

THE EPISTEMIC VALUE OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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Abstract

Given the indispensable role of a healthy environment to humans, the need to forestall environmental pollution and crises through profound epistemic awareness becomes exigent. The reason for this discourse is to nip in the bud those factors exacerbating environmental injustice through practical education of communities impacted by environmental pollution. Such education, provides the members of the communities with justification for fostering environmental justice. While exploring the central thesis of this work, the method of analysis becomes crucial in achieving the objective of this work. This method clarifies basic terms and presents and evaluates scholars' stances on environmental justice. The method of analysis also helps chart a trajectory to environmental justice among communities impacted greatly.

Key words: Environmental Justice, Epistemic Value, Eco-literacy, Epistemic Credibility, Eco-Friendly disposition, Environmental Imperialism.

INTRODUCTION

Given the indispensable role of a healthy ecological environment in the well-being of humans, the need to forestall environmental pollution through education and praxis becomes exigent. Such education, I argue, provides the members of the communities with the skills to foster environmental justice, especially in Enugu state and beyond. The latter is the thrust of this work, which I divided into five sections. The first section introduces the work, while the second section clarifies basic terms. The third and fourth sections discuss the epistemic benefits of promoting environmental justice through practical education and how eco-literacy and strong institutions can foster environmental justice, respectively. The final section evaluates and concludes the entire discourse.

CLARIFICATION OF BASIC TERMS

This section elucidates two foundational terms that are of great importance in this work, namely “epistemic value” and “environmental justice.” Let us now explain the two basic terms.

Epistemic Value

The term “epistemic value,” as used in this work, encompasses cognitive skills acquired by an agent through education on the basis of a speaker’s or instructor’s credibility. An agent assigns credibility to a speaker if the agent trusts the speaker or sees the speaker as a reliable authority. So, something X has an epistemic value if and only if X has an intrinsic epistemic worth and instrumental relevance to something else Y. Here, X stands for *promotion of environmental justice* and Y for *the impact of such protection on humans and the environment*. In other words, X is of epistemic value to Y if it has an intrinsic and extrinsic epistemic relevance to Y (cf Goldman 1991: 189). However, the value chain is incomplete if an agent does not translate the testimony of the instructor into action. For instance, promoting environmental justice is of an intrinsic and extrinsic epistemic value to humans and the environment (i.e., Y) with the presence of a reliable or credible instructor and concrete application of skills acquired to solve environmental problems. That means that education for environmental justice does not only equip humans with intellectual skills to protect the environment but also enables them to see the reason to act accordingly.

Environmental Justice

The term “environmental justice” refers to people’s rights to be protected equally from environmental harm and equal share in environmental benefits and decision-making. Understanding these rights unveils the connections between environment, culture, power, and inequality (cf. Byrnes 2023: 8). This stance means that a healthy environment is indispensable for enjoying the rights mentioned above. Hence, creating an awareness that fosters a healthy environment through education and praxis reveals the benefit of such a cause. Notably, the discourse on environmental justice encompasses various themes ranging from climate change to climate justice to water and air pollution. New perspectives in environmental justice today encompass current issues such as “environmental harm that may be exacerbated due to gender and sexuality, primarily” (Wiegand 2008: 1710). This work focuses on the former (i.e., environmental harm) rather than the latter.

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The idea here is that through practical education, human agents acquire cognitive skills that give them a reason to believe that it is imperative to promote a healthy environment. The acquisition of the said cognitive skills is through the instrumentality of a credible instructor or speaker on environmental justice. So, a belief *that p* (where *P* stands for an agent’s belief that it is necessary to promote a healthy environment) is justified if it is “based on an objectively adequate ground [the testimony of a credible instructor, L.I.], one that is (fairly) strongly indicative of the truth of the belief” (Alston 1991: 99). This excerpt from Alston means that when the testimony *of a credible instructor* convinces an agent to assent to the proposition that “it is imperative to promote a healthy environment,” the agent becomes responsive to promoting a healthy environment by utilizing the acquired cognitive skills constructively. The *adequateness of the ground* for such belief is dependent on the truth-conduciveness of the ground (i.e., the testimony of a credible instructor).

A *ground* is *truth-conducive* if the “input-output function” is activated in an agent, where the input is the ground for justification (i.e., the testimony of a credible speaker or instructor), and the output is the agent’s belief. Such input-output function makes the formation of true belief probable if and only if “in a large range of (actual and possible) cases of the operation of that function in situations of the sort we typically encounter, the belief outputs would be mostly true” (Alston 2005: 134). For instance, the testimony of a credible instructor on environmental justice is presented to a receptive agent (input), who then forms a belief (output) that is pro-environmental justice after acquiring some cognitive skills. The ground for this belief (i.e., testimony) is adequate: (i) if the input is connected to the output (i.e., the belief), and (ii) if the belief produced through this process is mostly true (cf Isife 2023: 131-133). If the latter process produces true beliefs most of the time, then the process is reliable since it (i.e., the process) confers justification on an agent’s belief. Herein lies the epistemic value of the knowledge and cognitive skills acquired by an agent vis-à-vis environmental protection. However, the *epistemic value chain* is incomplete if an agent does not transmute the acquired knowledge to ensure a healthy environment in all ramifications. Some concrete steps that an agent (i.e., an agent with requisite cognitive skills to protect the environment) could take to foster environmental justice are discussed in the next section of this work.

FOSTERING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

A clean, healthy, and sustainable environment and social development cannot be achieved without an awareness of the need to protect our environment. Such awareness would help local communities impacted by the consequences of an unhealthy environment, especially in Enugu state, Nigeria.

By the term “awareness”, I mean practical education characterized by an action-oriented disposition that promotes environmental justice. Such education can be guaranteed when there is good governance and visionary leaders who are disposed to Strengthen People-Centred and effective Institutions and promote eco-literacy. Let us now explain the latter concepts.

i. Strengthening People-Centred and Effective Institutions:

The enthronement of environmental justice in Enugu state depends a lot on the establishment of effective institutions with realistic guidelines that motivate people to develop environmentally friendly lifestyles. So, strong institutions ensure accountability, adherence to the rule of law, sustainable development, and environmental justice. The latter features of strong institutions are realizable with good governance, which champions the development of policies and the implementation of environmental laws that respect and protect environmental rights. So, building strong and stable institutions is of great importance to any government willing to foster environmental justice.

ii. The Pedagogical Option (eco-literacy)

Ecological literacy encompasses pedagogical strategies that enhance the protection of the environment. To say that agent *X* is eco-literate means that *X* knows that *p* (where *P* represents being acquainted with the nitty gritty of environmental justice through learning and being able to use such knowledge productively). That means that *X* does not only know that *P* but can also utilize such knowledge in extensive circumstances to promote a healthy environment. So, education for environmental protection must have a practical dimension. For instance, it is not enough for an agent to know through learning that waste management is essential for environmental protection. A practical and sustainable dimension to such knowledge is when the agent in question can convert waste to wealth through effective waste management. The idea of waste management refers to “the collection, keeping, treatment and disposal of waste in such a way as to render them harmless to human life, animal life, the ecology and the environment in general” (Ogbodo 2009: 7). In other words, an agent fosters environmental justice through good management of industrial, commercial and household wastes.

Another example like the latter is that it is not enough for the government to educate the masses about signed and gazetted bills that forbid open grazing, which paves the way for hooliganism; they should also move a step further to see to the implementation of the law by ensuring that herders opt for ranching. For instance, in 2023, the government of Enugu signed the gazetted bill

forbidding open grazing into law but failed woefully to implement the law. The failure is still obvious to date with menace caused by herders in the state while grazing their cattle in the open. However, with the concerted effort of the current state Governor, Bar Mr Peter Mba, to find lasting solutions to People-herder crises, Enugu State seems to be one inch closer to dealing with the aforementioned environmental crises and pollution.

Drawing on the above, it is obvious that eco-literacy provides knowledge transmutable into action, while functional institutions provide legal backing for the fostering of environmental justice. Herein lies the epistemic value of the two practical steps mentioned hitherto.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

I have presented the importance of a healthy environment to humans and the epistemic benefits of promoting environmental justice through practical education. Such education, I argued, must be deployable in a wide range of circumstances and must be able to equip the participants with the requisite cognitive skills and eco-friendly dispositions to foster environmental protection. That means that a viable curriculum on environmental justice for all levels of education in Enugu state must focus on local needs and as well as facilitate the acquisition of cognitive skills that propel one to promote a sustainable, healthy environment. When a curriculum on environmental protection fails to take cognizance of the local needs of a given people, such education amounts to “environmental imperialism” (Carmen 2001: 1015). The term “environmental imperialism” unveils the deliberate imposition of the environmental agenda of different groups of people on another set of people. Such imposition is devoid of epistemic value since it undermines the development of effective policies to respond to the environmental challenges of a given group of people. Herein lies the demerits of unbridled education on environmental justice. Hence, I conclude that creating more awareness of environmental justice through contextualized and realistic pedagogical strategies is a prerequisite for ensuring a healthy environment.

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