




Stewardship: An Ethics for Environmental Respectability in Africa

Bonaventure B. Gubazire¹ 

¹ Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Spiritan University, Ejisu - Ghana.

ABSTRACT

Drawing on various environmental philosophers and other scholars, this paper modestly proposes an ethical theory known as *stewardship* that strongly challenges mankind to treat nature (environment) with substantial reverence and care. Nature and human beings are symbiotically related. Human beings depend on nature for their existence. *Stewardship*, as an ethical theory and practice, pivots on the philosophical idea that nature is sacred [i.e., bearer of intrinsic value and locus of transcendence]. *Stewardship* challenges human beings to committedly preserve nature and to only tamper with it for the procurement of basic human needs. Destroying nature is somehow destroying oneself. Such awareness may change the way human beings relate to nature, especially in radical capitalistic societies where nature is simply seen as a means to satisfy human interests. This paper recommends contributory measures for implementing the ethics of *stewardship*. These include the ethical principles of *co-existentiality*, *personalised responsibility*, *proportionality* and *solidarity*. The ethics of *stewardship* carries greater prospects of challenging people's irresponsible appropriation, commercialisation and instrumentalisation of nature (anthropocentrism); hence, contributing to environmental respectability.

Correspondence

Bonaventure B. Gubazire

Email: bgubazire@yahoo.fr

Publication History

Received 27th May, 2022

Accepted 22nd July, 2022

Published online 8th August, 2022

Keywords: *Nature (environment), Anthropocentrism, Sacredness, Stewardship.*

© 2022 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Publishers.

This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

INTRODUCTION

Today, human beings in Africa and other parts of the world face unparalleled environmental challenges. Many scientists, ethicists, scholars, politicians and religious leaders attest to the fact that

© 2022 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Publishers.

This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

nature (environment) is undergoing an accelerated degradation.¹ The rapidity of degradation seems to contradict the natural pace of ordinary cosmic changes. Some studies show that a significant number of species are becoming extinct day by day and that this rate could “double or triple within the next few decades.”² The natural resources that sustain life on the planet [air, water, soil...] are being polluted at alarming rates. The human population, especially in Africa and Asia, is rapidly increasing. While population growth is hailed in many societies, overpopulation in some ways contributes to the depletion of natural resources. Human beings have continued to encroach on the world’s wilderness, wetlands, mountains, grasslands, etc.³ Tones of wood are ferried from Africa to the outside world for commercial reasons, quite often, for the benefit of those in political positions. Sometimes, huge forests are destroyed for the sake of creating space for multinational companies to set up their factories. Again, the beneficiaries are mainly a few capitalists and some government officials. Animal poaching is another problem. God knows how many elephants have been ruthlessly and illegally killed in the African jungles and their tusks sold for ornamental or decorative reasons! Toxic wastes continue to accumulate in many parts of the world. It is not uncommon to find plastic bags and bottles in street gutters.

Indeed, the current relationship between human beings and the natural world needs thoughtful attention. This raises fundamental questions: How ought mankind to treat nature in a way that benefits the present and future generations while conserving nature’s integrity? Is it ethically justified to treat non-human nature [animals, trees, plants...] as a mere means to human ends? Is nature itself not a bearer of an intrinsic value, i.e., a value that is independent of human evaluations? Does it make sense to talk of “equality of value” between human beings and nature, based on the fact that humans depend on nature for their survival? Considering the alarming situation of the current environmental degradation, how best can one reconcile human flourishing and environmental justice? In other words, what role ought human beings to play to bring about environmental respectability?

This paper endeavours to shed some light on these questions. Firstly, it attempts to define nature in the context of environmental philosophy and to present the scale of environmental damage as given by some empirical studies. Secondly, it critically examines the anthropocentric contention that human species are superior to non-human species; a mentality that has largely contributed to environmental degradation. Thirdly, it proposes an ethics of *stewardship* as a means to reduce the rapidity of environmental deterioration. Fourthly and lastly, this paper recommends contributory measures for implementing the ethics of *stewardship*. These include a change of mentality towards the natural world through the application of key ethical values such as *co-existentiality*, *personalised responsibility*, *proportionality* and *solidarity*.

Nature

In this paper, the terms “nature,” “environment,” “non-human nature,” and “natural world” are used as synonyms. They represent the same reality to describe the entirety of the physical and biological world as contrasted [but not opposed] to the human world. Nature is basically what surrounds

¹ Eric Wolff et al, *Climate Change: Evidence and Causes* (New York: The Royal Society, 2020), 3. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si : Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home* (Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa, 2016), 18-19.

² Joseph R. Desjardin, *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2001), 5.

³ Pradip Kumar Maurya et al, “An Introduction to Environmental Degradation: Causes, Consequence and Mitigation,” *In Environmental Degradation: Causes and Remediation Strategies*, Eds. Vinod Kumar et al, Volume 1 (Haridwar: Agro Environ Media, 2020), 5.

mankind as life support.⁴ Nature encompasses organic and inorganic entities such as wetlands, animals, insects, plants, mountains, water bodies, air, etc. Different organisms relate with one another to form what is known as ecosystems.⁵ Nature itself exhibits an inherent directionality. Each organism tends to its natural function. The natural world becomes stable when living organisms fulfill their natural function or actualise their inherent potentialities.⁶ Thus, nature undisturbed is fundamentally good.

In most capitalistic societies, nature is basically conceived of as a mere means to serve human interests. Human interests seem to override the interests of nature, particularly biotic nature. In other words, nature is given value insofar as it serves and satisfies human interests. Mankind relates with nature simply for instrumental or commercial reasons. Land has value insofar as it contains natural resources. A dog has value insofar as it chases away intruders. A tree has value insofar as it provides fruits, shade or wood. It can be argued that the anthropocentric (capitalistic) claim that nature has value insofar as it serves human interests is a major contributory factor to environmental degradation. Most ecological problems arise when human beings irresponsibly interfere with the natural order by treating the natural world as having value only insofar as it serves human purposes.

Environmental Degradation: The Scale of the Challenge

Environmental degradation is one of the pressing concerns of modern times. Efforts are being made to figure out how best mankind can face this challenge. Some studies show that the earth's average temperature has increased by more than 0.75°C over the last 100 years.⁷ If nothing changes, there might be a further increase in world temperatures and disequilibrium in the natural climatic cycle. Scientists have tracked not only the changes in the temperature of the air and oceans but also other indicators like the melting of the polar ice caps and the increase of worldwide sea levels.⁸ The same studies link the rise in temperature with phenomena like desertification in some regions, prolonged drought as well as stronger extreme weather patterns like hurricanes and cyclones. Natural calamities create a harmful impact on ecological systems, especially on the lives of humans and other biotic species. The worst impact of climate change is mostly felt by developing countries, especially in Africa. These countries largely depend on “natural reserves” and “ecosystemic services” like farming, fishing and forestry.⁹ Moreover, developing countries, more often than not, do not have enough capital to make it possible for people to adapt to climatic mutability or to face natural disasters.

The rapidity of these environmental vicissitudes is largely blamed on human activities such as the increase in greenhouse gases, unplanned urbanisation, encroachment on wetlands and forests, burning of fossil fuels, use of health-threatening pesticides in agriculture, manufacture and use of plastic material, etc.¹⁰ These activities, and many more, call for a critical examination of the way human beings related to nature.¹¹ As such, several questions arise: What makes human beings think that the natural world is meant to be used as they wish? What makes current capitalistic societies treat the natural world as a mere means to human ends?

⁴ P. A Ojomo, “Environmental Ethics: An African Understanding,” *African Journal of Environmental Science and Technology* 5, no.8 (August 2011): 573.

⁵ Pope Francis. *Laudato Si*, 80.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), Book 1 chapter 7.

⁷ J. Hansen et al, “Global Surface Temperature Change,” *Reviews of Geophysics* 48, no. 4 (2010): RG4004. Leonel, J.R. Nunes and Marta Ferreira Dias, “Perception of Climate Change Effects over Time and the Contribution of Different Areas of Knowledge to Its Understanding and Mitigation,” *Climate* 10, no.7 (2022), 1-2.

⁸ Eric Wolff et al, *Climate Change: Evidence and Causes* (New York: The Royal Society, 2020), 3.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 30.

¹⁰ Maurya et al, “An Introduction to Environmental Degradation: Causes, Consequence and Mitigation,” 3.

¹¹ This paper does not to engage in the philosophical debate on whether environmental disasters are really caused by human activities or are simply natural processes as some sceptics would argue. This paper simply acknowledges the fact that some human attitudes and activities do play a major role in environmental degradation.

Anthropocentric Conception of Nature

Anthropocentrism is an environmental theory that considers the human species (*Anthropos*) as superior to non-human species (natural world).¹² Human beings are placed at a higher position on the ecological scale. Mankind is above everything. The natural world exists for the sole purpose of serving human interests. Nature is simply a bearer of an instrumental value, i.e., a means to serve human ends. Anthropocentric thinkers, as it shall be shown, maintain that only human beings are endowed with the faculties of rationality and autonomy. Other beings lack them.

The claim that mankind is superior to the natural world is not a new teaching. It can be traced to Western philosophy, especially to Judeo-Christian and Kantian philosophies. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-28). Human beings have a privileged place in the world. They are the only species created in the image of God. It is the unique mark God placed upon humanity. Only human beings, among God's creatures, share with God the capacity to think and co-create. For Augustine, "Man's excellence consists in the fact that God made him to His image by giving him an intellectual soul, which raises him above the beasts of the field."¹³ For Thomas Aquinas, "...intellectual creatures alone, properly speaking, are made to God's image."¹⁴ This makes mankind superior to other earthly creatures.

In the same vein, Immanuel Kant maintains that rationality and autonomy are proper to mankind.¹⁵ Rationality enables human beings to create values and ethical systems that not only render human life more meaningful but also capture the worthiness of other life forms. Non-human species do not have such capacity. Only human beings can enjoy a sense of freedom. Autonomy is the basis for human dignity. It makes mankind an end in themselves and never a means to something else.¹⁶ Rationality and autonomy, therefore, exalt man over other creatures. While mankind ought not to treat fellow human beings as a means to an end, they can, nonetheless, regard the natural world as a means to human ends. Rationality then justifies mankind's interference with the natural world. Mankind has the right to exploit nature the way they want. Nature is a means toward human flourishing, even when it is used for luxurious ends. There is no *equality of value* between the human species and non-human species.

The anthropocentric ideology is also reflected in several contemporary philosophers. For John Passmore, the natural world bears value only when it serves human interests.¹⁷ Otherwise, nature has no value. Similarly, Bryan Norton, maintains that the earth's species and ecosystems should be preserved for the sake of human well-being. Only humankind is the locus (reference point) of "deep-seated values."¹⁸ Notice that this instrumentalist conception of nature is what inspires modern capitalism. Nature has value insofar as it serves as an economic asset.

The anthropocentric conception of nature is not without flaws. It puts the natural world in a precarious situation. If the human species are considered superior to other species, then there is nothing that can stop human beings from exploiting the natural world the way they want, even when human activities are environmentally destructive. What would prevent a greedy capitalist from killing a herd of elephants to maximise profits on the ivory market? After all, these animals have no intrinsic value. They are simply instruments for human use.

Again, if it is maintained that the natural world has value only when it serves human interests, in a situation where nature can no longer serve human interests [because people see no value in it], it

¹² Bryan Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism," *Environmental Ethics* 6, no.2 (Summer 1984):131-148.

¹³ Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram*, VI, 12. Cited by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), Qn. 93, Article 2.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Qn. 93, Article 2.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4:436.

¹⁶ Kant, *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:428.

¹⁷ J. Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (London: Duckworth, 1974), 43-45; Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 13-14.

¹⁸ Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism," 132.

means there is no need of conserving it. Richard Routley, for instance, imagines a case [last person case] in which a disastrous occurrence has killed all other human beings on earth, such that there is only one person left alive. If this person were dying, and it would still be possible for her to press a button that would destroy the rest of their life on earth, would there be anything morally wrong about doing so, since the natural world has value only insofar as it serves human interests?¹⁹

In all, anthropocentrism does not guard the environment against harmful exploitation. It gladly justifies human encouragement of the natural world, even for lucrative ends (non-basic needs). Most ethicists, as it shall be shown, disagree that the natural world has value insofar as it serves human interests. They claim that nature [or at least its parts] has a value that is independent of human evaluations. How true is this claim?

Intrinsic Value in Nature

Intrinsic value refers to the *worthiness* of an entity independent of human evaluations. It is the value that a thing has *for its own sake*. Intrinsic value is a worth that, properly speaking, “transcends” human evaluation criteria. Many ethicists subscribe to this philosophy. James Sterba refutes arguments that exalt the human species over other species.²⁰ Though mankind has distinctive traits that other species lack [like elevated rationality and moral agency], these distinctive traits are not sufficient enough to justify mankind’s superiority over non-human species. Members of the non-human species are also endowed with distinctive qualities that human beings lack. Consider, for example, the homing capability of pigeons, the speed of cheetahs, the “skilfulness” of birds when making their nests, the ruminative capacity of cattle, etc.²¹ As such, the distinctive traits that humans have are no more valuable than the distinctive qualities of other species.

Tom Regan and Peter Singer refuse to subscribe to the anthropocentric claim that only human beings are endowed with rationality and autonomy. These two ethicists [though differently] extend “rationality” and “rights” to other animals. Animals have moral rights [in terms of claims rights] that are independent of human ascription.²² As sentient beings, animals have their way of thinking. They also experience pain and pleasure. This implies a moral obligation, on the part of humans, to minimise the suffering of non-humans and allow them to also flourish.²³ Mary Midgley doubts whether rationality is the key to human supremacy over the natural world.²⁴ She, instead, posits the psychological feature of mankind’s insignificance before the natural world as the centre for their claim of dominance or superiority to non-human nature.

In the same vein, Paul Taylor contends that every organism has a value of its own.²⁵ The value consists in the full development of each being’s biological powers. Each organism is a teleological centre of life, pursuing its good in its way. It is groundless to claim that humans by their way of nature are superior to other species. Instead, mankind should consider the fact that humans and non-human organisms are members of the earth’s community of life. The relationship

¹⁹ Richard Routley, “Is there a need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?” In *Proceedings of the XV World Conference of Philosophy*, Varna, 1 (1973): 205-210; James Sterba “Reconciling Anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric environmental Ethics,” In *Environmental Values* 3, (1994): 229-224.

²⁰ Sterba, “Reconciling Anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric environmental Ethics,” 230.

²¹ Sterba, “Reconciling Anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric environmental Ethics,” 230.

²² Regan and Singer hinge their arguments for animal rights on the moral dilemma of attributing moral rights to beings that lack rational autonomy, for example, infants, the comatose or mentally deranged humans. If we deny moral rights to animals simply because they lack rational autonomy, why then do we not deny the same rights to all those who lack rational autonomy like infants, the comatose or mentally deranged humans? If these incapacitated beings are said to have rights, then, animals too have rights. Tom Regan, “the case for Animal Rights” in *In defence of Animals*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985): 13-15.

²³ Peter Singer, “All Animals are Equals”, In *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 361-371.

²⁴ Mary Midgley, “The end of Anthropocentrism?” In *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, eds. Robin Attfield and Andrew Besley, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 103-112.

²⁵ Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 44-45.

between mankind and nature should be a relationship of consideration, a relationship that respects the inherent value of each organism. For Arne Naess, all living beings have an intrinsic value independent of human interests.²⁶ Each being is unique and has value in itself. Biological diversity in nature contributes to the richness of the ecosystemic process under a complex matrix of interrelationships. As such, there is a need to shift from a *shallow ecology* [instrumentalisation of nature] to *deep ecology* [that acknowledges the presence of an intrinsic value in nature], if mankind wants to address environmental problems.

For Friedrich Paulsen, plants also manifest many of the same vital processes that are found in animals such as nutrition, growth, reproduction and many more.²⁷ It is unfair not to acknowledge their intrinsic value. In this regard, Paulsen raises pertinent questions: “Does not the plant turn its buds and leaves to the light, does it not send its roots where it finds nourishment, and its tendrils where it finds support? Does it not close its petals at night, and when it rains and does it not open them in the sunshine?”²⁸ After contemplating a water lily, which had spread its leaves over the water and basking in the sunlight, Gustav Fechner attests that the water lily must be capable of feeling the sun and the bath.²⁹ This is to say that each organism has a right on its own, a right to flourish; hence, an intrinsic value that is independent of human accreditations.

Nevertheless, despite its noble contribution to environmental respectability, the ethical claim that nature has an intrinsic value still faces some logical challenges: Are things really valuable because of the qualities they *intrinsically* have or are they valuable simply because human beings *value* them so? Again, if the value of the natural world is indeed intrinsic [inherent in an entity] how, then, can it be known by other species including human beings? To say that something is valuable, does it not need a “valuer”? If that is the case, can there be a value independent of the valuer? Baird Callicott acknowledges that the defining problem of environmental ethics is how to discover an intrinsic value in nature.³⁰ The existence of a value presupposes the presence of a “valuer,” someone to identify or acknowledge the existence of a value. But this does not mean that the natural world cannot have an intrinsic value. Instead, the natural world ought to be valued not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself.

Some thinkers, as it shall be argued, consider the concept of *intrinsic value* as a reflection of “transcendence” or “divine presence” in nature.³¹ Interestingly, the expression “intrinsic value” carries within it elements of transcendence. Intrinsic value is a *worth* that, properly speaking, “transcends” human evaluation criteria. It is simply there, present in its own right (*causa sui*). It does not depend on human beings for its existence. This is precisely the basis of the claim that nature is sacred. How justifiable is this claim?

Nature as Sacred

An entity is said to be sacred when it evokes reverence, veneration or awe. Such an entity is usually associated with divine or spiritual realities. Nature expresses an inherent power. It undergoes a continuous process of synthesis. ³² Different species continuously generate each other. There is an inherent directionality in the natural world. All things tend to their natural end.³³ Every being has a good for its own sake. Things are good when they fulfil their natural function. Natural ecosystems

²⁶ Arne Naess, “The Basics of Deep Ecology,” *The Trumpeter* 21, no.1 (2005 [1986]): 61-71

²⁷ Friedrich Paulsen, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 2nd American ed., trans. F. Thilly (New York: Holt and Company, 1906).

²⁸ Paulsen, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 96-97.

²⁹ Gustav.T Fechner, *Religion of a Scientist*. Trans. W Lowrie (New York: Pantheon, 1946), 176-177.

³⁰ Baird J. Callicott, “On the Intrinsic value of Nonhuman Species,” *The preservation Species: The Value of Biological Diversity*. Ed. Bryan G. Norton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986), 138-171

³¹ The term “transcendence” is philosophically associated with divine realities or mystical powers that play a vital role in human life and environmental harmony. John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 2nd ed (Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers, 2008), 51.

³² Charles Hartshorne, “The Philosophy of Creative Synthesis,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 55, (1958): 944-953.

³³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1 chapter 7.

are well ordered and harmonious. Each entity contributes to the natural order in its own way. Intellectually speaking, the human mind cannot grasp the immensity of nature. The human mind is rather left in awesome wonder.

The sacredness of nature can be traced to Judeo-Christian religious philosophy. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and all the living and non-living beings (Genesis 1-2). Nature is thus a creation of God. If nature is a creation of God, it logically follows that there is something of God in nature. In other words, the environment echoes *traces* of Godliness. For Thomas Aquinas, God's divine law operates in nature.³⁴ Nature is a theophany; i.e., a manifestation of God's divine presence and divine plan. God's divine design in nature evokes an experience of awe. This aesthetic experience is brilliantly expressed by the words of the Biblical psalmist: "When I see the heavens, the work of Your hands, the moon and the stars which You arranged, what is man that You should keep him in mind, mortal man that You care for him?.." (Ps 8:3-4).

The sacredness of nature equally resonates with Kant's philosophy of beauty.³⁵ The beautiful experiences derived from the natural world [be it a flower, a mountain, a river, an ocean...] are a product of what Kant terms "supersensible substratum" inherent in nature.³⁶ It is the *supersensible substratum* (the sacred) in nature that makes one to exclaim: Oh! What a beautiful flower! What a wonderful mountain! What a marvellous ocean! Notice that the *supersensible substratum* is "revealed" to the human mind, but without the mind totally grasping it. The Latin suffix "super" means *beyond* or *above*. Nature goes beyond human understanding. Instead, it evokes awe because of its sensational magnitude (size, grandeur, height, depth...)³⁷ Mankind feels small before its greatness. The effort to comprehend the totality of nature exceeds the capacity of human imagination. The mind finds itself elevated or "raised" towards nature (Sublime).³⁸ Imagine the beauty of the sky; the beauty of a rising or setting sun! Imagine as well the beauty of a mountain, a rainbow or waterfalls!

Interestingly, most African traditional societies consider the natural world as "sacred." Nature manifests "things" that transcend human knowledge. Most people believe that nature is a sanctuary of metaphysical or spiritual beings. It is a place where the spirits of the ancestors dwell. For Edward Kanyike, the natural world "is not a property to be used anyhow, it is a dwelling place of spirits, a resting place of ancestors."³⁹ Nature connects man to the spiritual world. It serves as a ladder for climbing toward the supernatural. As such, nature deserves substantial reverence and care.

Notice that the consideration of nature as "sacred" does not mean that the African worships nature. The African simply sees the natural world as a mediator. In other words, he or she uses matter [the material] to reach the immaterial [the spiritual], the visible to reach the invisible. This is why sacrifices are offered to spiritual beings (ancestors) using material objects. These ritualistic practices normally take place under special trees in the forest or on the slope of mountains. There is a special relationship between human beings and the environment, a strong ontological bond that regulates the way human beings treat nature. For instance, among the *Bakiga* people of Uganda, before felling a tree, one has to seek permission from the ancestors. It is believed that the ancestors normally sit under trees to watch over the activities of human beings. Permission from the ancestors is also sought before killing some animals, clearing bushes or crossing certain rivers.

³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Qn. 94, Article 2.

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans., Guyer p., & Matthews, E. (Cambridge: Cambridge press, 2000), 138.

³⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 138.

³⁷ The Sublime is represented in objects like pyramids, ocean, waterfalls, mountains, storm etc.

³⁸ The song by the American singer Josh Groban "You raise me up, so I can stand on the mountains..." seems to echo such an aesthetic experience of the Sublime.

³⁹ Edward Kanyike, *The Principle of Participation in African Cosmology and Anthropology* (Balaka: Montfort Media, 2004), 112.

In a nutshell, most African societies conceive of nature as sacred. It is practically impossible to draw a line between the profane and the sacred, the physical world and the spiritual world. These realities are fundamentally intertwined. This viewpoint had for centuries prevented the African people from destroying their environment. Destroying nature would be tampering with the flow of life, a life that springs from the ancestors.

Unfortunately, times have changed. The relationship between human beings and nature has taken a different tone in today's capitalist world. Nature is simply an economic asset to serve human needs. This mentality has largely contributed to environmental degradation in many parts of the world. The pressing question for the present times is: How can mankind treat nature in a way that benefits present and future generations without causing environmental damage? How ought mankind to treat the natural world productively and respectfully? What role ought human beings to play to bring about environmental respectability?

Ethics of Stewardship

The ethics of *stewardship* suggests a relationship of responsibility between human beings and their environment. It entails a thoughtful engagement with the natural world to avoid deplorable environmental damages. *Stewardship* is not a new notion in environmental ethics. Aldo Leopold applies it to land ethics, especially on how human beings ought to relate with animals and plants.⁴⁰ Nathan Bennette *et al* use the expression “environmental stewardship” to express a concern that the message conveyed in *stewardship* is not receiving global attention in most environmental preservation policies.⁴¹ Clare Palmer employs the term “stewardship” to show how the concept itself can be unfortunately misused to justify the human exploitation of nature for mere “recreational and aesthetic ends.”⁴² For Sachi Arakawa *et al*, “stewardship” still is the ideal pathway toward proper environmental management.⁴³

In the context of this paper, *stewardship* describes a responsible treatment of the natural world through a caring attitude and safeguarding practice. *Stewardship* challenges human beings to committedly preserve nature and to only tamper with it for the procurement of basic needs. The earth is a common home for human species and non-human species. Human beings depend on nature for their existence. Nature provides basic needs such as water, air, food and shelter. Certain medicines are also obtained from nature. Interestingly, the term “stewardship” is closely related to the term “nourishment.” Mankind needs *stew* (food) to survive. A steward is like a shepherd. A good shepherd nurtures, sustains and safeguards the flock while taking some of it as food or source of income. Notice that a good steward or shepherd tampers with nature for the sole purpose of human survival (basic needs). No nourishment no life. No shelter no life. Human life is thus endangered when the natural world is treated carelessly.

As mentioned earlier, traditional philosophies and modern capitalistic societies place mankind at the centre of the Universe. Human beings are said to be superior to other beings because of the human faculties of rationality and autonomy. This trend of thought has continuously empowered many people [especially radical capitalists] to dominate the natural world and simply use it the way they want. Yet, Judeo-Christian religious philosophy discloses an essential element which, unfortunately, has been, quite often, misinterpreted. Human beings were not created to *dominate* the world, but rather to have *dominion* over the world. “Be fruitful...and have dominion... over everything on earth” (Gen 1:28). “Domination” and “dominion” are two different concepts.

⁴⁰ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

⁴¹ Nathan J. Bennette et al, “Environmental Stewardship: A Conceptual Review and Analytic Framework.” *Environmental Management*, Published on line January 31 2018, Accessed May 25, 2022.

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00267-017-0993-2>

⁴² Clare Palmer, “Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics,” *The Earth Beneath*, Ian Ball, et al, eds (London: SPCK Publishers, 1992), 85.

⁴³ Sachi Arakawa *et al*, “Environmental Stewardship : Pathways to Community Cohesion and Cultivating Meaning Engagement,” in *Hand Book of Engaged Sustainability* (2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53121-2_37-1

Dominion is another name for *stewardship*. It calls for ethical responsibility in mankind's handling of the natural world. *Domination*, however, connotes superiority over other creatures. To dominate is to control, overlook, or even to destroy. Instead, *dominion* is a caring attitude towards nature.

Stewardship, as an ethical theory and practice, acknowledges the fact that environmental degradation as a subject remains controversial. It is not without a sceptical voice. Nevertheless, there are strong reasons to believe that some human activities can accelerate the rate of environmental damage. As mentioned earlier, such activities include deforestation, over-mining, burning of fossil fuels, manufacturing and use of plastic bags, etc. These activities must be either minimised or halted to allow nature to flourish. Below are a number of recommendations that are likely to challenge mankind to treat the natural world more respectfully and responsibly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, there is a need for *mental conversion* if the battle against environmental degradation is to be won. The mentality that humans are superior to non-human nature ought to change. Education at all levels should take this point on board. Students and other concerned parties should be made aware there is an intrinsic value in nature independently of human evaluations, wants, needs or desires. Nature ought to be allowed to flourish for its own sake. There is a symbiotic relationship between the natural and human beings. This is precisely the ethical value of *co-existentiality*. Human beings depend on nature for survival. There is no human life without food, air, water, and shelter. Destroying nature is somehow destroying oneself. Except to satisfy vital human needs, people have no right to interfere with the ecosystem.⁴⁴ Nature is also a home for spiritual elements. For some believers, nature is a manifestation of God's power and greatness. Contemplating nature brings about inner wellness. It can relieve stress. The natural world is thus not a personal property to be used anyhow or destroyed. Nature is rather a common home that must be respected at all costs.

Secondly, environmental protection campaigns could be extended and accentuated at local or village levels in Africa. This is to allow the ethical value of *personalised responsibility* to sink into the minds and hearts of people. "Personalised responsibility" suggests a voluntary concern for the wellness of one's *immediate* [environmental] surroundings. Each citizen should be encouraged, for instance, to clean his or her homestead, business unit, path, field, etc. There is a saying *if you want a clean village (country), begin by cleaning your courtyard and its surroundings*. Governments and environmentalists should set put measures to encourage this practice. Coordinated efforts could be set in place to avoid illegal and ruthless animal poaching. Political rallies, schools and churches, etc., could offer a suitable platform for proper sensitisation on environmental issues. The use of plastic bags and other toxic materials could be banned. Where it is not yet done, garbage bins could be provided in public places like schools, markets, bus stations, etc.

Thirdly, whenever there is an encroachment on the natural world, the ethics of *environmental proportionality* ought to be taken into account. "Environmental proportionality" suggests a respectful and moderate manner of tampering with the natural world. It recommends logical correlativity between encroachment and restoration. Whatever is tampered with ought to be duly restored. Encroachment should be limited to what is basic for human life and not for lucrative or luxurious ends. This is precisely what lies beneath the ethics of *stewardship*. Restoration can be concretised through different environmental programmes such as reforestation, cleaning campaigns, reduction or ban on the use of dangerous pesticides, the introduction of non-polluting energies, recycling of plastic material, etc. With the issue of reforestation, it should be a practice that when a tree is felled, two or more trees must be planted. Mining or burning of fossil fuels must be largely moderated or restricted. Such measures are likely to reduce the rate of environmental calamities and other cosmic predicaments.

Fourthly and lastly, there is a dire need for an ethics of *solidarity* in this largely capitalistic world. The natural world should not be used to benefit or maximise profits for a group of people or

⁴⁴ Naess, "The Basics of Deep Ecology," 414.

for only a few nations while excluding other nations. Developing countries, especially in Africa, could be helped to adopt new environmentally friendly energy technologies. Solar energy is an example. Africa is a land of sunshine. Africa is also blessed with large freshwater bodies. It is paradoxical and extremely shameful in this technologically developed world to find people suffering or dying of starvation due to prolonged drought when lakes and rivers are in their vicinity. What is the purpose of international aid? Is it really intended to enable developing countries to become self-reliant? Since the Earth is a common home, there ought to be an equitable share of knowledge and natural resources among nations [solidarity] if the battle against environmental degradation is to be won.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to argue that the current relationship between human beings and nature (environment) needs serious attention. Nature is undergoing accelerated degradation. Some irresponsible human activities are compromising natural ecosystems. Phenomena like desertification in some regions, prolonged drought as well as stronger extreme weather patterns are on the rise. The worst impact of climate change is mostly felt by developing countries, especially in Africa. Anthropocentric thinkers claim human species are superior to other species on the planet. The natural world is given value insofar as it serves human interests. This mentality largely justifies and legalises massive exploitation of natural resources [mostly for luxurious ends]. Modern capitalism conceives of nature as simply a means to maximize profits regardless of subsequent environmental damages. On this premise, this paper has proposed an ethics of *stewardship* which challenges human beings to relate with nature responsibly and respectfully. *Stewardship* stems from the conviction that the natural world is sacred and has got an intrinsic value independent of human evaluations. Nature is home to spiritual elements that play a vital role in human life and environmental harmony. Nature and human beings are symbiotically related. As such, mankind ought to tamper with nature only to meet their basic needs. Unfortunately, modern capitalism continues to define the good life in terms of material prosperity. The natural world is nothing other than an arena for profit maximization. This remains a major challenge on the journey towards environmental respectability.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arakawa, Sachi et al. "Environmental Stewardship: Pathways to Community Cohesion and Cultivating Meaning Engagement." in *Hand Book of Engaged Sustainability* (2018). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53121-2_37-1
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. trans. W.D. Ross, Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999.
- Attfield, Robin. *Environmental Ethics*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981.
- Bennete, Nathan J. et al, "Environmental Stewardship: A Conceptual Review and Analytic Framework." *Environmental Management*. Published online 31st January 2018. Accessed in May 2022. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00267-017-0993-2>.
- Callicott, J. Baird, "On the Intrinsic Value of Nonhuman Species." *The preservation Species: The Value of Biological Diversity*. Ed. Bryan G. Norton. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986.
- Desjardin, R. Joseph. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*. 3rd ed. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2001.
- Hansen, J. et al. "Global Surface Temperature Change." *Reviews of Geophysics* 48, no. 4 (2010): RG4004.
- Hartshorne, Charles. *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*. London: SCM. 1983.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. trans. Guyer p. & Matthews, E. Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2000.

- _____. *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kanyike, Edward. *The Principle of Participation in African Cosmology and Anthropology*. Balaka: Montfort Media, 2004.
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1949.
- Maurya, Pradip Kumar et al. "An Introduction to Environmental Degradation: Causes, Consequence and Mitigation." In *Environmental Degradation: Causes and Remediation Strategies*. Eds. Vinod Kumar et al. Volume 1. Haridwar: Agro Environ Media, 2020.
- Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers, 2008.
- Midgley, Mary. "The end of Anthropocentrism?" In *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*. Eds. Robin Attfield and Andrew Besley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Naess, Arne. "The Basics of Deep Ecology." *The Trumpeter* 21, no.1 (2005 [1986]): 61-71.
- Norton, Bryan. "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism." in *Environmental Ethics* 6, no.2 (Summer 1984): 131-148.
- Nunes, Leonel J.R. and Dias, Marta Ferreira. "Perception of Climate Change Effects over Time and the Contribution of Different Areas of Knowledge to Its Understanding and Mitigation." *Climate* 10, no.7 (2022): 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.3390/cli10010007>
- Palmer, Clare. "Stewardship: A case Study in Environmental Ethics." *The Earth Beneath*. Ian Ball et al. Eds. London: SPCK Publishers, 1992.
- Paulsen, Friedrich. *Introduction to Philosophy*. 2nd American ed., Trans. F. Thilly, New York: 1906.
- Pope Francis. *Laudato Si: Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home*. Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa, 2016.
- Regan, Tom. "The case for Animal Rights." in *In defence of Animals*. ed. Peter Singer, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985.
- Routley, Richard. "Is there a need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" In *Proceedings of the XV World Conference of Philosophy*. Varna. 1 (1973): 205-210.
- Singer, Peter. "All Animals are Equals". In *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*. ed. Russ Shafer-Landau. 2nd ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
- Sterba, P. James. "Reconciling Anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric environmental Ethics." in *Environmental Values* 3, (1994): 229-224.
- Wolff, Eric et al. *Climate Change: Evidence and Causes*. New York: The Royal Society, 2020.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Bonaventure B. Gubazire (PhD) is currently a Lecturer in Philosophy and serves as Dean of Students at Spiritan University College-Ejisu (Ghana). He is a Catholic priest belonging to the Society of Missionaries of Africa (M. Afr). He holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy and has lectured in some other universities. He has published a number of scholarly materials and presented academic papers in various universities in and outside Africa. His research interests are focused on Education, Ethics and Religions (Metaphysics).