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ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: FROM PHILOSOPHY TO MOVEMENT

Samuel Akpan BASSEY¹, Leonard NWOYE²

¹Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar,
Calabar, Cross River, 540242, Nigeria

²Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar,
Calabar, Cross River, 540242, Nigeria

Abstract:

Environmental ethics is an area that investigates the subject of which ethical norms are suitable for governing human relations with the natural environment.

The association among humanity and her environment turn out to be an ethical dilemma amid the twentieth century, when accelerated economic and scientific development was conveyed by deep modifications in our global ecological systems. In response, environmental ethics calls for restrictions to this dichotomous association between man and nature.

This paper unites the existing literatures on environmental ethics, asking for a move from philosophical postulations to tangible action so as to save our world.

Keywords: legislation, environmental ethics, environmentalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the introduction of major legislation concerning the environment, it had been a popularly accepted notion that our utilization of the earth would be subject to no limitations. Our manifold reason, pertaining to the growth of commercial industries, the purchase of lands for residency, the optimization of environmental settings for pedestrian requirements and the persistently swelling request for space upon which to drive had for many years after the start of the Industrial Age taken priority in our perception of sociological development. The overarching notion that the earth belonged to man to do with as he pleased was given little contest in the public forum, with large economic, political and cultural contingents generally conceding to the argument that this was the best avenue to serving the public interests.

Decades of industrialization, however, leading into the economic boom which followed World War II and saw America into its first great age of consumerism, began to take a legitimate toll on the natural landscape of the nation. Especially in the United States, which was so valued a land asset in its founding due to the seemingly endless wealth of natural resources and species diversity, it had been perceived that such bounties were at our disposal in perpetuity.

With growing evidence that this perception was not only false but was bearing deeply destructive consequences for the species and land surrounding us, a new perspective began to emerge which would be the ideological grounding for the environmental, conservation and wildlife preservation movements. Namely, a thought referred to as environmental ethics would take root, first as an outcome of a few significant works of literature and afterward as a meaningful, multifaceted and harmonized political movement.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Accordingly, we are guided by the definition offered in the text by Brennan & Lo (2002), which establishes that “environmental ethics is the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its nonhuman contents.” (Brennan & Lo, 1) In other words, prior to the inception of a popular environmental movement, the notion that we as a species have a responsibility to live in harmony with rather than in dominion over our surroundings would be broached in the philosophical context first. The advance of this idea in popular consciousness would ultimately produce a compelling and mainstream acceptance of the idea that we must shift our perspective as a species to one with more ecological sensibility.

Indeed, the most practical ways that this has come to affect us on a day to day basis can be seen in the way that products are packaged, the manner in which land is used and the way that our natural elements are protected from abuse. For instance, the ideals of the environmental ethics movement may be credited for forcing the adoption of emissions standards for factories and automobiles. This will in turn have reduced the number of pollutants in the air and the occurrence of resultant health maladies such as emphysema, bronchitis and certain types of cancer.

This capacity to effect practical change is the primary reason for the emergence of global effort movements such as those represented in Earth First and Greenpeace. Such groups have been dedicated through activism first and practical political orientation thereafter to help make the philosophical imperatives of environmental ethics a practical reality.

The notion of biocentric equality is an underlying impetus of the environmental movement known as Earth First! According to its website, the organization rejects the arrogance of any entity—corporate, environmental or governmental—which assumes a human superiority tantamount to negotiating control over nature. Founded in 1979, Earth First! explicitly rejects trivialization under the category of ‘organization,’ instead remarking upon itself as a movement, a priority and a family. Under this supposition, it purports itself a global group intent upon recognizing that nature is not a resource to be exploited by humanity, but a network of codependent systems and species of equal value.

Subscribing to the tenets of the Deep Ecology movement, Earth First! is accordingly sympathetic to and explicitly in favor of actions which, though perceived in the mainstream as radical, are actually directed at liberating the environment from the radical abuses of human institutions. In this regard, it is apparent that there is a direct correlation between the tenets of the modern Deep Ecology movement and the principles offered by early environmental icon, Henry David Thoreau. Several years prior to the publication of his landmark 1854 *Walden*, Thoreau would coin the term ‘civil disobedience,’ in an essay which determined that legally or socially subversive tactics may sometimes not only be acceptable but may be considered the only ethical redress to the

institutionalized symptoms of a sick society. It is the explicitly stated design of Earth First to engage the problems of our environmental abuses through direct action rather than what its leaders refer to as the indirect methods of structural compliance. Earth First! campaign search of biocentric goals on all fronts, attempting to interrelate with the court system, to systematize grass-roots campaigns in the face of precise threats and even to engage in non-legal forms of civil display.

The movement's ethical position is that there is no acceptable compromise with regard to the earth's health and that it is the responsibility of every single individual to take action. As Thoreau had argued, it may be considered unethical to stand by and witness the performance of grave injustices without taken preventative action. More moderate groups though, have experienced greater success in gaining some level of legitimacy on the global environmental scheme.

To this end, Greenpeace, probable the most identifiable name in the movement for environmental ethics activism was shaped in 1971. This was done upon the event of a nuclear test conducted in Alaska by the U.S. government. One of what would become a sizeable and easily recognizable fleet of ships, the Amchitka stood 'witness' to the abuses of our environment as a principle of individual responsibility. It was the view of those a party to this action that the organization's policy of witness against crimes perpetrated upon the environment could help it to expose and campaign for the reduction of such behaviors.

In accordance with the principles of Social Ecology, Greenpeace views the institutional violation of the environment as reflective of a shared indifference. It is thus that it promotes the ascendancy of individuals to both sustainable living practices and alignment with its goals of global climate-change prevention, ocean protection, wildlife defense and the elimination of nuclear power, among many other associated interests. Arguing that there is a direct relationship between the state of the environment and the inherent inequality in a number of human institutions, this organization brings to bear some of the ideas of Rachel Carson, whose 1962 watershed text, *Silent Spring*, as we will observe hereafter, pinpointed the consequences of corporate and governmental negligence.

III. DISCUSSION ON ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

References here above to Henry David Thoreau and Rachel Carson are crucial. Though separated by roughly a century, the works of these two writers may be seen as the philosophical basis to the environmental ethics ideology that would ultimately become a practical movement. The concept of environmental ethics would originally be established with the proliferation of Thoreau's ideas of simplification and ecological compatibility and thereafter, with the collision of Carson's ideas and the age of reform in America.

In 1962, marine biologist and environmental activist Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a work that opened the first round of fire against the perception that man was the only species of importance on the Earth. A book rife with frightening contentions about the irreparable damage with which we have already lashed the earth, *Silent Spring* would be a sensible point of entry into the discourse over environmental preservation. As one of the first popular works of non-fiction to promote the idea that ecological decline will inevitably lead to a decline in the survivability of man, Carson's book touched off a public awareness of the need to apply new strategies to extending environmental conscientiousness.

Carson's book centers on the ill effects which the commonly accepted use of pesticides in agriculture were having on the health of environments which hosted all manner of life, among them humanity. Decrying the absence of regulation against the use of such dangerous chemicals, Carson's work points to some of the major environmental contingencies of our failure to prevent this poisoning of our ecology. She also uses this stark and frightening logic to connect a failure of the government to regulate environmental behaviors with an ethical failure to do the business of protecting the people.

To accomplish this, she uses startling imagery that keys into our capacity for moral outrage over environmental abuses and their implications. She represent a town where “mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. The farmers spoke of much illness among their families. In the town the doctors had become more and more puzzled by new kinds of sickness appearing among their patients.” (Carson, 2) That the correlation between these collected symptoms and the use of pesticides in our predominantly agricultural towns had yet to be recognized at this point in history is important to consider. Though today it still receives troublingly little acknowledgment, the exponential rise in the consumption of organic produce in recent years is indicative of a graduating cognizance of that which Carson’s work brought to the forefront of ecological discourse. Here, she makes apparent the causality of her concern and, thus, illuminates the pattern of environmental abuse which is an immediate ethical trespass and an ultimate threat to man as much as it is to any other species which is targeted by such behavior, either with intent or by collateral happenstance.

Herein, she expounds upon the retribution which man will receive for his impractical coexistence with other species and habitats on earth. In simplified terms, she describes a cycle in which man ultimately poisons himself. Using pesticides to exterminate entire species of insect has had the effect of eliminating certain creatures from an ecological chain, therefore removing an important set of players in the interaction between predators and prey. With the toxification or disappearance of insects in the habitats discussed in *Silent Spring*, the bird population which relied upon these as a source of food also began to suffer. Given the adaptability of nature, insect populations commonly resurge with new genetic immunities to our pesticides. In the absence of the bird populations once controlling them, these insects are then capable of spreading disease and crop devastation without obstruction from natural ecological balance. And as it is described above and throughout the book, it is clear that these are ecological changes which directly correlate to man and his survival. This is sensible given his singular role in creating environmental blight and ecological imbalance.

Carson’s work would also give rise to works of great importance by figures such as Lynn White, whose “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” would tighten the correlation between ecological decline and ethical misappropriation of man’s self-appointed role as a custodian of the planet. Indeed, White (1974) most aggressively identifies man’s moral disposition as a key catalyst for the destruction of the earth, demanding some more practical channeling of the various strands of ethical divergence reflected in our environmental policy. As White opine,

“with the population explosion, the carcinoma of planless urbanism, the now geological deposits of sewage and garbage, surely no creature other than man has ever managed to foul its nest in such short order. There are many calls to action, but specific proposals, however worthy as individual items, seem too partial, palliative, negative: ban the bomb, tear down the billboards, give the Hindus contraceptives and tell them to eat their sacred cows. The simplest solution to any suspect change is, of course, to stop it, or better yet, to revert to a romanticized past: make those ugly gasoline stations look like Anne Hathaway’s cottage or (in the Far West) like ghost-town saloons.” (White, 2)

This point of focus is a useful one for beginning to understand the orientation of such nations as the U.S. toward a global environmental movement. Indeed, for the U.S., ethicality scarcely enters into the discourse. Quite to the contrary, the United States appears to be inexorably and ruthlessly driven by the ambitions of its economy. The desire for massive levels of consumption and the conditioning of a lifestyle of excess have both delivered the U.S. to a place of ecological unsustainability. However, its government and industries have simultaneously proven unresponsive to these conditions. U.S. automakers lag behind those in other nations that have worked out of economic necessity to develop more fuel efficient alternatives to the gas-guzzlers which are so popular in America.

The economic effects of this chosen dependency are based on the danger of relying upon a finite source of fuel. To this point, Whitehall (2008) demonstrates a pattern which denotes the close correlation between an increasing oil scarcity and a set of clear economic challenges. His findings show that over just a period of a

year, the cost per barrel rose from just fewer than 60 U.S. Dollars a barrel on the international market to upwards of 140 U.S. Dollars a barrel.

The increase is a demonstration of how unreliable oil is not just in terms of its lack of sustainability but in terms of its negative economic implications, which associate it to dangers of economic inflation. (Whitehall, 1) This signifies the ecological effects of America's poor orientation towards environmental ethics have undoubtedly identifiable economic cost as well.

On a global scale, the environmental movement is increasingly becoming less a fringe activist terrain and more a policy area of great importance for the industrialized nations of the world. There is increasingly a consensus on the dangers of global climate change; the threat to our health of pollutants in land, air and water; the implications to food scarcity to hungry populations; and the need to change energy harvesting and consumption habits. Collectively, these environmental concerns are registering with ever-greater prominence in the nations of Western Europe, North America and in economically advanced parts of China. Quite certainly, in all of these contexts, there remain considerable challenges ahead in achieving projected future goals for meeting environmental improvements. However, these challenges pale in comparison to those which lay ahead of the developing nations of the world. Where environmentalism is concerned in particular, a clear challenge exists to the developing sphere, with many developing nations simultaneously demonstrating the greatest need for extreme environmental reform and yet fully lacking the resources or priority to address pressing environmental concerns.

IV. HOW IT HAS BECOME A MAJOR ISSUE

This presents our future outlook with its greatest area of complexity. As nations struggle simply to feed their populations and to address famine, disease and homelessness, environmentalism is a policy focus often perceived as luxury at best and as politically motivated at worst. Also impacted by the patterns of globalization which open the doors of developing nations to the activities of multinational corporations, many developing nations find that their environmental conditions are very much at the mercy of outsiders. As a result, as the debate raging around many developing countries on how to bring global restraint to environmental abuses continues, practices in many of these contexts continue to reflect a severity of neglect for reform. Indeed, all evidence suggests that in spite of the economic arguments against the implementation of environmental restrictions in developing nations, rationality denotes that soon all nations must face these issues.

According to our research, "environmentalism, although a good postmodern indicator, is more fundamental than a culture shift because it is based on serious global threats to life on this planet. Ideologies may surge and flow across the face of these realities, but environmental issues cannot be argued or deconstructed away." (Peritore, 30). This is quite a pertinent point to the discussion, lending us the basic understanding that the permeation of environmental ethics into developing nations, though inclined by the processes of globalization, is not simply a vestige of foreign imposition. The establishment of more firm protections for land, air, water and, by extension, food sources, communities and homes, in the developing world is tantamount to the emergence of this sphere from untenable conditions of poverty and filth.

And yet, resistance exists in a variety of forms, even beyond the obviation that nations such as those in Africa, the Middle East or South Asia will frequently lack the stability or resource to maintain or enforce sound environmental policies. This is true for a number of cogent reasons relating to the cost of environmental enforcement and for a number of more conditional reasons relating to the desire of globalizing firms to operate in nations with decidedly lax environmental parameters. This morass of conditions denotes that "while we should not necessarily be sanguine about environmental protection in developing countries, we need not be pessimistic either." (Warshawsky, 114)

This is to say that the international community is increasingly drawing to a consensus on the need to curb behaviors which have are causing trauma to the environment, with the leadership change from Bush to Obama in the United States promising significant new level of improvement in regulatory enforcement. In general, the pattern of the last two decades has moved the developing world toward higher levels of control over corporate polluting in particular, especially with the 1997 inception of The Kyoto Treaty. This set of environmental protocols “commits industrialised nations to reducing emissions of greenhouse gases, principally Carbon Dioxide, by around 5.2% below their 1990 levels over the next decade” (BBC News, 1).

In many ways, though this should be considered a model for improvement in the industrialized world, it has interceded with the forces of globalization to encourage corporate polluters to find contexts in which those activities will be enabled. Ultimately, the matter of this opportunity for exploitive profitability is a dominant force obstructing the development of stricter environmental regulations in the developing sphere.

V. SOURCES

The set of sources consulted for this subject drive together the topics of environmentalism and ecological ethics. The array of journal articles, complete texts and web sources consulted discuss these two topics both individually and in intercession with one another to formulate a thorough overview of environmentalism as a function of an ethical imperative.

This is most importantly noted in the text by Carson (1962), which is a template setting work in the field. Among the first to aggressively affiliate ethical trespass with the degradation of the environment, this would be both historically important to the discourse and central to the way that this account addresses environmental ethics. This is grounded even further in the literary milestone that was Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), which promoted perhaps for the first time in any notable context the ethical clarity which can be gained through a simplicity and naturalness of living.

The text by Peritore (1999) is valuable for applying the assumption that ethics and environmentalism must be inherently related, presenting the case that the way environmental abuses are perpetrated in the developing world represents a serious trespass of human ethical responsibility. By contrast, the article by Warshawsky (2003) shows some developing nations, in this case Costa Rica and Bolivia, working to achieve progressive templates for environmentalism in the developing world.

Such a dynamic segues well into an evaluation of such web-pages as the Earth First! Worldwide and Greenpeace International organizational sites. These present an overview of the environmental challenges and activities poised at addressing them as channeled through prominent activist groups. These sites are also driven by explicitly stated ethical imperatives to the protection and preservation of the earth.

Indeed, such activities are characterized by the Brennan & Lo (2002) text, which defines these activities as comporting to the specific principles of environmental ethics. This also serves as a working definition for our purposes, demonstrating the notion that environmental responsibility is tantamount to the preservation of human life, among the utmost of ethical imperatives. The compilation by Light & Rolston (2003) underscores this concise definition by providing an exhaustive list of many of the landmark discussions on the subject. This would include important texts by Aldo Leopold, Richard Sylvan and Peter Singer.

On an applied level, the text by Whitehall (2008) would discuss the over-consumption of fossil fuels and the connection of this pattern with environmental degradation. This denotes a concrete human behavior that may, in this discussion, be addressed according to an ethical lens. So too may this be applied to evaluation of the article published by BBC News (2003), which describes the Kyoto Treaty and its implications to global environmental responsibilities. With respect to our discussion, this would provide a useful construct for what should be expected of the ethically oriented environmental perspective.

VI. CONCLUSION

Economic Development single-handedly cannot prolong for long except the health of our surrounding environment is properly ensured. This is achievable only when human beings begin to understand their own potential and restrictions in terms of the immensity of God's creation and value the entire ecosystem at large for sustainable future.

Hence combination of environmental, social, ethical concepts and strong communal involvement along with community participation is the key to successful sustainable development program.

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