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"I DON'T CARE" ATTITUDE: FROM ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS TO ENVIRONMENTAL CARE

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Abstract

This work examines the necessity of environmental care in today's society, where the "I don't care" attitude toward the environment has become a significant barrier to sustainability and ecological preservation. While traditional environmental ethic frameworks, such as anthropocentrism, biocentrism, animal rights/liberation, ecocentrism and ecofeminism, provide moral justifications for protecting the environment, this work offers a relational and empathetic approach, emphasizing the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. By shifting from indifference to responsibility, the work calls for care for the environment amidst the challenges of pollution, waste disposal, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, ocean acidification, water pollution, public health issues, plastic waste disposal, poor waste management, etc. This work argues that protecting our environment is a moral responsibility, as failure to do so is a way of preparing for hazardous effects. It is the view of the work that caring for the environment must involve conscious efforts at individual, community, and global levels to promote ecological balance, as environmental problems do not respect national boundaries. The work holds that overcoming environmental indifference requires a change in attitude and ethical transformation, where care-based responsibility can replace passive neglect.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Care, Environment, Natural Challenges

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Introduction

Do we have any obligation regarding the environment? Is the human environment of any value? These and many more are questions that bother within the scope of environmental ethics, which is a relatively full-fledged new discipline in applied philosophy that is concerned with the human person and his environment. "Right from the beginning of the world, people have always been interested in their environment. This is because man's existence is intricately woven with his environment as it is his environment that provides him with succour in all its ramifications" (Okiche 225). Man's existence and sustenance are tied to the environment in which he finds himself. Thus, human existence is interwoven with the environment. The constant interaction between man and his environment has made the environment a significant concern since the 20th century. The problem of air pollution, depletion of the ozone layer, drastic reduction in biodiversity, constant deforestation, population growth, global warming, water pollution, chemical risks, energy production, habitat destruction and species extinction have given rise to a new course on human's attitudes to and challenges facing the environment. It is, therefore, the concern of this work to pay attention to the need for environmental care in contemporary times when most people show less concern about their attitude towards their environment.

Human Environment and Environmental Ethics

Environment as a concept refers to all external factors that affect man or organisms, including water, air, land, plants, animals, and human beings. It refers to surrounding influences and factors that affect the activities of man, the planet, plants and animals. In the environment, biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) components exist. The biotic factors in the natural environment include plants, animals and microorganisms. The abiotic factors include air (atmosphere), water (oceans, rivers, lakes), soil and land (mountains, forests, deserts) and sunlight and climate. While humans are part of the environment, it provides them essential (oxygen, water, food, shelter), supports biodiversity and ecosystems, regulates climate and weather patterns and maintains the balance of natural cycles (carbon, water, nitrogen cycles). However, human attitude and negligence have necessitated the emergence of environmental ethics and the constant call for environmental care in a period when the environment is faced with threats of pollution (Air, water, soil, noise), deforestation (Loss of forests due to human activities), climate change (Global warming, rising sea levels) and loss of Biodiversity (Extinction of species due to habitat destruction).

Environmental ethics is an aspect of applied ethics which examines human responsibility towards the environment. It is a relatively new discipline within philosophy that has gained its foundation and popularity since the 20th century. The emergence of environmental ethics was a result of awareness of the effects of industrialization, economic expansion, increasing population and technological developments. This awareness was aided by the work of Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring, which was first published in 1962. Carson* warned of how the prevalent use of chemical pesticides poses a severe threat to public health and the destruction of wildlife. Another similar work that contributed to the development of environmental ethics is Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb,* published in 1968, which warned about the effect of increased population on the planet's resources. On the other hand, the first Earth Day in 1970 also drew

people's attention to the need to care for the environment. Also, it tasked philosophers to consider the philosophical aspect of environmental problems.

While ethics traditionally focus on human beings, environmental ethics is concerned with nature, and it bears criticisms against humans' abusive and exploitative attitudes toward nature. It evaluates the rightness and wrongness of human actions in relation to the environment. Environmental ethics raises and answers questions that bother the foundation of ethics in relation to the environment. Environmental ethics emerged on three fundamental principles: First, ethical frameworks must account for nature and all living beings, as life on Earth is deeply interconnected. Second, ethics should extend beyond the present, considering future consequences and adopting an intergenerational perspective. Third, a meaningful ethical system must acknowledge that human existence depends on the Earth's well-being and the maintenance of its proper conditions.

Environmental ethics focuses on human beings and the environment. It is concerned with the relationship between man and his environment. It answers the question of man's obligation to his environment. As Enger & Smith noted, "The goal of environmental ethics, then, is not to convince us that we should be concerned about the environment, many are. Instead, environmental ethics focuses on the moral foundation of environmental responsibility and how far this responsibility extends" (qtd. in Okiche 226). According to Alasdair Cochrane:

> The job of environmental ethics is to outline our moral obligations in the face of such concerns. In a nutshell, the two fundamental questions that environmental ethics must address are: what duties do humans have with respect to the environment, and why? The latter question usually needs to be considered prior to the former. In order to tackle just what our obligations are, it is usually thought necessary to consider first *why* we have them. For example, do we have environmental obligations for the sake of human beings living in the world today, for humans living in the future, or for the sake of entities within the environment itself, irrespective of any human benefits? (https://iep.utm.edu/envi-eth/).

Environmental ethics is a branch of philosophy that studies the moral relationship between humans and the environment. It seeks to determine how we should interact with nature, considering the rights of non-human beings and the long-term impact of human actions. Environmental ethics holds onto the principle of interconnectedness of life. It argues that all living beings and ecosystems are linked, meaning that human actions affect the environment and vice versa. It is of the view that humans have the duty to protect and preserve nature, avoiding activities like pollution, deforestation, and species extinction and on the other hand, that the Earth is unique and indispensable, as it provides the conditions necessary for life, so it must be treated with respect. Thus, environmental ethics holds that ethical decisions should consider long-term consequences, ensuring a healthy planet for future generations.

Schools of Environmental Ethics

Does the human person have any moral obligation towards the environment? Is it right for a man to intentionally cause the extinction of species out of their convenience? How best can

humans conserve their environment? Should humans continue to clear off forests for their convenience? Does the present generation have any obligation towards the future generation? Providing answers to the above questions and many others has brought about different thoughts that are known today as schools of environmental ethics/philosophy. Within the discipline of environmental ethics, there are different schools of thought or what Nwadinihu (2021) refers to as idea-line of which each contributes some truths about reality as no school of thought has ever exhausted explanation about man and the world (64). The schools of thought in environmental discourse include: Anthropocentrism, Animal Rights/liberation, Biocentrism, Ecocentrism, and Ecofeminism. These schools of thought provide answers to the above questions from different perspectives. However, it must be noted that there are variances in each school of thought, and ideas overlap.

a. Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism, which is also known as human-centred or humancentric refers to an ethical framework that grants moral standing solely to human beings. An anthropocentric ethic asserts that only humans have intrinsic moral significance, meaning that all direct moral obligations, including those related to the environment, are ultimately responsibilities we hold toward other human beings. Anthropocentrism considers man to be at the centre of the universe and every other thing in existence to be at the service of man. Thus, our concern and care for the environment is as a result of how they affect our well-being. Simply put, an anthropocentric ethic asserts that we have a responsibility to protect the environment to safeguard human well-being and prosperity. Anthropocentrism is the view "that there is no other better way of looking at or thinking about the world than in terms of how our environment affects us" (Asogwa 243). This implies that taking care of our environment is necessary for human well-being rather than for the sake of the environment. Anthropocentrism traces its claims to Biblical roots (Gen 1:27-28), where man was given the injunction to multiply and subdue the earth. Anthropocentrism is of the view that there is no moral obligation towards our environment/moral relationship between man and his environment. Thus, the preservation of the environment is a result of human interest. Our duty towards taking care of the environment is, therefore, to ensure that the Earth remains a sustainable and hospitable environment for human life, preserving its beauty and resources to maintain a high quality of living. Thomas Hill, as Asogwa noted, outlined distinct claims that underline the ethic of anthropocentrism as follows:

> (i) Everything in nature except human beings exists solely for material benefits. (ii) All valid concerns about the natural environment derive ultimately from human rights and duties to respect human interests. (iii) It is good to value nonhuman animals, natural wilderness and ecosystems non-instrumentally (by this is meant that it is virtue of human being, though not other creatures to do this). (v) The ultimate justification for thinking that we should value nature non-instrumentally (and count it as 'morally considerable') must appeal not only to the facts about natural world and our place in it but also to the nature of moral sensibility, experience, dialogue and reflection" (Asogwa 244).

The proponents of anthropocentrism advocate that the maintenance of the environment is for the well-being of man and not for the sake of the environment. "They maintain that there is no ethical implication in the relationship between humans and nature. Implied in this is the idea that the interest of humans should centre principally on humans to the exclusion of the interest of other species" (Asogwa 244). This idea of exclusion of other species apart from humans is today seen as an older conception of anthropocentrism as modern anthropocentrism tries to understand what the interest of man is and means and distinguishes between what they refer to as reasoned preference and felt inference, or enlightened and unenlightened anthropocentrism. Modern anthropocentrism, however, objects to the view that pays attention to the environment for human interest at the exclusion of other species. Hill is of the view that those "who regard human rights and welfare as reasons not to destroy the natural environment seem to lack the natural basis of the virtues of proper humility, gratitude and aesthetic appreciation" (qtd. in Asogwa 245).

b. Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (*Feminism or Death*). In her work, she argued that the same patriarchal systems that oppress women are responsible for the exploitation and destruction of nature. Ecofeminism combines environmental advocacy and feminist views. As a branch of environmental ethics, Ecofeminism examines the connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. It argues that both environmental destruction and gender inequality stem from the same patriarchal, hierarchical structures that prioritize dominance, control, and exploitation. Ecofeminism embodies the views of different writers. However, ecofeminism argues that the domination of nature is an extension of the male domination of women. "Ynestra King argues that the domination of women by men is historically the original form of domination in human society, from which all other hierarchies, of rank, class, and political power flow" (qtd. in Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). Thus, "human exploitation of nature may be seen as a manifestation and extension of the oppression of women, in that it is the result of associating nature with the female, which had been already inferiorized and oppressed by the male-dominating culture" (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). Eco-feminism attempts to explain the domination and exploitation of nature by linking it to the domination and exploitation of women. According to eco-feminism, the domination and exploitation of women is an extension of how women are exploited. Thus, they associate women with nature and exploitation and dominance with men. However, "eco-feminism does not treat environmental problems in isolation; rather, it links them to other social problems like discrimination and exploitation of women" (Okiche 230).

c. Animal Liberation/Rights

Anthropocentrism holds that what matters is the well-being of man and that human beings will perish if we do not take care of the environment. However, Animal Liberation/Rights objects and holds that the inclusion of man only is detrimental and that animals are equal holders of rights, and these rights should be acknowledged and respected. This school of thought is commonly associated with Peter Singer and Topm Regan. Animal Liberation is the view that animals should be part of human duty and should be treated as an end and not just as a means. The exclusion of animals as a duty and total focus on man is what Peter Singer calls

"speciesism", which is a prejudiced attitude or bias towards the interest of members of another species. Peter Singer, in his book *Animal Liberation* (1975), argues that speciesism (favouring humans over animals) is an unjust bias, similar to racism or sexism. Singer is of the view that humans are always in the habit of promoting their interests to the detriment of other species/members of the biospheric community. Thus, he recommends that humans allow other species, similar beings with self-awareness, suffering capacity, etc., to have the right to life they (humans) have. On the other hand, Tom Regan, in *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), argues that animals have rights independent of human interests. Unlike Singer's utilitarianism, Regan supports a deontological approach (duty-based ethics), asserting that animals should never be treated as mere resources. Animal liberation is of the view that while man is favouring his environment for his own sake, animals should be considered.

d. Biocentrism

Biocentrism, meaning life-centred, is a philosophical perspective in environmental ethics that grants moral significance to all natural entities. It challenges the notion that nature exists solely for human consumption, emphasizing that humans are merely one species among many. Biocentrism advocates for a fundamental shift in how humans perceive and interact with the environment, asserting that since humans are part of the ecosystem, any harm to other living beings ultimately affects humanity as well. This viewpoint upholds the inherent value of all species, rejecting human superiority and promoting a non-hierarchical approach that prioritizes the natural world as a whole.

Biocentric ethics have been explored by various philosophers, including Albert Schweitzer, who introduced the concept of Reverence for Life; Peter Singer, known for his advocacy of Animal Liberation; and Paul W. Taylor, who developed the principle of Biocentric Egalitarianism. Biocentrism calls for a profound reconsideration of humanity's role in nature, promoting a more respectful and harmonious relationship with all forms of life. In his 1981 paper, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature", Taylor emphasizes that humans are nonprivileged members of the Earth's community of life. He argues that humans, like all other organisms, are part of an interdependent system and that the survival of each organism is determined in part by its relations to other organisms. Taylor also points out that humans have inhabited the Earth for a relatively short period compared to many other organisms. While many organisms do not depend on humans for survival, humans would likely become extinct very quickly without the support of many life forms. Taylor proposed that the same moral consideration should be given to the welfare of all other organisms as it is given to human concerns.

e. Ecocentrism

Ecocentrism is a school in environmental ethics which holds that "the whole environment deserves direct moral consideration, not indirect consideration which merely stems from human or animal interest" (Okiche 229). Ecocentrism extends the frontiers of moral status to the whole of nature. Enger and Smith summarized ecocentrism as a theory which holds that "the environment has direct rights that qualify for moral personhood, that it is deserving of a direct duty and that it has inherent worth. The environment, by itself, is considered to be on a moral par with humans" (qtd in Okiche 229). Ecocentrism sees the ecosphere – comprising all Earth's ecosystems, atmosphere, water, and land – as the matrix that birthed all life and is life's

sole source of sustenance. It is a worldview that recognizes intrinsic value in ecosystems and the biological and physical elements that they comprise, as well as in the ecological processes that spatially and temporally connect them (Gray, Whyte and Curry 2018). has three shades: land ethic, deep ecology and the theory of nature's value. Aldo Leopold made a prevalent land ethic, and it holds that man should no longer be regarded as the conqueror of the land but as ordinary members of the community, just like land. "Deep ecology, on its part, asserts that everything in the ecosphere has an equal right to live and blossom and so must be given the chance to do so. According to the theory of nature's value, nature has. As our duties to nature derive from this value, we must value nature by not harming it" (Okiche 230).

The term Deep Ecology was first introduced by Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss in 1973. He distinguished between "shallow ecology" and "deep ecology." According to Næss, shallow ecology focuses on short-term, technocratic solutions to environmental problems, such as pollution control and resource management, without questioning the deeper structural and philosophical causes of environmental degradation. Deep Ecology seeks to address the root causes of environmental destruction by advocating for a profound shift in human consciousness and values. Næss was influenced by Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism, as well as the ecological sciences. He argued that modern industrial society's anthropocentric attitude towards nature is the primary cause of ecological destruction and must be replaced with an ecocentric worldview, one that sees humans as part of the larger web of life rather than as its rulers.

Environmental Challenges and the Imperative of Care

Our environment is constantly changing, and as our environment changes, so does the need to become increasingly aware of the problems that surround it. With a massive influx of natural disasters, warming and cooling periods, different types of weather patterns and much more, there is an urgent need to care for the environment. Thus, with the reality of challenges facing the environment, which range from pollution, global warming, overpopulation, natural resource depletion, waste disposal, climate change, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, ocean acidification, ozone layer depletion, acid rain, water pollution, urban sprawl, public health issues, genetic engineering, plastic waste disposal, e-Waste disposal, polluted environment, constant deforestation, dangerous fumes from ill-maintained cars, poor waste management, industrial discharges, oil exploration, release of toxic materials into the environment, to erosions, etc., one question before us is: what do we do towards a sustainable environment?

Caring for the environment is fundamental for maintaining the health of our planet and ensuring a sustainable future for all living beings. Environmental care and protection involves conscious efforts at individual, community, and global levels to promote ecological balance. Environmental problems do not respect national boundaries, as one environmental issue that emanates from one nation can affect another. For example, the forest fire of 1998 that ravaged Mexico impacted the air quality in Texas. Air pollution, oil spillage, climate change, etc., are environmental issues without boundaries. Hence, finding the solution to environmental problems is not a single-man or one-nation problem but one that requires all nations to work together. We have an obligation to care for our environment, as neglect of this will have a profound effect on human beings. Poor neatness culture, dumping of refuse anyhow, industrial

pollution, flooding and erosion, human waste, etc., are all challenges to human and environmental well-being. Though many legal treaties are enforceable for a better environment, we still have moral duties that emanate from our consciences, even though laws do not back them. The Stockholm Conference of 1972, The Rio de Janeiro Conference of 1992, The Copenhagen Conference of 2009, etc., are all geared towards a better environment. Thus, protecting the ozone layer, curbing noise pollution, and ensuring clean environmental sanitation, oil spillage, habitat destruction, water pollution, chemical risks, etc., requires all efforts. Thus, for a better environment, we need a change in attitude.

Change in attitude is vital for a sustainable environment, especially in today's society where people exhibit an "I don't care" attitude towards the environment, not minding the effects of the constant throwing of plastics into waterways, bush burning, deforestation, etc. Taking Nigeria as a case, many people see nothing in littering the environment with anything that their hands can hold. Urinating anywhere seems to be a culture, and dumping waste, even in waterways, tends to be an everyday thing. "It is common to see a person driving the brand of state of the art car throw garbage onto the road through the window as he drives along the road" (Okiche 236). The high rate of "I don't care" attitudes that are exhibited in our environment calls for urgent change. Many people are unaware of the health implications of a dirty environment, not to talk of a polluted environment. Thus, there is a need for proper education and orientation on the effects of environmental degradation on humans.

The environmental challenges we face today are mainly the result of humans' constant interference with nature. Destroying natural vegetation, a high mentality of material possessions, and consumerism all affect our environment. While individual change of attitude is vital, business organizations should, in the course of maximising profits, form the habit of taking care of the environment. The constant release of hazardous gas affects the air we breathe. The government, on its side, owes the people the best in terms of making the environment a better place for all. However, while we do not have laws and sanctions regarding environmental protection in shortage, what seems to be relegated is its enforcement. There is a need for a system that will be serious and live up to its duty in making the human environment habitable. On another note, we need environmental education, which will be geared towards the protection of our environment. Thus, "if all of us recognize that we are individually responsible for the environment we live in, our environment will be the better for it. Our actions affect the environment around us. If A decides not to pollute his environment and B also decides not to pollute, the abatement of pollution has already started" (Okiche 237). We have to change the mentality that man has dominion over the earth; therefore, he can do with it as he wishes. Humans should be prudent in their relationship with the environment, bearing in mind that they are co-existents with other creatures and that they owe the next generation the duty to make the world habitable. For a better environment, Onuoha enumerates the following measures as necessary on the part of the government:

1. Implement measures to check environmental pollution by factories, industries, power plants, vehicles, smokers and other polluters.

2. Regulate deforestation and afforestation meticulously.

3. Ensure that construction companies that build roads provide adequate drainage facilities like gutters and culverts at appropriate places.

4. Enlighten the citizens continuously on environmental protection and preservation.

5. Develop a market economy that encourages recycling and discourages wastage of limited resources (191).

Following from the above, it is necessary, therefore, that we reduce waste by avoiding unnecessary packaging, minimizing single-use plastics, opting for sustainable products and reusing items like containers, shopping bags, and clothes instead of discarding them after one use. However, materials like paper, glass, plastic, and metal can be recycled to reduce landfill waste and conserve natural resources. Furthermore, reducing energy consumption would help lower greenhouse gas emissions and slow climate change. Hence, there is a need to support renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power.

Biodiversity, on the other hand, is essential for a balanced environment, as ecocentrism holds. Thus, humans can help protect nature by avoiding deforestation, supporting reforestation projects and keeping natural habitats clean by disposing of waste responsibly. As it has become common to cut down trees because of house building and for no just cause, it must be noted that trees absorb carbon dioxide, produce oxygen, and provide habitat for wildlife. It is imperative that while we cut trees to create space to build, we must plant more trees, support afforestation and reforestation projects, and protect forests from illegal logging and land conversion. As can be seen, plastic pollution has become a typical environmental problem, harming marine life and polluting land and water sources. Thus, to reduce plastic pollution, it is necessary to avoid single-use plastics like straws, plastic bags, and disposable cutlery and build the habit of using reusable shopping bags, water bottles, and containers.

Conclusion

From the beginning, we noted that environmental ethics concerns our attitudes toward the environment. It is an aspect of applied ethics which calls us back to consciousness to reconsider our actions and their effects on our environment. Thus, we have a responsibility to care for the environment by adopting sustainable lifestyles and advocating for environmental protection and care. Small individual actions, when combined, can create a significant positive impact on our environment. Protecting our environment is our responsibility, as failure to do so is a way of preparing for hazardous effects on us. We owe the future generation the responsibility of making the world a better place for them to be in when it is their time to come into existence. Thus, we must protect our environment for the sake of the whole ecosystem and the sake of the future. We have both legal and moral obligations to make our environment a better place for all existents by changing our attitude of less concern towards environmental problems.

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