



# Anthropocentric-Utilitarian Tradition and the Quest for Environmental Justice in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

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## **Abstract:**

*There is a growing concern, lately, in the Niger Delta region, nay, Nigeria at large, over the despoliation of our environment by multinational oil companies and citizens in quest for economic gains. The problem is that humans have come to see themselves as “landlords” and masters of God’s creation rather than stewards, having untrammelled authority to plunder natural resources with reckless abandon. The resultant effect is that this unethical attitude towards the environment poses grave danger to both living and non-living things in the ecosystem and forecloses the possibilities of its sustainability. Specifically, this paper critically examines the implications of the anthropocentric- utilitarian tradition in environmental ethics for the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The anthropocentric approach emphasizes the use of non-human natural resources solely in terms of their instrumental value to human kind. Its utilitarian dimension holds that so long as an environmental attitude or policy produces the greatest happiness, pleasure or benefit possible for the greatest number of people, it is moral. This paper posits that such tradition is quite problematic to the realization of environmental justice and wholeness in the Niger Delta. Our objective here is to show that the monumental environmental problems in the Niger Delta resulting from oil exploration are precipitated by the some unjust socio-economic and unethical principles. This paper recommends the application of the principles of environmental stewardship and environmental justice as a way out of the problem. These principles stand for moral consider ability towards the environment as well as a fair distribution of environmental burdens and benefits.*

## **Keywords:**

*anthropocentrism; utilitarianism; environment; justice*

## **I. Introduction**

Environmental ethics is an aspect of environmental philosophy that is concerned with the moral obligations and relational responsibilities of human beings to their non-human environment (e.g. land, animals and plants) (Akpan & Leonard, 2018). As a value laden discipline, environmental ethics explores the moral standing of sentient animals and the non-sentient natural world and investigates the moral problems associated with their sustainability.

In the words of Rolston III (2012) “Environmental ethics is theory and practice about appropriate concern for values and duties concerning the natural world” (517). It examines values carried by the non-human natural world and prescribes appropriate ethical response(s) that could ensure its preservation or restoration (Light and Rolston, 2003, p.1). Environmental ethics, in practical terms, is concerned with the application of ethical principles in dealing with environmental issues and problems as a means of promoting quality environment. This need arises in response to environmental threats to the communities of life and the entire ecological systems which is precipitated largely by human inconsiderable activities.

Environmental ethics is narrowly anthropocentric if it is human-centered and non-anthropocentric if it is nature-centered. Non- anthropocentric theorists argue that beyond the

inter-human environmental concerns, values are at stake when human beings relate to animals, plants, species and ecosystems. They maintain that these non-human members of the natural world are intrinsically valuable in themselves. Human beings, therefore, ought to or should find nature morally considerable in itself because of its intrinsic value.

## **II. Review of Literature**

### **2.1 The Anthropocentric Tradition**

An anthropocentric approach to environmental philosophy is that which emphasizes the use of non-human natural world in terms of its instrumental, non-intrinsic value to humans (Bassey 2019). This approach does not necessarily imply a reckless and inconsiderable exploitation of the natural world. It simply suggests that the natural world and its resources should be very carefully harnessed for human benefit (Ogar & Bassey, 2019). This includes harnessing natural resources for the benefit of present and future human generations, otherwise known as sustainable development. Such instrumental benefits from the natural world include offering humanity a broad range of economic, physical, aesthetic and spiritual values. Suffice it is to say that a broadly anthropocentric approach to environmental issues underpins much international environmental debates and policy making. Environmental issues ranging from the careless discharge of carcinogenic pollutants, toxic wastes, resource depletion destruction of rain forests, depletion of stratospheric ozone, global warming, aquatic, land and air pollution, over population problems all focus ethically on their effects on human beings primarily (Udoudom et al 2019).

### **2.2 The Consequentialist-Utilitarian Tradition**

Consequentialism is a term used to represent ethical theories that consider the end result of human action as the determining factor of its goodness or badness (Bazargan, 2014). Utilitarianism, an ethical theory driven by the utility principle, belongs to this ethical tradition. Utilitarianism (Latin, *utilis*, meaning “useful”), is the doctrine which holds that what is useful is good and consequently, moral values are determined by the utility of their results (Wolff, 2008). In other words, utilitarianism is a theory of ethics that prescribes the quantitative maximization of good consequences for a population. Thus, it is a single value system and a form of consequentialism.

Utilitarianism as a theory of ethics has two basic features, namely: the consequentialist principle (or its teleological aspect) and the utility principle (or its hedonic aspect). The consequentialist principle holds that the rightness or wrongness of an act is basically determined by the goodness or badness of its outcome or end result. In other words, the end justifies the means. On the other hand, the utility principle holds that the only thing that is good in itself must produce some kind of pleasurable state, happiness or quantifiable welfare (Wolff, 2008).

The Utilitarian is concerned with the greatest happiness, pleasure, welfare or benefit of the greatest number of people. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are considered as the foremost proponents of utilitarianism. Some prominent advocates of consequentialist-utilitarian approach in environmental ethics include Peter Singer, Donald Van De Veer, Robin Artfield and Gary Varner. This theory has an economic and human-welfarist (including sentient beings) implications. So long as an environmental attitude or policy produces utilitarian, economic benefits, it is considered moral. Whatever is of the greatest economic benefit possible to the highest number at the lowest cost is considered desirable or “good” and, therefore morally acceptable (Gesang, 2013).

### **2.3 Environmental Issues in the Niger Delta**

The geographical area designated as Niger Delta is an oil rich region in Nigeria covering 20,000 km<sup>2</sup> within wetlands of 70,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Egya, 2016). This area has four different ecological zones namely: coastal barrier islands, mangrove swamp forest, freshwater swamps, and lowland rainforests. The Delta region has a richly endowed ecosystem populated with the highest concentration of biodiversity on planet earth, in addition to complementing large quantity of flora and fauna, arable land that sustain a wide variety of crops, timber, agricultural trees, and large species of freshwater fish than any ecosystem in west Africa (Egya, 2016).

Lately, there is a growing concern over the monumental environmental crises in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria precipitated by some unethical oil exploration activities (Chukwumeka & Aghara 2010). The growth in oil mining and refining activities has continued to create some hazardous consequences for the once enjoyed pristine Niger Delta natural environment. Environmental issues in the Region include oil spill leading to soil and water pollution, natural gas flaring leading to air pollution and greenhouse effect, loss of mangrove forests and biodiversity, depletion of fish population and loss of species, deforestation and so on. Suffice it to say that the region is experiencing an immoral but steady rise in the discharge of carcinogenic, radioactive pollutants into its biosphere.

The problem of environmental degradation caused by oil exploration and development activities in this region has remained largely unmitigated. Added to the foregoing is the issue of oil bunkering, pipeline vandalization and militancy occasioned by injustice, marginalization and neglect of the region over a long period of time. All these have aggravated the environmental problems in the area through oil spill and its toxic effects on both aquatic life and farm lands. The issue of gas flaring has also taken a great toll on air pollution with far reaching hazardous implications for human and animal health.

Unfortunately, Nigeria has an avalanche of moribund environmental laws that lack enforcement and crippled by corruption (Ikoni, 2010, p.1). There is also a prevalence of wide spread monumental ignorance among the people over the calamitous implications of these putrid anti-environmental practices. This is coupled with human greed, relativistic business ethics by the multinationals and poor public enlightenment on people's moral responsibility to the environment. Suffice it is to say that Niger Delta region faces an environmental crises of potentially catastrophic proportions with momentary and futuristic fatal consequences to human existence and the entire communities of life. Unfortunately, no adequate scientific solution has so far been proffered on how to manage these environmental issues perfectly. According to Obi (2009) the complexities involved in environmental issues require our going beyond the scientific approach. One of the reasons for this is that most of the cases of environmental degradation are related to unfriendly human attitude towards nature. They are not purely, or even primarily, such that demand scientific and technological solutions (Shrader-Frechette 1981, p. ix), because they are value related. What is required in such cases is ethical orientation and attitudinal change.

## **III. Discussion**

### **3.1 Environmental Problems and Sustainable Development**

One of the most important developments in environmental consciousness in recent times is that of environmental sustainability (Gruen and Jamieson 1994, p. 175). "Sustainability" is an economic but also an environmental concept. The concept of "sustainable development" has been welcomed in most circles as having to do with

“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.43). “Sustainable” coupled with “development” expects continued growth but not such as degrades the environment and forecloses opportunities for future generations (Rolston III, 2012, p.6). The fundamental flaw in “sustainable development” is that it typically sees the earth only as a resource. After four centuries during which science and economics have progressively illuminated us about how we can transform nature into goods for human benefit, the moral issues involved, however, remain unaddressed. Both science and economics can, and often do, serve human interests, but they equally perpetuate environmental degradation and injustice. For this reason, this paper considers it more appropriate to use the concept of ‘sustainable environment’ instead of ‘sustainable development’. The idea of “Sustainable Environment” evokes moral sensitivities having to do with inter-generational equity and fairness and/or inter-temporal moral relations (Norton 1990, P. 155).

Sustainability, in this context is all about the future, our environmental concerns towards it, and moral responsibility for our actions that affect future generations. Put succinctly, it has everything to do with our moral obligations to future generations in terms of environmental stewardship. It is sad to note that the present untrammelled exploitation of natural resources in the Niger Delta region, the lack of ecological conscience on the part of most citizens, and the financial recklessness of some of those in charge of these resources are rapidly closing options for future generations.

### **3.2 The Need for Environmental Ethics**

The American environmentalist, Aldo Leopold in his seminal work “Land Ethic”, wrote about six decades ago that was no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land, animals and plants which grow on it. Land, as at his time, was considered as property. The human-land relation was strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations (Leopold 1970, p. 237). Though the situation has largely improved over the years in the United States, Aldo Leopold’s home country, the situation in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta, has not changed. Many environmental philosophers link the environmental challenges here to a general deficiency of ethical standards and environmental values (May & Sharratt 1997, p. 72). However, in order to make any progress towards environmental well-being in the Region, there is need for strong ethical responses and conceptual arguments to persuade those in power, policy makers, citizens and multi-nationals, that considerations for the environment goes beyond the prevailing traditional property and economic value concerns. Environmental ethics considers is value-laden and seeks for the extension of our ethical duties to the natural world.

In view of the foregoing, addressing the complex environmental problems in the Niger Delta solely from the standpoint of science and technology may not provide an adequate solution, as experience world over has shown. If these problems were purely such, that demand exclusive scientific or technological solutions, then its resolutions would, probably, have been achieved long before now. As a matter of fact, the entire garment of the environmental problems in the region and beyond is a reflection of profound difficulties with some of the most basic principles of our value systems. This is obvious when we, in retrospection analyses our pre-industrial natural attitudes and values which appear more eco-friendly than we have now.

Our present environmental realities challenge us to assess the adequacy of the basic principles in our accepted systems of values and, if need be, discover a new ethical framework

that is more ecological objective and could confront the reality of man's inherent egocentricity and greed. Many researchers in environmental studies have failed to decipher and analyse ethical and social assumptions implicit in their work (Shrader-Frechette, 1981, p. ix). This is one of the deficiencies bedeviling many current efforts at halting environmental degradation in many societies (Hargrove 1989, p. 1).

Although some measures have been taken by the Nigerian government and the multi-national firms to tackle the prevailing environmental issues in the Niger-Delta, there is little to show for these efforts. This is so because these challenges cannot be addressed with cosmetic 'solutions'. What is required is a radical change in our philosophical outlook, a value-system-change. This change involves both personal and cultural transformations. This change would affect basic economic and ideological structures of our society (Des Jardins 1997, p. 201). The prevailing system is economic based and anti-environment. This is the system that sees the environment as something to be exploited solely for economic benefits, used and discarded rather than as something to be given some moral considerations, cared for and protected. Thus, environmental problems are often misinterpreted as economic problems requiring the skills and expertise of economists. However, owing to the complexities involved in the issues of environment, its study has become multi-disciplinary and broad based in approach, of which this work participates.

Environmental ethics, a relatively sub-discipline in philosophy, is essentially non-anthropocentric and nature-centred. It holds that non-human members of the natural world are intrinsically valuable in themselves. Human beings, therefore, ought to or should find nature morally considerable in itself because of its intrinsic value and not just for its economic value. This paper considers non-anthropocentrism and environmental justice as veritable philosophical tools for fighting environmental problems in the Niger Delta.

### **3.3 The Quest for Environmental Justice in Niger Delta**

Environmental justice is a concept that investigates the social distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. This means that "a society that distributes these benefits and burdens unequally is *prima facie* unjust" (Des Jardin 1997, p. 228). Social ecologists see ecological degradation as related to social problems of control and dominance. They trace the root cause of our environmental crises to the unjust human institutions and practices. They believe that the domination and degradation of nature arise from social patterns of domination and hierarchy, patterns of socio-economic life in which some human beings exercise control or dominance over others (Des Jardins 1997, p. 224).

A central insight of environmental justice concerns the relations between individual human beings and the patterns of social organization in which they live. It should be noted, here that societies are human creations, organized and structured by humans in ways that serve human ends. Thus, when evaluating socio-economic problems relating to the environment, we should ask about the ends or purposes served by the particular institutions causing the problems. In addition, we also need to ask questions about what a particular government policy or arrangement or approach by the multinationals is doing to the environment and its components. Who is benefiting from, and who is harmed by, the anthropocentric-utilitarian tradition in the Niger Delta? Going by the view of social ecologists, many social structures serve to oppress some segments of society for the benefits of others (Bullard 1994, p. 133). I think, this has been the experience of the Niger Delta region in terms of getting a fair share of the burdens and benefits of the environment. The region does not enjoy a commensurate benefit with the environmental burdens it bears. Widespread poverty,

unemployment, squalor and diseases are quite prevalent in the area (UNDP report, 2006 p.76). Again, a report from United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) said that over half a century of oil operation in the Niger Delta, by multinational firms including Shell, had caused serious environmental degradation in the Region without a corresponding benefit (Fuggle 2004).

In addition to these, there is unmitigated industrial/air pollution, poor management of solid waste, oil pollution and its toxicity on the environment, and lack of access to portable drinking water. These contribute to a large extent to the spread of airborne and water borne diseases like hookworm, dysentery, cholera, typhoid and diarrhea resulting in hundreds of preventable deaths annually (Davis 2014, p. 269). From prevention to clean up of oil spill to punishment of offenders, this paper found that enforcement of environmental laws in the Niger Delta is systematically lax when it concerns minority communities (Bullard 1994, p. 281). This connotes environmental injustice and, therefore, needs to be addressed squarely.

### **3.4 Applying Theories of Social Justice to Niger Delta**

Justice can be understood as the first principle of social and political philosophy. However, in one sense, moral philosophy provides the framework against which a theory of justice develops (Des Jardins 1997, p. 226). Moral philosophy considers, among other things the responsibilities (even corporate social responsibilities) that each of us has toward others or a multinational organization has towards a host community and the rights that we possess against others. In a simple way, we may say that justice is concerned with giving each person his or her due. Theories of justice differ in determining exactly what people deserve. In the Western philosophical tradition, issues bordering on this question start with Aristotle's argument that justice demands treating equals equally and unequals unequally. This is referred to as the "formal principle of justice", and can give rise to different interpretations. The utilitarian theory holds that we should treat the interests of each person as of equal value and then apply the impartial rule of maximizing the overall good to the question of distributing social benefits and burdens.

For Rawls (1971), the social and economic benefits and burdens should be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution would benefit the least advantaged members of society and if those be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution would benefit the least advantaged members of society and if those benefits are attached to positions for which each person has an equal opportunity. In his words, "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions" (3).

Having done a concise discussion of justice let us come back to the question of how the benefits and burdens of the environment should be distributed in the Nigerian society. Are the present distributions of benefits and burdens fair? How much of the benefits and burdens are the Niger Deltans receiving? Obviously, environmental justice is yet to be realized in the Niger Delta and we recommend a modified Rawlsian approach as discussed above as a way forward.

### **3.5 Sustainability and Environmental Justice**

Environmental justice is an issue bordering on the balanced use of resources and power. Accordingly, if sustainability is to escape the label of an ideological concept that imposes the legitimacy of interests of an established class, then at some level, just patterns of resource use must be such that is fair to the minority and least powerful (Light and Rolston III 2003, p. 340). The application of utilitarianism to questions of environmental policy, must

consider not only the economic interests of the larger population but also the interests of the minority. Any moral principle in this regard should be positive to the implementation of policies of sustainable environment that would ensure the total well-being of the entire citizenry.

If we apply Kant's universal law formulation of the Categorical Imperative, to the issue of environmental sustainability and justice, we will demand that: For a rule to be a moral rule, it must be consistently universalizable. The ground of moral duty rests on no empirical conditions or subjective egoistic considerations. Only the one objective condition, that the rule can become a universal law, is sufficient as the ground of its moral validity. And this condition simply implies that the rule can be prescribed as a guide to our moral conduct with regards to the environment without involving a self-contradiction. In this regard, any rule or policy that cannot be universalized, might be considered an "unsustainable" environmental policy. A Kantian might argue that if we pollute and deplete natural resources in a particular region of the country for economic reasons, in such manner we cannot universalize, we are not acting morally.

Similarly, if we apply a hypothetical social contract theory such as Rawls' theory of 'Distributive' Justice to the issue of environmental policy, we must ask whether rational, self-interested individuals in the 'Original position' behind the 'veil of Ignorance' would agree to environmental policies that are in conflict with the idea of 'Sustainable Environment'. Anyone applying this moral theory might argue that individuals in the Original Position would only agree to policies of sustainable environment because they do not know whether they will experience a net gain or a net loss from pollution and resource depletion (Thero 1995).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The prospect for continued environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources in the Niger Delta Region coupled with the issue of environmental justice has been the concern of this paper. The primary aim of this work is to provide a clear, systematic and concise introduction to the philosophical issues bordering on environmental problems in the Niger Delta. A significant amount of philosophically related research work on environmental and ecological issues in the Niger Delta is still in the making because it is a relatively new field of study. However, this paper may be considered as a contribution to the extant literature in field. The tendency in our culture to treat environmental issues as solely techno-scientific, economic or even political problems should be reconsidered in the light of this paper. These environmental issues in addition to their scientific, technological, economic and political dimensions raise some fundamental questions about values and beings. We have attempted at highlighting and addressing some of them here. Specifically, the problem of anthropocentric-utilitarian approach to the environment and the issue of environment justice were treated. This paper recommends a non-anthropocentric, deontologic approach. With respect to environmental justice in Niger Delta, it recommends the application of a modified Rawlsian principle of distributing social and economic benefits and burdens in such a manner that gives a fair share to host communities. A situation where an unequal distribution would benefit the least advantaged group that bears the burdens of environment.

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