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## A Critical Evaluation of Paul B. Thompson's Contribution to the Agrarian Philosophy

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### **Abstract:**

*Paul B. Thompson is a renowned professor and a philosopher who has advanced his ideas in the field of Agrarian Philosophy. Being a member of manifold committees around the world he has committed in the study areas of Food Ethics, Biotechnology and Nanotechnology, Environmental Philosophy, Community Ethics, and Agrarian Philosophy. This article aims to critically evaluate his ideological contribution to developed agriculture and its practical application. This discussion has divided into three themes; the spirit and soil, food ethics, and agrarian philosophy. The analytic method has been used in the data collection and analysis part of the research. Secondary data was collected through Thompson's publications done relevant to Agriculture. Thompson's identification of agrarian philosophy is relevant to providing a moral significance in consuming natural resources. He draws the attention of environmentalists and environmental philosophers to discuss the environmental issues in agriculture. And his focus has given in the field of food ethics recalling it as a social problem.*

**Keywords:** *Agriculture, bioethics, food ethics, environmental philosophy*

### **1. Introduction**

Paul B. Thompson is a professor and a philosopher and holds the W. K. Kellogg Chair in Agricultural, Food, and Community Ethics. His research and study areas were the philosophical and ethical issues that are relevant in the fields of agriculture, food, and techno sciences including biotechnology, nanotechnology, etc. He has served in several national and international level organizations and committees. He has been the president of the Society for Philosophy, Technology and the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society. His publications expand in many areas on the field of agriculture, they are; *The Agrarian Vision: Sustainability and Environmental Ethics* (2010), *The Ethics of Intensification* (2008), *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism* (2000), *Agricultural Ethics: Research, Teaching and Public Policy* (1998), *The Spirit of the Soil* (1995), *Ethics, Public Policy and Agriculture* (1994), *Agrarian Myths and Policy Realities* (1992), *Beyond the Large Form: Ethics and Research Goals* (1991), etc.

The quality of the environment is depending upon the impacts of human activities on it. In this process, agriculture comes first. Field work and animal products are the key procedures in agriculture. But these activities can affect the quality of natural resources, such as water and soil. The environmental movement from the beginning focused on the impact of agriculture on nature. And mostly, current environmental issues are said to be involved with agriculture. Thompson questions whether the environmentalists and ethicists have given their attention in identifying the coercions of agriculture concerning environmental issues.

Thompson gives attention to food ethics. His identification of this topic is relating to social injustice. In his book *'From Field to Work: Food Ethics for Everyone'*, he explains that 'Many key food topics can be approached powerfully through a political or philosophical ethic that builds on an analysis of poverty or of racial and gender oppression.'<sup>1</sup> He describes the workers in the farms and food industry is vulnerable to being abused and exploited. Those who are exploited in the food industry, according to Thompson, should be a fundamental concern in food ethics. More than that, he discusses food security and food sovereignty in this book.

In the field of Agrarian Philosophy, he explains that, from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century European philosophy, there have been attempts to discussing Agrarianism relevance to the fields of political economics, science, and epistemology as well. In his book of *'The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism'* (2000), he depicts the agriculture as the 'cultivated, material transformation of soil, water, and sunlight into the living tissue of plants and animals for use by human beings'.<sup>2</sup> He also explains agrarian

<sup>1</sup> Thompson, P.B. (2015), *From Field to Work: Food Ethics for Everyone*, Oxford University Press, pp. 54-79

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, P.B. & Hilde, Thomas C. (2000), *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, Vanderbilt University Press, p. 26

philosophy should be explicated in three distinctions; the status of farming, agrarian image in art and literature, and the studies of agrarian mentality.<sup>3</sup>

The objective of this research is to converse the contribution of Paul B. Thompson in the field of Agrarian Philosophy. Therefore, the discussion negotiates his ideas on food ethics, environmental issues of his discussion with the ideas and concepts, which he brought and presented, in the field of Agrarian Philosophy.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology of this study is that qualitative method because this is an analytical and comparative study for Thompson's works on Agrarian Philosophy. Therefore, this study will consider e-books of Thompson's original works. The discussion is mainly divided into three parts, related to Thompson's major work fields; Spirit of Soil, Food Ethics, and Agrarian Philosophy. His ideas and explanations of the above fields have given the focus. Therefore, this research contains the analytic methodology.

## 3. Results and Discussion

For the convenience of studying Thompson's work, the results and discussion have been divided into main three topics; Spirit of Soil, Food Ethics, and The Agrarian Philosophy. And these topics have been discussed separately in the following paragraphs.

### 3.1. *Spirit of Soil*

In his book of *The Spirit and Soil* (1995), Thompson discusses the ethics of the soil, the environmental critics of agriculture, the protectionist paradigm, Agricultural stewardship, and the good farmer, calculating the true cost of food, the holistic alternative and finally the sustainable agriculture. This book is providing an advanced identification of environmental issues in agriculture. He suggests that environmental Philosophers have given less attention to agricultural work.

While historians have traced the environmental impact of agricultural settlement patterns and cultural practices, environmental ethicists have been preoccupied with the extension of moral concepts to animals and the environment, and with the establishment (or rejection) of non-anthropocentric, holistic, and pluralistic axiology for defining the moral imperatives of environmentalism. Some of these topics are relevant to an environmental philosophy of agriculture, but they are sufficiently disengaged from agricultural problems that their applicability is far from obvious.<sup>4</sup>

Thompson explains that environmental philosophy is similar to science. The reason is, the environmental ethical theory should be powerful enough to provide solutions for every environmental issue, that no philosopher ever tried to discuss. Therefore, the unexpected impacts of the environment by agriculture should be addressed with the knowledge of environmental philosophy. According to Thompson, there are two specific reasons that environmental philosophy is failed in relating its knowledge to agriculture. The first is, the environmentalists and philosophers were unable to distinguish the imperative of production and the second is, the environmentalists, agricultural scientists, and farmers were unable to develop an environmental ethic in their work process.<sup>5</sup> Thompson explains them as worse than the period before the 'Silent Spring' (1962) by Rachel Carson.

Further, Thompson explains that agriculture cannot continue without environmental ethics. Mostly, farmers are not aligned with long-term expectations of the lands. For instance, the chemical producing company can shift into a drug production company in a short period. Landowners can gain profits by selling lands.<sup>6</sup> The needs of the land might be diverse. But the permanence of the land in the farmers is not concerned. There are some other attempts done by farmers such as organic farming. Organic farming practitioners are more likely to develop an environmental ethic. They are committed to the land.

As in the book *The Spirit of Soil*, the spirit of life resides in the soil. This is a pagan religious belief. These ideas have given the soil a meaning of a self-aware object. Thompson explicates this as 'They impose the human soul upon earth.'<sup>7</sup> But coming to the modern ideas of matter, the soil is a lifeless object. Thompson defines agriculture as, 'Agriculture is, in short, a natural activity, properly emergent within many of the ecosystems in which the human species is found.'<sup>8</sup> Thompson expects to bring out an ethic of farming, the integration of the natural environment, and agricultural activities. This philosophy is indeed needed for those who produce the food, which means the farmers, and also those who consume the food, that is the consumers. Agriculture is concerning production. Since the land is a fixed capital in the production process it is necessary to avoid unwanted outcomes of agriculture. The environmental philosophers and environmentalists have been criticizing agriculture from the food processing to the animal feed. Especially their focus was on pesticides and the emerging biotechnology.

Under the agrarian stewardship, Thompson explains the farmers have been the stewards of the land. And he suggests the good farming means caring for the soil, water, plants, and animals with greater supervision. Through traditional methods of farming and traditional believes and practices, a pearl of common wisdom was made, if the farmer is unskilled and unable in caring the nature, will be failed in the process of farming. The early ages of farming made a great deal with nature since people had the responsibility of protecting the god's creation; nature. Stewardship means ensuring

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 27

<sup>4</sup>Thompson, Paul B. (1995), *The Spirit of the Soil*, Routledge Publishers, p. 05

<sup>5</sup>Thompson, Paul B. (1995), *The Spirit of the Soil*, Routledge Publishers, p.13

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.14

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.17

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.18

and conserving nature and avoiding the pollution of water, soil, or environment. Therefore, Thompson promotes the concept of Agrarian Stewardship, which is an ecologically founded obligation of the farmer, that links with the self-interests of the farmer in the production process. Thompson suggests it is needed to have the agrarian stewardship because it encompasses the environmental ethic and an ecological identification of nature as well.

More than that, he is discussing economics and holism to fill the gap between the environment and agriculture. These approaches including stewardship, economy, and holism link the human self-interests while giving an ethical significance to nature. But still, the philosophers move between anthropocentric ethical theories and ecocentric ethical theories regarding the obligation of future generations. In this issue, Thompson comes up with the idea of sustainability as a hopeful answer. Explaining this, in means of ecological ethics, their people can practice respect and specify their duties and preserve nature. And in anthropocentric ethics, nature can be preserved for future use but lacks the moral obligation on it. But the concept of sustainability can promote the unity between these two theories.

### 3.2. Food Ethics

The publication of 'From Field to Work: Food Ethics for Everyone' (2015) by Thompson is dealing with a higher notion of food ethics. Each person has each food choice, and Thompson suggests these diverse food choices become ethical if they are giving positive or negative outcomes for humans, non-human animals, or for the environment.

It is worth reminding ourselves that this is a relatively new idea. Enthusiasm for farmers' markets; humanely produced animal products; and fairly traded coffee, tea, and cocoa have grown markedly over the last decade. Over the same period, we have also gained greater recognition of links between diet and the alarming growth in diabetes, heart disease, and other degenerative conditions.<sup>9</sup>

According to Thompson, from the early stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the consumers were unable to see where the food is coming from. There was a long supply chain in the food processor, and food came with brands. And many were suggesting the canned and packed foods are healthier and progressive. This emerged with food advertising and branding. From the 1960s people started having meals outside the home. Along with these the usage of chemicals and pesticides, factory farms came up with consumer ignorance and the massive technological changes. The food culture changed with this. From the *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, people started concerning the health and environmental impact of industrially made food. Then they moved from natural to organic food.

The food ethic can be a cultural, political, or social aspect to a person. Eating reflects an ambiguous and social, ontological concern of humans. As mentioned in the same book, contemporary philosophy encompasses the idea that each individual should have their freedom of making plans out of his life. Ethical problems emerge when these plans conflict. Morality and religious duties cannot be put in the same box. For example, if a person is eating relying on the prudential concerns, that can be seen as personal. Therefore, Thompson also suggests the food ethics must include the welfare of others, in the food production and distribution processes, 'with choices about what to eat'<sup>10</sup>.

Throughout time, many philosophers have been discussing topics like poverty, hunger, distribution of goods, etc. Thompson explains that when society is becoming less interested in agriculture, there is a tendency of seeing 'hunger' as a social problem rather than calling it an act of god. Therefore, food can be concerned as a key problem in social justice. The root causes of the hunger can be taken as the social and economic activities of humans; therefore, humans have a moral responsibility of providing solutions for these. Thompson explicates the primary concerns of food ethics should be on social institutions, market structures, public policies along with possible other circumstances in social life. It can be us who are supporting the ill-treatment of any other human or non-human entity when buying food products. Or else it can be anyone else who is impacting on us when we do not have alternatives. Thompson also suggests the 'food ethics to be philosophically contestable domain of inquiry'.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.3. Agricultural Philosophy

In 'The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism' (2000), Thompson and Hilde explain the agrarianism cooperates diverse moral, social, political, and metaphysical philosophies with relevance to the field of farming. In the same book, the agrarianism has been defined as 'agriculture and those whose occupation involves agriculture are especially important and valuable elements of society'.<sup>12</sup> Agrarian philosophy involves developing a value-based relation with society, humans, and agricultural land. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the agrarianism was taken as a romantic approach to nature along with technological and scientific development.

The very idea of agrarianism is not well understood by many scholars, activists, or environmentally enlightened citizens today. One can argue that the term is primarily associated with land reform movements aimed at breaking up large parcels assembled under colonial domination. Indeed, the online version of Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines agrarianisms 'a social or political movement designed to bring about land reforms or to improve the economic status of the farmer'.<sup>13</sup>

As mentioned in the introductory part of this research, the agrarian philosophy can be explained under three aspects as the status of farming, agrarian imagery in art and literature, and the study of agrarian mentality.<sup>14</sup> The first of these three is the natural way to the agrarian philosophy. The agrarian ideas have made the basic production practices

<sup>9</sup>Thompson, Paul B. (2015), *From Field to Work: Food Ethics for Everyone*, Oxford University Press, p.05

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.29

<sup>11</sup>Thompson, Paul B. (2015), *From Field to Work: Food Ethics for Everyone*, Oxford University Press, p.53

<sup>12</sup>Thompson, Paul B. & Hilde, Thomas C. (2000), *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, Vanderbilt University Press. p.01

<sup>13</sup>Thompson, Paul B. (2010), *The Agrarian Vision: Sustainability and Environmental Ethics*, University Press of Kentucky, p.05

<sup>14</sup>Thompson, Paul B. & Hilde, Thomas C. (2000), *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, Vanderbilt University Press. p.27

within various social institutions throughout history are concerned here. According to Thompson, agriculture was the main feature that shaped the personality of these social institutions and modeled the European civilizations. From the practices of fishing to the advanced development of biotechnology, this can be seen. Second, the imagery of agrarianism can be seen in various modes. It can be seen in artwork such as painting, literature, poetry, drama, etc. These provide a better picture of the quality and features of rural experiences to the people. And these help to evoke the agrarian mentality, the third aspect. As explained by Thompson, the agrarian mentality is 'simply the mindset of someone living in or particularly well suited to an agricultural society'<sup>15</sup>.

As a philosophical tradition, agrarian thought emphasizes the idea that farming practices have the power to shape the moral character of the individuals who engage in them, and that a society's farming culture—its means of subsistence—reverberates through all its institutions. Agrarian ideals are moral and aesthetic ideals. They describe a way of life, as it ought to be lived.<sup>16</sup>

In the book 'Agricultural Ethics in East Asian Perspectives' (2018) Thompson explains the term agrarian philosophy as a cluster of traditions and theories that emphasize the relationship between subsistence production practices and processes of cultural formation.<sup>17</sup> Agrarianism also should involve the moral and political significances in their practice and farming. The agrarian ideas also can be understood with the history of the European political economy. And Agrarianism developed with ethical and aesthetic ideals, which provided the foundation of the American pragmatism. Agrarian ideals are associated with politics, preservation of ethnic, racial, and gender stereotypes. Thompson here argues that his idea is not about preserving agrarian philosophies or adopting an unreconstructed set of agrarian views as an appropriate way for the modern age. Instead of that, his understanding of agrarian philosophy is a way of providing insight into the human cultures and their relations to the biophysical environment and to guide utilizing the ecosystems while interacting with it.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Paul B. Thompson's work is expanded in many areas; Agrarian Philosophy, Environmental Philosophy, Biotechnology and Nanotechnology, Food Ethics, etc. This research mainly focused on his ideas relevant to the Environment, Agrarianism, and Food ethics. The discussion has separately studied as the spirit of soil, food ethics, and agrarian philosophy. His ideas in his book of *The Spirit of Soil* are concerned with the environmental impact of agriculture. It tries to get the environmentalist and philosopher's attention in discussing the agriculture and the impact of agriculture in nature. Thompson is examining the environmental problems that come in the industrial agricultural process and encompasses an ethical and moral concern towards nature.

Second, this research focused on food ethics as explained by Thompson. Thompson's idea of food ethics was related to social injustice. He explains that injustice and exploitation happen among the workers in the food industry and the importance of morality in the production and distribution of food products. The third part of this research was on the agrarian philosophy. Thompson enrolls with the concept of sustainability in utilizing natural resources and preserving them for future generations. Also, his idea on agrarianism is, it helps to understand the human cultures, throughout history and it is doing a major role in shaping the moral character within the person. With his publications and research work in the field of agrarian philosophy and the experiences as a professor in the so-called field, his thoughts and conceptual ideas of the agrarian philosophy provides much insight to the modern industrial world.

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<sup>15</sup>Thompson, Paul B. & Hilde, Thomas C. (2000), *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, Vanderbilt University Press. p.27

<sup>16</sup>Thompson, Paul B. (2010), *The Agrarian Vision: Sustainability and Environmental Ethics*, University Press of Kentucky, p.05

<sup>17</sup>Thompson, Paul B. & Thompson, Kirill O. (2018), *Agricultural Ethics in East Asian Perspective: A Transpacific Dialogue*, Springer, p.04

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.09