

METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN AN AFRICAN CULTURE

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Abstract

This study argues that environmental problems cannot be resolved unless we know the foundations for the various failed attempts by scholars, namely, the subject-object dichotomy upon which all hitherto existing theories are based. It argues that such ontology portrays a consequentialist conception of the environment, which encourages instrumentalization of the object (nature) by the subject (humans), and the resultant abusive use of nature. The study analyses some theories of environmental ethics, and extends this consideration to the debate concerning moral obligation to future generations. The study then x-rays some attempts by some African philosophers to ground environmental ethics on metaphysics, and draws attention to an alternative theory in indigenous Esan thought which is not premised on subject-object dichotomy but on the union of beings.

Keywords: Complementary Environmentalism, Eco-bio-communitarianism, Instrumental rationality, Relational Environmentalism, Subject-object dichotomy, Union of beings

Introduction

Several human activities have continued to generate negative consequences, which threaten the continued existence and sustenance of nature. These threatening signs include pollution, erosion, desertification, overpopulation, acid precipitation, resource depletion, global warming, depletion of ozone layer, land degradation, garbage treat, climatic change, flooding, loss of biodiversity, extinction of species, among others. Since some thinkers became conscious about environmental feedbacks, they have made efforts to direct attention to the looming dangers that are coded in these signs. Environmentalists call for a new ethic that will help protect

the natural environment from destruction.¹ The emergence of environmental ethics in the discipline of philosophy is one of the results of such efforts. Some philosophers attempt some theorizing on how to both meet human needs and maintain a safe environment. The field of environmental ethics emerged in the West as the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to the environment and its non-human contents,² or as the part of environmental philosophy which considers extending the traditional boundaries of ethics from humans to the non-human natural world. Some fundamental questions that environmental ethics addresses are: what duties do humans have to the environment? And why should they have such duties?³ The debates surrounding these questions revolve around theories of environmental ethics, eco-policy, environmental law, eco-theology, radical ecology, obligations to future generations, and intrinsic and instrumental values.

Some of the reasons for environmental concerns are to remedy some of the damages already done to the environment as well as avert further damage in future interactions. It is only our understanding of these problems and human values that can guarantee our ability to deal with the problems that our world faces today. In whichever way, ethics will help us to reflect and make decisions on how we should live our lives and how we should act concerning the environment. The aim of this study is to assess some of the theories of environmental ethics, and provide some hints on how to correct the subject-object dichotomy that has been the bane of most of the extant theories. This study is justified in drawing attention to alternative thought system grounded on African metaphysics, including those particularly present in Esan, and which establishes a union with the environment. The study highlights the unitary structure of being as a holistic ontological framework to restructure human actions and relationship with the environment. This study adopts the philosophical methods of comparative and critical analyses.

Philosophical Approaches in Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethical theorists differ on the extent of human obligation to natural environment and the various ways the natural environment is to be valued. In this section, we assessed some theories of environmental ethics and radical ecology.

¹Eugene C. Hargrove. *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*. (Texas: Environmental Ethics Books, 1996), 77.

²Andrew Brennan and Yeuk-Sze Lo. "Environmental Ethics." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (2014), 1. Accessed 29/10/ 2014, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental>

³Alexander Cochrane. "Environmental Ethics." *Internet Encyclopedia Of Philosophy*. (2008), 1. Accessed 29/10/2014, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/envi-eth/>

a. Theories of Environmental Ethics

Theories of environmental ethics include: anthropocentrism, sentientism, biocentrism and ecocentrism.

i. Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism is an environmental ethical theory that is human centered.⁴ It places significantly higher value on human interests at the expense of non-human things. One major proponent of anthropocentrism is John Passmore. Passmore argues that there is no need for a new environmental ethic since anthropocentric perspective is sufficiently strong to address any environmental problem. Peter Vardy made a distinction between strong and weak anthropocentrism.⁵ A strong thesis anthropocentrism argues that humans are at the centre of reality; therefore, only human beings are morally considerable in their own right. Weak anthropocentrism, on the other hand, argues that reality can only be interpreted from a human point of view and that everything else in existence should be evaluated in terms of its utility for humans. For instance, Aristotle maintained that “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man” and that the value of non-human things in nature is merely instrumental.⁶ Anthropocentrism faces some considerable criticisms from many environmental ethicists who claim that moral standing should be accorded to all or some non-human natural world. They argue that a system of ethics formulated from a human perspective may not be entirely accurate.⁷ Other theories of environmental ethics thus expand the scope of moral standing beyond what anthropocentrism prescribes.

An aspect of this anthropocentric theorizing is on the debate concerning human moral obligation to future generations. For its human-centeredness, anthropocentric environmental ethics lays a path in the extension of moral standing to human beings who do not yet exist.⁸ The granting of moral standing to future

⁴ Rebecca Gillaspay. *Environmental Ethics and Human Values: Definition and Impact on Environmental Problems*. (2003- 2014), 77. Accessed 29/10/2011, <http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/environmental-ethics-human-values-definition-impact-on-environmental-problems.html>. Also see Hargrove. *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*. 1996.

⁵Peter Vardy. *Paul Grosch: The Puzzle of Ethics*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 231.

⁶Aristotle. *Politics*. Bk. 1, Ch. 8. For a similar view, see Alan Gewirth, “Human Rights and Future Generations.” In M. Boylan, ed. *Environmental Ethics*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 207-211.

⁷Cochrane. *Environmental Ethics*; see T. Kochi and N. Ordan. “An Argument for the Global Suicide of Humanity” *Borderlands* 3, no. 1 (2008): 1-21.

⁸For detail of this argument, see Joel Feinberg. “The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations.” In Thomas A. Mappes and Jane S. Zembaty. eds. *Social ethics*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 358; E. Wesley and F. Peterson. “Time Preference, the Environment and the Interests of Future

generations is considered necessary because many environmental problems, resulting from present anthropogenic impact, will affect future humans. Besides, the actions and policies that contemporary humans undertake will have some impacts on the well-being of future individuals. Some other reasons that may ground our moral responsibility to future generations include egalitarian principle and social contract among all generations. Contrary to these views, some other scholars offer many reasons to support their claims that we do not have any moral responsibility to members of future generations.⁹ According to them, future people cannot be said to be holders of legal rights; they cannot act reciprocally; and they lack definite identity, among others. However, there are some objections to these arguments. It is contended that identity, inability to reciprocate, ignorance about the needs of future persons, and so on, should not matter to the ethical evaluation of an act. A wrong act is wrong regardless of these.¹⁰

ii. Sentientism

Sentientism is an environmental ethical theory which argues for the extension of morality from human being to sentient or conscious beings. The most prominent philosophers who support this view are Peter Singer and Tom Regan. Singer argues that the anthropocentric privileging of members of the human species is arbitrary; it is a kind of “speciesism”, which is as unjustifiable as sexism and racism.

Generations.” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1993): 107-126; Brian Barry. “Sustainability and Intergenerational Justice.” In Andrew Dobson. ed. *Fairness and Futurity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93-117; Kristin Shrader-Frechette. *Environmental Justice: Creating Equality, Reclaiming Democracy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 102-120. See also John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 44-45, 284-298 and Richard DesJardins. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*. (3rd and 4th eds.), Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006, 2001), 74; Gewirth, *Human Rights and Future Generations*, 207-211; Cochrane, *Environmental ethics*, 2-4; G. Kavka, The Futurity Problem. In R. I. Sikora and Brian Barry, eds. *Obligations to Future Generations*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 186-203.

⁹See Ruth Macklin. “Can Future Generations correctly be said to have Rights?” In Ernest Partridge, ed. *Responsibilities to Future Generations: Environmental Ethics*. (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981), also in *Ethics for Modern Life*. 4th ed. Raziell Abelson and Marie-Louise Friquegnon. eds. (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1991), 255-256; Shrader-Frechette. *Environmental Justice*, 100; M. Golding. Obligations to Future Generations. *Monist* (1972): 85-99; Derek Parfit. Acts and Outcomes: A Reply to Boonin-Vail, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, no. 4 (1996): 308-317; Derek Parfit. *Reasons and Persons*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), chapter 16.

¹⁰ For details of this argument see Joel Feinberg. *The Rights of Animals*, 358-359. See Shrader-Frechette, *Environmental Justice*, 101-103, Wesley and Peterson, *Time Preference*, 107-126; DesJardins, *Environmental Ethics*, 74; Cochrane. *Environmental Ethics*, 3-4; Barry. *Sustainability and Intergenerational Justice*, 93-117.

According to Singer, the criterion for moral standing is sentience: that is, the capacity to feel pleasure and pain.¹¹ Tom Regan¹² argues that those animals with inherent value have the moral right to respectful treatment, and we have a *prima facie* moral duty not to harm them. He argues that disrespectful treatments of conscious animals (that is, animals that have, among other things, sense-perceptions, beliefs, desires, motives, memory, a sense of the future, and a psychological identity over time) are intrinsically wrong, regardless of whether or not some better consequences flow from them. For the sentientists, non-sentient parts of the environment (such as plants and non-animate natural things) do not have intrinsic worth and moral standing, and therefore can be used for the well-being of sentient animals.

Many environmental philosophers are dissatisfied with animal-centred environmental ethics. Some of these philosophers, such as John Baird Callicott and Mark Sagoff, claim that animal liberation cannot be considered to be a legitimate environmental ethics.¹³ For these thinkers, all animal-centred ethics suffer from two fundamental and devastating problems: they are too narrowly individualistic, and the logic of animal ethics implies unjustifiable interference with natural processes. These philosophers want the boundaries of our ethical concern to extend beyond sentient beings. Among such philosophers are the biocentrists.

iii. Biocentrism

Biocentrism is an environmental ethical theory that is life-centred. It argues for the extension of the scope of moral consideration to all living things. The proponents of this theory argue that organisms have the intrinsic value to achieve their own good, whether they are capable of consciousness or not. Some of the proponents include Albert Schweitzer, Paul Taylor and Robin Attfield. Albert Schweitzer argues that since life is sacred, good means to preserve, promote and protect it, and evil means to destroy it and stifle its development. In view of this, the moral person refrains from breaking a branch off a tree, from picking flowers or carelessly destroying insects.¹⁴ Albert Schweitzer's position puts humanity in a state of

¹¹See Pete Singer. "All Animals are Equal." *Philosophical Exchange* 1, no. 5 (1974): 243-257; Peter Singer. *Practical Ethics*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Andrew Brennan and Y-S. Lo, *Environmental ethics*.

¹²Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, 2nd ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983/2004), chapter 7.

¹³Cochrane. *Environmental ethics*, 5-6.

¹⁴Albert Schweitzer. *Civilization and Ethics: The Philosophy of Civilization. Part II* John Naish, trans. (London: A & C Black Ltd, 1923), 257; Gerhold Becker, *Je Suis Le Grand Tout: Respect for Nature in the Age of Environmental Responsibility*. In King-Tak Ip, ed. *Environmental Ethics: Intercultural Perspectives*. (New York: Rodopi, 2009), 27.

perpetual dilemma, moral squalor and irremediable moral guilt, since using part of nature to keep one's alive or sacrificing one life for nature's sake is murder - an immoral act. The colossal dilemma and demand of Schweitzer's position made some thinkers to develop a different version of this theory.

Paul Taylor argues that the intrinsic value of wild living things generates a *prima facie* moral duty on our part to preserve or promote their goods as ends in themselves.¹⁵ Taylor advocates a position of general equality between the interests of living things, and a series of principles in the event of clashes of interest. There are problems with Taylor's submission: It applies only to individual creatures and requires commitment to the equality of living teleological systems, human and non-human. This makes resolving conflicts between them very difficult. Besides, Taylor has nothing to say about the value of rivers or mountains or of entire ecosystems, except insofar as they provide a suitable environment for the flourishing of teleological systems of life.¹⁶ This suggests that Taylor construed the non-living environment instrumentally for biocentric community. Robin Attfield argues for a hierarchical view that, while all beings having a good of their own have intrinsic value, some of them (e.g., persons) have intrinsic value to a greater extent. This implies a categorization and legitimization of value distinctions among species. Irrespective of their different arguments, the position of biocentrists examined so far is that "moral standing should be extended beyond conscious life to include individual living organisms, such as trees".¹⁷

Some biocentrists have opposing view from the preceding argument. Such biocentrists argue instead for extension of morality more to non-human animals rather than to humans. Kristin Shrader-Frechette¹⁸ summarily captures some of these positions. While Edward Abbey remarks that he would rather shoot a human than a snake, Garrett Hardin recommends that people injured in wilderness areas should not be rescued because rescue attempts would damage pristine wildlife. Paul Taylor, whose position we have just stated, seems to have a view which conflicts with the one stated earlier. He states in his *Respect for Nature* that "[i]t seems quite clear that in the contemporary world the extinction of the species *Homo sapiens* would be beneficial to the Earth's Community of Life as a whole". In *Eco-*

¹⁵ See Paul Taylor. "The Ethics of Respect for Nature." *Environmental Ethics* 3, (1981): 197-218; Paul Taylor. *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*. 25th Anniversary Edition. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁶Christine E. Gudorf and James E. Huchingson. *Boundaries: A Casebook in Environmental Ethics*. 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 12.

¹⁷See Robin Attfield *A Theory of Value and Obligation*. (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Brennan and Lo. *Environmental Ethics*, 17 and Cochrane. *Environmental Ethics*, 7.

¹⁸See Shrader-Frechette. *Environmental Justice*, 4-5. For a detail of Taylor's version of this argument, see Paul Taylor. *Respect for Nature*, 114-115.

Warriors, Rik Scarce advocates extermination of humanity as “an environmental cure-all”. According to John Callicott, one of the reasons traditional environmentalists emphasize protection for nature rather than humans is that many environmental ethicists claim that the problems of planetary degradation result from human-centred values.

Like other theories examined so far, biocentrism faces a number of objections, some of which have already been considered. On a general note, biocentrism sees the rest of nature as separate from living entities. In whichever way it is considered, biocentrism stands at polar ends. Either it is conceived as extension of sentientism, which is itself an extension of anthropocentrism, and then sees the rest of nature as instrument for the well-being of the biocentric community, or it is misanthropic, in which case it would want humanity to be sacrificed at the expense of non-human nature. There are some beings outside biocentric scope of moral reference, which ecocentrism included in its scope, and would grant moral standing.

iv. Ecocentrism

Ecocentrism (or Eco-Holism in a sense), is an environmental ethical theory which takes nature as a whole as its locus of value and worth. Ecocentrism either considers the extension of morality from human being to include the whole of nature, or it considers nature itself as the centre for moral standing upon which the morality of its individual members is parasitic. It argues for the evaluation of human actions on the basis of how well they promote ecological welfare. It focuses on the good of the whole ecosystems or biotic communities, rather than on its individual members.¹⁹ The proponents of this theory include Aldo Leopold and John Baird Callicott. Aldo Leopold grants moral standing to the land community itself. This follows from his famous ethical injunction that: “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”.²⁰ Leaning on Leopold’s dictum, Callicott argues that it is the earth’s biotic community *per se* that is the sole locus of intrinsic value; the value of its individual members is merely instrumental and dependent on their contribution to the “integrity, stability, and beauty” of the larger community.²¹

¹⁹Brennan and Lo. *Environmental Ethics*.

²⁰Aldo Leopold. *The Land Ethic*. 1949, Reprint in Gary E. Kessler. ed. *Voices of Wisdom: A Multicultural Philosophy Reader*. 5th ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2004), 235-246; Cochrane. *Environmental Ethics*, 8-9.

²¹John Baird Callicott. *Indefense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), Ch. 5, John Baird Callicott. *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), chapter 4.

There are objections to ecocentrism. Leopold's definition of human duties toward ecosystems is problematic because, if the ecosystem is the proper and exclusive object of our moral attention, then its contributing components, such as the vast array of plants and animals constituting the system, must be valued not for their own sake, but in terms of their contribution to the integrity, stability and beauty of the ecosystem. This means that individual creatures serve the ecosystem and they may be treated in ways that violate their individual interests or teleological self-fulfillment when the ecosystem requires it. This criticism also applies to Callicott's submission. In support of this view, Stan Rowe argues that the attempt to build ethical concern for the ecosphere by starting with ourselves and the human race, and then gradually to the whole environment (that is, ethics, by extension to the biotic community, rationalized as expedient for human survival), will ultimately be the kiss of death for wild nature. In order to counter the anthropocentric position that the world exists solely for the sake of man, some ecocentrists go the opposite extreme that man or individual things exist solely for the sake of the biotic community.²² So far it is evident that while some interpreted ecocentrism ultimately to be anthropocentric, others interpreted it as environmental fascism or misanthropy.

Generally, there are some problems with the whole theories of environmental ethics.²³ On the one hand, the extensionists argue that some of the views of the theories of environmental ethics are tantamount to environment fascism (the conception of individuals as parasite to ecological prosperity and that individuals can be used for the prosperity of ecological whole). According to thinkers on the other divide (that is, the holists), these various theories of environmental ethics are, on critical view, mere extension of anthropocentrism since it is committed to expansion of its circle of moral standing from man to allow for the inclusion of other animals, plants, mountains and rivers. In this case, it carries with its sensibility the problems associated with anthropocentrism. Therefore, the various theories considered so far, contain within themselves some seeds of limitation or destruction. Thus, in whichever way they are considered, they lack the capacity for adequate moral relation and the subsequent sustenance of the environment.

²²For these arguments see Stan Rowe. *Ecocentrism: The Chord that Harmonizes Humans and Earth*, *The Trumpeter* 11 no. 2 (1994): 107; Gudorf and Huchingson. *Boundaries*, 14.

²³For details of this opposing argument, see John Baird Callicott, "Environmental Ethics." In L. Becker and C. Becker. eds. *Encyclopedia of Ethics*. Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 46; Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, 215; Gudorf and Huchingson. *Boundaries*, 8-9.

b. Radical ecology

Radical ecologists segregate themselves and their position from theorists and theories of environmental ethics. They argue that theories of environmental ethics are mere extensions of anthropocentrism, and therefore describe them as ethical extensionism. In their opinion, what is required to tackle the existing environmental problem is a radical departure from anthropocentrism. Although the ideas and beliefs within this “radical ecology” movement are diverse, they possess two common elements that separate them from ethical extensionism. First of all, radical ecologists do not see extending moral standing as a sufficient measure to resolve environmental crisis. They argue that a broader philosophical perspective which requires fundamental changes in both our attitude to and understanding of reality is needed. Secondly, radical ecology does not confine itself solely to the arena of ethics; it also demands fundamental changes in society and its institutions.²⁴ The various theories of radical ecology include: deep ecology, social ecology, ecofeminism, and environmental pragmatism.

i. Deep Ecology

The aim of deep ecology is not to formulate moral principles concerning the environment to supplement existing ethical framework; rather, it demands an entirely new worldview and philosophical perspective. On this platform, principles are of less important; what is more important is the fostering of appropriate states of consciousness. They argue that environmental philosophy must recognize the values that inhere objectively in nature independently of human wants or needs.²⁵ Some deep ecologists are Arne Naess, Warwick Fox, George Sessions and David Rothenberg.

Like Paul Taylor’s biocentrism, deep ecology proposes that all creatures are equal in intrinsic value (species egalitarianism). Following the more radical ecocentrists, it argues that the individual is completely subordinated to the wellbeing of the ecosystem; that is, the whole is of greater value than any of its parts, including the human parts. In this moral holism, deep ecologists describe human species as a pathogen or plague on the Earth. This is why the more outspoken deep ecologists are sometimes charged with misanthropy (hatred of

²⁴ See Cochrane. *Environmental Ethics*, 10-15.

²⁵ See Cochrane. *Environmental Ethics*, 10-15; David R. Keller. “Deep Ecology,” in John Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman, eds. *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. (New York: Cengage Learning, 2009), 206; Warwick Fox. *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 219, 225. Also see Arne Naess. “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary.” *Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (1973): 95–100.

humans). But deep ecology, conceived as species egalitarianism, cannot function in adjudicating conflicting interests, since all organisms have equal value. In order to avoid this difficulty of biocentric egalitarianism, that is, the equal valuation of all living species, including the human species in ethics, Warwick Fox argues that although all biota have intrinsic value, they are however not equal. Their value is in degrees because the “richness of experience” differs.²⁶ Despite its limitations, deep ecology has earned a place in the history of environmental philosophy.

ii. Social Ecology

Social Ecology shares with deep ecology the view that the foundations of environmental crisis lie in the dominant ideology of modern western societies. Thus, just as with deep ecology, social ecology claims that in order to resolve the crisis, a radical overhaul of this ideology is necessary. But in place of “self-realization” of deep ecology, social ecology proposes absence of domination. The most prominent social ecologist is Murray Bookchin. Bookchin claims that the hierarchies of power prevalent within modern societies fostered a hierarchical relationship between humans and the natural world. For Bookchin, within an ecosystem, there is no species more important than another. Interdependence and lack of hierarchy in nature provide a blueprint for a non-hierarchical human society.²⁷ Although social ecology attempts to deviate from the norms of deep ecology, however, the problem of species egalitarianism, which characterises deep ecology, also characterises social ecology. Besides, it is not clear how social hierarchy lapse into hierarchy in nature and how its absence can put an end to exploitation of nature, as social ecology contended.

iii. Ecological feminism

Ecological feminism, or ecofeminism for short, is the confluence of feminist and environmentalist strands of thought. The dominant view of ecofeminism is that human exploitation of nature is a manifestation and extension of the oppression of women. Like social ecology, it points to a link between social domination and the domination of the natural world. And like both deep ecology and social ecology, it calls for a radical overhaul of the prevailing philosophical perspective and ideology of western society. For most ecological feminists, it is the elimination of patriarchy in human affairs that would provide for elimination of human subjugation of nature. Some prominent ecofeminists include: Val Plumwood, Sheila Collins and Karen

²⁶For these inherent problems, see Keller. *Deep Ecology*, 207-209; Gudorf and Huchingson. *Boundaries*, 15, and R. A. Watson. “A critique of anti-anthropocentric biocentrism.” *Environmental Ethics* 5, no. 3: 245–256.

²⁷See Cochrane. *Environmental Ethics*, 13.

Warren.²⁸ There are some objections to ecofeminism. On a general note, it seems the connection between patriarchy and ecofeminism lacks logical sequence and so cannot be established clearly. This may be why Brooke Moore and Kenneth Bruder²⁹ argue that there is a much healthy controversy about what exactly is the linkage between the domination of women and the domination of nature.

iv. Environmental Pragmatism

Environmental Pragmatism is a new philosophical position which argues that theoretical debates in environmental philosophy hinder the ability of environmental movement to forge agreement on basic policy imperatives. Environmental pragmatists, therefore, aim at leading environmental philosophers away from such theoretical debates to more practical ones.³⁰ Some of the proponents are Bryan Norton, Anthony Weston and Andrew Light. However, as argued by Lars Samuelsson,³¹ a position which aims at leading environmental philosophers away from theoretical debates is not a proper philosophical position at all, given that, among other things, philosophy aims at making clear the problems that puzzle us. Samuelsson argues further that even if it is true that environmental ethics has failed to influence environmental decision-making and policy-formation, contrary to expectation, it does not follow that the best remedy for this failure is environmental pragmatism. This is because we do not know whether environmental pragmatism would have fared any better than traditional environmental ethics in this regard.

Despite their limitation, the various theories of radical ecology point out the inadequacy (the lack of practical content) of theories of environmental ethics in addressing environmental problems and challenges and in establishing a good foundation for harmonious relation with nature. However, some of the problems that characterise theories of environmental ethics, such as misanthropy, biocentric

²⁸ For details see Karen J. Warren. "The power and the promise of ecological feminism." *Environmental Ethics* 12, no. 3 (1990): 124-126.

²⁹ Brooke Moore and Kenneth Bruder. *Philosophy: The Power of Ideas*. 6th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 469.

³⁰ For detailed arguments, see Clare Palmer. "An Overview of Environmental Ethics," In Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III, eds. *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), 32. See also Ben A. Minteer and Robert E. Manning. "Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics: Democracy, Pluralism, and the Management of Nature." In Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III, eds. *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), 319-320.

³¹ Lars Samuelsson. "Environmental Pragmatism and Environmental Philosophy: A Bad Marriage!" *Environmental Ethics* 32, no. 4 (2010): 405-409.

and eco-centric egalitarianism, also bedevil radical ecology since both sets of theories seem to be driven by a deeply rooted instrumentalism.

The Problems with Instrumentalist Conception of the Natural Environment

A fundamental question that lies beneath any attempt to assess the relationship between humans, the environment, and future humans is: Why do humans attempt to resolve environmental problems? From the argument so far, an evident reason is sustainable development. People would want the environment to be sustained so that it can continue to be a source of life and support for human beings, since they stand to lose a lot if they refuse to protect it. This approach has some significant problems revolving around ‘instrumental rationality’ which is rooted in the ontological principle of subject-object dichotomy.

Instrumental rationality is a specific form of rationality which focuses on the most efficient or cost-effective means of achieving a specific end, without paying due attention to the moral value of such an end. It is one of the dangers facing modern humans in their own relationship with nature, and is therefore a threat to the natural environment. At the heart of instrumental rationality is a certain relationship with “the other” (world) – a relationship that uses reason to reach goals, without due consideration for the moral rightness or wrongness of such goals. With subject-object dichotomy as a base, which informs instrumental rationality, the theories considered so far rule out the moral considerations required in relating with the natural environment.

This is why in relating with the environment, it is considered as an object distinct from the subject who perceives, studies or relates with it. The dichotomy does not allow for a robust moral consideration in the relationship between man and the environment, and it is the result of the absence of a conceptual union between the subject and the object. Anthony Weston writes that other cultures felt no compulsion to divide the entire world between all humans, on the one hand, and all nature, on the other. This entire frame of reference is largely peculiar to modern Western cultures.³² Because of the instrumental framework which has become part of the interactive world order (including those concerning the environment), such theories anchored on them cannot resolve environmental problems because of the subject-centred value which generates them in the first place. Environment fascism is also defective in that the elimination of human species for the sake of the rest of nature is as disturbing as the elimination of the rest of nature or part thereof for the sake of human species. The various attempts toward resolving environmental

³²Anthony Weston. *The Incomplete Eco-Philosopher: Essays from the Edges of Environmental Ethics*. (Albany: State University of New York, 2009), 6.

problem can be classified into two – anthropocentric extensionism and environmental fascism. Each of them employs instrumental rationality to reach opposing goals and make evident differentiation of the subject from the object. This is why no environmental ethical theory or any other theory of the environment known so far can address the threatening crises from environmental problems. It is, therefore, evident that we need another conception of the environment, built on alternative metaphysics.

Some African Understanding of the Bases for Moral Relations with the Natural Environment

According to Andrew Brennan and Yeuk-Sze Lo, many Western ethical perspectives are *anthropocentric* in that either they assign intrinsic value to human beings alone or they assign a significantly greater amount of intrinsic value to human beings than to any non-human things.³³ Due to the various problems inherent in the Western kind of environmental ethics, (i.e., misanthropy, fascism, ethical extensionism, among others, noted earlier), some African scholars have attempted to offer alternative theories grounded in some traditional African understanding of human interactions with the environment. Here, the views of Godfrey Tangwa and Kelvin Behrens are selected as samples for our purpose.

Tangwa puts forward an environmental ethical theory he termed ‘eco-bio-communitarianism’. According to Tangwa, as human beings, we carry the whole weight of moral responsibility and obligations for the world on our shoulders.³⁴ Tangwa, writing from cultural background in Cameroon, submits that the pre-colonial traditional metaphysical outlook of the Nso people can be described as eco-bio-communitarian.³⁵ This implies the recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful coexistence among earth, plants, animals and humans. Within that traditional worldview, the distinction between plants, animals, and inanimate things, between the sacred and the profane, matter and spirit, the communal and the individual, is a slim and flexible one. According to Tangwa, the differences which the African traditional worldview recognizes between these realities do not suppose that human beings have any mandate or special privilege to subdue, dominate, and exploit the rest of creation. The attitude toward nature and the rest of creation is that of respectful coexistence, conciliation and containment. Tangwa argues that it is asymmetrical moral relation that justifies human use of the environment. He contrasts the African worldview with Western outlooks whose

³³Brennan and Lo. *Environmental ethics*.

³⁴Godfrey Tangwa. “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics.” In Kwasi Wiredu, ed. *A Companion to African Philosophy*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 388.

³⁵Godfrey Tangwa. “Bioethics: An African Perspective.” *Bioethics* 10, no. 3 (1996): 192.

beliefs are that nature is completely knowable and controllable, and that the universe is something that ought to be explored, subdued, dominated and exploited. Tangwa puts it that the Western worldviews can be described as predominantly anthropocentric and individualistic, in contrast with its African counterpart, which he described as eco-bio-communitarian.³⁶ Despite the merit of grounding environmental ethics on African ontology by Tangwa, there are some problems with his position. One of such problems is the making of copious distinction between man and the rest of nature.³⁷ Another problem is the identification of asymmetrical moral relation between man and the rest of nature as the justification for human use of nature.

Kelvin Behrens, another scholar, concerned with African perspective on environmental ethics, argues against the claims that African thought is essentially anthropocentric and that for the African nature seems to have no value apart from its instrumental values for persons.³⁸ He argues that in an African worldview, there is the strong belief that everything in nature is interrelated, and non-human natural objects are morally considerable. He writes that on many accounts of African ethics, true personhood is only achieved by promoting harmonious communal relationship through mutual care and solidarity. This essentially relational ethics can be taken to extend beyond persons and include other entities which constitute the African moral community, such as ancestors, the living and future generations that form part of the web of life. Behrens claims that these notions entail an 'African Relational Environmental Ethic'. Here, Behrens tends to allude to ethical extensionism.

Concerning entities toward which we have direct moral obligations, Behrens writes that African environmental ethics would regard all living beings, some inanimate entities such as rivers, rocks, mountains, forests, ocean currents, winds, and even the atmosphere, as morally considerable because all entities have life-force, though in gradations, and they play systematically important roles in the flourishing of other aspects of nature.³⁹ Behrens included future generation of humans in this class toward which we have direct moral obligations. According to Behrens, what distinguishes this approach from more familiar Western views is the

³⁶Tangwa. *Some African Reflections*, 389-393.

³⁷Tangwa. *Some African Reflections*, 2004, 388, 389.

³⁸See Kelvin Behrens. "Toward an African Relational Environmentalism." In Elvis Imafidon and John Bewaji, eds. *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta- Ethics*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 55-57. Also see John Callicott. *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 156, 158.

³⁹Behrens. *Toward an African Relational Environmentalism*, 63, 66.

focus on relationality and solidarity. Behrens concludes that African relational environmentalism could provide a plausible alternative to existing Western ecophilosophies.⁴⁰ Behrens' position tends to isolate those beings that do not play important roles in the well-being of other living things from moral consideration, arguing that it is because our well-being is so tied up with the well-being of other living and non-living things that we are obliged to take them into consideration. With this, Behrens tended towards anthropocentrism, a notion which he had argued against.

Although these African perspectives make a reasonable departure from Western perspectives, some allusions are still made to them, and there is still the subject-object distinction which is the major point of contention in this inquiry. The essence of the dichotomy between the Western and African perspective so far is that while the underlying principle in the West is explicitly subject-object distinction, those of Tangwa and Behrens discussed so far from African perspective, are, respectively, *eco-bio-communitarianism* and *relationality*, although they are implicitly or unconsciously tainted with subject-object distinction.

Union of Beings in Esan Ontology

The union among beings in Esan ontology can constitute a foundation upon which a veritable human relation with natural environment can be based. Since a workable ethical theory of the environment would require the appreciation of the environment not merely instrumentally, but as part and parcel of the entire, single whole, with its independent and inherent values, the Esan conception of reality presents a framework for theorizing on environmental ethics. In Esan ontology, there is no subject-object dichotomy; rather, there is an inferable union among the different beings occupying different realms of existence – physical and non-physical - human, supernatural and non-human nature. Some of her thoughts and activities reveal that the metaphysical beliefs in structure of being, animation, totemism, conception of time, gyratory existence, reincarnation, independent energy, moral reciprocity among beings, and so on, establish her conception of union among beings. The Esan position concerning the union of beings which results from her ontology does not border on equality, supremacy or the degree of importance of the different parts of nature but recognizes the specific functions the parts have to play to ensure the prosperity of one another and the whole of nature.

From this union, the Esan would not see the relation among beings as instrumental or hierarchical, but structural and thus see and treat different beings as

⁴⁰Behrens. *Toward an African Relational Environmentalism*, 70.

compartments of the same reality. Therefore, she would not see human position in nature as that of domination, but a partner. Isaac Ukpokolo argues that “[i]n traditional Esan culture, the human personality, or the human individual, is known to exist and necessarily locatable and located within a structure of beings or communion of beings or forces.... The individual human personality therefore finds location within the structure of beings or interplay of forces”.⁴¹ From this rendition, it is clear that:

What the individual human person becomes is dependent on how he/she lives, and promoting the harmony in the community of beings.... Removed from this holistic ontological structure, the human person is not able to accomplish a fulfilled life.... Herein lies the connection between metaphysics and ethics in the consideration of existence and fulfillment of life and relationship among the traditional Esan people.⁴²

Justina Ehiakhamen argues about Esan morality that “ontological commitments are essential in adjudging an action as right or wrong.... To this extent, the link between ontology and ethics is intrinsic rather than crucial”.⁴³ Valentine Obinyan opines that, among others, part of the duty of the Esan man or *Oria* is to promote and protect nature according to the desire of his maker. In Esan cosmological belief, therefore, man sees the universe in terms of himself and endeavours to live in harmony with everything in nature.⁴⁴

In this ontology, man relates with, talks to, connects and unites himself with, nature. When we talk of union with nature, we talk of ourselves as part and parcel of the environment - of merging, blending and unifying with nature. This union is a continuum. It constitutes the bedrock of Esan holistic moral theorizing, including about the environment. This underlying ontology, that is, the union of beings, does not encourage or pave way for subject-object distinction. The absence of this distinction leads to non-abusive use of the environment.

The indigenous Esan has always considered the non-human environment as part and parcel of his moral community. His reflective standpoint for protecting the

⁴¹Isaac Ukpokolo. “The Anti-Humanity of Secular Humanism: An African Interrogation of the Secular Humanist Metaphysics of the Human Person.” *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* XLIII no. 2 (2011): 21.

⁴²Ukpokolo. *The Anti-Humanity of Secular Humanism*, 24.

⁴³Justina Ehiakhamen. “Beyond Culpability: Approaching Male Impotency through Legitimated Adultery in Esan Metaphysics.” In Elvis Imafidon and John Bewaji, eds. *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-Ethics*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 97-98.

⁴⁴Valentine Obinyan. “Environcentricism: A Philosophy for a Constantly Changing World.” *Global Journal of Human Social Science* 14, no. 5 issue I (2014): 4-5.

environment is not because it or its component parts are the source of life and support, but because they are part of the ontological constituent of reality, complementing other beings in a mutual way. This standpoint could be regarded as *complementary environmentalism*. Given their ontological view of and regard for nature, in addition to concrete practices, the Esan people would take non-human parts of nature (such as plants, animals, rivers, soil, wind and other non-animate natural things and future generation) as moral patients.

For the Esan, it is not the extension of moral relation from human cooperation (which is suggestive of ethical extensionism), as Kelvin Behrens argued, that grounds human obligation to the environment but metaphysical union among beings. Also, contrary to Behrens' argument that it is because our well-being is so tied up with the well-being of other living and non-living things that we are obliged to take them into consideration (which tends towards anthropocentrism), the Esan would incorporate all animate and non-animate natural entities and would not categorize forces in gradation nor attribute morality to them on the basis of how they attend to human well-being.

The reason or basis for moral attribution to nature, put differently, the desire for moral consideration for the whole environment or its parts, does not result from the negative impacts from human interaction with the environment and the threat they pose to human survival as prevalent in Western theorising. This Western ideology leads to the reason why the focus of environmental ethics is maximally on how to sustain the environment or remedy its challenges for human interest. Contrary to this, *ab initio*, the Esan moral attitude to nature results from their consciousness of ontological union of being. These Esan moral perspectives would establish a foundation for a perceived better moral conception for understanding nature and for relating with it.

Conclusion

This study analysed the theories of environmental ethics and radical ecology toward resolving environmental problems, the ideal relationship which humans should establish with nature, leaving a liveable environment for future generations, and the moral status of nature or its various components. The study holds that the presence of a variety of the subject-object dichotomy which generally underlies Western discourse implies the continued dominance of the environment by humans. Hence, to resolve environmental problems, we need an alternative theory based on an alternative metaphysics to supplant the existing ones. Consequently, the study examined some African perspectives on environmental ethics as well as an idea of a holistic environmental ethics based on the metaphysical union among beings in the Esan ontology. This union dissolves subject-object distinction, and creates the

consciousness that humans are not separated from the environment, but are part and parcel of it. This ontological picture can resolve environmental problems by discouraging the abuse and misuse of the environment, and establish oneness and careful relation with it. for want of a better coinage, this study termed this kind of argument, which is a reflection of the Esan people, *complementary environmentalism*.

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