

Environmental Ethics: An Introduction

Paul A. Adekunle¹, Matthew N. O. Sadiku², Janet O. Sadiku³

¹International Institute of Professional Security, Lagos, Nigeria

²Roy G. Perry College of Engineering, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX, USA

³Juliana King University, Houston, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Environmental ethics (EE) is a branch of applied philosophy that studies the conceptual foundations of environmental values as well as issues surrounding societal attitudes, actions, and policies to protect and sustain biodiversity and ecological systems. The competing paradigms are anthropocentrism, physiocentrism (also called ecocentrism), and theocentrism. Environmental ethics has a great influence on a wide range of disciplines including environmental law, environmental sociology, ecotheology, ecological economics, ecology, and environmental geography. This paper presents an introduction to environmental ethics, challenges, and the way forward.

KEYWORDS: *Environment, Environmental Ethics, Anthropocentrism, Physiocentrism (or Ecocentrism), Environmental Law, Ecology, Environmental Geography, Crises, Biodiversity, Ecological systems*

INTRODUCTION

Environmental ethics as a branch of applied philosophy studies the conceptual foundations of environmental values as well as more concrete issues surrounding societal attitudes, actions, and policies to protect and sustain biodiversity and ecological systems. The five major environmental problems are: climate change, pollution, habitat destruction, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity – while solutions lie in promoting renewable energy, habitat conservation, sustainable forestry, and species conservation efforts [1, 2].

In environmental philosophy, environmental ethics is an established field of practical philosophy “which reconstructs the essential types of argumentation that may be made for protecting natural entities and the sustainable use of natural resources.” It is concerned with the natural environment and humans’ place within it [3, 4]. Environmental Ethics (EE) studies the moral relationship of human beings to the environment and its contents [5]. Traditional western ethical views are human-centered or anthropocentric [6], which places humans at the center of the universe; therefore, everything else in existence

should be evaluated in terms of its utility for us (i.e. anthropocentrism). However, all environmental studies should include an assessment of the intrinsic value of non-human beings [7]. EE as a branch of environmental philosophy considers the actual and possible ethical relationships between humanity and non-human nature, as shown in Figure 1. This field of study has to consider among other questions to be investigated, our obligations to the future generations, as well as to other species and even non-living components of the natural world [8].

HISTORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Environmental philosophy has a long history in western culture. This could be traced back to the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi, to the literature works of romanticism poets and transcendentalists, such as Wordsworth and Thoreau, and to conservation movements led by Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. Many other factors contributed to the emergence of environmental philosophy, among which is overpopulation, poverty and famine, the depletion of non-renewable resources, and the

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harmful effects to human and non-human by chemical pollutants [9].

Environmental Ethics (EE) emerged in the early 1970s, when environmentalists started urging philosophers to consider the philosophical aspects of environmental problems. Early environmental philosophers include Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Richard Routley Arne Naess, and J. Baird Callicott. The movement was an attempt to connect with humanity's sense of alienation from nature in a continuing fashion throughout history. Environmental ethics considers the ethical relationships between humanity and non-human world. A group of the Union of Concerned Scientists, of over two thousand scientists, concluded that climatic change is beyond dispute, and has already started changing our environment. Environmental instability portends ill for public health and well-being. Extreme weather conditions, species extinction, and increase in diseases due to environmental changes are too glaring to ignore – all of these and more raises crucial issues about environmental justice [10].

The academic field of environmental ethics grew up in response to the works of Rachel Carson and Murray Bookchin and events such as the first Earth Day in 1970, when environmentalists started urging philosophers to consider the philosophical aspects of environmental problems. Holmes Rolston III is widely known as the “father of environmental ethics” for his relentless articulation of the presence of natural values in nature. He was an American utilitarian philosopher and theologian who pioneered the fields of environmental ethics and environmental philosophy [11].

CORE DISPUTES IN ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Two major core areas of dispute by De Laplante causing division among the academic community on the subject of environmental philosophy are [12, 13]:

1. Do human beings have moral obligations to protect or preserve the natural environment? If so, what are they, and to whom, or what, are they owned? How are such obligations justified?
2. What are the root causes of contemporary attitudes and practices with respect to the natural environment, and how can we change them?

The first set of questions above effectively define the field of “environmental ethics.” This helps to distinguish between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric approaches to ground the moral obligations towards the environment. While the answers to the second set of questions effectively define the field known as “radical ecology,” which

Zimmerman categorized to include deep ecology, social ecology and ecofeminism.

At the heart of the first set of questions lies the debate about whether nature has “instrumental value” or “intrinsic value.” “Instrumental value” means that the existence of the environment is only for human beings' interests. On the contrary, “intrinsic value” refers to how the environment ought to be regarded as worthy of respect rather than merely useful. Those in support of the intrinsic-value argument hold that humans do not have the right to define the value inherently existing in natural objects. The environment has value beyond satisfying human aims [14]. As opined by Agar, “the intrinsic value associated with life forms the foundation of an environmental ethic, enabling us to recognize nature's moral importance” [15]. Whether the environment has intrinsic value or not determines the way human beings act.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Environmental justice is a key concern of environmental ethics. This is defined by the US Environmental Protection Agency as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” [16], and as per this definition, there are both distributive and participative (or procedural) justice issues involving the environment. Distributive justice concerns the allocation of burdens and benefits in societies. An important environmental burden is exposure to environmental hazards. Both low-income and high-minority communities are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, particularly chemical exposure and air and water pollution, stemming from living and/or working near transportation depots, industrial facilities, and waste processing facilities [17,18]. In the U. S., race is significant to exposure above and beyond income, leading to the use of the term environmental racism. All over the world, low-income and marginalized communities including the US are disproportionately exposed to ecological hazards from mining, agriculture, and global climate change [19, 20].

Participative justice on the other hand, means the involvement of those affected by decisions in making the decisions. However, many people adversely affected by policies, institutions, and choices about environmental matters have no say in their formation, which is a violation of participative justice [21]. Therefore, in order to avoid participative injustices, environmental ethicists have recommended full and

meaningful participation, particularly by those whose health and welfare might be affected in environmental decision making [22], as shown in figure 2.

Another area of concern is that of climate justice. Climate change is unjust from both an intergenerational and global perspective, while the exact nature of this injustice and how to respond to it are contested. Central to climate justice is determining the moral status and significance of future generations and distant contemporaries, as well as working out what practices would be just with respect to them. Majority of the world's climate scientists hold that the Earth's climate is changing and with these being human-induced. Reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says that the period from 1980-1999 to 2090-2099 temperatures are "likely" to rise by between 1.1 and 6.4°C while the sea levels may rise by up to 59 cm [23-26]. The driver of these climatic changes is the emission of greenhouse gases, which calls for the urgent need to limit the emission of these gases. This is due to the fact that the ecological conditions of people not yet born are impacted by our current practices, lifestyles, and policies, hence the need for sustainable development as shown in Figure 3.

CAUSES OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Some human activities that can cause damage, directly or indirectly, to the environment on a global scale include population growth, neoliberal liberal economic policies and rapid economic growth, overconsumption, overexploitation, pollution, and deforestation – causing disruptions in the usual function of ecosystems, which could be serious or catastrophic. The global world population of between 9-10 billion people can live sustainably within the earth's ecosystems if human society works to live sustainably within planetary boundaries [27]. Furthermore, greater environmental impacts are caused by the "excessive consumption of industrial goods" by the wealthiest populations [28, 29].

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT OR OUR PLANET

The protection of our planet starts with you, i.e. it is everyone's business. Mentioned below are what you and I can do to protect the earth [30]:

- Reduce, reuse, and recycle (the three "R's"): We must cut down on what we throw away.
- Volunteer: volunteer for cleanups in your community.
- Educate: as we further our education, we can help others understand the importance and value of our natural resources, as shown in Figure 4.

- Conserve water: use less water to avoid runoff and wastewater that eventually end up in the ocean.
- Choose sustainable.
- Shop wisely: buy less plastic and use reusable shopping bag.
- Use long-lasting light bulbs: make use of energy efficient light bulbs which reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Switch off light when not in use.
- Plant a tree: trees provide us with food and oxygen. They help save energy, clean the air, and help combat climate change.
- Don't release chemicals into our waterways: make use of non-toxic chemicals in the home and office.
- Bike more: drive less to keep off CO₂ emissions [31].

CONCLUSION

In the world today we are faced with environmental issues and problems, which are related to managing nature and the natural resources provided by nature to provide food for eating, paper for writing, lumber for construction, and areas for people to participate in outdoor recreation and experience the aesthetic enjoyment/beauty of nature. There are issues and problems related to protecting nature from many sources of degradation or damage by people [32]. God's word found in the Holy Bible provides the moral basis in the form of a Christian Environmental Ethic that results in responsible and caring stewardship of all of God's creation, which are founded on the Principle of Sustained Order and Purpose, and the Principle of Universal Corruption and Redemption. To practice effective Christian environmental stewardship, we must work on increasing our knowledge of these principles from Biblical, scientific and practical policy and management perspectives. But stale, book knowledge of these principles is not enough to get the job done. When we get the deep, and personal understanding of the way God loves and sustains all of His creation will give us a new and proper perspective of the temporal and eternal value and purposes of nature – transforming how we view and carry out our God-given role as caretakers of nature. When we make use of nature, the Christian (and non-Christian) stewards must recognize that he or she has the responsibility to manage or take care of nature in a way that is not wasteful or destructive of the original functions of nature designed by God. Humans generally need to respect plants, animals, and other elements of nature in their created order out of respect for the triune God – the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit who created and continues to sustain the entire earth and universe [33].

For more information, the following related books or journals can also be consulted.

- Journal of Agriculture and Environmental Ethics.
- The Trumpeter.
- Ethics & the Environment Journal.
- Ethics, Policy & Environment.

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Figure 1. Environmentalism - wikipedia

Source: https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=4490efdd07ced03b&sxsrf=ADLYWILJ9r-7snKwV25bFkSBW4tbiHFyOA:1716013008056&q=images+on+environmental+ethics+by+wikipedia&tbm=isch&source=lnms&prmd=ivsnbz&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjR5nOxpAGAxVOQkEAHfoFB8wQ0pQJegQIDRAB&biw=1034&bih=539&dpr=1#imgrc=MGF7Q0KY3RjVoM

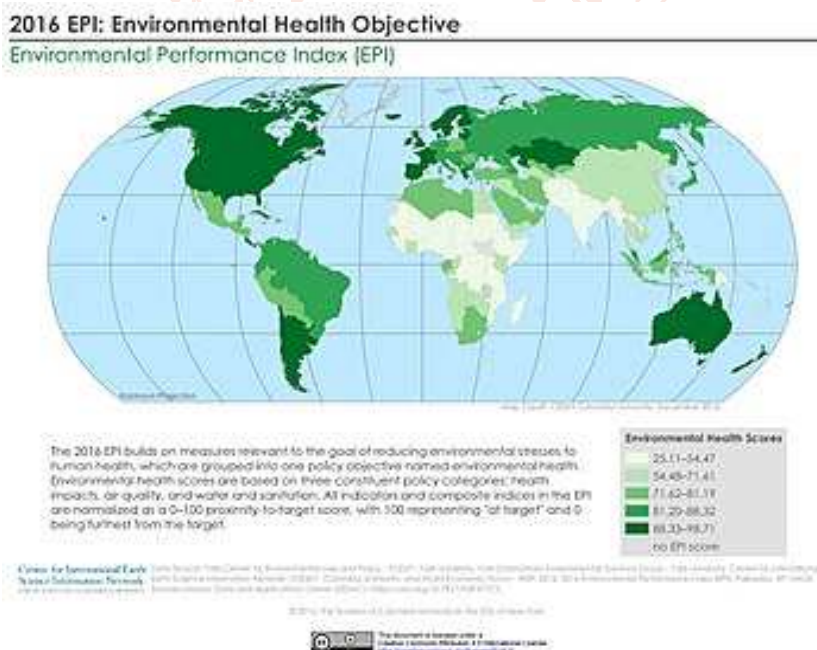


Figure 2. Environmental health – Wikipedia

Source: https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=4490efdd07ced03b&sxsrf=ADLYWILJ9r-7snKwV25bFkSBW4tbiHFyOA:1716013008056&q=images+on+environmental+ethics+by+wikipedia&tbm=isch&source=lnms&prmd=ivsnbz&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjR5nOxpAGAxVOQkEAHfoFB8wQ0pQJegQIDRAB&biw=1034&bih=539&dpr=1#imgrc=Ovv6lkZ9wPtH6M

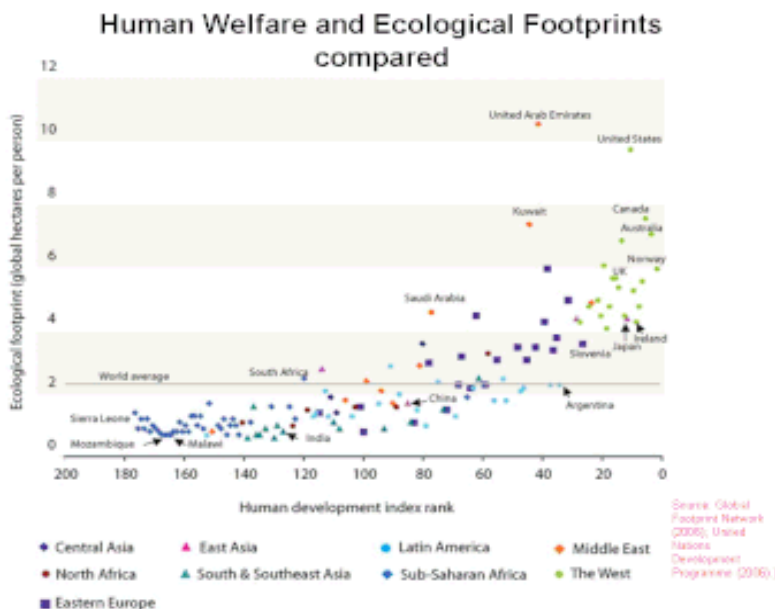


Figure 3. Sustainable Development – Wikipedia

Source: https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=4490efdd07ced03b&sxsrf=ADLYWILJ9r-7snKwV25bFkSBW4tbiHFyOA:1716013008056&q=images+on+environmental+ethics+by+wikipedia&tbm=isch&source=lnms&prmd=ivsnbz&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjJr5nOxpaGaxVOQkEAHfoFB8wQ0pQJegQIDRAB&biw=1034&bih=539&dpr=1#imgrc=542id1ELxDzRzM



Figure 4. Environmental Education - Wikipedia

Source: https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=4490efdd07ced03b&sxsrf=ADLYWILJ9r-7snKwV25bFkSBW4tbiHFyOA:1716013008056&q=images+on+environmental+ethics+by+wikipedia&tbm=isch&source=lnms&prmd=ivsnbz&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjJr5nOxpaGaxVOQkEAHfoFB8wQ0pQJegQIDRAB&biw=1034&bih=539&dpr=1#imgrc=ZKn8tO7kRvoxAM