Eco-Communitarianism:An African Perspective

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Abstract

It is an undeniable cliché that the world at large and Africa in particular is facing serious environmental problems such as deforestation, water pollution, air pollution, wetlands destruction, poaching as well as global warming. These problems are mainly caused by economic pressure for industrialization, technological advancement, population growth, poverty and ignorance. Western moral speculations like deep ecology, land ethic, ecofeminism and as well as scientific approaches methodologies have been employed in other to solve this problem. However these theories have been proven not to be very much effective. African eco-communitarianism as a hypothesis, implanted on Indigenous information framework can contribute to supply a local-developed answer for our current environmental issues. For Africa, environmental ethics is metaphysically embedded in what it means to be or to exist. Consequently, environmental ethics should be understood as stretching from the individual being to involve the communities of other persons, non-human persons as well the environment.

Keywords: Air pollution; Water contamination; Eco-communitarianism; Anthropocentrists; Carnivorous animals

Introduction

It is evident that our world and Africa specifically is confronting genuine environmental problems, for example, deforestation, water contamination, air contamination, wetlands destruction, poaching and also global warming. These issues are essentially caused by the economic weight of population growth, technological advancement, ignorance, and poverty. Endeavors to tone down these environmental problems have been generally impacted by the employment and deployment of Western moral speculations like deep ecology, land ethic, social ecology, ecofeminism and as well as scientific approaches methodologies. While these techniques are credited for framing the establishment of environmental discourse, they have not been a one-measure fits-all approach. Thus, they have not registered results in relieving ecological challenges particularly with specific reference to Africa. This is essentially in light of the fact that they have ended up being human-centric and they are not seasoned with socio-social substances which recognize the indigenous people and shape their association with the natural habitat. It is against this scenery that the author feels that African eco-communitarianism as a hypothesis implanted on Indigenous information framework can contribute to supply a home-developed answer for African natural issues.

Ethics and the Environment

All 'Organisms' rely on their environment for energy and resources needed to sustain life: Potable water, Clean air, Food, and Shelter to live. For the majority of human history, enhance long life is due to better access to these necessities. Though the environment sustains human life, it can also be the cause of diseases and sickness. Lack of basic necessities is a significant cause of human mortality. Advances in hygiene, water treatment, agriculture, and sanitation have had a far superior impact on individual health than medical technology [1]. Notwithstanding, more money is spent in our world today on technological advancement to the detriment of our environment. Environmental hazards enhance the risk of asthma, cancer, heart disease, and numerous other illnesses [2]. These hazards can be physical, such as food contaminants, toxic chemicals, and pollution or they can be social such as poor housing setting, dangerous working condition, poverty, and urban sprawl. Poor sanitation and hygiene, unsafe drinking is answerable for an array of infectious diseases, such as diarrhea, schistosomiasis, meningitis, cholera, and gastritis. In 2015, it was estimated that roughly about 3,50000 children under age 5 (mostly in third world countries) died from diarrheal diseases interrelated to unsafe drinking water, and roughly around 1.8 billion people drank water polluted with feces [3]. In the year 2017 more than 2 billion people globally lacked access to basic hygiene [3]. All this are a connection to the problems we face in our environment. The above problem calls for an urgent need for environmental ethics.

In Western philosophy, there is no doubt that environmental ethics exists as a philosophy that is concerned with the relations of how human beings ought to relate with their non-human counterparts and the natural environment as a whole. Paul Taylor attributes the development of contemporary environmental ethics to the ecological changes brought about by humanity as he argues that, the effects of human culture and technology on the planetary biosphere are becoming ubiquitous. Due to the emergence of large-scale industrialization in the past century, the recent rise in the growth rate of human population and the expansion of economies that stimulate and depend on high levels of consumption, our human presence is now felt throughout the Earth [4]. This is why Paul Taylor thinks that environmental ethics as a contemporary attempt, should aim to "Establish the rational grounds for a system of moral principles by which human treatment of natural ecosystems and their wild communities of life ought to be guided" [4]. The inquiry regarding the ethical relationship that should exist between human beings, non-human beings and their surrounding remains at the center of both Western and African environmental ethics. Contrary to Morscher, Neumaier and Simons' view that "Human beings are not the only creatures which have moral standing, and that not only human interests give reasons for action" [5], in western philosophy, human beings have tended to look at themselves as the only morally superior creatures on the planet earth. This view is based on the assumption that human beings are the only rational animals. This thinking can be traced to Aristotle thought which states that 'Man is a rational animal', hereby negating all other animals. This can be drawn from the Ancient period of western philosophy to date. The view which shapes anthropocentric environmental ethics has been held by thinkers like, Aristotle, Plato, Aquinas, Augustine, Spinoza, Descartes, and Leibnitz. While many persons think it is reasonable to hold the view that human beings are indeed the only creatures on earth that are capable of rational reflection, such knowledge has served to validate and form a somewhat anthropocentric thinking in environmental ethics. Anthropocentric thinking is essentially the expense of every environmental problem we encounter today.

Western Anthropocentric Thinking

The word 'Anthropocentrism' is seen from the Greek vocabulary for "Human" and "center" and is expressed simply as human-centered opinion [6]. The perspective holds that human beings are detached from nature and are advanced compared to nonhuman species. Human beings are positioned as the "Central or most significant entities in the world" and this is also in line with Protagoras postulation which states that 'Man is the measure of all things'. Consequently, anthropocentrists are often in favor of any actions that appear to be of advantage to humans, to the detriment of all other non animal and things. Anthropocentrism is frequently used synonymously with the stipulations "Human supremacy". The conception is understood to be an important aspect of Western thinking and culture and may be a significant factor to the human-caused mass extinction of nonhuman species, environmental degradation, and mistreatment of captive animals.

From the Greek era in philosophy, the western world has been considered to be anthropocentric in nature. Godfrey Tangwa echoes this when he claimed that "The Western worldview can be described as predominantly anthropocentric and individualistic, and contrasted with its African counterpart is described as eco-bio-communitarian" [6]. Also to this Coman further strengthens the argument that is worth taking into account:

In the west, from the time of Homer and Plato up to the 18th century Enlightenment, it was considered as a given that humans and human destinies were the central reference point through which meaning and purpose could be given to the word- indeed, to the universe. In the Platonic philosophy, there was a close correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm-that is to say, between the way the material world is structured and the way the human creature is structured [7].

Aristotle also is seen echoing this thought, and his thinking goes further to the point of identifying a pecking order of moral precedence between non-human animals, humanity and the world of plants as he daringly argues:

In like manner we may infer that, after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of man, the tame for use and food, the wild, if not all, at least the greater part of them, for food, and for the provision of clothing and various instruments. Now, if nature makes nothing incomplete and nothing in vain, the inference must be that it has made all animals for the sake of man [8].

Such thinking often supports the traditional division between nature and humanity and thus contributes to the supremacy of human beings over the environment. This sought of thinking is even more shocking when we consider that a more brutal similar thought was used to colonized and enslaved Africans. As Africans were said to be non-humans since they have no capacity to reason, and also are outside world history hence they were considered nonhumans as rationality is only what defines human according to western Aristotle [9]. David Hume, Trevor-Roper, Aristotle, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Hegel are few authors who fronted this position. Informing environmental ethics, Jeremy Bentham philosophy also posed a serious attempt at advancing an anthropocentric environmental ethics. To Bentham "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the other hand, the standard of right and wrong, on the other, the chain of causes and effects are fastened to their throne" [10].

Here, Bentham's utilitarian philosophy and advancement to ethics have influenced environmental ethics not only modern philosophy, but it is also seen in contemporary environmental ethics. Traditionally, western environmental ethics is clued-up by needs of protecting the needs and interests of present and future human generations. Attempts to consider the moral wellbeing of human future generations and the environment in themselves have been noticeably intrinsic in traditional Western rational discourse. Singer [11] also echoes this truth that has been predominant in the Western philosophical custom.

For Singer, Aristotle is among the founders of this custom in Western philosophical thinking that holds the view that human beings in nature ought to claim dominion over the natural environment. Aristotle hence shares the thoughts of most early Greek and Western philosophers who regard nature as some form of a hierarchy [11]. Nevertheless, it is not until later that non-anthropocentric environmental moral concerns began to be champion in most debates on the need for a change in environmental ethics, ideology and animal rights in modern western philosophy. In advocating this standpoint, Arne Naess opines that 'Today, a leading responsibility of humankind is the responsibility for future generations; that we hand down a planet with resources as great as we found in our own generations. But we also have a responsibility for future living creatures in general" [12]. Elliot also welcomes the new systematized thinking in environmental ethics he notes that:

A human-centered environmental ethic may go quite a way toward articulating the moral responses many may have to environmental damage and destruction. But, not everyone who endorses environmentalist policies is moved merely by human-centered considerations. Indeed, some might regard them as comparatively insignificant and others would regard them as no more significant than considerations that extend beyond the interests of our own species [8,13].

Alternatively, the basis's why environmental ethics requires to be measured without automatically prioritizing human wellbeing alone, is that human actions on their environment affect not only human species alone. Rather, it also has long-term effects on other non-human animals and the non-conscious reality that also dwell within the environment. Thus, the prerequisite to safeguard the needs of current and future generations, as well as the interests of other non-rational creations in their own right, remains at the core of contemporary environmental ethics in the Western world.

Eco-Communitarian

Eco-communitarian implies interdependence and peaceful co-existence among humans, animals, earth, and plants which is against the Western perspective that is said to be anthropocentric and individualistic [6]. African environmental ethicist namely Tangwa, Ogungbemi and Ugwuanyi talk about eco-communitarianism, as ethics of nature relatedness and the articulation of African moral principle and traditional practices in relation to environmental ethics respectively. Of importance and interests from these ideas is the realization that they are all premised on African communitarianism so together they are calling for an environmental ethic from within. Eco-communitarian seeks to restore certain elements of an African conception of the political and to expand the limits of the concept. According to a classic account, if ethics is the pursuit of the good life or self-realization, then politics is the pursuit of the good life in common and self-realization for the whole community [6]. Eco-communitarian affirms the political in this sense but reinterprets it in ecological terms. It seeks the improvement of our long-obscured nature as zoon politikon. By this phrase we mean not simply the "Political animal" who partakes in the civic decision-making process, but the communal and social being whose selfhood is developed and articulated through energetic engagement in the various dimension of the life within the community. An eco-communitarian considers ways in which we can promote the emergence of mutualistic, humane, ecologically- conscientious institutions in every quarter of social life [14].

African Communitarianism

The underlining key presumption is that African communitarian social orders put precedence to the welfare of the community other than the individual. Gyekye [15] in his variant of moderate communitarianism contends that communitarianism sees the individual as inherently common being, installed in a set of social relationship interdependence. What this involves is that a

communitarian culture shares and maintains similar religious beliefs, proverbs and an understanding of morality. These, among different viewpoints, characterize a communitarian culture. This involves from a communitarianism perspective, that an individual is not understood in isolation, rather, as he relates and relies upon others. Menkiti further contends that, in Africa, the community has precedence over the individual. Menkiti states categorically that personhood is defined by community and not by traits such as memory, will or rationality. He distinguishes the Western perspective which commonly embraces that a person is a lone individual from an African perspective, in which a person is acknowledged by allusion to his environing community, quoting John Mbiti's proclamation "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am". According to Menkiti as far as Africans are concerned, the actuality of the communal world takes priority over the reality of individual life histories, consequently, the communal ethics has epistemological and ontological precedence [16]. What is essential here is that Gyekye and Menkiti's expression of African communitarianism is that an individual is "inherently a communal being embedded in a context of social relationships of interdependence". We can then say that a community in this regard refers to both human beings, plants, animals, and other non-living things of our natural habitat. If this is true, then it is, however, safe to postulate that it is through the idea of common good, goodwill, holistic approach, co-operation, consensus, taboos and totemism, and African traditional religion that an African environmental awareness is reflected and hinged.

African Traditional Religion and Eco-Communitarian

The famous intellectual of African Traditional Religion, John S Mbiti, opined his book, African Religions, and Philosophy, that "Africans are notoriously religious", this implies that religion penetrates and permeate the entire life of an African in everything he does including his relations. African traditional religion naturally integrated into daily life such that for Africans there is no clear-cut division between what is sacred and what is secular. Every act and everything is looked upon from a religious perspective. Also, African idea of the human person is said to be existential, in the sense that it is plinth on the belief that the metaphysical globe is not abstractly unconnected from concrete experience since the metaphysical and physical are necessary aspects of human reality [17]. Vimbai Chivaura resonance comparable sentiments as he claims that, the African world declares that our world has two aspects. They are the physical and the spiritual. The spiritual manifests itself in various ways. The material and spiritual, therefore, coexist both in human societies and the rest of nature since we are all interwoven into the fabric of the spiritual universe [18].

In promoting life, African Traditional Religion is linked with the environment, for the reason that it is through a healthy environment that life is improved. As a communal religion, Traditional African religion is concerned with whatsoever affects human life. In this view then Africans view the universe as a profoundly religious universe, hence they treat it as such. Africans view an individual as part of the environment. Environment to an African means a whole life. Everybody then in traditional African culture had a religious and moral responsibility towards the environment. They knew that to destroy the environment meant to destroy the human person. Thus the communal culture has ontological and epistemological precedence. It is leaning towards safeguard of life and endorsement of anything that enhances life. It is almost impossible to try to understand African environmentalism devoid of understanding the culture of African people. For example in African traditional religion some certain trees, mountains, forest, and rivers are considered sacred because through them God could commune with them, so they are of celestial significance and treated with respect. The same is valid for some animals. In African traditional society, each clan belongs to a particular totem which they recognize themselves with.

In African traditional religion, the notion of the vital forces is based on the assumption that existence is anchored upon some fundamental conceptions of existence. This conception of existence hinges on the understanding that "Lifeforce is the fundamental reality in the universe" [19]. In African traditional religion, it is commonly accepted that all life, be it human or non-human, is a sacred creation. By this, it means that all objects or being of life ought to be treated with reverence and respect such that they could fulfill the purposive goals for existence which involve living a meaningful and good life. Subsequent this view, I thus submit that reverence and respect for life remain the foundational obligations in which humans owe his environment. It is such that if reverence and respect for life and sacred creation are employed as the most primary purposes in life, it would inform our conscience and actions towards our environment. All creation should live since such life is sacred. Even though some beings like human beings and carnivorous animals might depend on other living beings, all created beings should to have a right to harmonious living. This is why for instance; human beings should be discouraged from slaughtering animals when they do not intend to use them. According to Behrens, there is a need to form harmonious interactions "Between persons and persons, and between persons and other parts of the web of life" [20]. If we can accept balance and harmony as an essential means to the purpose for all life, there will be a strong reason to accept eco-communitarian environmental ethics stemming from African philosophy.

Traditional African ecology, likewise every other thing in the society, is inseparably connected with traditional religion. For Africans, environmental protection is endorsed by the creator God and the ancestors of the land. In African Religion, it is a consideration that human manner towards the natural environment is determined and also determines their conduct and relationships with God. This analysis is shaped by the commonly acceptable African understanding that nature and God are inseparable and spiritually bound such that one's behavior towards God will approximately always boil down to one's behavior towards the environment in terms of ethical implications. This is the spiritual aspect connecting microcosms such as God, human beings, ancestors and with the bigger macrocosm; the environment. This hypothetical relationship in African Religion is much valuable to African environmental ethics. Thus, going by this, environmental ethics can be strongly influenced and informed by the way African religion understood human playing a part in the relationships to his environment. Laurenti Magesa echoes this truth in his exposition: How does African religion view the world and humanity's place and role within it? What elements make up the universe and how do they influence life? What is the purpose of human existence, and what implications does this have for the practical order of things? In African religion, the answers to these questions delineate the conception of morality in the universe: the understanding of the good that sustains life and the bad that destroys it. They establish both the context and the content of African morality and ethics [21].

African conceptions of God validate that the African natural environment is a sacred creation and mainly a sign of God's creative capacity. This could explain while an African would always pour libration to acknowledge, respect and admire God sacred creation. Pouring of libation entails pouring of liquid substance on soil with the conviction that contact is made between man and metaphysical realm by lubricating the soil with liquid substance like alcohol or wine. An African often does this when he is about to exploit or have any significant dealing with nature. This is often done to acknowledge, respect and seek permission from God(s) for his purport undertaking. For instance, in Africa, before a man would cut down a tree for the medicinal purpose; he will pour libration, seeking permission to carry out such endeavors. This undertaking helps man to respect and be at peace with nature.

Totemism and Taboos

Totem is a plant, animal or natural object (or depicting an object) that serves as the symbol of a family or clan among a traditional people or a tribal. Totems represent a supernatural or ritual bond of harmony within the group [22]. In early societies, totems were key symbols of social cohesion and religion; they were also essential tools for educational and cultural transmission. Totems are regularly the source for regulations and laws. In African societies, it is a breach of spiritual life and cultural to hurt, hunt, kill a plant or animal totem. This approach has been and is the foundation of environmental regulations and laws that existed in African societies. The idea of totemism has a bearing on the African people's environmental outlook since no one would kill and eat an animal belonging to his totem. Therefore, these animals could as well be conserved. Cited in (Mangena) [22], Nyajeka opines that the totem (mutupo) belief focuses on promoting rapport between humans and humans, human and animals, animals and the deity, humans and nature and lastly, humans and deity, the living and the dead. The mutupo belief attempts to enumerate and approximate the ideal mode of life which assures a sustainable future for all existence. An analysis of fundamental elements of mutupo principle reveals that it is a principle which seeks to create a cosmology that takes the existence of human entities seriously Nyajeka [23]. Thus if one's totem is a pig, one cannot, therefore, eat pig meat and this is meant not only to protect pig species from extinction through arbitrary killing for meat but also to show that pigs and human beings are related [22]. Equally significant to the concept of African religion and cultural beliefs in relation to environmental ethics is the aspect of taboos. Taboos are part and parcel of the African environmentalism and morality. Due to their prohibitive nature, they character human behavior in relation to nature. Sheridan and Nyamweru [24] while citing secret forests as totem and taboo claimed that, since sacred forests are considered places of memory, it is a taboo to harvest natural goods from such forest. According to Kaoma [25], numerous African cultures trust that ancestors, God and other spirits can manifest in nature. On the relationship between this and environmentalism, Ekwealo [26] claim that while some critics may argue to contrary on ecological spirit as regards African ideology, the ethical implication of spirits dwelling in nature can still be seen to have eco-centric connotation. This is due to the fact that the values it upholds when taken to their fullest cannot in actuality be in defense of human beings only.

Conclusion

The driving force of this paper is hinged on the consciousness that Western environmental ethical theories have shown to be too anthropocentric to an extent that they have not been notably instrumental in reducing environmental problems worldwide. As a result, this study appears to close the knowledge gap that exists between Western environmental ethics and African environmentalism by content that it is possible to devise an environmental ethics hinged on African communitarianism. Why African communitarianism? African communitarianism is a theory to go by because it is a theory that reflects African philosophy through religion and morality. According to this brand of environmental ethics which is hinged on the view of existence and purpose in African ontology, all beings which exist must have existed and been created in such a way that they occupy a certain level of existence within the ladder of being that extends from, the human beings, ancestors, non-human beings down to God.

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