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ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE AFRICAN LIFEWORLD

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Abstract

The failure of prevalent ecological and philosophical theories to stem the present tide of environmental degradation leaves the contemporary age in great perplexity. With the assumption that the way we treat nature is an outcome of our perception of nature, the paper hypothesizes that a tenable solution to a response to the problems caused by our perception of nature requires a shift from our previous conceptual framework about nature, since the same environmental paradigm engendering the causal factors of the problem cannot superintend over its reversion. Its eco-phenomenological approach leads to the adoption of the "African lifeworld" as model theory while using the activities of the multi-national corporations in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria for study sample.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, eco-phenomenology, environmental depletion, extrinsic valuation, intrinsic valuation, instrumentalism, lifeworld, phenomenology, sustainability

Introduction

A window into understanding the broad view of the environment can be found in the statement in Ibe Nwoga's 1984 Ahiajoku Lecture on the Igbo concept of "Uwa". It reads: "*ụwa* is used to indicate that the Igbo speak more in terms of fields of action than of place of action. Space is a field of action, a plane of action, not just a location made up of discrete physical distances and separate physical spaces" (Nwoga, 1984). It is rather a web of life which is constituted of a variety of beings/entities in an interactive intimacy and proximity. Importantly, insights from both ecology and environmental philosophy emphasize the importance and indispensability of the physical environment as a sheltering dome for diverse life forms. Ever since the declarations of the Stockholm Conference in 1972, for instance, the United Nations and ensuing myriad of eco-literatures have been making increased affirmations regarding the importance of the natural or physical environment. Highlights from this literary genre portray it as the "common umbrella" sheltering all living organisms (Parker, 2019; Talukder, 2018; Mrema, 2022). While "umbrella" evokes the idea of a common shield, as conveyed in the Greek "oikodome" (household), a coinage from "oikos", the etymological root for both environment and economy, it discloses the close affinity between these two literally distinct terms (MA, 2005; The Convention on Biodiversity, 2022; 2009; see Nwachukwu, 2022; Omerede, 2014; and Onuoha et als, 2018). Under this shield, there exists, according to the African ecocentric worldview, a kindred relationship between humans and nature, in which the various elements in nature and its ecosystems never appear as expendables for exploitation and profit. This agrees with highlights

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of nature's immeasurable value in Aristotle's ethics and natural teleology, natural objects become ends in themselves, rather than means. They hold that nature is valuable insofar as it is constituted by natural objects or things with natures. And, where an object or a thing has a nature, it would have an end or a good towards which it strives or tends. Based on this thesis, nature's objects are considered to have morally relevant interests, quite independent on any extrinsic ascriptions or ancillary ends (cf, Foster, 2002).

However, despite the above picture, the image of physical nature and its environments as experienced today is one in near state of total shambles. Indicators of broken and environmental crisis are observed while media reports attest to the alarmingly increasing rates of environmental degradation and crises even at the global stage. Not a few eco-literatures attest to the depleted environment or underline the weight of human economic pursuits on the environment. A bunch of eco-literatures highlights on the causal factors while others point at the perilous consequences of this human malfeasance on nature. Scientific ecology has furnished valuable insights on how a degraded environment, as a torn turf, is unable to shield living organisms from existential precipices, and how this characterizes contemporary shared experience. While the Brundtland Report (1987) and the MA (2005) highlight how damage done to physical environments impacts every living organism and the future of the earth, this "new reality" is described as a "daunting challenge" the current age and future generations are condemned to grapple with (see, United Nations, 2000). The Convention on Biodiversity (2022) underline biodiversity loss and other attendant dastardly existential strains as glariest pointers to the deleterious power of this challenge. Other consequences include distorted food and energy chain, damaged natural shields against life-extinguishing sun rays, perforated hazardous gas sinks, and consequent losses of traditional means of livelihood, eco-friendliness and spirituality (Osigwe et als, 2023), and social conflict. This body of literary genre shades light too on how this is gradually shaping contemporary human experience. Representing the common opinion in many of these literary works, therefore, Morelli tags this (daunting) challenge (experience) "our new reality" (Morelli, 2011). This nomenclature, "our new reality" is an illustrative metaphor for the present perilous condition created by humankind's economic stranglehold and unsustainable use of the physical environment and its contents (see, Convention on Biological Diversity, 2009; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Rinkesh, 2023; Tecklu, 2004). This hyperbolic expression underscores with perplexity the consequent condition of an endangered environment, the theatre of human existence, which is lacking in capacity to guarantee support to the myriad of teeming living organisms that depend on its services for their survival. The reportedly rising scale of environmental degradation, and its deleterious consequences, is worrisome. That humans contribute to creating this condition, coupled with its increasing global spread, despite the wealth of insights on this phenomenon, gives much concern. Environmental crisis is therefore an outcome and negative impact of environmental degradation, which is a compromised condition in which reduces biological diversity and the general health of the environment. This paints environmental degradation as "the reduction of the capacity of the environment to meet social and ecological objectives, and needs" **(*"ISDR: Terminology"*. *The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. 2004-03-31. Retrieved 2010-06-09*).** Its consequences subject all life forms and the future of the earth to a state of existential precipice and jeopardy. The above definition underlines the present age's perplexity over the condition of the common shield, especially as occasioned by the weight of human unsustainable leaning on this life support system (MEA, 2005; Shrinkhal, 2019).

This paper addresses this challenge, especially as a contribution to the general campaign against the phenomenon. It relies so much on scientific insights which reveal how "Mindless consumerism and economic growth" impact Mother Nature very negatively. That this attitude reinforces and entrenches ongoing

environmental depletion thus making "sustainable development", the catchword of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a mere buzzword (Morelli, 2012; Shrinkhal, 2019), despite available advanced level of ecological and environmental cognition, without attenuating the causal factors, the pace and desire for economic development, rouses a lot of questions that occasion further search for solution to the challenge, from the philosophical perspective. It is therefore the attempt to answer the following questions: "What is the root cause of environmental degradation?" What factors are responsible for engendering and reinforcing these causes? And finally, why do suggested theories never able to arrest these factors or cushion the negative effects? And finally, what alternative theory can we employ if really we want to address this phenomenon?

Addressing the issues here takes us to a study of a sample case. Followed is the work of scientific research on the problem, and finally, the eco-phenomenological response which we shall split into two, eco-phenomenology and the African lifeworld approach.

A Sample Context

To instantiate and to ground the above objective and Environmental degradation is a global phenomenon with pervasive presence across the globe. But field investigations draw attention to local contexts where nature's environments and their ecosystems are dragged to a crisis point. One of such contexts is Nigeria. The 2023 IPCC Report's inclusion of Nigeria in the list of most vulnerable countries according to its vulnerability mapping (Farand, 2022) gives a clue to Nigeria's current environmental degradation index, especially in her Niger Delta region. The causes are anthropogenic. This justifies the use of Nigeria as a sample case for investigating how anthropogenic economic activities weighs on ecology, thereby precipitating environmental degradation.

Similar to any delta where the "geographic setting of each delta and its watershed results in different spatiotemporal patterns of distribution of hydrological, ecological, and biological indicators for each delta" (Chen, 2019), the Niger Delta region's 70,000 km^2 area "is characterized by wetlands and waterbodies with large mangrove forests and a network of creeks and rivers crisscrossing the entire region, with aquatic splendor …" (Omorede, 2014). The carbon sequestration capacity of its mangroves filters the environment and gives support to a wide variety of plant and animal lives and freshwater. This makes the region a sample point of multiple varieties of biotic species. Besides this bio-diversity index, the region is endowed with large deposits of natural mineral resources, most notable of which is oil. Its enormous mineral oil and gas reserve makes the region the destination hub of many multinational oil corporations in Nigeria (Osigwe et als, 2023). This is the mainstay of the Nigeria's economy. It accounts for about 40% of Nigeria's GDP, 70% of budget revenues, and 95% foreign exchange (World Bank, 2004; Agbede, 2023).

Nevertheless, the key biophysical processes of degradation in the area are same in all deltas and similarly affect their ecology and food chain dynamics, and this in turn impacts mankind. Chief among these are ecosystem depletion in the forms of deforestation, wetland destruction, and pollution. This is occasioned largely by the activities of the multi-national oil corporations in the region. With globalization trends' reinforcing of fossil oil economy across the globe, Nigeria became, not only "a target for multinationals considering her large population, mineral resources and geographical location …" (Iyanam, Ubi, & Ero, 2021), her oil and gas basin (the Niger Delta Region) turned into the hotspot of multinational corporations' chase for Nigeria's oil windfall (Osigwe et als, 2023). Not less than seven major multinational oil corporations – Agip, Chevron, ELF, Exxon-Mobil, Texaco Overseas, Total and Shell – are currently competing for dominance in fossil fuel exploration, extraction and, permissibly, exploitation in the country. Other competitors include Addax and CNOOG, and their local subsidiaries.

A vast array of relevant literature articulate the impact of continuous oil exploitation by these Multinationals on the region's environment. The authors attest that unsustainable intersection of economy on the environment has weighed negatively on both humans and the environment. The findings show how the hot chase for petrodollar and the manner of oil hunt have created a "new reality" that now characterizes communities in the region as poverty and impoverishment hotspots with heavily depleted ecosystems. Onuoha et al (2018) condemns this heavy leaning on oil mineral resources in the region. In Donatus (2016), that reduces Niger Delta to one of the most polluted regions in the world; its multidimensional degradation drags the region to a precipice. And for Omorede (2014), the business activities and operations of these Corporations have turned the region into an environmentally challenged scavenging field. Akinwotu (2022) and Giles (2018) interpret black soot pollutants around the city of Port Harcourt in this light. All this boils down to saying that the intersection of economy and environment as instantiated by the activities of the Oil Corporations operating in the Niger Delta have created a new environmental and ecosystem reality in the region. Sadly, this "new reality" leaves life in the region in a precarious condition. Onuoha et als (2018) reports that the reaction of indigenes of oil producing communities in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. They vent deep pain over the damage done to these "life-support systems" and the endangered condition of their lives both as individuals and as a people as they no longer consider the gains of petrodollar commensurate to the dangers and pains that befall them. Omorede (2014) remarks that the region's "oil resource wealth has turned to oil resource curse as they are disempowered, and condemned to perpetual underdevelopment". These works and many others illustrate how the theater of human existence and culture (environment), has become a victim of unsustainable human economic activities as the following reveals:

i. the atmosphere of polluted environment creates "our new reality" in the Niger Delta
ii. this is a result of depleted, imperiled, environments
iii. the reason is business activities and processes in the area
iv. the perpetrators are the oil giants with full political backings of government
v. their sole motivation is profit
vi. this condition endangers life and the earth's future (Nwachukwu, 2022)
vii. the cause is ultimately anthropogenic

Underlying Conceptual Issue in the Logic of the Corporations

The 1987 Brundtland Report warns of imminent irreversible environmental crisis and biodiversity extinction unless the present trend environmental degradation is reversed. But Sorcha O'Connor remarks that addressing the effects of climate change and pollution will make little headway while we continue to produce these problems at the same rate. She counsels: "In treating any problem, it is important that solutions not only manage symptoms but also target the problem's source … it is necessary to identify its conceptual foundations ... examining its production at the level of thought …" (O'Connor, 2022). This insinuates that environmental actions emanate from assumptions that justify and facilitate them. These assumptions, themselves, are determined by the "conceptual foundations" that shape our understanding of nature and its environment.

Freya Matthews builds the above into three statements of axiomatic significance to illustrate both the origination of environmental actions and the logic of the business world:

a. how we understand the world determines, to a large degree, how we treat it

b. how we treat our world constitutes our basic modality
c. our basic modality colours everything we do – our entire culture takes its cue from it (Matthews, 2006).

In other words, beyond a literal interpretation of the question, "What is the root cause of environmental degradation?", a viable search for solution to the menace should equally underline the factors(s) that shape(s) our understanding of ourselves, the world around us, and our relationship to it. This primary task of contemporary environmental thought therefore requires some hermeneutics.

An inference we can draw from Matthews (2006 & 2014) and O'Connor (2022) is that environmental degradation is basically a conceptual problem. These two authors ground their logic on the historical antecedents of prevalent occidental worldview in which nature and, indeed, all natural phenomena, has been projected in dualistic patterns (Matthews, 2014). Against the monistic thesis, dualism splits all reality into two mutually exclusive taxonomic blocs. Modern dualism derives from Rene Descartes' distinction of "mind" (*res cogitans*) from "body" (*res extensa)* (see Descartes, Discourse on Methods, IV). Matthews' two publications, Environmental Philosophy (2014) and Dilemma of Dualism (2017), for instance, relate how this frame of mind evolved over time into the systematized intellectual tradition in the Western hemisphere, and how this "… strictly materialist worldview that was atomistic, mechanistic and dualistic in its ontology and analytical, quantitative and mathematical, inductive and empiricist in its methodology" (Matthews, 2014), metamorphosed into the dominant global environmental and ecological worldview. O'Connor underscores how culture entrenches this dualistic framework. A dualistic culture of creates blocs that treat each other as insurmountably different, entirely isolated from "self"; hence, the notion of two wholly separate worlds, human and non-human (O'Connor, 2022). This bifurcation discloses the characteristic features of dualistic logic – hierarchy, radical exclusion, commodification, objectification, homogenization, and hyper-separation, which experience shows, is not exclusive in the human-nature divide, but also in numerous shades of bifurcations and dichotomizations among humans as witnessed in human history and relationships (O'Connor, 2022).

This Cartesian taxonomy basically distinguishes the "thinking self" or "subject" (*res cogitans*) and "objects" or "body" or "world" (*res extensa*). As an exclusive reserve of the "thinking being", "mind" is a unique (subjective, invisible) characteristic that separates the human from other component entities (objective) in nature, environment and ecosystems. *Res extensa* is constituted, on the other hand, of observable (objective) properties of reality. These objective properties, being in themselves, empirically observable and quantitatively calculable, are the adopted the data of modern science and of the scientific method. This composition denies *res extensa* of any subjective properties, being themselves definitionally "meaning-less", "mind-less", "value-less", since these lack the unique properties of mind (value, thought, meaning) and its functions – reasoning, thinking, etc. (Matthews, 2014). While the distinction radically differentiates humans by placing them on a hierarchically superior pedestal over non-humans (*res extensa),* it engendered the modern analogous instrumentalist interpretation of nature as an "estate" or a "property". The quintessence of this bifurcation crystalizes in the French Revolution's conferment of a threefold rights on humans over the estate: *usus* (right to use), *fructus* (right to the fruits), and *abusus* (right to dispose of it) (Godard, 2009). While nature, its environments and their other (non-human) biotic and non-biotic selves as a "collection of goods or natural assets that are useful to man", either as "property", "estate", "good", or "resource", and "resource base", "natural capital" or "natural resource" (Dijkstra, 2003), humans are distinguished from the rest as "masters" (*les maîtres*) and "lords" (*dominus*) of the estate, whose interaction with the rest in nature rides on the motif of making themselves "… the lords and possessors of nature"

(*Discourse on Methods*, Book VI). This neoclassical representation of the "subject-object", "agent-object", split reduces the value of nature and its non-human elements (objects) to a mere instrument at human disposition (see, Dijksra, 2003).

This environmental hermeneutic of this dualistic mind frame can be summed thus:

i. nature is a vast fallow field and storehouse of resources
ii. the environment is a web of interactions among the different taxonomic components – the "using", subjective components (humans) and the "useable" goods (non-human or objective components).
iii. the usable/exploitable constitute a bunch of exchangeable "market goods" or "objects"
iv. the "subjects" (humans) possess the naturalized right to use or dispose of "objects" as they deem fit (Dijkstra, 2003; Brundtland, 1987; Godard, 2009; O'Connor, 2022)
v. business operatives are competitors in a hot chase for riches in this mindless fallow field

Based on this perception, business operatives run their businesses on the assumption that "the license to operate and to grow was granted on the basis of the 'profit dimension' only" (Dijkstra, 2003). Their activities consist mainly of translating nature's resources into usable goods and services, and transmitting them to the downstream for the sole purpose of making profit (see, Ogbodo, 2009).

Practically, environmental degradation and consequent environmental crisis arises as "... the expression of different … and often conflicting value domains that are neither reducible to each other nor to some ultimate value" (Arias-Arévalo et al., 2018). Dichotomizing these domains renders the two formerly related fields, economy and ecology, from the same root, "oikos", so mutually incompatible that the satisfaction of one translates into the repression of the other. The above dichotomization serves as the theoretical thrust behind the economic operations of business operatives, as it prompts the preference of the market value of certain "resources" above others, and the prioritization of some "goods" over the wellbeing of the entire ecosystem (O'Connor, 2022; cf., Alier, 2002; Arias-Arevalo et als, 2018). This is highlighted in the question: "Suppose that Walt Disney was going to build a ski resort in a wildness area adjacent to a national park, which could produce revenues of millions of dollars and provide hundreds of jobs. Is it acceptable for the government to approve this project at the risk of harming the natural environment?" (Wanting, 2018). A similar concern is raised over the conversion of a nearly sixty year old green space in the heart of the South Eastern Nigerian city of Enugu, Polo Park, into a shopping mall (Onwuanyi & Nwodo, 2018). The above indicates that the well-being of the environment is estranged for business options, hence its reduction to a subservient status. Estranged too is the 'virtuous cycle' where People, Planet and Profit (3-P's) reinforce each other (Elkington, 1997). Even where People and Planet are cared for, the underlying reason is to ensure that "…the resource and services needs of current and future generations" (Brundtland Report, 1987). The business operative valuates People as social capital, Planet as resource base, and the care as investment strategy for enhanced productivity and prolonged profit (see, Dijkstra, 2003; O'Connor, 2022). Hence, the action of business operatives is none other than a continual process of possessing and commodification of those meaning-less, mind-less, value-less goods for a more meaningful, valuable and usable resources to serve human interests. The present conditions of poverty and ecosystem depletion in the Niger Delta are outcomes of such operative mindsets (Ogbodo, 2010) in the Nigerian context.

Godard's assertion that "Economic activity … lies, without a doubt, at the heart of the climate risk" (2009) proceeds from an inferential environmental logic already captured in Matthews and O'Connor. This is represented in the pattern where the conclusion has it that environmental degradation is an

outcome of our conceptual frameworks. The inferences clarify how our conceptual roots entrench recognizable presuppositions that give impetus to the extent that nature has been transformed by human praxis (Thomson, 2004). Yet, this foundation or invisible standard has metamorphosed over time into a global ontological, epistemological and ethical standard for measuring all other frameworks (Matthews, 2014; O'Connor, 2022). This has been exported to other climes, having become the yardstick for global environmental and ecological discourse. The causation and persistence of the malaise is importantly evocative of the present age's tendency to ignore the conceptual connections between this worldview and the present condition of degraded environment. Their definitive divorce defines environmental devastation as a predictable consequence of our collective historical effort to master such a 'meaningless' world of objects, hence anti-dualistic environmental thinkers are unanimous in their position that addressing the phenomenon would require a change of worldview and conceptual framework.

Addressing the Phenomenon: The Eco-Phenomenological Window

The above exposition shows that the root causes of anthropogenic environmental degradation, and its outcomes – climate change, global warming, flooding, and biodiversity loss – are found, neither in deforestation nor pollution or any other such malfeasance. "Philosophers … do not believe that the environmental crisis is an isolated problem, which any particular initiative can solve and so, instead, they offer different types of approaches in order to overcome it" (Talukder, 2018). Regarding these crises as outcomes of our presuppositions and assumptions about nature they describe how our modalities have engendered the human-nature divide and "posture of mastery" over the non-human self (cf. Kohák 2000; Matthews, 2014; Godard, 2009). Insights on the hazardous consequences has led to numerous calls for change of those assumptions and frameworks that have engendered degradation of the earth's environments and shaped the human-nature relationship. Hence, against the previous scheme which interprets humans as "planet managers", and nature as "useful resource", Evendern proposes "redrawing of the map of reality" for a new one that could "… recognize the integral entwinement of self and world that is basic to our experiential navigation of the lived environment" (Thomson, 2004; Evernden, 1999; Prášek, 2023; Plumwood, 1992).

The earliest calls for attention to worsening environmental condition sounded in Aldo Leopold's *A Sandy County Almanac* (1949) and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1963). Leopold wished for a land ethic that would protect nature from asphyxiating human grips, while Carson raised alarm over the danger of defoliation of forests and global spread of fertilizers and pesticides within the living tissues of creatures (Altman, 2018). But this took a new dimension in the emergence of numerous egalitarian environmental philosophies, beginning with Richard Routley's paper at the 1973 World Congress of Philosophy, *"Is there a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?"* (Routley 1973; Attfield 1998; Altman, 2018). However, O'Connor discountenances the diverse forms of this egalitarian replacement theory, like biocentrism, eco-centrism, eco-feminism, and sentientism, as "definitionally defeated", since they perpetuate and reinforce the same logic of dualism they all condemn (O'Connor, 2022). Plumwood (1993) labels their approach "uncritical reversal", that is, "a common method of challenging oppressive dualisms in which the hierarchy of opposing classes is reversed, while all the other elements of dualistic structure are retained". The two authors, Plumwood and O'Connor, accuse them of propagating social injustice by preserving the dominant culture and its values at the expense of the others. These writers find them inadequate to address the many dimensions of environmental crisis, having robbed themselves of the capacity to address issues of environmental injustice affecting human populations (O'Connor, 2022; see Plumwood, 1993; Talukder, 2018). Consequently, their

inability to abate ongoing degradation of the environment furthers the need for alternative environmental paradigms (Matthews, 2003; 2005; O'Connor, 2022).

In response therefore to this need "to change the traditionally inherited philosophical mindset" for us to solve this problem (Talukder, 2018), eco-phenomenology comes up with an optimistic promise that the physical environment can be cured. This positive theory advances a two-step approach to the issue: proper diagnoses of the problem, and a proper treatment of the crisis. Similar to these other egalitarian schools, eco-phenomenological diagnosis reveals that "environmental destruction and crisis are caused by core beliefs within our worldview that sanction, legitimate, and even encourage the domination and technological control of nature" (Thomson, 2004), while a change of those core beliefs that engender the malaise is the cure. However, it differs a great deal from in its methodological approach, which is the phenomenological method. Eco-phenomenologists' criterion for looking at nature, different from the previous egalitarian or anthropocentric and dualistic visions, is phenomenological paradigm which is determined, not by "our beliefs about ourselves (planet managers) and what nature is (useful resource), but by what we actually encounter as nature – by our experience of nature free of all assumptions" (Prášek, 2023; see, Evernden, 1999). This requires addressing environmental issues from the perspective of phenomenological embodied experience. Its employment of phenomenology's methods, concept and insight aids its specific task of redirecting our consciousness towards nature as we experience it in our daily encounter. This experience discloses of a world where all the constituting elements exist in an interconnected and interdependent relationship, rather than in their individuality of being. Eco-phenomenology therefore examines the fundamental structures of subjective experience in the world and the interrelationality between organism and the world in its metaphysical, epistemological and axiological dimensions.

The foundation of this theory of environment is laid in Husserl, and subsequently, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, Deleuze and later phenomenologists. Characteristically, Husserl's phenomenology rejects or brackets out (phenomenological *epochê*) all previous theses, theories, assumptions, abstractions and presuppositions that project a naturalistic conception of nature as a purely extended matter governed by natural laws of causality (Prášek, 2023; Kohák, 2000). By *epoché* (suspension of judgment, parenthesizing), he speaks of letting a phenomenon alone to speak for itself in terms of its own inherent system of meaning, by `bracketing' the usual presuppositions that colour our perception of any reality. Rather than such pre-conceived labels, Heidegger's address of reality is based on the foundations of "what we actually encounter as nature – by our experience of nature free of all assumptions" (Prášek, 2023; see, Evernden 1999). The central tenet of his *Being and Time* (1937/2011) characterizes existence as "being in the world", "embeddedness" and "inseparability". His existential and hermeneutic phenomenological tendencies emphasize human existence within the world and the role of interpretation in all spheres of life. His phenomenological ontology presents Being, "*Sein*", as "the basis of all that exist. It is the primordial substance of all existence" (Onwuatuegwu, 2022); his *hermeneutic* highlights being in the world as unitary and "must be seen as a whole". But his analytical description of Dasein, the type of Being the human being has and the window of *Sein*, presents *Dasein* primordially as a *"being-in-the-world"*, one who is consequently a *being-with-others,* who interprets but engages with these other entities and the contexts in which they live. Hence, his insistence that "…to continue the analytic of *Dasein* one must explore being in the world in the context of "being with others" (Heidegger, 1927/2011, in Horrigan-Kelly, et als., 2016). Heidegger's phenomenology had painted the image of the world as a web of significant relationships in which the different populations (distinct entities) relate to each other and form a significant whole. The nature of their interrelationship is captured in Matthews' concept of "synergy", or the "energic

exchange 'in which each party adapts its own rhythm, in some activity, to that of another, producing, in consequence, a new energic synthesis harmonious with the rhythms of both parties" (Mathews, 2003; 2014). Characteristic of this synergic experience, the parties engage with the other to change it without disrupting its nature or subordinating its ends or reducing it to mere instrument (Mathews 2005, 2006).

Dualistic bifurcations among beings in nature create a situation Thomson describes as Heidegger's first law of phenomenology – "the law of proximity" or "the distance of the near" – that is, the situation where "what is closest to us in our everyday worldly environment is … furthest from us in terms of our ability to attend to and comprehend it explicitly" (Thomson, 2004). This "distance of the near" leads to deleterious human highhandedness of the environment and its ecosystem services, just as the failure of environmentalism is traceable to its separation and prioritization of the human over nature (Thomson, 2004). Applying Heidegger's thesis to environmental issues eliminates the frameworks of hierarchy, domination, radical exclusion and hyper-separation among the constituent entities in nature by recognizing the equality, interdependence and intrinsic values of all constituting members of the environment or ecosystem (Matthews, 2014; Talukder, 2018; Prasek, 2023; O'Connor, 2022; Plumwood, 1993). This thesis is a furtherance of Husserl's phenomenological epoche and eidetic reduction methods and provides a springboard to eco-phenomenology. Thus, against any instrumental description of non-human nature, eco-phenomenology eliminates the domination, exclusion and hyper-separation of the "other" (objects) by "self-certain subjects" that characterized the dualistic framework and anthropocentric worldview (Prášek, 2023). Emphasized rather is the pure description of how nature appears immediately in our experience, and why the more-than-human world should be treated with a reverence and respect that were hitherto only humans' prerogatives (Prášek, 2023; Kohák, 1987; 2000). This calls for return to the pre-theoretical level of experience, putting to question and consequently rejecting the previous "maps of reality" for a more mutualistic thesis. This promises a positive re-shape of human understanding of nature, enhancement of the culture of eco-friendliness among the components of the environment (O'Connor, 2022), and engendering needed behavior change that can determine how to act towards nature. This would be the leeway to arresting current spate of misuse and degradation of the physical environment (cf., Matthews, 2006, 2014; see also, Evernden, 1999; O'Connor, 2022; and Prasek, 2023).

Eco-Phenomenological Response from the African Lifeworld Experience

Human lived experience proves the above exposition presents eco-phenomenology as a new name for an old practice. While intellectual records show how Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Deleuze laid the foundations of this environmental thought, and how eco-phenomenologists have labored to systematize it, especially from the Euro-American intellectual perspective, its central thesis is not totally novel. Husserl used the notion of "*lifeworld*" (*lebenswelt*) in reference to the world as experienced in its everydayness, that is, the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life, free from the distorting influences of scholarly or traditional values and prejudices, but reserved to the very givenness or presentation of experience. This pre-epistemological level of environmental experience or environmental *lifeworld* is best instantiated in traditional or indigenous societies. This revolves around the cultural pattern of daily lived experience among indigenous peoples, especially, in non-Western societies, where situated experience is connected to flora and fauna of the natural environment. In such cultures, sustainable living entails being in tune

with the natural environment and its limits, cycles, and changes. This has been the experience in indigenous societies in Africa, Asia and the Oceania and in every indigenous culture.

A significant number of studies, especially by indigenous scholars themselves, employs this mutualistic interdependent approach of eco-phenomenology in their narratives and reflections. These depict the interconnectivity among the various components of the world, biotic and abiotic, human and non-human, sentient and non-sentient, animate and inanimate. Their findings suggest that environmental degradation and the existential precipice to which this has subjected contemporary society results from the disjunction from human "embeddedness" with nature as a "being-in-the-world". To these scholars, a return to this traditional environmental paradigm is nonnegotiable. It offers better insights into present day environmental challenges and aid towards a meaningfully sustainable response to these challenges.

An example of such traditional environmental worldview is ancient Taoism (or Daoism). In this culture, the virtuous life meant living in harmony or in accord with the cycles of nature. That is, living in accord with the natural, cyclic processes of Dao (Gowans, 2021). Virtue in this context entails also "… environmental protection and dynamic equilibrium in human and natural systems …" (The Twi-Global Group, 2023). This contrasts with today's experience despite the fact that the environmental question has become an increasingly common global concern. For this traditional worldview of the Dao, therefore, and for other indigenous societies, interconnectivity, and interdependence, shapes people's understanding of reality. This understanding is given expression in their concepts. Another indigenous environmental worldview is from the Australian Aborigines. This worldview is represented in the concepts, *Dreaming*, *Motj*, *Le-an,* and *Dadirri,* which have no non-indigenous equivalents (Matthews, 2014). Against the West's atomistic and mechanistic view of nature and the world, *Dreaming,* for instance, presents a more holistic vision of the world in which an inextricable bond of unity exists between spirit and matter. In this context, spirituality connotes "the relation of self to a larger, meaningful whole". This relation illustrates the centrality of interconnectedness of all reality, and underlines how "'people … plants and animals, land forms and celestial bodies' are inter-related both with one another and with humankind" (Matthews, 2014, citing Vicki Grieves' Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal Philosophy). Since this worldview roots the inter-relatedness of all things to one, single, metaphysical source or basis (often referred to as Totem), *Dreaming* projects aboriginal philosophy as a coordinated system of belief, knowledge and action that expresses a close relationship where mankind is identified as part of nature, not fundamentally dissimilar to the mythic beings or to the animal species, with whom the human share a common life force. This reinforces the obligation to "sustain the cultural landscape as it is set down from the creation stories" and to "keep all alive" all in it. Beyond scientific ecology, this aboriginal ontology engenders a moral universe already steeped in meaning and spiritual presence (Matthews, 2014).

African indigenous environmental worldview is based on a similar conception of the universe as a web of interactions. In this web, the different spheres of existence, and every entity in them, human and non-human, living and dead, animate and inanimate, maintain such an inescapable relationality from which none can extricate oneself. This worldview is entrenched and reinforced in indigenous African cultures. It permeates all their cultures, where it is expressed in numerous forms of belief and concepts. These beliefs and concepts disclose the African view of reality around them, or "worldview" (*weltanschauung).* This worldview emanates from African cosmology which splits the world ("Uwa") into several domains of existence – the spiritual/invisible (realm of spiritual entities like the Supreme Being, gods, ancestors, and the unborn), the physical/visible (realm of the abode of humans and of all

biotic and abiotic entities). But contrary to the Occidental dualistic bdifurcated universe, these worlds (as realms of existence) are so intertwined in such a way that "what happens in any of these worlds will have consequences in the world of human beings" (Kanu, 2019, citing Ogungbemi, 2007). So, against the Aristotelian-Newtonian visions of a complex of countless atomistic components (substances), or to the standpoint of mechanistic reductionism whereby the world is seen as sum total or calculus of divisible soul-less, mind-less, meaningless and valueless particles (see Matthews, 2014), reality for the African is essentially relational since there exists an inextricable interconnection among entities in the different spheres of existence. The universe is therefore seen and interpreted as an interdependent continuum wherein all members of the hierarchically structured world, from the Supreme Being down to the minerals, constitute an inextricably united one "uni-verse". Describing it with the spider's web's analogy, Placid Tempels illustrates how the intertwinement of the African world reduces the said division to a mere metaphor because "no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the world network" (Tempels, in Ufearoh et als., 2021).

This profession of cosmic harmony amidst all the beings or realities within the African world, human and non-human alike, shapes the African lived experience (lifeworld) itself. As Kelland (2024), citing Khoapa (1980), explains, Africans understand the world through their intersection with all aspects of the world. This shapes their existential reality as one of collective being. This understanding of life is borne witness in their tendency towards interdependent existence as illustrated in their collective survival pattern, or harmony, in which even the aged is not left out. This holistic and humanistic vision reflects on their oral traditions, belief in the continuity of life, and rhythmic music, folkloric tales and choreographic dances. It is therefore not uncommon, for instance, to find in such folklores where humans characteristics and roles are accorded to non-human entities like plants and animals. The same goes for seasons and climatic conditions. While such stories could entertain and communicate moral lessons, they are instructive too on the people's worldview.

As Kelland's further elaboration indicates, the anchor of this metaphysical connection between all that exists within the universe is an all-pervasive energy or "**spirit**" in every entity. This plays the role of the vital force that animates the universe. Though "there is a distinct hierarchy among the things that make up the universe. At the top of the hierarchy is God, followed by the ancestors (including the founders of the tribes, aka the "god-like ones") and the living. Then come the animals, plants, and minerals" (Kelland, 2024). Thus, while recognizing their individual distinctness and differences among the various components of the universe (as does the Aristotle in his classification of reality), no one entity is or can be subjugated under another because of the pervading presence of this spiritual force that opens each entity (human or non-human, even weather and celestial bodies) to community and interconnectivity with all others in the different domains, without exception. In this order therefore, the human being stands on a unique pedestal among all there is: "We share a biological connection with animals, and an inherent spiritual connection with plants and minerals, but our privileged position at the junction of spirit and nature allows us to participate in a spiritual life that separates us from the animals, plants, and minerals … we link the universe with God, we awaken it, we speak to it, listen to it, and try to create harmony. This leads to a profound connection with the rhythm of the universe" (Kelland, 2024). Through this unique characteristic, which Kelland says is divine, humans are able to transcend both the physical universe and time, and at the same time, get connected to another person, place, or thing, and even relate with the dead (ancestors). Accordingly, respect and recognition to other lives and creatures is grounded on this African spirit and method of complementarity where every existing thing serves as a missing link in the web of reality (Okpe & Oti, 2019). This linkage enounces engenders a moral meaning in the interaction of the various elements

in the universe and their respective domains. This is paradigmatic to the way nature is treated in Africa. When human persons recognize, for instance, that "through spirit all things become one, and if they adhere to this realization, they lose all sense of individual ego/mind. Instead, they experience the harmony of collective identity and a sense of extended self that includes ancestors, those not yet born, all nature, and their entire community" (Kelland, 2024). This is the African lifeworld, where the human is typically "being-in-the-world".

Over the centuries, this ontology of relatedness has engendered a moral universe where the various constituting elements find in themselves essential links to the cosmic web of existence. While the hyper-separation and domination characteristic of a dualistic worldview is eliminated, fellowship-feeling with both individual entities and the larger metaphysical superstructure engenders a sense of eco-friendliness even with the physical universe (Okpe & Oti, 2019; Ufearoh et als, 2021). African scholars therefore speak freely of a symmetric ethical relationship to which human and all non-human entities (biotic and abiotic, animate and inanimate) are bound. As this moral standard dictates any communitarian laws that direct human actions, even toward the nature and its environment, an inextricably harmonious relationship that entrenches a culture of respect, dignity, caring, and accommodation among all these beings becomes the resultant of this ontology. Tangwa, for instance, builds his "*eco-biocommunitairian"* theory on this African worldview of "inter-dependence of the dimensions of the African world" (Kanu, 2019). Underscored in this too is the mechanism of restorative justice for making peace and achieving harmony with the cosmos. It displaces the exploitative domination of nature as resource base, in preference to an ecologically just modes of transition to go beyond 'shallow, technocratic progressivism' (Terreblanche, 2018). Its normative bio-communitarian inclination rejects as predatory, discriminatory and proneness to domination, the separation of the human from nature, in contrast to any epistemology that situates humans as part of nature or promotes inclusive ecology and eco-friendliness (Ufearoh, et als, 2019). Clean air and nontoxic atmospheric conditions, growth of resources that can be relied upon, and water quality and cleanliness, promoting teeming population of diverse living organisms, are all benefits of deep respect for nature as nuanced in traditional African environmental outlooks.

Evaluation

The foregoing has proven environmental degradation to be a historical eventuality occasioned by the eclipsing of experience of inter-subjectivity between human and non-human nature. A dualistic picture of reality engenders a reductionist dismissal of the other, where "Otherness", says John Zizioulas (2009), is constituted in difference – between "that" which is "me" (subject, my-self) and "that" which is neither "me" nor "like me" (object, "non-self"). The bifurcation makes the human (subject, the "I") only a part of a world (the non-human, object) with which he holds a relationship of "separateness and detachment" (Alex Scot, 2002; Ravenscroft, 2018, O'Connor, 2016). Being the "subject" who is endowed with capacity to valuate the "other", the human has tended to objectify and to place the "other" – nature, and by extension, with all other humans – on a scale of valuation that are determined on the scales of utility and profit (Dijkstra, 2003; Godard, 2009; O'Connor, 2019; Matthews, 2014; Plumwood, 1993; Wanting, 2018; Arias-Arevalo et als', 2017). Degradation of the environment and ecosystem depletion is an indication of the exploitative use of non-human reality as entrenched by the dominant dualistic worldview.

Analysis of this situation has revealed how "the actions and decisions we make are based on assumptions that justify and facilitate those actions …" (O'Connor, 2022). This is evident in the asphyxiation of the physical environment through the business activities of the corporations and how

this has defaced or re-facing nature in the Niger Delta. This awareness creates the logical condition that leaves the contemporary society with no option than adopting a new environmental framework if we are to save the earth from collapse. The eco-phenomenological paradigm shows capacity of cancelling and healing the wounds of division among interdependent reality. Its call to return to lived experience offers rather great optimism in this regard as a worldview that recognizes both the uniqueness and commonality between all entities in nature. This highlights the interdependence of all for constituting membership in the one interactive web called universe. Borrowing a leaf from Heidegger, where Dasein, as the window of Being (Sein), is essentially a "being-in-the-world" which thrives on the awareness of his basic characteristic as a "being-with-others", eco-phenomenology highlights the required change of outlook where each entity's being is understood dynamically as a "pragmatic involvement rather than spatial inclusion", that is, "being-in[extricably involved with]-the-world" (Thomson, 2004).

African indigenous worldviews offer windows for peeping into the above logic and its viability to create social-environmental cohesion. the culture prioritizes the importance of fellowship with nature and the "interconnectedness" of ecosystem components. This is so pervasive that many scholars describe it as the metaphysical outlook that underpins the manner of cosmic relations between human beings and nature (Ogungbemi, 2007; Kelbessa, 2019; Kanu, 2021). It is a worldview of "live and let live" (Kanu, 2021), which is itself "the spirit behind the traditional African's preservation behavior in relation to nature" and "the lesson that our technological, industrialized, modern, consumerist, capitalist, etc., world must learn from traditional African spirituality of the environment if the environment will be safe and the human life itself protected from further harzards [sic]". Tangwa, for instance, bases his "eco-bio-communitaiarian" theory on it (Kelbessa, 2019; Kanu, 2021). Kanu underscores its capacity of impacting ethical behavior capable of making people very "cautious in their altitude towards plants, animals and inanimate things and the various invisible forces of the world" (Kanu, 2021), hence the remark that taking care of the immediate environment is the DNA of a typical African (Okpe & Oti, 2019).

Conclusion

The foregoing invites to an excursion into the African worldview for an eco-phenomenological exploration. Its thesis of "reconnecting culture with nature" offers a viable chance of creating "the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations" (US, EPA, 2022). This environmental objective demands a transformative re-thinking of our relationship to the "other", human or non-human. Its method engenders a new culture of eco-friendliness. The goal promises reversion to the precipitous condition to which anthropogenic activities have subjected nature's environment. This is justified by the threat of imminent collapse of the world should the present state of environmental degradation continue unabated. A threefold environmental step is evoked here:

i. the first step is to reconfigure "…our self-understanding as agents, together with our attitudes to our environment and to (the rest of) nature" (Attfield, 2018) as reason and right judgment demand
ii. recreate contemporary exploring, extracting and manufacturing activities to adapt to the growing demand for, and expanding, the scope and viability of green technology
iii. promote socio-environmental cohesion and justice where every human, every social group and individual and ecosystem component counts as intrinsically valuable

It would therefore be a mark honesty to adopt this logical conclusion as a leeway to redressing the harm caused by our mindsets, and boldness to throw over board any mindset that has precipitated this daunting challenge. Refusing to open oneself up to embracing this change of attitude would continue to force environmental discourse to remain at the level of the talk, without the walk, as it has been for nearly eight decades.

Deductively, then, the mindset enunciated by the eco-phenomenological "pragmatic involvement" which is inherent in African societies elicits a culture of eco-friendliness, live and let live, sense of familyhood and behavior change towards nature. This would be correctional to the Multinational Corporations' exploitative behaviour towards the environment, especially in their economic activities in poorer local communities. By its promise, nature would be healed, humans restored to their proper position in the committee of beings, and human dignity reinforced. However, this paper is rather an invitation to explore more the African communitarian worldview as key to addressing contemporary global challenge of environmental degradation, especially by laying more emphasis on how this worldview could become the central focus in the global environmental discourse.

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