

Environmental Degradation: Development Philosophy and Moral Responsibilities

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ABSTRACT

Many damages have been done to the ecosystem, especially the biosphere that houses the human species. The systems demand that human species and non-human species should be protected from avert environmental or ecological conditions which are detrimental to healthy living. This review examined environmental degradations in modern society. It also examined the ways in which every individual, group, community can help its society in establishing healthy environment and communitarian ethical living by possibly looking at the effectiveness of man's moral obligation to the ecosystem as the responsive solution to the degrading environments surrounding humanity.

Keywords: *Environmental Degradation, Moral Responsibilities, Humanity, Development*

INTRODUCTION

For better and happy living to be achieved, man should be very much atoning with nature and his environment in general. Development is the responsibility of everyone. Largely through human activity, life on earth faces serious danger of extermination. Since the dawn of modernity, humans have sequentially polluted, degraded and destroyed the very environment which sustains their lives and those of other living organisms. Not only have they succeeded in making the environment hostile to life, they have also turned it into a breeding ground for usual and unusual diseases and sicknesses (Nnamani, 2005).

This responsibility is a global one, for concerns not just with energy but with the whole of creation, which must not be bequeathed to future generations depleted of its resources. Human being legitimately exercises a responsible stewardship over nature, in order to protect it, enjoy its fruits and cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world's population (Benedict XVI, 2009). Everything surrounds the consideration of the human person, and though not fully understood because of his composition. The paradoxes of the human person point to two facts: the obvious fact that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of his years which nature permits its varied organic form. The other fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world (Udoh, Mbuk and Ejiogu, 2008). Even with these prospects, one can see that the world is sick

and then man is equally very sick and ill. Its illness consist less in the unproductive monopolisation of resources by a small number of people than in the lack of brotherhood among individuals and peoples (Cf Paul VI, 1967) especially as a result of man's activities that lead to environmental degradations.

This state of menace for man from what he produces shows itself in various directions and various degrees of intensity. We seem to be increasingly aware of the fact that the exploitation of the earth, the planet on which we are living, demands rational and honest planning. At the same time, exploitation of the earth not only for industrial but also for military purposes and the uncontrolled development of technology outside the framework of a long-range authentically humanistic plan often bring with them a threat to man's natural environment, alienate him in his relations with nature and remove him from nature. Man often seems to see no other meaning in his natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption. Yet it was the Creator's will that man should communicate with nature as an intelligent and noble "master" and "guardian", and not as a heedless "exploiter" and "destroyer" (John Paul II, 1979).

The issue of this write-up is on the effects of environmental degradation and the possible moral dictates to curtail them. But the questions that come to mind when discussing such issues are: can there be meaningful development without the effects of environmental degradation, of which they are regarded by scientific and technological researchers as residual products in the quest of meaningful engagements? Are we really morally obliged to and obligated for the wellbeing of our environment? Do we really consider the importance of photosynthesis and the needs for healthy surrounding which providentially necessitate healthy living? Do we really protect our collective heritages and consider the control of our freedom for the purpose of common goodness? Therefore, the aim of this work is to bring to fore the imperativeness of the exercise of man's moral responsibilities to the environment for enhanced better living condition.

ENVIRONMENT, ECOSYSTEM AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Environment is about the whole factors in nature that promote the courses of living. It can be regarded as nature itself, because one cannot talk about natural order without recourse to the concept 'environment'. Environmentalist is thus defined as the person who is concerned with or advocates for the protection of the environment; a person who considers that the environment has the primary influence on the development of a person or group (Kusumalayam, 2008). The keeping to the responsibility will necessarily engender sustainable development. From the foregoing, it can be deduced that every person is an environmentalist since it is obvious that no one even the most ugly person hates his/herself.

Sustainable development is the human moral response to think and act in the interests of themselves and their posterity, especially by protecting earth's natural habitats. It is an approach to protecting natural environment, which is urgently demanded now for human continuity or perpetuity (Malachy Igwilo, 2008/9). When discussing environment what comes to mind is the condition of it. Thus the meaning of a 'safe and healthy' environment remains ambiguous. It can mean being in a situation where we are free from

the threat of crime or from the threats of pollution. But when it is used strictly in the context of a right to safe and healthy environment it has now come to mean being free from a “particular set of threats” to human safety, namely those which stem from technological and industrial processes the disposal of sewage and wastes (MalachyIgwilo, 2008/9). It demands the collective conscience and positive symbiosis by the whole humanity that she is part of the environment and it presses on her to protect it. The environment is a home which houses all that is therein.

Ecosystem is the arrangement of the natural order. It is all about the events of living, which are naturally placed, and by its design keeps the whole creative order or creation on-going. One advocates for the maintenance of it; because the whole ingredients of life lie on the wellness of it. So, ecosystem is the habitat arrangement of the natural order which necessary sustains life and living possible. It is seat of life and its living conditions, because it guarantees the necessary factors for life’s possibility.

Environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources such as air, water and soil. It is the destruction of ecosystems and the extinction of wildlife. The UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction defines environmental degradation as the reduction of the capacity of the environment to meet its social and ecological objectives and needs for the development of the human society. The major areas of crisis of degradation are: agricultural activities and Force degradation; industrial pollution; agrochemical and waterways pollution; and developmental degradation.

Also, environmental degradation, according to High Level Threat Panel of the United Nations Organisation, is one of the Ten Threats in humanity, which can easily lead humanity into extinction if not properly monitored and controlled. This is because it is a process through which the natural environment is compromised in some way, reducing biological diversity and the general health of the environment (www.wisegiek.com). The process can be natural, but in most cases, it is accelerated or caused by human activities. It is about the violence done to natural order, especially by the scientific and technological activities associated with man’s innovations and ingenuity. According to Benedict XVI, today much harm is done to the development precisely as a result of these distorted notions. Reducing nature merely to a collection of contingent data ends up doing violence to the environment and even encouraging activity that fails to respect human nature itself (Benedict XVI, 2009). The foregoing clearly shows that the human world at various levels of our existence is far being properly regulated.

Consequently, it is a very fragmented world in which the ideals of freedom, justice and human harmony are far from being realised. In short, the world today is dominated by the negative values of alienation, injustice and disharmony. Hence, it is far from being a free world (Oladipo, 2008). So the issues of environmental degradation call humanity with great attention and interest, because it is for her good that they should be properly addressed.

THE NATURE OF ENVIIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

The forms of environmental degradation are overuse of natural resources, which mostly are as a result of spillage and depletion of water, air and land; land erosion as results of

flooding; privatisation of common lands for habitation; pollution via toxic substances from industrial and military engagement, vehicle emission, agricultural runoffs, disposal of radioactive wastes, naval exercises, geological activities, pipe lining, mining, cable and mechanical installations; emission from nuclear technological materials. According to Loon, “the rick society thesis works on the basis of the assumption that the technological culture inhabited by human can no longer perform functional closures. That is, the self-evidences of the ordering –revealing enabled by technoscience can no longer be taken for granted. As a result the relationship between human being and environment is no longer unproblematically mediated by technology, instrumental fidelity breakdown. This breakdown is catalysed by the digitalisation of environment. In the world of telematics, the relationship between human beings and environment is inevitably ambiguous (Van Loon, 2002).

The causes of environmental degradation are mostly linked with man’s activities which are factual from the inception of economic and industrial revolution in the 18th Century. This follows most intensively by the advancement of modern scientific and technological activities which have been the major problems to man’s living conditions, though in some many ways they have been his saviour. It can also be linked with: the effects of poverty and unmanaged population growth that lead to the culture of deforestation and excessive use of water, air and lands in the ecosystem, poor government policies on environmental and waste management, indiscriminate activities of science and technology; with the explosion that is associated with it comes the quest for more and more resources. This quest for resources, especially energy, has resulted in loss of other animal species as their habitats are threatened by mining, deforestation and dam projects (MalachyIgwilo, 2008/9), the uncontrolled growth of urbanisation and industrialisation, poor town planning, soil erosion as a result of over-cropping and overcrowding, wars and other forms of conflicts, and the likes.

Any degradation leads to ecological collapse if allowed to persist, and result to mass extinction of resources, animals and plants. According to Izibili (2005), no doubt, damage to the environment is no respecter of frontiers, and damage done to one generation has the consequence of affecting the future generations. . . . Environmental degradation occurs when renewable resources are depleted or used at a rate faster than they are naturally replenished. If such replenishable rate of use continues, the resources can become non-renewable on a human time scale or become extinct (Izibili, 2005). It leads to toxicity of the ecosystem, and resiliency to the original ecosystem, and the destruction of natural irrigational system. Overgrazing, overcrowding, reduction of availability of food, demographic pressure, loss of vegetation, shortages of biomass, drought, reduction in child mortality rate, forceful human migration in search of welcoming environments, increase in poverty rate, diseases, natural calamities, desertification, aversive climate change, greenhouse gas emission, soil erosion, ozone layer depletion, vulnerability of women as a result of search of basic materials for livelihood are also its effects. According to JohnPaul II, the gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related ‘greenhouse effect has now reached crisis proportions as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urban

concentrations and vastly increased energy needs. Industrial waste, the burning of fossil fuels, and unrestricted deforestation, the use of certain types of herbicides, coolants and propellants: all of these are known to harm the atmosphere and environment (JohnPaul II, 1990).

MAN'S MORAL OBLIGATION TO THE ENVIRONMENT

Man's morality affirms the consciousness of the predicaments of his existence, and also his capability to choose to act in a number of ways (Echekwube, 2005) for the betterment of his/her living. As the environmental situations unfold, philosophers and environmentalists are forced to redefine the scope of moral obligation. There is no doubt that the present generation is to a great extent living at the expense of the future generation (Nnamani, 2005). So, man's moral obligation towards the ecosystem will appear to us as the remedies to the effects of environmental degradation. They are as follows:

- i. Respect of human rights and dignity, and the promotion of the dictates of social justice. The ordering of human affairs is possible on the respect given to the ordinance of natural law where the human rights are derived. Morality demands that everyone obeys and carries out these commands that will necessarily bring about the reign of social justice.
- ii. Respect of Right to development and Right to Safe Environment as specified by the United Nations Organisation. In this type of culture, the conscience is simply invited to take note of technological possibilities. Right to Safe Environment which the UNO has been championing in the recent times is a moral restitution that should be seen in the life of everyone.
- iii. Promotion of the course of human life and happy living. Every individual should show constant readiness to be environmental friendly for the management of natural resources and their usages. Researchers have shown that many models of our lifestyles are not environmental friendly, even the mode of funerals has been so toxic to the ecosystem, which are very negative, and has contributed and been contributing to the destruction by the chemicals we use to embalm corpse before burials. They suggest that corpse should be buried without embalmment.
- iv. The control of personal freedom towards innovation and creativity, and the respect of collective freedom. Environmental issues really pose moral challenges. We are therefore challenged to examine the quality of our relationships to ourselves, to our neighbours, to nature and to the entire universe. They confront us the duty of becoming responsible for our actions and of becoming the people we should be (Nnamani, 2005).
- v. Adoption of the doctrine of Intergenerational Equity and Common Heritage of mankind (Kusumalayam, 2008). These are also in line with the thought of UNESCO in the Declaration on the responsibilities of the Present Generations to the Future Generations (adopted on 12 November 1997): (a) In order to ensure that generations benefit from the richness of the Earth's ecosystems, the present generations should strive for sustainable development and preserve living conditions,

- particularly the quality and integrity of the environment. (b) The present generations should ensure that future generations are not exposed to pollution which may endanger their health or their existence. (c) The present generations should preserve for future generations natural resources necessary for sustaining human life and for its development. (d) The present generations should take into account possible consequences for future generations of major projects before these are out.
- vi. Awareness of environmental importance and the change of people's perception of poverty in developing countries, especially on the scourge of poverty and migration. Curiosity is all about education of man. Man should be curious about what will promote his/her life intellectually and culturally. The achievement of healthy environment is based on the education of the rights which the society will be able to give to the people and the ones man can lay claim to, the sense of morality which he has placed the value of his life and his activities on.
 - vii. The promotion of effective environmental and waste management by individuals, national and international agencies, and regulations of trans-boundary movement of hazardous wastes. The societal individual should develop the consciousness of private hygiene that will necessarily engender communal cleanliness.
 - viii. Proper impact assessment policies and implementations for the placement of industries, and proper legal framework for maritime law and safety, Land Use Act, Airspace Regulation, and the protection of biodiversity under international law.
 - ix. Afforestation: there is need for the regeneration interest for replacement of extinct and consumed plants, especially economic trees, in order to regain the adequate and beneficial biosphere.

With these factors for moral engagement for the sustenance of environment, the following suggestions or policies should be considered as measures to curtail the effects of environmental degradation. Reverence for the worth of man is the basis of morality, and a person is dutiful not for material gain, pleasure and the like, but for reverence for himself as a person a moral agent (Edema and Abam, 2008/09).

THE ACCEPTANCE OF ECOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

In the attempt to attain environmental friendliness and consciousness, the embrace of ecological philosophy which is about the compartmentalisation of knowledge of addressing the entire domain of human interests for the management and utilisation of the environment is utmost important (Allan Savage 2006). These attitudes, sustained by a renewed awareness of the interdependence of all the inhabitants of the earth, will contribute to eliminating the numerous causes of ecological disasters as well as guaranteeing the ability to respond quickly when such disasters strike peoples and territories. The ecological question must not be faced solely because of the frightening prospects that environmental destruction represents; rather it must above all become a strong motivation for an authentic solidarity of worldwide dimensions (PCJP, 1994). This is the thrust of moral change of mentality of humankind towards proper environmental integration. It also helps in the monitoring of the activities of science and technology for the advancement of human families. This is about

the security of human life and demands of the promotion of its existence. Openness to life is at the centre of true development. When a society moves toward the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding meaning the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man's true development. The acceptance of ecological philosophy exemplifies the respect for the principles of intergenerational equity and common heritage of mankind. The principle of Intergenerational Equity focuses on the rights of future generations. It is a partnership of progress and development that each generation has right to inherit the same diversity in natural and cultural resources enjoyed by previous generations and been enjoy by current generations and in projection by future generations, and equitable access to the use and benefits of these resources (Kusumalayam, 2008).

According to Calwell (nd), it establishes a legal obligation to preserve favourable environmental conditions for future generations, to guarantee them equal access to natural resources and benefits (Kusumalayam, 2008). What this means is that every generation has the task of engaging anew in the arduous search for the right way to order human affairs; this task is never simply completed. Yet every generation must also make its own contribution to establishing convincing structures of freedom and of good, which can help the following generation as a guideline for the proper use of human freedom; hence, always within human limits, they provide a certain guarantee also for the future. While the principle of Common Heritage of Mankind states that some of the resources present on our planet are said to be for the common heritage of mankind. Mankind exists on every existing generation, and it demands its sustenance through the available resources. Such resources are air, water and land. It demands proper management, protection and promotion of these heritages for the advancement of humankind and the whole ecosystem.

Every economic activity making use of natural resources must also be concerned with safeguarding the environment and should foresee the costs involved, which are an essential element of the actual cost of economic activity. In this context, one considers relations between human activity and climate change which, given their extreme complexity, must be opportunely and constantly monitored at the scientific, political and juridical, national and international levels. The climate is a good that must be protected and reminds consumers and those engaged in industrial activity to develop a greater sense of responsibility for their behaviour (PCJP, 1994). It is a moral obligation to our generation and the future generations to carry out these tasks, disposes the sense of monopolisation of any natural inheritance by any existing generation, and discourages the overuse of any of these inheritances.

The evaluation centres on the needs to consider the moral obligations especially the respect of human life and its rights in the human activities, so that what man does, will not be detrimental to his/her existence. In a nutshell, the adoption of the principles of common heritage of mankind and intergenerational equity, if fully considered, will go a long way to eliminate any activity that may lead to environmental degradation in any form. This is because; man will greatly consider the usefulness of materials or resources in natural order with cautions, for the good of every existing generation. These principles promote right to development which is seen in man's nature. But they evaluate this development,

because man does not develop through his own power, nor can development simply be handed to him (Benedict XVI, 2009). In the course of history, it was often maintained that the creation of institutions was sufficient to guarantee the fulfilment of humanity's right to development. Considering that:

Today's world has placed a premium on material development, sacrificing many moral and spiritual values on the altar of material progress. Economic, political, social, cultural and educational realities have evolved and changed in significant ways, with the result that our worldview, values and outdated schemes of thought do not always allow us to devise appropriate solutions to crucial problems. Nor have we always succeeded in preventing our values and cultures from becoming detached from the global economy, the rules of the market and the highly useful but invasive new technologies. This has led to a divorce between the twin poles of our existence. As a result, cultural allegiances and religious ideologies- often distorted from their true meaning- have increasingly imposed themselves as exclusive responses (Bernani, 2004)

Moreover, such development requires a communal ethical vision of the human person that imbibes the workability of collective morality: without him with such mindset, then, development is either denial or entrusted exclusively to man, who falls into the trap of thinking he can come about his own salvation and ends up promoting a dehumanised form of development. Even in the face of modernity and civilisation, humanity is roaming in the shackles of uncertainty as they pose the challenges of wars, terrorism and other social and environmental unrests, pollutions, deforestation, false industrialisation and urbanisation, enslaved economic and political policies, false biotechnology, nuclear warfare, armament or arm race, poverty, draught, diseases, and natural disasters, where philosophy as discipline seem to have little or no relevance in proffering urgent solutions, only appear in the abstraction of ideas, not only philosophy, every profession or discipline is limited in this quest of solution rendering. What matters now is the use of man's conscience.

Philosophically also, the embrace of the philosophical venture of the usefulness of the dictates of Ecological Philosophy (Allan Savage, 2006) for environmental consciousness will be very meaningful in monitoring the activities of humanity in relation to environmental maintenance and valuation. These bring the culture of humanised freedom that is very much accommodative. As Benedict XVI asserts that "the right state of human affairs, the moral well-being of the world can never be guaranteed simply through structures alone, however good they are. Such structures are not only important, but necessary; yet they cannot and must not marginalize human freedom. Even the best structures function only when the community is animated by convictions capable of motivating people to assent freely to the social order (Benedict XVI, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The environment is a living organism itself, and every organism in the environment is all seeking survival, including man himself. With this, we have a give-and-take relationship

between humans and non-humans, and ultimately with the environment. They all have life that needs to be promoted and protected. We all have collective responsibility to the environment, for the benefits of human and non-human organisms. We know that “we have before us here a great drama that can leave nobody indifferent. The person who is trying to draw the maximum profit and, on the other hand, is paying the price in damage and injury is always man. The drama is made still worse by the present close at hand of the privileged social classes and of the rich countries, which accumulate goods to an excessive degree and the misuse of whose riches very often becomes the cause of various ills.”³¹ Man is allowed to use his God-given talents, not to exploit but to explore his environment, in order to derive comfort and joys in it all. In another light, man and nations should allow their freedom to be controlled by morality, spirit of common goodness, diplomatic interest and respect for local and international agencies’ policies, even in the name of military, scientific and technological advancements.

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