

## THE CREATURE (MAN) AND HIS ENVIRONMENT: AN ETHICAL EXAMINATION

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### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on an ethical examination of man and his environment. It begins with the proposition that in any functional sense, man and his environment are inseparable and form only one unitary system. Man cannot exist without the environment and the environment has descriptive properties only if it is connected to man. However, the conception of man in his relationship to the environment has probably been problematic and controversial. This is because the creature (man) and his environment were created to interact with each other on a balance basis. While the natural environment is to create a fair decent shelter and to provide food supplements including economic resources and so on. Man on the other hand is supposed to care and protect the environment from destruction. However, when placed on measurement scale, there seems to be inequilibrium in the relationship existing between the two, that is (man and his environment). Hence, the analysis done in this paper based on ethical perspective is to provide in-depth information on numerous issues pertaining to the role of humankind in the environment with which he is associated. This is done to make people have a better understanding of the impacts of our activities on our environment, and the need for proper management against wanton exploitation.*

**Keywords:** Human Person, Environment, Ethical, Deforestation, Pollution, Climate Change

### **Introduction**

This paper begins with the proposition that in any functional sense, man and his environment are inseparable and form only one unitary system. Man cannot exist without the environment and the environment has descriptive properties only if it is connected to man. However, the conception of man in his relationship to the environment has probably been problematic and controversial. This is because the creature (man) and his environment were created to interact with each other on a balance basis. While the natural environment is to create a fair decent shelter and to provide food supplements including economic resources and so on. Man

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### **Explication of Conceptual Framework**

#### **(a) The Creature (Man)**

Practically, every African society has its own myth or myths concerning man. African ontology is basically anthropocentric. Man is at the very Centre of existence, and everything else is seen in its relation to this central position of man. God is the concrete explanation of man's origin and sustenance. It is as if God's existence is for the sake of man. The spirits are ontologically between God and man. Man is not merely a passive element in the rhythm of nature. He plays an active role in nature. He actively participates in the mysterious forces which keep the universe going. He is not just a parasite living off the earth. He lives in it, feeds and sustains himself. According to Aquinas, man is not only a rational animal, incarnate spirit, and thus free but above all a person. There is then, in nature, nothing superior to man, Gilson, writes: "Now, every man is a person, it is his act of being which gives men that combination of gifts which he alone possesses: Of being a reason and person; all he knows, all he does, all he wills, issues from the fact by which he is what he is." As *homo-religiosus* (a religious being), man lives in a religious universe, so that nature and its objects are intimately associated with God.

However, aside the African perception of 'man,' Fatubarin (2014: 49) observes that what is generally known as "Man," is also known by such other names as Mankind, Humankind and Human being. These are generic names that cover both sexes, male and female of the organism that goes by the biological name of *Homo sapiens*. This is a name that means the "perfect man," This is the form of human being that is also known as the "modern man." This is a name that reminds people that the humankind of today is scientifically, a product of organic evolution, which involved translating from lower forms of human beings, through less perfect, to the perfect human being we have today. This

biological evolution involved the translation of human forms from *Dryopithecus*, through *Australopithecus*, *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens* (Fatubarin, 2008:82).

It is this evolution of humankind that confers on him, the traits that makes him more highly developed than other animals. It is also this evolution that makes man to be more sophisticated than other living things, which he not only exerts dominance upon, but can also manipulate to suite his purpose. According to Pastor Adeboye (2012:54), humankind, is a special being, comprising of a three-fold-components of physical, social and spiritual being, who acquired his special endowments during his evolution that involved thousands of years. However, it can be said without fear of contradiction that, all the natural endowments of humankind have no parallel in other living things. They are what have added together to confer supremacy of humankind over other living things. They are also what are contributing to making him not only to dominate over any environment he finds himself, but also manipulate such environment the way he chooses. It is the complex interplay of his interactions within the environment that give rise to the title of this paper.

### **(b) The Concept of Environment**

Ever since the word environment entered the lexicon of the English Language, it has attained an omnibus status that makes users of the English Language apply it to as many deserving situations as possible. Therefore, the word is used for such things as Third World Environment (Akinrinade, 2012:23), enabling environment, business environment, among others. However, Fatubarin (2014:49), remarks, "though environment and a number of other terms have for long been recognized as important terms in ecology, as part of the active vocabularies of the subject, it is the recognition of the importance of environment in sustainable development and in particular, the phenomenon of climate change that have made the term environment, to move to the front burner among other ecological concepts." Climate change – a major environmental concept, has been recognized the world over as about "the greatest crisis ever faced collectively by humankind" (Foley, 1991 cited in Fatubarin, 2014:49).

However, in the context of this study, the term environment means the total surroundings of any living organism: man, plant and animal. It is divided into three components: (a) Natural environment composed of plants and animals, water, air, gases and soil, (b) Artificial environment composed of factories, cities, markets, roads, houses and the modifications obtained from these environments,

(c) social environment composed of people's culture, art, law, etc. The influence of man here is centered on the natural environment which is made up of the following factors of climate: temperature, land, wind, light, rainfall, water, population explosion. For instance, agriculture, forestry, wildlife, fisheries all represent some aspects of the modification and exploitation of natural environment by man. All that have been said so far point directly to the fact that man's influence on the natural environment to which he belongs or exerts some impacts on, is very tremendous and could be looked at individually so as to deduce their specific ecological impact on the environment.

### **Man and his Activities within his Environment: An Ethical Appraisal**

When God created the universe, human beings inclusive, He saw all that He had made to be good, cf. Gen.1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and He entrusted all those creations to humans to care for it with high sense of responsibility. "The Lord entrusted all of creation to their (man and woman) responsibility, charging them to care for its harmony and development (cf. Gen. 1:26-30)." Therefore, it can be said that, it is the will of God that man, with his intelligence, should use the earth to better the condition of his life and that of humanity at large. The care of the earth, our common home, which according to Aristotle is the center of the universe, and "is occupied by the life-bearing earth, the home of diverse creatures (Barnes, 1990:391), is therefore a duty incumbent on human beings, so that the goodness given to it by the Creator should not in any way be disfigured, and that both the present and future generations will live dignified life as the creator willed it.

However, as observed in the world today, the creature (man), rather than being the responsible and prudent custodian of his environment, has, through his daily activities, which at times are motivated by some selfish or ulterior reasons that do distort the nature of the other inhabitants of environment, become its adversary. As the center of the universe, every other thing becomes relative in so far as man's convenience is the ultimate value. Whatever does not serve his interest becomes irrelevant and so can be discarded at will. Here lies the root of man's inhumanity to man in all its ramification as well as his inhumanity to nature.

The effects of all this man's misguided knowledge and behavior, especially with regard to the environment, are evident today precisely in the issues of climate change and the endangered species. The depletion of the ozone layer due to large scale of environmental pollution by the industrialized "super powers" is taking

its toll on life on earth- the excess heat, the massive draught and its attendant famine and hunger, the desertification of the environment and its attendant erosion menace, the menace of flooding in some places due to the disorganization of river ocean channels-reclaiming of land for housing and industrial developments, to mention only a few. Complex technology releases the so-called “anthropogenic” (human induced), greenhouse gases – carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluorocarbons – into the atmosphere and these are the greatest contributors to climate change. These anthropogenic greenhouse gases are distinct from the ones found naturally in the atmosphere.

For the man of technological age, nature has become an object for manipulation by means of technology, since he sees nature from the mechanistic point of view; and development from the consumerist standpoint. Nature becomes something to be manipulated and consumed. Hence, **doing** and **having** taken precedence over **being**, the **transcendence in nature** is being thrown over-board. Rich and industrialized nations have been competing on technological powers and superiority, thereby jeopardizing the life and equilibrium of mother earth.

### **The Impacts of Man’s Activities on His Environment: Environmental Crisis**

This section deals with the crisis that results from the relationship between the human person and his environment. Since every relationship has its challenges, that of the man and his environment is not devoid of such problems. The intrinsic dignity of the world has been compromised. “When human beings fail to find their true place in this world, they misunderstand themselves and act against themselves” (*Laudato Si*, 111). The identified underline cause of this problem can be seen in man’s pretention of exercising unconditional dominion over things, heedless of any moral considerations which on the contrary must distinguish all human activities. The human origin therefore is at the origin of environmental crisis. The earth now cries out because of the harm inflicted on her by man’s irresponsibility. The situation of our planet is depressive, it seems the human person has embarked on a self- destruction journey.

It suffices to move from one major town to another and, then one will get the true picture of the magnitude of the damage of what human beings have done to mother earth, ranging from pollution to deforestation. Exploitation of the resources of creation and the conquest of this resources seems to be the expression of the understanding of the power God has given to humanity to dominate nature. All this affects the quality of human life because there is obviously a decline in the quality of life. The growing capacity transformative



intervention of the human person has become a threat to the environment hospitable aspect. According to John Paul 11, "the powerful means of technological civilization threatens the environment as a whole." Nature seems like an instrument in the hand of a human person which he must manipulate constantly especially by means of technology, consequently the disastrous effects are seen as follows:

### **Deforestation**

In Nigeria, deforestation has led to climate change. The loss of tropical forests which will otherwise help mitigate climate change is alarmingly on the increase. However, going by Biblical account, on the third day in His creation project, God commanded the earth to produce vegetation and so it was (Gen.1:11-12). The act of deforestation is working contrary to this desire of God as human beings today, seem to be saying: "let every vegetation be turned into desert land." If we neglect to monitor the harm done to nature and the environmental impact of our decisions, we will be signaling our disregard not only for the message contend in the structures of nature itself but also the message of Scripture that human beings should care for the earth (Gen. 1).

### **Pollution**

Some forms of pollution are part of people's experience. The rate at which our earth is exposed to atmospheric pollutants produces a broad spectrum of health hazards. There is a whole lot of pollution ranging from industrial fluids, means of transportation, agro toxins used on different plants, substances which contribute to the acidification of soil and water, such as petroleum spillage (Gerry, 1999: 24, Freedman and Jaggi, 1993: 1 - 3). A drive through some of our towns shows a whole lot of filths and piles of things around the city corners. This also is hazardous to people's health.

### **Climate Change**

The world over is presently witnessing a very disturbing climatic system. Some decades ago, one can confidently identify the different seasons of the year and the characteristics of such season. In recent times, it is difficult to say when the rain will begin in Africa, when the snow will stop falling in Europe or America, etc. Excessive heat is experienced within in different part of Africa, while excessive snow fall is experienced in America and flooding is experienced in some other part of the world. Apart from the warming which results from volcanic activities, variations in the earth's orbit and axis and the solar cycle,

there is a whole lot of human activity which aggravate it. In recent times, the great concentration of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides, etc. has been identified as responsible for this global warming. One need not to be told about the effect of warming on the carbon cycle, which creates a vicious cycle that aggravates the situation and could end in an unprecedented destruction of the ecosystem. The quality of water available to the poor is such that is hazardous to human health as a result of pollution (Dublin 8, Gill and McMillan, 1983:1).

What can we do to stop this or at least reduce it to the barest minimum? Does that imply that we should do without or away with technology? Must we make a return to the stone age in order to salvage our common habitat? The environmental concern is no other than a tragic consequence of the unchecked activity of man. All of us at one time or the other in one way or the other has contributed to environmental crisis. Whenever the human person degrades the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wet land, contaminating the earths' waters, lands, air and its life, sins are being committed against itself and God (Chryssavgis, 2012:51). The magnitude of the abuse of the earth by the human person is such that a critical review of the crisis will lead any reflective mind to begin to ask series of questions such as the following: what is happening to the earth, our home? Is technology bad? How do we engage the new techno-science without destroying our environment?

However, we cannot ignore the fact that humanity has entered a new era of advanced technology which has brought us to crossroads. We are beneficiaries of two centuries of enormous waves of change. We must admit that science and technology are wonderful products of a God -given human creativity and it is good to rejoice in them and be grateful for the possibilities this progress offer to humanity especially in the area of medicine, engineering and communication. The whole technological progress seemed like solving a problem to create others.

Pathetically, our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience. We have little awareness of our limitations. The human person has constantly intervened in nature which for a long time meant being in tune with it and disrespecting the possibilities it had to offer us. It was a matter of receiving whatever nature itself allows but now the contrary is what is obtainable, we are now the ones to lay our hands on things to extract everything possible from nature without respect. All these affect the quality of human life.

Today our world is being plagued and ravaged by so many illnesses. People are dying of strange illnesses that were not heard of before because of our carelessness. Cases of different forms of cancer are alarmingly on the increase. Many people have died and are still dying as a result of this and we ask God why (Eric Chivian et al; 2008: 286-323). But I am of a contrary opinion; I think the “why” of all these strange deadly diseases should rather be addressed to us. Are we not largely responsible for all the different forms of pollutions and other ecological catastrophe which are consequences of all our technological and scientific activities? There is need for a change! Environmental ethics should be imbibed by all and sundry.

### **Environmental Ethics in Perspective**

It is pertinent to have a foray on the definitions of ethics, especially environmental ethics as it is perceived and transmitted through the Biblical studies perspectives. As a term, ethics originates from the Greek word, *ethos*. The concept was introduced by Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, to designate a location where people lived and shared life experiences together. According to Manus (2008:307), “with the advancement of human civilization, the term, ‘*ethos*’ came to acquire such other significations as custom, temperament, character, in fact, before the ancient knew it, it has come to denote a way of thinking and a way of behaving.” Furthermore, he maintained that, “for the Greeks and under the continued inspiration of Aristotle, human beings are endowed with the capacity for rational behavior as the ‘real’ basis for ethics and human conduct.” In related development, Manus (2008:307) sees ‘environment’ inter alia, as the aggregate of social and cultural conditions that influence the life of an individual or a community. It also means the locale where people live, move and have their being.

In the light of these definitions, their significance bear relevance on the various concepts: naturism and environmental ethics to our context in contemporary society, Africa in particular. For Manus (2008:307), the concepts of nature and environmental ethics, is co-extensive to deep iconology or value ethics, “a secular environmental ethics that recognizes value. In all life forms, the natural system and diversity of earth and rejects anthropocentric ethics.” In his analysis, Bowie in Manus (2008:307-308) avers:

Values ethics prescribes that we humans must respect our environment through the preservation of species, the conservation of



habitats, the non-depletion of biodiversity and natural resources, the ozone layer and the effects of air and water pollution.

In his own view, Bowie (2004:100) writes that “value ethics concerns itself with human behavior and conduct towards creation which has value in itself and reveals God’s own love for creation as human life depends on it.” “It rouses our consciousness on the environment and sustainability issues. It insists on their conformation to the essential norms of human values, conduct and behavior....” One can say here that, value ethics places a demand on us to insist on what ought to be in order to allow our generation to share the good life, the life worth living; especially life that is satisfying to the taste of the average human craving for a fulfilled life on earth.

All religions of the world have traditionally expressed some ethical concern for the environment and its creatures. They have accorded some moral significance to other creatures and proposed some ethical dimensions towards optimum care of our natural environment. For instance, Pope John Paul 11 in Keith (2009:11) made a significant contribution to the retrieval of stewardship ethics within Christianity; In 1990 he wrote a *World Day of Peace Message* entitled, “*The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, here, he asserted that, environmental problems are a moral crisis for all humanity, and that the environment is ethically significant in its own right.” In other words, nature has intrinsic value as God creation. Its conclusion reads:

Today, the iconological crisis has assumed such proportions as to the responsibility of everyone, as I have pointed out, its various aspects demonstrate the need for concentrated efforts aimed at establishing the duties and obligations that belong to individuals, peoples, states and the international communities. Thus, all members and groups in the human family, regardless of their faith or whether they have faith, have responsibilities to the environment.

Within Christianity, the vision of living within a sacramental universe complements the idea of stewardship ethics. According to Keith (2009:11), a ‘sacrament’ is a visible expression of divine love and Christians celebrate certain rituals (e.g. baptism, eucharist) as sacraments. He further states that, “recent their logical thinking has sought to recover the ancient understanding of these rituals within a broader understanding of the entire created world as having religious significance. This approach reveals the continuity between the formal sacraments

and the physicality of our world.” Thus, the scope includes all life, indeed, all of the created world. This is in line with Obilor’s (2003:135) definition of religion as, “the whole complexus of attitudes, beliefs, practices, gestures, rituals, emotions, convictions, and institutions through which we express our deep fundamental relationship with reality and not excluding the created order.” The phrase “created order” is equally important to ensure that religion begins with creation and the creator. St Francis of Assisi is an example of someone who understood himself to live in a world charged with divine life, in a sacramental world. He was named Patron Saint of Ecologists because he celebrated the beauty and diversity of creation through his prayer and preaching. He viewed the entire created world as members of the divine family. By implication, the entire created world should be well managed by human persons for the common good of all without exploitation and destruction through unethical practices that lacks moral justification.

### **Way Forward: Time for Change**

We (humans) play a vital role in our environment just like everything else. However, experience shows that what most of us lack, is the ability to understand our place within it. This cognitive capacity of ours has historically been the cause of a perceived division between man and his environment. However, in order to achieve a sustainable future in which humans assume a more reasonable role and have less of negative impact, it is imperative that we reconsider our role and relationship with our environment. A change in the way we regard and treat God’s gift upon mankind. By implication, such change of attitude will enable us to reevaluate our position in the world rather than continue to degrade it.

There are a number of ways in which we can begin to reconsider our relationship with our environment, but all of which require an enormous effort. Through a universal education curriculum, it is possible to encourage people everywhere to consider themselves as part of a larger picture. By teaching people about the environment, evolution and ecology, we can provide them with the tools for change. In order to bring about necessary change it is critical that people take action. Through a universal environmental education program, it is possible to galvanize people into forming new ideas and opinions of their environment and to understand their place within it.

A universal education program would go a long way in encouraging change in how we view each other and our environment. Changing attitudes are a primary

component in achieving a sustainable future-one in which nature is allowed to run its course without human intervention or will allow people, machines and nature to work together for each other's mutual benefit. In order for the Earth to retain its balance, it is important that we not overstep our bounds as species. This requires a universal effort to reevaluate our relationship with nature and make adjustments as needed.

### **Conclusion**

The discourse so far shows that, the present environmental situation is an indication that there are lots of cracks in the planet that we live in and this definitely calls for solutions which can help us to escape the spiral of self-destruction which engulfs us. Folding arms and watching from afar, is not the best option, rather adherence to environmental ethics, encompassing Christian environmental ethics would finally be the turning point in alleviating environment crises. It is believed that, with the establishment of a Christian ecological conscience and the involvement of institutional commitments, new ideas, spiritual contemplation as well as political activism, environmental crises shall be gradually eliminated in Nigeria and the global world. Hence, all hands must be on deck; the set time to right all the wrongs is now, for tomorrow may be too late.

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