

Climate Change and Its Attendant Issues

Olalere kunle O^{*}, Adedokun Temitope . R
General Studies Department, The Polytechnic, Ibadan, Ibadan Oyo State, Nigeria
^{*} E-mail of the corresponding author: olalerefemi@gmail.com

Abstract

Climate change and its attendant issues has generated various debates especially in this century. Various arguments and positions have been put forward concerning the affects of climate change on the human race; much concern however has been placed on the role of human beings as agents in the continuous degradation of our climatic conditions. Activities necessitated by man's insatiable quest for the "good life" and of course, bettering his life has negatively impacted on our environment such that environmentalists, philosophers and even laymen have expressed concerns on the rapid and continuous degradation of our ecological-system. The task of this paper will center around the activities of human persons as agents of climate change with a view at examining the ethical implications of human's continuous exploitation of the eco-system for economic and social development thereby disturbing the balance of nature. The paper will also take into consideration certain ethical principles as they affect man's insatiable quest for development and how it affects and encourages climate change.

1. CLIMATE CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

Climate change has been defined and described in different ways, for some it is simply conceptualized as a noticeable change in world climate. It can also be defined as a long-term shift in the statistics of weather (including its averages) for example, it could show up as a change in climate normals (expected average values for temperature and precipitation) for a given place and time of year, from one decade to the next.

Climate change is a normal part of the earth's natural variability, which is related to interactions among the atmosphere, but at the inception of the 21st century a noticeable increase has occurred in the degree of climate change. The last decade of the 20th century has and the beginning of the 21st century has witnessed the warmest period in the entire history of human race.

The source of the rapid increase can be traced to effects of human activities on nature; this fact is echoed in our insatiable drive in conquering and harnessing nature. The emission of green house gases, that is, certain naturally occurring gases, such as carbon dioxide, water vapour etc, trap heat in the atmosphere causing a green house affect which triggers emissions which affect our environment in no little ways.

The single human activity which is most likely to have a large impact on the climate is the burning of fossil fuel such as coal, oil, gas etc., these fuels contain carbon dioxide which is emitted as a result of industrial activities channeled towards technological development. 'As Europe and Japan recovered from World War II, their energy consumption and carbon emission rose (Wesley 1999) such that its affect on the climate could not be ignored. Attempts by third world countries in improving their standards of living further pushed the effects of global warming it is limit such that it began depleting the ozone layer and also increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by nearly 30% increasing the average global temperature to between 1F and 2F

E Wesley and F. Peterson asserts that burning of fossil fuel, cements production and gas flaring accounts for 96% of gas emission which traps infra-red radiation from the earth thereby increasing the temperature of the earth from the earth increasing the temperature of the earth surface and this in no little way has created a ripple effect on the eco-system in particular, such that these negative effects are evident in all aspects of human existence. As people burn more fossil fuel for energy they add more carbon dioxide to the atmosphere and this evidently leads to a rise in the temperature of the atmosphere. If climate change occurs persistently it will cause change in the amount of rain, sunshine, the length of grooming seasons, the frequency and severity of storms etc. Farms, forests, plants and animals in the eco-system will be affected.

The reality of all these aforementioned of global change has created awareness against the ills of environmental exploitation and degradation such that issues concerning global warning, ozone layer depletion, gas emission etc has taken center stage when we discuss facts about how results of human activities on nature has gradually brought us to a seemingly critical point in the course of human history

In renewing the evidence from a large number of scientific studies the intergovernmental panel on climate change (I.P.C.C) concluded that these levels of green house gas concentration are having an impact on global temperature, also it has been shown that the consequence of such change include rising sea lords as the Antarctic ice cap melts and warmer sea water expands inundating islands and flooding coastal areas presently inhabited by large number of people's such the recent wares of Hurrricanes that rendered thousands of people homeless in the vented states, others classical examples can be seen in the noticeable encroachment of desert land on hitherto vegetative farmlands on the outermost part of the Sahara.

The veracity of the attendant problems of climate change has led world leaders into taking certain strength

measures which are meant to check or reduce the effects of this phenomena, for instance, leading nations in technological development have been urged to generate large amounts of energy from sea water without producing any carbon- dioxide or the substitution of non- polluting energy sources such as wind, geothermal, hydro electronic and nuclear power since these are the ways geothermal, hydro electronic and nuclear power (Wesley 1999) since these are the ways through which are can reduce energy consumption which causes global warming through the emission of carbon dioxide and others greenhouse gases.

One of such decisions was taken at the “Kyoto Protocol on Global Warming”; the controversies that trailed these decisions have however created difficulties which have made the enforcement of these decisions enigmatic. Having accepted the fact that the problem of climate change deserves multi – dimensional approaches in order to curb its attendant consequences – Wesley and Peterson put forward issues which are to be addressed when we discuss climate change, the issues are the following.

- (1) Is climate change really occurring?
- (2) Are human beings responsible for it?
- (3) What are the consequences?
- (4) If human action is contributing to it and the consequences are negative, what can be done?
- (5) If it is decided that some form of collective activity is needed to counter global warming that action involves sacrifices be distributed among various countries.

These five questions represent the multi-dimensional nature of the problems related to climate charge. We need to first accept the fact that indeed there is a rapid negative decline in the atmosphere condition of the world and if we do not find instant solutions to these questions we would be in unquantifiable peril, that is, the whole human race.

When we put the question of climate change on the front burner, it is necessary to note that certain cogent reactions are bound to arise, it is necessary to note that certain cogent reactions are bound to arise, these questions are derivations of the 4th and 5th issues raised by Wesley and Peterson, namely, that if we accept that human actions are the main causes of climate change what should be done and also that who should bear the brunt of the consequence of the actions directed at emasculating the whole of the human race from the attendant evils of climate change .

We will go on to examine certain implications of these questions with a view of reaching a satisfactory position.

2. HUMAN BEINGS AS PART OF THE ECO –SYSTEM

As human beings the question arises often times, do we have a moral obligation towards nature? What actually is man’s role in preserving the ecological system?

It is an obvious fact that human beings depend on their environment for their well- being as long as they still alive. Some ethicist have argued that man should be seen as a part of the ecological system, and if he is so considered and he sees himself in such light he would definitely see the protection of the environment and nature as a whole, not essentially as an obligation, but as a duty on which his existence depends (Rhoderick 2008)

Thomas McGinn supports this view when he said; man is a part of a whole.... The whole has value, man has value insofar as he shares a place within the whole, and whenever he disturbs the whole he acts immorally, for he attacks a value which is higher than his own (Mc Ginn 1989).

From this position man is expected as a point of duty, on which his life depends, to take care of his environment and by so doing he is indirectly taking care of himself. This position sees human beings as a unit in a system whose function is essential to the preservation of the whole system.

If we accept this argument as put forward by some ethicist and environmentalists, the problems of climate change as a result of human activities should not have arisen in the first instance.

Given the present threat which climate change constitute to human existence a humanist approach which is logical in all its ramification must be adopted, in which the duty of all human being is to desist from acts which disturbs the balance of nature since we are actually part of nature.

The paradox of treating man as a part of a value system centered outside himself throws us back to some sort of humanism as the basis of the reality of value where we are supposed to judge the biosphere not only as a means to the attainment of human satisfaction, but as an extension of the human race itself because to conceive of it otherwise is to see man as essentially superior to his environment and that the only purpose which the eco-system is to nourish the cravings of the human beings who reside on it.

A critical look at man’s dependence on nature elucidates the point that man should preserve the balance of nature for it is in his own interest (Mc Ginn 1989), some ethicist even argue that each passing generation owes a duty to the incoming ones to preserve the eco-system and some things which are in the interest of individuals living at present must be given up for the sake of the race in the future (McGinn 1989), perhaps when we make attempts at controlling population we are indirectly curbing the impact of population growth on the environment.

According to Mc Ginn, if we see ourselves as composite parts of the eco-system and we make attempts towards its preservation we are actually engaged in what he called “Self interest ethics” which boils down to the

protection of oneself and the environment in extension.

3. TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Developed countries have an obligation to restore the balance of nature as agreed and put forward in the Kyoto protocol earlier mentioned. The 'Kyoto protocol' requires that 39 countries classified as "industrialized" should as a matter of fact and urgency begin to take measures which would help in ameliorating the effects of climate change.

Developed countries due to their role in the exploitation of nature, have a moral responsibility towards the rehabilitation of the eco-system. This argument raises an obvious problem of distributive justice, but we must recognize the fact that it is in line with distributive justice to saddle these developed returns with higher responsibilities in rebuilding our environment. From another point of view it should be understood that the main responsibility of the developed countries is in reference to themselves since they must avoid contaminating the biosphere any longer even if it involves an absolute stop to technological growth. If we decide to curb environment exploitation we are faced with more questions of who or what bequeaths the right on anybody or group of persons to act as monitors who would prevent people or nations from exploiting nature for their benefits. There is a genuine reason for asking developing nations to desist from disrupting the balance of nature, but the developed nations who in more cases than one, see themselves as "world police" do not expressly possess the moral standing to discourage underdeveloped nations or actually enforce regulations which are meant to protect the eco-system.

Arguments put forward in support of this view states that the earth is a classical example of a common pool resource and no individual has an incentive to constrain behaviour that may be harming the resources unless there is assurance that others are also constraining their behaviour in a similar manner (Wesley 1989). Due to the liberty with which man is presented in using nature as a means to an end with little or no restriction, especially when the exploitation of nature has benefited a particular region of the world almost exclusively, it is grossly untenable to promulgate rules which restricts others, especially the third world nations, from having their own fair share of nature as a mean towards development. The third world wants nothing more than development, so it seems on the surface, but in deviance to the current world trend, will they be able to risk the problems which the west and Japan had created in their selfish quest for development? , put in a different way, would the third world nations be justified in their quest for development if it contributes to the climatic hazards which has already reached alarming rates.

If we apply the ethical theory of utilitarianism to the dilemma at hand an obvious reply would be that if the result of the actions of these third world nations does not provide the greatest number of happiness or utility for the greatest number of people all over the world, then such an action is not morally acceptable, also if we apply Kant's categorical imperative which states that such acts that cannot be universalized on the accounts of their consequences are morally wrong we arrive at the same conclusion that a further exploitation of nature is morally unjustifiable in the sense that its eventual result depicts the annihilation of the human race courtesy the resultant effects of climate change.

CONCLUSION

We must understand and accept that climate change and its attendant problems portray grave dangers to human existence if not immediately curtailed. The onus however does not fall on any particular nation or group of nations to act as watchdogs in the prevention of environmental exploitation, rather it should be seen as a task which all nations are to stand up, not by coercion, but by systematic concession in which agreements on modalities which will be employed in gradually restoring the balance of nature will be eventually deliberated and agreed upon by all concerned parties.

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