

Environmental Ethics and the Concept of Life

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Abstract

The situation of our planet has generated serious cause for concern. Everyday humanity is confronted with serious environmental crises created as a result of the attempt to conquer or harness nature. This exploitative disposition is causing problems of dangerous proportion than what humanity can handle easily. Ecological problem as we have it today warrant urgent discussion especially in view of its ethical implication. This and other pertinent issues fall within the jurisdiction of environmental ethics. Although, this is a relatively recent study but of applied ethics. This paper is an explicit study of environmental ethics. We shall clarify environmental ethics, and discuss selected environmental ethics in this century.

Keywords: ecological, ethics, environmental

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Introduction

The idea of environment is expanding in line with prevailing realities of the time but there is a problem. What is the problem? The environment has suffered serious deterioration as a result of the exploitative work of man. Human exploration and exploitation have sincerely yielded fruitful result but the adverse manifestation obviously threatens the animate and the inanimate world. This is compounded by the dearth earth and non-commitment to essential knowledge which can minimize ecological crises. Though it is commonly said that the planet earth can no longer be wiped out completely but 'being' and 'being good' are not the same thing. The impact of being on being and future possibility of being are factor that must be properly noted in any scheme on the benefit of a good reality.

Notably, the world is passing through a moment of ecological crises. There is huge erosion of the top soil, a large number of natural calamities, deforestation, oil spillage, extinction of some species, global warming, nuclear threat exploitation without proper technical expertise etc. . These are life threatening situations that must be properly dealt with. Man as the ultimate director and exploiter of nature must inquire and raise fundamental knowledge to halt environmental degradation, raise environmental consciousness and forge a good link among the exploring man, the populace and the exploited universe. This quest to raise an environmental structure that is conducive to life and situated upon relevant intellectual base is the focal point of this paper.

The Concept of Environment and Ethics

Environment is a complex term, ordinarily elementary social studies teaches that "Social Studies is the study of man and his Environment" Environment in reference here is 'social and physical' (Morogbonwon and Bolanle 2010:1) However this social and physical dimensions go beyond man to integrate some complex systems, factors and unit which only a multi-discipline approach can uncover. In line with this, the environment includes the physical and biological factors along with their chemical interactions that affect an organism. It equally entails the surrounding of a physical system and the impact on all ontological entities living and non-living. From a social viewpoint it involves the surrounding that an individual lives in, the people and the system with which they interact. The Wikipedia defines it thus: "The biophysical environment is the biotic and abiotic surroundings of an organism or population, and consequently include the factors that have an influence in their survival, development and evolution...each organism has its own environment ... life and environment interacts. All life that must survived must have adapted to conditions of its environment temperature, light, humidity, soil etc..... all influence any species, within any environment. However life in turn modifies, in various forms, its condition" (en.wikipedia .org/wiki/environment). One can infer that the environment comprises the dwelling place of organism, the prevailing system therein and effect. There is a need for environment studies. This is the systematic study of interactions of human with their environment, it studies the social environment, natural environment and built environment. In extensions, environment here is the sum total of all surroundings of a living organism including natural forces and other living things. The word Ethics in a simple rendition in moral philosophy "it is a branch of philosophy that deals with the morality of human actions" (Omoregbe 1993:3). The emphasis here is that ethics fundamentally appraises human conduct using some principles." It is not a set of guidelines or principles that regulates human conduct. Rather ethics critically examines and analysis those principles that regulate human

conduct (Mabol 2002:3)” it is concerned with the question of right and wrong in human behaviors. It deal with how men ought to behave and why it is wrong to behave in a certain ways (Frankena 1993:ix)

Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics is the part of environmental philosophy which critically assess the moral part of human act on the environment. It appraises man’s ethical relationship with the environment. As remarked in the **Stamford Encyclopedia of philosophy**, environmental ethics is the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human being to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non human content (2008) Basically, it is that aspect of philosophy which seek to generate reasons why non humans nature has value that must be solely defined economically. It accentuates the synergy between the living and the non living concepts in the environment. Natures have values as man has values, so man has obligation concerning the environment. There is a need for man to care for the non-human world of stone, fish, animal, space, insect etc. Hence: environment ethics applied the basic tools of philosophy to study the conceptual foundation of environment, value, impact of consumption on the environment ethical decision making in exploitation of natural resources, danger of environmental pollution, household waste, industrial waste, over population, climate change etc.

Really the environment is under serious threat; the threat from agricultural activities and force degradation, industrial pollution, agro chemical and pollution of water-ways and developmental degradation. Environmental ethicists point out that man must place value on every ecological reality across spatio-temporal locale. As enunciated in the 1996 Catholic Bishop Conference “Our environmental common goods are not only available for careful use and employment today, but are held in trust for use and employment of future generations. Public authorities must not treat them as having no intrinsic worth nor commercial concerns but see them merely as sources of profit or lossthe environment is a great reposting of humanity present and future, freely and equally” (1996:107)

The above position by catholic Bishop is commendable but philosophically questionable. It does not only considered the immediate time but even the future. Meanwhile, can we rightly say that future generation exists, Richard T. De-George is of the view that “future generation do not exist since this class is presently empty” (CF Dasaolu 1998:86) in Georges word, ‘non-existent entities by definition do not exist. What does not exist cannot be the subject or bearer of anything. Hence, it cannot be the subject or bearer of right” (George 1983:90) In a reinforcement of this thesis George noted that existing human beings have no obligation to any future and not yet existing set or class of human being we owe them nothing and they have no legitimate claim on us for the simple reason that they do not exist (ibid) Annette baier (1983:7) challenged this line of thinking “ the fact that future generation are not living persons is irrelevant to the issue if we are willing to speak of the rights of those who are not long living person” without delving into another polemics, De-George counsel that instead of total obligation, our obligation should be situated on compassionate ground. Nevertheless, the thrust of this paper is that there is synergy between the animate and inanimate aspects of life and this synergy must be ethically managed now and with future responsibility in focus. The issue goes beyond responsibility, there is a need for humane rationality to complement human technical commitment and exploration of the earth.

Of course, science is the most powerful instrument humanity has developed to solve the problems of human existence, both materials and biological. Culture on the other hand, a summation of human experience codified in a way of life or world view is conservative in nature, tending to pressure and to forbid human action which might otherwise be possible or feasible but can be disruptive of establish order. Sciences disposition is towards constant change always affirming that whatever appears possible should also be tried. (Anya 1998:32) This is why scientific exploration should be based on humane rationality .Indeed, we share Jarding’s view that environmental ethics presents and defends a systematic and comprehensive account of the moral relationship between human being and natural environment (Jardin 1993:4). Some other concern of environmental ethics are: should man continue to clear forest mainly for human use? How can we minimize the effect of gas emission? What environmental obligations do we need to keep for future generations? How best can man be oriented to appreciate environmental issue? Is it proper for religious organization to disturb the society through blasting of sound via megaphone and heavy metals instrument? How do we thus reconcile the moral commitment of an evangelistic church with the psychological comfort of people with different beliefs?

Approaches

There are different approaches to environmental ethics. One of this is the Anthropocentric or human centered approach. Anthropocentrism is the belief that human beings are the central or most significant species of the planet. They are considered to have a higher moral worth than other beings on the earth. This theory is equally called human centricism or human exceptionalism. Since it is human centred, then it underscored that implementation of sound health system and humane environment is vital for human survival. This is a shallow viewpoint which William Grey disdained. In Grey’s word “What’s is wrong with shallow view is not their concern about the well-being of human, but that they do not really concern enough in what the well being really consists. According to the view, we need to develop an enriched fortified anthropocentric motion of human interest to replace the short terms, sectional and self –regarding conception”(Grey 1993:463). In extension, Grey writes that we should be concerned to promote a rich, diverse and vibrant biosphere” (Ibid). Another theory or approach is biocentrism. This theoretical position extends inherent values to all living things. This is not a social equation between man and animal but the idea is based on nature as a whole not on man. The totality of nature is considered. This position promotes biodiversity, animal rights and environmental protection. Human are simply one species among many. He is just a part of ecosystem and whatsoever affect all, affects man” (Judibari 2015). Paul Taylor (1986) puts it thus: human are members of a community of life along with other species; there is a system of interdependence between all members and human are not wherently superior to other species. This last point is questionable. Indeed Richard Watson (1983) is his essay, *A critique of Anti Anthropocentric Biocentrism* points out that “if the equality between man and animal is drawn, then human culture and actions are as natural as the way in which any other species of animal behaves.” Meanwhile, Watson points out that the extinction of species in nature’s ways. But then, man must curtail their destruction work in relation to other species because annihilation of other species will result in our destruction. Thus, there is a mutual complement and reinforcement between human life and other forms of life. The human environment has been subjected to diverse damages as a result of pollution, environmental degradation, chemical weapon, uniformed disposal of waste, depletion of ozone layer,

deforestation, destruction of species and wrong disposal of refuse etc. The issue is serious in nation like Nigeria where a man will just wake up tomorrow and drill bore hole without consideration of soil texture and possibility of seismic vibration. There is no thorough monitoring of this. People dispose refuse in drainage and unapproved places, e-waste are throne anywhere, tyre and cellophane are burnt without attention to the health implication on people. There is massive deforestation. Nomadic cattle rearers with their cattle move from street to street while their cattle littered the street with faeces, Oil spillage is a regular occurrence and this threaten fishing which is a stable sources of income for riverrine dwellers.

Enviromental Ethics and Concept of Life

There is a need for a well structured environmental ethics to address the existential challenges associated with man's exploration of the earth. First and foremost, there is a need to consider or extend moral obligation to future generations, "there is no doubt that, the present generation is to a great extent living at the expense of future generation" (Nnanmi 2005:396). This position is amplified by Jardins ...Fossil fuel are non reward able every barrel of oil and ton of coal that will burn is forever lost for use by future generation every mountain mined and wilderness developed in the search for coal and oil is also lost for future people. Secondly, combustion fossil fuels will continue dump billions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. What are our duties, if any, to preserve resources for and minimize risk of future generations (Jardins 1993:73). The life of future generation is a key factor to be integrated into corpus of developmental theories by the present generation. Another key issue is enlightenment on disposal of waste. This rests on a well structure educational programme and discipline. Africa is in dire need of this. Appropriate structure must be built along roads to stop indiscriminate disposal of waste. Prohibition of waste disposal in a place without structural provision to avert such is nothing but injustice. Every organism count, every life count, this is best exemplified in a food chain. Functionally Joseph Des Jardin expatiates this, "some organisms called producers manufacture their own food by producing organic compound from inorganic molecules and energy photosynthesis is the primary process through which producer manufacture food. Other organism, consumer depend on producers, directly or indirectly for their food source. Herbivores or primary consumer feed directly or indirectly for their food source on the other hand of the food chain decomposer (mostly fungi and bacteria's feed on dead organic materials, breaking it down into simple in-organic molecules" (Ibid). This goes to show that, if ant as small as it is wiped off, humanity may be in danger, all living species of living organism form part of system of interdependence life of any sort whether sentiment or vegetative, rational on irrational, is criterion for moral standing, moral right do not depend on any hierarchy among the living things (Nmanami 2005:398) This is a biocentric approach to environmental ecocentric measure-that all ontological realities count. Everything that exist in the universe counts in the making and remarking of human life.

There must be a radical measure to curb noise pollution especially among religious body evangelism and noise making are two different things. Evangelism that disturb others is demonological wrong. If all religious bodies take to this approach, there will be metal strain in the society. Truly technology widens human intellectual and cultural scope but it must appropriately tampered oil spillage and gas emission threaten human survival. The use of lethal chemical weapon equally threaten life. Not only of man but animals and other creatures. There must be well defined social policy

to arrest this situation. There must be an attempt to intellectualize environmental science and environmental ethics in local language so that the local populace can understand the existential implication of their act. A person who does not know the health implication of poisonous chemicals can burn anything and inhale anything .People die from inhaling carbon monoxide emitted from generator. Tobacco smokers in Nigeria, even smoke in vehicles crammed with passengers. Though this may be egoistically justified it is deontologically Wrong.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need to humanize and massively intellectualized environmental ethics especially in the less developed world. There is a synergistic rapport between the kingdom of man and other kingdoms in nature. If this association is not ethically controlled and balanced, man is surely walking on a dangerous precipice.

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