humanity, which is slowly beginning to be implemented.

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