

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF BASIC CHALLENGES IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND SUSTAINABILITY IN NIGERIA

MARAIZU ELECHI, PhD
Department of Philosophy
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt
Email: drmaraizuelechi@yahoo.com

Abstract

The care, management and preservation of the natural environment is an important aspect of the branch of philosophy known as environmental philosophy. Sometimes, environmental philosophy is called environmental ethics. It is concerned with the critical evaluation of human activities in his environment. It explains sensitive issues that border on the environment in relationship with man, the need to protect and preserve the environment and the effects of environmental degradation and possible solutions. This paper thus reflects on the basic problem in environmental ethics and sustainability in Nigeria, which it considers as the lack of adequate understanding of the environment and the place or role of man in its preservation. The paper argues that the relationship between man and the environment must be one in mutual dependency and harmony. Therefore excessive exploitation of the environment by man must be avoided and the environment seen and appreciated from its intrinsic worth. Otherwise, there will not be an end to environmental disasters since the environment has a way of fighting back. In the end, the paper recommends immediate stimulation of environmental consciousness or awareness as a formidable approach to the preservation, conservation and sustenance of the environment.

Keywords: Environment, environmental ethics, environmental disaster, environmental consciousness, mutual dependency.

Introduction

The challenges in environmental ethics are many. One of those challenges include how man should relate with the environment since it is the physical ground of his existence. It also considers whether man has any ethical obligation with regards to the environment; and if he does, what are the logical reasons for this obligation as well as the extent of man's duty or responsibility to this obligation. The critical analysis of the importance of these basic philosophical issues or challenges is quite germane especially against the backdrop of man's activities and attitude towards the environment and in consideration of the co-determination of the quality of human life and general wellbeing and continuation, and the flourishing of other natural species and or environment. Pope Francis, in his *Encyclical Laudatosi*, writes:

“The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change” (no. 13). He continues “I urgently appeal ... for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all” (no. 14). Most importantly and mind-touching is Pope Francis’ feminization of the environment by referring to it as “our sister and mother who sustains us”. According to him, this our sister and mother now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will.

This maltreatment and domination done to the environment, Pope Francis argues, is responsible for the widespread environmental degradation, the “sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life” while the environment groans in travail. The occurrences of disastrous phenomena like erosions, earthquakes, volcanic eruption, etc., clearly indicate the destabilization of the cosmic relationship existing between man and the environment. These catastrophes arise mainly from human activities in the environment such as indiscriminate dumping of refuse, mismanagement of oil spill and exploration activities as well as nonchalant attitude towards the management and sustenance of the environment.

The environment, no doubt, is more than we ordinarily can imagine especially in its complexities, relations and activities. For this reason, passivity on the part of man towards the totality of the existential domain in which his being unfolds and continually accounted for is very dangerous. It calls for critical reflection and pragmatic approach since the environment provides the basis of human activities and interactions with other beings in the world. In fact, it is contradictory to think of man outside the environment; he is part and parcel of it.

Theoretical Reflections

It has become expedient for us at this point to briefly evolve some sort of theoretical reflections or clarifications of the concept that constitutes our study: “environmental philosophy”. First and foremost, the concept “environment” is a very broad and composite concept. Therefore, it is better we approach our understanding of the term ‘environment’ by looking at its root word. Environment means “that which environs us”. And being “enviored” simply means being encircled or surrounded. Broadly speaking, the term “environment” is understood as the overall physical, natural, cultural, social conditions surrounding man. It pervades the economic, social, political, literary, religious, cultural and scientific planes. In fact, it covers the whole facet of human life and

behavior, rendering it, therefore, a universal or global issue. Michael Barbiar writes that: “An environment is the complex set of physical, geographic, biological, social, cultural and political conditions that surround an individual or organism and that ultimately determine its form” (89). The environment is the totality of the existential domain or ecosphere in which our being unfolds. It refers to all the facts and relations, when taken together, play a role in shaping our consciousness in particular ways and in relation to other beings and these other beings in relation to others (Njiofor 234).The environment, according to Njiofor,;

Generally consists of the cosmological and territorial, the metaphysical and physical (material composition) of our living surrounding and its spatial area including the ontological forces of interaction of the biotic and abiotic factors therein... the environment is understood as constituted of the immediate and remote spatio-temporal dimensional base of human existence in the world (233).

In his article *Personification of Environment: An Alternative to Extreme Empiricist and Rationalist Based Environmentalism*, Asouzu defined the environment as:

The framework within which we [live], mould our thoughts, actions and feelings from which we can be understood and perceived as persons other than the environment itself... our environment is the foundation of our activities especially of our attempt at giving meaning to life (143).

The environment influences how people live their lives and how societies develop. For this reason, people’s progress, economic development and environment are closely linked up together. We therefore need to explore, tend and protect our environment in order to live happily (Alawa144).

Now, to the question – what is environmental ethics? Environmental ethics which is sometimes called environmental philosophy is a new branch of philosophy that is concerned with the natural environment and humans’ place within it (Belshaw4). Its concern is basically to provide philosophical basis and or solutions to environmental challenges facing man. Environmental ethics embodies a set of principles that could guide humans in dealing with environmental issues. It is a young field of study that brings together traditional nurturing of wisdom with a specific interest in the environment. Part of environmental philosophy is, therefore, exploring what we know that is, our justifiable true believe about the environment. But we have to be careful not to stop there. For, environmental ethics requires us to develop

wisdom about the environment and that means, as we have noted above, discussing what is best for the environment, especially with respect to our own actions within the environment. This branch of philosophy also considers animals and the natural world or reality otherwise known as “the biotic community”. According to Aldo Leopold “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise”. Environmental philosophy asks very important questions like: why do we need to preserve the environment? What is the place of man in relation to the environment? These philosophical questions constitute some of our major reflections in this paper.

Why Preserve the Environment?

This philosophical question has left philosophers divided in their views. Some are of the view that we need to preserve the environment because of its economic and practical values or benefits to man. This view is known as the *Anthropocentric View* of the Environment. It is championed by the conservationist philosophers like Gifford Pinchot, Fein Blur, etc. For them, the environment needs to be preserved because it provides economic values to man; it is beneficial to man with the rich diversity of resources required by him to survive. This view considers all natural creatures as meant to serve the benefit or interest of man. It considers nature or the environment as having extrinsic rather than intrinsic value. This is another way of saying that the environment has a human-centered attitude or function. There is a serious challenge or inherent flaw in this conception. There is no doubt however that there are two values, namely intrinsic and extrinsic values that are associated with the being or nature of anything and everything, but to claim that every natural being, objects or realities have extrinsic value only regardless of their intrinsic practical value in themselves is a misnomer.

What constitutes extrinsic values of the environment? The extrinsic values of the environment are those worthwhile things which lie outside of environmental experience, but are brought about by it. Although, they are values led by, and resulting from the environment. The extrinsic values of the environment are material or economic values made possible through the exploitation and exploration of the environment. On the other hand, intrinsic values of the environment are those values that do not only lie within and constitute the nature or essence of the environment, but also those values that are not necessarily discernible by the outward looks of the environment. In relations to man and his environment, we can say for instance that the intrinsic value of the environment is the sympathy, the mutual natural dependency and interconnectedness of life and living among all realities, especially between man and his environment. Unfortunately, these are not popularly recognized values, that is, that not many people will share our point of view. This is because arguments about the values of the environment which take their

premises from human material needs and survival always win their audience. We all need to survive – even philosophers do – so arguments about the values of the environment which pick the premises from human survival and material values appeal to our soft spots. The need for human material values is important; but, it is all the same, not the only need that humans have. Joad puts it thus:

... Our age governed pre-eminently by the stomach and pocket view of life, demands of whatever is proffered for its approval that it shall 'deliver the goods'... But what of the capacity for clear thinking, the sympathy and tolerance which come from a lively understanding of the views and difficulties of others... and the habit of disinterested intellectual inquiry. Do these not add to the fullness and richness of our lives? (68-9).

In fact, to begin with, material benefits are not ultimate issues in the mind of a philosopher. Therefore the conceptions of why man should preserve the environment as rooted in terms of material gains or pleasure is implausible. It is fraught with the consequences of reducing man to the appetitive level of lower animals. In other words, humans need the environment to be properly human. Rather than just a means to an end, the environment also serves an end in itself. Therefore nature needs to be respected and preserved not only because it is simply the right and appropriate thing to do regardless of some sorts of benefit it bestows on man, but also because it has values in itself. This is *in tandem* with the view of the naturalist philosopher John Muir when he argues that nature needs to be preserved because it is a service for human pleasure and satisfaction which are not merely instrumental for anything else, but rather valuable in itself. In fact, to extend this argument further is the view of the ethicists that man requires to respect and preserve the environment even when it has no human use or value. This is the moral duty of man to even animals, biological and other natural realities.

To put the argument straight, it is our view that the importance or need to preserve the environment goes beyond the recourse to intrinsic or extrinsic values as being argued by some philosophers. It rather encompasses a more holistic human-centered value system. The environment as a matter of fact must be seen and treated as one in mutual relationship or interdependency with man in such a way that each plays crucial role in the collective existence and co-existence of all. What this means is that we need to preserve the environment because it is better to see the environment as a system and collectivity rather than as a separate entity in relation to man. This is so

because there is a mutual natural dependency and interconnectedness of life and living among all realities.

In this relationship of mutual dependence, the environment provides the individual with the possibilities for shaping his life in a meaningful way. Since the environment provides the individual with the foundation for a meaningful existence, a radical irresponsible incursion into the environment could distort the fundamental mutual relationship between man and his environment. This mutual relationship is like a bond or contract in which each partner is expected to contribute his just quota towards effective realization of the content(s) of the contract (Asouzu 149).

The point is that the relationship between man and the environment is one that should be mutual and complementary. Beniston also subscribed to this view when he writes:

The revolution of humankind was largely dependent on the quality of the environment and resources it provides in terms of water, food, and favourable health conditions. These are as vital as ever... Today [however], the conditions for human sustainability (i.e. water quality and quantity, food security, and health) are potentially under threat as a result of numerous human-induced factors; among these, climate change (557).

Man and His Environment

Man, his nature, place or role in the environment constitutes primarily the center and point of departure for every rewarding philosophizing. The reason is that the environment is one of the basic features of human existence. It is a natural creature and at the same time a natural necessity for man. The environment not only serves enormous benefits for man, but man conversely is a product of it. In fact, man is part and parcel of the environment. The role of man in the preservation of the environment is surprisingly in a serious dispute among philosophers thereby making the possibility of reaching consensus on the issues difficult. This is quite understandable because rational argument is the beauty of philosophy. This paper therefore lends a view to the question, but in doing so, we find the following questions very pertinent to be unbiasedly answered to enable us better understand and appreciate the issue and take a stand – ‘Are humans equal or above other natural beings? Do they

have special rights and privileges over and above other natural beings? Do they have higher and special role in shaping and managing nature? IF YES, why are they assigned this burden or moral status over the environment? We need to answer these questions as we have already said, to be able to properly define the place of man in the natural environment.

Taking our departure from the Judeo-Christian doctrine we found that human beings are created in the image of God - *imago Dei* – with the responsibility to take charge of nature or the environment and by extension, use animals and other natural resources for their own purposes and advantages. There is no doubt that this freedom and privilege given to man has resulted to the emergence of certain arrogance towards the environment, which led Lynn White to argue in his work *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* published in 1967, that the arrogance has bolstered the growth of science and technology. This supremacy assumed by humans is responsible to many environmental problems. They also result to the arrogant disregard for the rights of other living things by man. Contrary to this, is the view of some environmental philosophers that man is part and parcel of natural *cum* biological environment and not above or outside it. For this reason, man must ensure the promotion of an egalitarian environment, this is a holistic or general overview of his natural place in it. This is the view defended by Paul Taylor in his work *Respect for Nature* published in 1986 in which he meticulously argued that there should be a bio-centric egalitarianism in which all living organisms have rights claims. He considers this a moral principle which he calls ‘priority principles’. According to him, this will help to guide against cases of conflict between human beings and things in nature. This appears to be pointing towards assigning humans an equal place in nature with biological creatures and other natural beings. But the place of man towards nature or the environment is that of the role of stewards of nature or environment, including the biological creatures. This is a very special and important role.

Secondly, man, from the rational point of view is the only creature by nature that possesses reason and intelligence. He is a thinking intelligent being with reason and reflection. The essence of which therefore lies in the exercise of the characteristics of his nature in leading an intelligent and rational life towards the rest of natural beings or realities. His natural perfection, endowment or credential puts him in the position to exercise those powers and capacities, that is, rational intelligence and understanding towards the control, maintenance and preservation of the environment. This is very important because as natural creatures, humans must firmly come to terms with the meaning of natural wisdom. And if environmental philosophy is about anything in particular, it is and would be about the love of natural wisdom. This, according to Aristotle is the role which man did not arrogate to himself,

but one which nature has conditioned him by virtue of certain natural *credentials*, gifts and endowments.

Examining the Moral Status of Man towards the Environment

It may be argued that since some constituent elements of the environment do not experience pleasure or feel pain, so what would be wrong with destroying them by man? What is wrong with defacing a mountain ridge or an old-growth tree? Can we include lower animals and forests within the compass of the moral realm? Do they deserve moral consideration? We have to answer these questions because the environment has so been exploited by man to the extent that philosophers are worried about whether there is a moral status of man towards the environment.

The question of what moral status or consideration animals, biological areas and natural environment places on man has been a subject of much discussion by environmental philosophers. For instance Aldo Leopold affirms the moral status of ecological areas; Paul Taylor assigns moral status to all living things, and Jeremy Bentham argues that unnecessary suffering should not be inflicted on beings and the environment at large even if they do not have any moral status or consideration. The legal philosopher Christopher Stone argues that natural environment should have the legal right to be protected from improper use. He maintains that the courts should recognize the claims of natural environment to be protected. In his book *Animal Liberation*, published in 1975, Peter Singer advocates for the moral status of animals. Yet, it seems to us that many people would disagree that moral consideration should be extended to even appetitive creatures.

The utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) attempted an answer to these questions with his comment: 'Can the constituent elements of the environment feel? If they can, then they deserve moral consideration, but if they do not, then they do not deserve any moral consideration'. The point is that if they do not have moral consideration, then they can be exploited, abused and aesthetically violated. This is the reason why man spoils the beauty of nature and conversely nature reacts thus causing harm to man. Joseph Omoregbe was right when he says that nobody can cheat nature and get away with it. Nature will always have the last word. After the violation and the enjoyment resulting from it, the punishment will surely follow in a manner and at a time one may not expect. To avoid the inevitable punishment of going against the law of nature, it is pertinent that we embark on the exploration of nature with certain ethical principles that will not provoke nature to act.

Feeling, thinking, being conscious, reasoning, reflecting, willing, doubting, questioning and remembering qualify any being worthy of moral

consideration. This position leaves us with the thought that humans are the only being worthy of moral consideration. If this is the case, why are humans exploited, abused and violated by fellow humans even when they have moral consideration? Albert in his book *The Philosophy of Civilization* published in 1923 defends the doctrine of 'Reverence for Life'. He argues that all living things are worthy of respect, arguing that one should not kill bugs, ants or even plants if this can be avoided. He argues further that the aesthetic values of the natural environment should be maintained or preserved notwithstanding the economic exploration or end which it serves. Schweitzer's position, no doubt, appropriates the extension of moral consideration to both human and nonhuman beings. But this may be considered odd by some philosophers, especially those who argue that biological creatures live at the expense of human beings. In order to wriggle out of consideration, Schweitzer concludes his argument (which equally lends credence to the exploitation of the environment. This conclusion seems rife, in consideration to the extent that the nature of the moral status of animals in particular and the environment in general remains a challenge. Yet, the question of how to weigh differing values, and what moral status to assign to nature, has been the stimulus for environmental philosophy.

Environmental Sustainability: the Nigeria Question

The sustenance of the environment has a compelling ethical dimension. It simply means the need to preserve the environment for the future. This means that there is a natural moral urge towards self-preservation since the environment is the spatio-temporal base of human existence and coexistence. Environmental sustainability simply means community or societal sustainability. Environmental issues pervade the whole facet of human life; it pervades the whole act of human behavior and thinking. Its sustenance clearly explains the difference between a group of people and others; between one clime and another, between civility and incivility, and between developed and undeveloped nations. There appears to be no genuine and sincere commitment by the human society especially in Nigeria towards the care and preservation of the environment. Incredible varieties of human activities in Nigeria have turned what is supposed to be for the good of man against him. Such human activities like oil exploration, gas flaring, mining, forest logging, bush burning etc., have adversely affected the Nigerian environment. There are issues of climatic change: rivers are drying up and sometimes disappearing, the ozone layer is depleting, and most importantly, the issue of sooth in the oil rich Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, especially in Rivers State. Forests are gone, mainly as a result of deforestation. Human life is in danger with increasing cases of deaths as a result of contaminated air and water pollutions. Game reserves or familiar animals are almost thrown into extinction, with increasing cases of erosion menace worsening the situation. This situation provides a clear prismatic compass of where we are heading to as a nation. For, one of

the yardsticks for determining how developed a society has attained is with reference to the environment, that is, the overall manipulation, exploitation, conservation, preservation and sustainability of the environment. Environmental sustainability in Nigeria is a very serious concern, but the good news is that it can be achieved. It must be achieved through ecological consciousness or awareness, value orientation, advancement of responsible ecological citizenship and ecological conversion and institution of workable laws or legal framework. This is what Njiofor means when he writes:

Environmental problem is due mainly to our ill-nurtured environmental orientation; it is due to poor understanding of the concept of the environment and our place in it. It is a problem of excesses accruing from wrong understanding and definition of need; a problem of wrong attitude towards the foundation and physical ground of one's own existence (240).

This form of education would include ethico-moral harmony with the environment; the consideration and recognition of the centrality of the environment in the being of man and existence. The point is that environmental education is key to environmental sustainability in Nigeria. Educating the citizens on conservation, that is, the care, protection, preservation and improvement of the environment is very important. This knowledge is very essential for further decisions or policies on the improvement of the quality of the environment. Any attempt at doing the contrary would amount to undermining environmental education and the ethical obligation of man towards the protection and preservation of the environment. The consequence of this will be very grave on the continued existence of man and the country. Environmental education simply put, is "a permanent process through which individuals gain awareness of their environment and acquire the knowledge, values, skills, experiences and determination which will enable them act individually and collectively to solve present and future environmental problems". This education must be continuous and unending including parents, schools, society and government. It should be accommodated in the curriculum content of learning in our schools and colleges. It requires conscious effort and commitment from all and sundry including the global community. In fact, global consensus is seriously needed to confront environmental problems because environmental issues are global issues. The reason is that unilateral actions on the part of individuals or specific countries cannot achieve environmental sustainability. Such as planning a sustainable and diversified agriculture, developing renewable and less polluting forms of energy, encouraging a more efficient use of energy, promoting a better management of marine and forest resources, and ensuring universal access to drinking water (Obungwah et al,191-192).

This position is also expressed by Engel and Engel (1990) in their article presented in a Conference on the Conservation and Development of the Environment. According to them, concrete solutions to environmental problems will largely depend on a new organizational capacity of society as a whole, based on the cultural values of different communities, their creativity and their potentials for innovations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A keen awareness, detailed observations and an enthusiastic sustenance or preservation of the natural world that environs is the responsibility of us all. Therefore we must simply and squarely imbibe the stimulation of environmental consciousness or awareness as a formidable approach to preserve, conserve and sustain the environment. We must consciously seek to maintain a mutual and complementary relationship with the environment since our survival and wellbeing depends on the conducive nature of our environment. To this end, Nigerian people and government must develop conscious culture of the preservation of nature and desist from disrupting the natural processes of things and their ecological relationships in the world by engaging only in responsible environmentally or eco-friendly actions. Government must implement measures to check environmental pollution by individuals, companies, factories, industries, etc. It must regulate deforestation and afforestation meticulously and ensure that houses are built with proper drainages. The government of Nigeria must ensure that it develops a market economy that encourages recycling and discourages waste of limited resources. The continuous enlightenment of the citizenry on environmental protection and preservation by government must be encouraged. Government must evolve workable laws or appropriate legal framework necessary for the conservation and preservation of the environment.

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