

Existential Issues on the Sustainability of the Environment

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Abstract

Man is said to be the centre of the universe. He gives meaning to existence as well as exploits the whole of existence for his own personal sustainability and the survival of his species. Beyond this, man has continued to exploit matter in his quest for the accumulation of capital and increment in the standard of living. This ruthless quest for the exploitation of nature has threatened the very sustainability of the earth itself. Should man continue in his compulsive quest for the exploitation of nature for the sake of mobility on the totem pole of his society? Can the earth itself be saved? Who sets the norms on what to exploit and what not to exploit in the environment? Is there any moral justification in denying developing countries the very means post-industrial nations who call the shots today used to attain their affluence? These existential questions are what this work is set to determine. The work critically analyses the issues in contention as well as proffers possible solutions to the environmental imbroglio in which the modern man is mired.

Introduction

The environment, which is our world has been a contentious issue in philosophical discourse right from the inception of formal philosophy. From the crisis of idealism versus materialism to the controversy of appearance and reality, philosophers have continued to probe the meaning of the environment, though more often than not, not using the term “environment” which is of relatively recent popularity. Right from the ‘ustuff’ or origin philosophers to contemporary thinkers the nature of the environment and man’s place in it have been of immense intellectual concern to philosophers. From Thales of Miletus who traced the origin of the natural environment to water to Anaximander of Ionia who called the natural environment boundless and indeterminate, philosophers have maintained focus on the environment. The duality of reality in world of appearance and forms in Plato, and the world of the senses in David Hume and Karl Marx are no less discourses on the meaning and nature of the environment. Even the philosophic inquiry itself was inspired by the environment as the generality of philosophers, without any sense of dubiety are in agreement that the philosophic inquiry originated in wonder. It is the curiosity in man aroused by the wonders of the environment that impels him to philosophize.

It did not take too long however, before man’s celebrated wonder at the environment paid off in science and technology, and the subsequent easy domination of the environment by man. Virtually all fields of learning celebrated the conquest of the environment by science until recent unpalatable happenings. Man’s immense curiosity about the environment paid off in increased knowledge of the environment and the enhanced ability to exploit the environment. The historical dialectics of struggle and adaptation between man and the natural environment culminated in the ushering in of the Industrial Revolution which became the watershed of man’s ruthless dominion of the environment.

The Industrial Revolution brought many goods as well as significant evils to humanity. It has left the world with life threatening existential challenges. It did not take too long for the euphoria of the world’s fascination with technology to give way to the phobias of pollution, exploitation and abuse. The Industrial Revolution though made life arguably easier, left human societies with ghastly environmental nightmares. Industrial communities became heavily polluted communities. Deaths and diseases arose from the pollutions. The sustainability of the earth became threatened as global warming, ozone layer depletion, acid rains and rising sea levels became the order of the day. The earth’s resources became increasingly depleted, raising concerns for the survival of future generations.

But greater questions arose. Is man the owner of the environment? Is he different from the environment? Is he superior to the environment? Are the earth’s resources infinite and ever plentiful? Has man no obligation whatsoever to the sustainability of the environment?

The reality of pollution and atmospheric damage by industries have brought the discussion on the environment to the front burner. The environment is inseparable from the existential reality of man. As a matter of fact, the existential condition of man is defined in his environment. To survive, man have has to be existentially attuned to his environment. The threat to the environment is ultimately the threat to the survival of man. These threats are what this papers discusses as it affects the existence of man. The threats are hereby discussed below.

The Reality of Global Warming

It is no longer news that our earth is getting warmer year after year. The reality of global warming is here with us. The evidence of global warming is all around us. As Michael Bell put it,

...there is plenty of evidence you don’t need statistical software

to appreciate. Broiling hot summers. Drought alerts. Floods. Rising sea levels. Record hurricanes. Melting glaciers. Decreased snow cover. Open-water fishing at the North Pole. Palm trees and peaches where they never grew before. Diseases and insects our grandparent's generation never had to contend with in our regions.¹

In the last ten years, the world has been warming at an alarming degree. The problem is that it is sometimes called global climate change rather than the global warming that it is. Rivers are springing up in the Arctic regions that were normally permanently frozen. The implication is the reduction in the ice residue of the earth and increased radiation. As glaciers and icecaps melt and are drained into the sea, the ocean water heats up and expands, and the sea level rises. Rises in sea levels interfere with natural drainages. As it becomes difficult for rivers to drain into the sea, the rivers overflow their banks resulting in flooding. The menace of flooding cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand. Two years ago much of the Niger Delta was invaded by massive floods which sacked hundreds of communities resulting in numerous deaths and countless economic losses. Many coastal cities around the world are facing the danger of being washed away by floods. In Lagos, people are vacating waterfront apartments overlooking the Bar Beach as a result of incessant flooding. Magnificent buildings are left to waste away because of the dire ecological danger of flooding without warning.

Relatively cold regions of Europe and America are experiencing heat waves which lead to the deaths of thousands of people. In 2003, about 50 000 people were killed in France, Germany, and other European countries by a horrific heat wave.² In the United States, heat waves and droughts induced wildfires which resulted in the burning down of thousands of homes and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. In 2010, Russia experienced its hottest heat wave in recorded history which touched off devastating fires that killed about 15 000 people and caused about 15 billion dollars' worth of damage. Things are so bad that researchers from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) predict that by the year 2040, there will be no Arctic icecap at all at the height of the Northern Hemisphere Summer; the British Antarctic Survey thinks that it will happen even earlier than that.³ The implication is that as the white surface cover on the earth decreases, every year less and less solar energy is reflected back out into space, heating the earth planet the more. The reality of open water in the Arctic region is a clear indication that Arctic icecaps are retreating.

Global warming has disease implications. Warmer world weather has been implicated in the resurgence of cholera in Latin America in 1991 and the pneumonic plague in India in 1994. It was also implicated in the outbreak of Hantavirus in the southwest of the U.S in 1994. Scientists are wondering if global warming is a factor in the resurgence of about 10 diseases in the 1990s.⁴

Global warming is certainly, not a sudden act of nature. It is the result of some insidious human activities on the environment. Carbon dioxide has the ability to trap heat that would otherwise be radiated back into space. Unfortunately fossil fuels constitute about 85% of global energy need. The Industrial Revolution has given us a motorized world. Our cities are full of automobiles of different makes while our airspace is brimming with aeroplanes. All of these use carbon based fossil fuels, and are forever emitting carbon dioxide through their exhaust pipes. The result is that the atmosphere is saturated with carbon dioxide emissions, atmospheric balance is disrupted and excessive heat is trapped in the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is not alone in this act. There are other gasses produced by human industrial activities which aggravate global warming when released into the atmosphere. Greenhouse gasses like methane, nitrous oxide, chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), and ozone produced by human activities also induce global warming. They account for as much global warming forcing as carbon dioxide. This is a threatening existential situation. Man by his existential activities has altered the global temperature, thereby endangering his very existence in the world.

The pre-industrial world had no business with global warming whatsoever. In other words, the pre-industrial world was an environmentally safer world. Do we discontinue the industrialization of the world? What of the Third World countries that are just finding their feet in industrialization? Are they to be discouraged from industrialization? At any rate, not all industrial activities are harmful activities. But if industrialisation ought to be regulated, is it not better that the richer countries who by their exploitative industrialization created the environmental imbroglio be discouraged from further industrialization so that poorer countries could catch up?

The Tragedy of the Fossil Fuel

The automobile industry is powered by the fossil fuel. As at 2008, about 37 percent of the world's energy consumption comes from oil, 27 percent comes from coal and about 21 percent comes from gas.⁹ All these sources are fossil fuels, making it about 85 percent of the world's energy consumption that comes from fossil fuels. The tragedy of fossil fuels is that extracting them necessarily incurs environmental disaster. They are not replenished neither can they last forever. The greatest tragedy of fossil fuel is that they are all carbon based. Their use lead to the release of incredible amount of carbon dioxide and other harmful gasses into the atmosphere.

Oil for instance is extracted from geological shale underneath the earth's surface. The extraction of oil from the earth's crust leads to the distortion of the balance of pressure beneath the earth's crust. The removal of oil and gas creates vacuum underneath the affected earth surface. It is only a matter of time before it caves in due to the pressure from the load above. This can lead to earthquakes and landslides. The ideal practice is to pump water back into disused oil wells, but the multinational companies that drive oil exploitation worldwide can hardly be bordered with that.

Before oil is accessed from oil wells, natural gas trapped within the earth crust normally flows out first. The usual practice of oil exploring companies is to burn out these gasses, resulting in gas flares which do untold harm to the surrounding ecosystem. Gas flares induce acid rains and release huge amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Oil spillages are familiar sad story of oil producing communities. In the Niger Delta, the situation is so bad that some oil producing communities cannot boast of clean water to bath with let alone drink. The rivers are so contaminated that fish and fauna are almost extinct. They farmlands are made barren as they are thoroughly drained with oil. The experience of oil exploration is nightmarish for most oil producing communities in the Third World. Their mode of existence is severely altered as they are excised from their traditional ways of livelihood. Cancer and diseases hitherto unheard of within their communities become their lot. In the Niger Delta, the environmental degradation had led to restiveness and militancy which resulted in near genocide experience in some communities. The sacking of Oddi by troops of Nigerian government is still fresh on our minds.

A greater issue is the sustainability of the fossil fuel. Unlike what some naïve cornucopian apologists would like to believe. The fossil fuel resources are not infinite. Once upon a time, there was abundance of coal in Enugu. Where is the coal today? Gone and exhausted. I have personally toured some exhausted oil wells in the Niger Delta. The reality is that fossil fuel sources are getting smaller by the day. Yet, the majority of the world's population carry on as if these sources are infinite. We cruise in our SUVs and sport cars that guzzle incredible amount of fuel without qualms. The upper echelon of the human society globe trot in jets notorious for their energy consumption. The sad reality is that richer countries guzzle more and more energy while poorer countries bear the brunt.

Have we no moral obligation in preserving energy sources for future generations? Should we not give a damn whether enough energy is left for future generations or not? Are we to wrap ourselves in the blind cornucopian faith that nature will take care of itself? These are existential questions that must be confronted by humanity sooner than later.

The Ozone Layer Imbrolio

The ozone consists of groups of three oxygen atoms bound together into single molecules O_3 in the upper atmosphere which protects life on earth from ultraviolet radiations from the sun. Ultraviolet rays when they penetrate into the earth cause skin cancer, cataract, damage the immune system and disrupt the ecosystem. It is no longer news that outside the tropics, the ozone layer is seriously depleted. As a matter of fact, scientists have observed large expanse of ozone holes in the South Pole. These are areas where the ozone layer is thoroughly depleted. The consequence of this environment threat is better imagined than experienced. In the Chilean City of Punta Arenas, the most southerly city of the world, the threat is real. In the year 2000, the high ozone layer depletion area passed over the tip of Punta Arenas for nine days causing untold damage and anxiety. In recent years, the cancer rate of the city has shot up by 66 percent. Other heavily populated cities in the world are not free of this threat. Australia and New Zealand are pretty worried. The reality is that the Punta Arenas experience could happen in either country. Globally, the rate of skin cancer has shot up significantly, no thanks to ozone layer depletion.

Ozone layer depletion is caused by industrial use of chlorofluorocarbons CFC_s and hydrochlorofluorocarbons $HCFC_s$. These gasses when emitted into the atmosphere, induce the depletion of the ozone layer. Although industries in China and Japan are turning to alternative gasses, the refrigerator industries in Europe and America are yet to turn a new leaf for reasons of protectionism.

The existential question is, why the capitalist industrial activities in the Northern Hemisphere should be threatening the existence of entire cities in the Southern Hemisphere. Doesn't that amount to international terrorism? The established fact that the chlorine in CFC_s induce ozone layer depletion should be enough for industries in Europe and America to stop using them forthwith. But the capitalist world thinks otherwise even at the risk of grievous environmental hazard. These are existential issues that ought to be resolved.

Another worrisome development is the formation of the ozone layer in the lower parts of the earth's atmosphere. The ozone layer is good news up there in the sky. But down here on the ground, it is very bad news. The nitrous oxides, NO_x emitted by automobiles and industries, and the off gassings from drying paints react with volatile organic compounds, VOC_s to form ozone. When the weather is warm and still the ozone thus formed hugs the ground and reacts with the sunlight to produce photochemical smog. The ozone when inhaled, burns the lung tissue of animals and leaf tissue of plants thereby inducing premature deaths. Are you still

wondering why the average life expectancy in Nigeria is between 50 and 55 years? It adds up to the tragedy of the fossil fuel. The Industrial Revolution may have done a lot of good to man but it is killing man gradually.

The New Phenomenon of Acid Rains

The reality we live now is that acid rains do in fact fall from the sky. Emissions of sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxides from fossil fuels into the atmosphere do sometimes combine with the water in the atmosphere to acidify rain. The result is the direct pouring of acidic substances on plants resulting in damage to plant tissues, wildlife and acidification of lakes which the rainfall drain into. What do we say? Another tragedy of the fossil fuel. The situation is dire in northern Europe which experiences higher volumes of acid rains.

The Burden of Particulates in Industrial Cities

Most big cities and their surrounding suburb face the challenge of particulates in the air. These are whitish microscopic particles formed in the atmosphere by emissions from poor fuel combustion in cars, trucks, power plants, stoves, outdoor fires, droplets of sulphates, nitrates, and volatile organic compounds. The bad news is that particulates envelop cities in whitish smog, damaging lung tissue, exacerbating asthma and increasing the risk of heart attack. Is anyone still surprised that heart attack, a phenomenon unheard of in traditional African societies is becoming a commonplace in our modern cities? Industrialisation is here with us, effectively powered by fossil fuels but unfortunately killing us gradually.

The Social Environment

As the Oxford Advanced Learner's English Dictionary puts it, "environment is the conditions that affect the behaviour and development of somebody or something; the physical condition that somebody or something exists in; the natural world in which people, animals and plants live"⁶. So the environment is not about the physical world alone. It is also about the social world. More often than not, the physical world predetermines the social world. However, the social world equally affects the physical world. It is more or less, a dialectical interplay of influences. Let us therefore, x-ray some of the social contentions in the natural environment.

Environmental Justice

There is no gainsaying that environmental injustices abound in the world. The powerful class wreck environmental havocs on the weaker class. Powerful nations wreck environmental havoc on weaker nations. The powerful sex wreck environmental atrocities on the weaker sex; eco feminism on my mind. How do we talk about the many instances of woman subjugation in our environment? Alarmingly, powerful species wreck environmental havoc on weaker species. Consider the many insidious activities of man against the non-human members of the eco system. How many species of animals are endangered or have gone extinct due to human activities? Do we talk about deforestation and desertification?

Environmental justice is a holistic concept that goes beyond humans. We surely do have some ethical obligations towards non-human members of the environment for the world does not belong to us alone.

But when environmental justice is mentioned, the environmental brutality against the Ogonis of the Niger Delta readily comes to mind. Shell Petroleum Development Corporation Unlimited had been involved in oil exploration and exploitation in Ogoniland for years without any iota of regard to the environment. The whole of Ogoniland was messed up by oil spillages. Appeals for clean-ups and compensations from Shell fell on deaf ears. Attempts by the Ogonis to take their destiny in their own hands were met with mind numbing violence. The Ogonis, who number a few hundred thousand were massacred in their thousands by trigger happy Nigerian soldiers on the orders of the then maximum ruler from the majority tribe inhabiting the arid region of Nigeria but propped up by the West to oversee the exploitation of the oil wealth of Nigeria. The rest is history. The minority are often the victim of the environment.

Environmental Racism and Discrimination

Yes, there is a racial dimension to environmental degradation. Let's face it, the kind of environmental degradation committed by the multinationals in Africa without a whimper from any authority cannot take place in their home countries without serious penalties and heavy compensations. Can you imagine an oil spillage in the streets of London? Is there gas flaring anywhere in Europe or in the U.S? Yet, it is a ubiquitous activity of European and American countries in the Third World.

It is another story for Black Americans. Why is the infrastructure in Black dominated neighbourhoods in the U.S always neglected by the authorities? The White dominated environments get the best protection and maintenance from the government. But Black neighbourhoods often have to make do with decaying infrastructure. There is a racial element in environmental degradation.

The story is no different for the poor. Everywhere in the world, the rich live in the best environments while the poor live in the worst. Governments respond quickly to the environmental needs of rich neighbourhoods. But

more often than not, poor neighbourhoods have to wait on God. As you can see, class struggle even extends to the environment. Why are the poor always associated with squalor? Is it impossible for the government to provide for the poor, same standard social amenities it provides for the rich? These are existential questions for thinkers and academics to ponder on.

The Environment as a Social Determinant

Sometimes poverty or riches is a matter of the environment one finds himself in. There is no gainsaying that opportunities for success and wellbeing vary in varying environments. There is no gainsaying that a child born in New York has better chances of having the goodies of the good life than a child born in Afghanistan. Though it is painful to admit, the average Nigeria child would prefer to have American citizenship as an insurance if it were up to him. Is there any wonder that our rich go to Europe and America to have their babies? I wonder what would have become of me had I been born in Somalia.

Environmental Power

There is serious power play in the social environment. It is often expressed in subtle but obvious ways. We see it in conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, conspicuous waste, non-environmental production and non-environmental career. The irony in the world is that, the more we satisfy our needs, the more we consume much of what we don't need. A cursory look at the GDP_s of the world's nations show that richer countries consume much more than poorer nations. Little wonder, there are more cases of obesity in rich countries than poorer countries.

In our society, the rich consume more resources. They consume more security manpower, they consume more energy. Their vehicles consume more petrol. Their homes consume more energy. Their houses consume more building materials. And of course, they consume more food. The first sign of wellbeing is fresh body. You can see the conventional wisdom in associating big men with big belly.

Our rich sometimes consume, not out of need but out of the desire to waste. No nation in the world wastes as much food as the U.S, yet hundreds of thousands are starving all over the world. Have you been to the party of any of our rich? The rich wastes resources precisely to impress their power over natural resources on onlookers. Think of big and unnecessary cars that guzzle impossible amounts of gasoline.

Conspicuous leisure is also an attribute of the rich. Staying home for days without going to work. Indulging in expensive pastimes. Annual vacations at expensive resorts abroad. Of course, they never fail to come back with photographs, gifts and enough gist for their prospective onlookers and listeners. It is called conspicuous leisure.

The well to do pride themselves in their ability to stay away from productive work that involve direct interaction with the environment. Farming for instance. Finally, we have non-environmental careers, desk jobs that involve no outdoor activities at all. A cosy office work that is done in well air-conditioned offices. That is environmental power play. Majority of those who are in non-environmental career consider themselves superior to those engaged in jobs that expose them to the elements on a daily basis.

Environmental Warfare

Although all wars take place in the environment certain modes of warfare target the environment specifically. Atomic warfare is a specific example. The damage done to Nagasaki, Hiroshima and Kyoto all in Japan during the World War II are causing ripples in their environments till date. It permanently contaminated the environments of the affected cities. It induced gene mutations that did damage to both human and non-human species in the affected environments.

Chemical weapons generally target the environment. The U.S used hydrogen bombs to induce defoliation in the tropical jungles of Vietnam. Some chemical weapons introduce toxic substances in the atmosphere, making it inhabitable. Biological weapons are also weapons that target the environment. They introduce diseases to environments where it was unheard off, thereby disrupting the ecosystem. There are strong suspicions that HIV and ebola are creations of biological weaponry.

Environmental Terrorism

We are all living with the grim reality of ebola in Nigeria. An American bio-terrorist of Liberian descent wilfully introduced the dreaded ebola virus to the Nigerian environment. Since the malicious entrance of late Mr Patrick Sawyer into Nigeria, the Nigerian public and the Nigerian government have been making frantic efforts to contain the spread of the virus.

That is not the first instance of environmental terrorism against Nigeria. In 1987, an Italian company collected toxic wastes all over Europe for a fee and dumped them in Nigeria. The Nigerian government had to commandeer an Italian ship to crate the waste back to Italy.

Cornucopian Anthropocentrism

There is a school of thought that believes that the environment is centred on man, and is at the disposal of man to make use of as he deems fit. This school of thought believes that nature's resources are limitless. Therefore, man need not worry as nature will ultimately take care of itself.

My response to this school of thought is simple. I know some dry streams. I know some dry oil wells. If some can dry, there is no guarantee that all can't dry. As for the anthropocentric claim of the environment, that is the story of the hunt according to the hunter. The game surely does have a different story.

Conclusion

The environmental question cuts across all disciplines. Every field of learning is ultimately about life. All living takes place in the environment. The inquiry into environmental issues ought not to be left to those in the faculty of environmental sciences alone. It is a multidisciplinary inquiry.

Man's activities in the environment have existential ramifications. Human existence itself can be extinguished by human activities. The atom bomb is quite capable of that. Human activities sometimes in faraway places interfere with the mode of existence of other people. Consider the effects of the ozone layer depletion. Who could have imagined that the activities of refrigerator manufacturers and other industries that use the CFC_s in faraway Europe and America could affect the southerly city of Punta Arenas?

We cannot afford to remain aloof to the discourse on environmental issues. It affects our very existence.

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