

Love your Neighbour as Yourself: A Case For A Love-Based Environmental Ethic

Oduora Okpokam Asuo
University of Calabar, Calabar

&

Mike Ukah
University of Agriculture, Umudike

Abstract

The call to love one another is biblical, religious, philosophical and indeed a social necessity. This is the balm that will heal the maladies that plague societies everywhere in the world if radically and sincerely applied by men. This paper, while acknowledging this truism, takes a leap further by asserting that ecological crises are results of lack of love or the inappropriate interpretation of the injunction to love others as oneself. An anthropocentric interpretation of this injunction leaves out essential parts of nature and this results in environmental crises which also affect man as punishment for not heeding this instruction. It is argued that a re-appraisal, re-orientation and re-direction of love to include all of nature will not only benefit nature but man even more so. This is an advocacy for an environmental ethic based on the biblical injunction to love others as ourselves. The conclusions of this paper are based on critical analyses of selected literature.

INTRODUCTION

Very few concepts have been so much used as the concept of love. It has been put to both holy and unholy uses and this has made the average person to want to look at it with disdain. This paper however calls attention to the invaluable place of love in the bid to conserve the environment. The call to love one another is biblical, religious, and philosophical. It is a social necessity. It was taught by Christ as the greatest and surest foundations of social cohesion and communal peace as well as the most relevant of all divinely given commandments to man. It was interpreted in strikingly similar words, though with appalling philosophical additions by Immanuel Kant. He rightly opined that any worthwhile ethical or moral theory must be grounded in this truism – that others should be seen in the same favourable light as you see yourself. He believed, and rightly so, that with such an ethical paradigm in place, most, if not all of the problems facing man, and which are generated by man, can be prevented (*Groundwork* 14).

The wisdom behind the “love your neighbour” ethic has proved unarguably beneficial and promising especially in this present generation. But the benefits are mostly confined to the relationships that revolve around man and which have relevance only within the confines of human societies. However, relationships transcend the confines of human societies and human beings. Man relates with people from other climes and creeds and consequently needs to adjust his moral ambits to accommodate the differences in moral orientations and the requirements for moral consideration of others in other cultures.

Similarly man interacts and relates with other parts of nature. Human society is not the only place where man belongs or relates with others. He is also part of an active ecosystem where other biotic and abiotic neighbours cohere. This was most clearly brought out in the writing of James Lovelock who demonstrated the web of interrelatedness between man and other parts of nature bringing out the dire need for moral responsibility (115). Consequently, where there are relationships there needs to be an ethic that will serve as a regulating mechanism for these relationships. This need was clearly stated by Aldo Leopold in his *Land Ethic* where he advocated for an ethic that enlarges the boundaries of the community beyond man to include soils, waters, plants, and animals (203). In other words these parts of nature should be brought under the ambit of moral consideration. An exclusively human, environmental ethic or a near-de-anthropocentricised ethic will not suffice to cater for the well being of such an ecosystem that is home to both man and other beings because it will tend to protect the interest of men while at the same time neglecting that of other co-inhabitant of the Earth. Even if this ethic assumes the ability to forestall injury or harm to non-human parts of nature, it will more or less be doing this with an anthropocentric bent.

It is in the bid to avoid the pitfalls of adopting an ethical system that will protect man’s interest exclusively or one that will pretentiously assert the interest of the rest of nature, that this paper advocates for an ethic based on the extension of the “Love your Neighbour as Yourself” injunction beyond the shores of human moral consideration. Objects of love transcend man to include other parts of nature including both biotic and abiotic factors. Whatever can be brought into the arena of love must also be loved in line with this divine injunction. Human love goes for men, women, lands, flowers, trees, animals in domestication and animals in the wild, as well as inanimate objects like rocks, rivers, seas, houses etc. It is also argued that the object of love deserves to be loved like our own selves according to the teaching of Christ. That is the best way to love and also the best grounding for an environmental ethic.

The consequences of this ethical position are many and interesting. While considering them however, it is only worthwhile to pre-empt that the result of adopting this kind of ethic in relating with other parts of the environment or nature will inarguably give us pleasant results as every anti-environment action can be reviewed or suspended with an adequate understanding of how to love others.

THE SEARCH FOR A VIABLE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC

The search for a viable and an acceptable environmental ethic is as old as the birth of the philosophy of environment itself. This may be the reason that some

scholars and thinkers readily equate environmental philosophy with environmental ethics. Zimmerman explains this when he asserts that “environmental philosophy is often regarded as identical to environmental ethics, that is, as an effort to examine critically the notion that nature has inherent worth and to inquire into the possibility that humans have moral duties to animals, plants, and ecosystems” (3). He however rightly cleared this misconception by holding that environmental philosophy is broader than environmental ethics. This line of argument is also supported by Asuo and Maduka when they aver that;

One can say without mincing words that environmental ethics has grown to be the most influential of all the branches of the philosophy of environment... while accepting the pride of place that environmental ethics occupies in the philosophy of environment; it is apt to also vehemently state that the field of philosophy of environment is broader than environmental ethics (14).

Even though it is argued here that environmental philosophy holds a distinct and higher identity from environmental ethics, yet discussing the issues that are generated by the philosophy of environment almost always degenerates to discussing ethical or moral concerns. Consequently, philosophers of environment have often sought for an ethic that can suffice to proffer solutions to the myriad of environmental issues that abound in the present world.

The search for a viable environmental ethic appears to be a continuing one as noted by Richard Sylvan in his article “Is there a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?” He held that the kind of ethics dealing with man’s relationship with fellow man in human societies will prove incapable of dealing with people’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it (205). According to Sylvan this kind of ethic is noticeably absent in the western tradition. Since the traditional ethic is incapable of handling this aspect, regarding them as outside the moral domain of man and considering the present predicaments of the environment, it becomes necessary to develop a new ethic with the task of filling the moral void and providing flexibility in dealing with moral issues that involve man and non-human nature. The necessity of an ethic of nature was also highlighted by Leopold when he argued that there is need for an ethic that will regulate and legislate on man’s moral obligations towards nonhuman nature (203). It is in line with the need for a new; an environmental ethic discovered by Sylvan that this work advocates for an ethic based on the Christian Golden Rule – “Love Your Neighbour as Yourself”.

This is not however to suggest that other philosophers of environment had not suggested or articulated an environmental ethic. Rather, this new ethic seeks to fill the lacuna left by their brands of environmental ethics. Paul Taylor listed a number of systems of environmental ethics in his article “The Ethics of Respect for Nature”. These include the following:

Human-Centred or Anthropocentric System

According to Taylor, in this kind of ethic, Human actions affecting the natural environment and its nonhuman inhabitants are right (or wrong) by either of two criteria: they have consequences which are favourable (or unfavourable) to human well-being, or they are consistent (or inconsistent) with the system of norms that protect and implement human rights. From this human-centred standpoint, it is to humans and only humans that all duties are ultimately owed (197).

From the foregoing, the only being that is worthy of moral consideration in the human-centred or anthropocentric ethic, is man. This ethic is based on the assumption that morality and ethics are human constructs and hence are limited to humans and human understanding of reality. It is also based on the thinking that only man is worthy of moral consideration and the environment has only an instrumental value rather than an intrinsic one.

For instance, the deforestation of the forest in Boki Cross River State, will become of moral concern, as it is now, if it is known that it threatens humans in the form of climate change or any other way. The major problem with this kind of ethic is that it is an epitomization of human selfishness and pitches the well being of the environment directly against the welfare of man. Where human welfare is seen to outweigh the well being of the environment it gives man the leverage to sacrifice the environment at the altar of human welfare. For instance the economic importance of continuous oil drilling in the Niger Delta is often seen to be of higher benefits to man than protecting the creeks and villages in these areas. So oil spills and the degradation of the water and marine life have become the norm in those areas while people watch in helplessness thinking that the economic survival of the people outweighs the health of the natural environment. Taylor succinctly puts it this way:

We may have responsibilities with regard to the natural ecosystem and biotic communities of our planet, but these responsibilities are in every case based on the contingent fact that our treatment of those ecosystem and communities of life can further the realization of human values and/or human rights. We have no obligation to promote or protect the good of nonhuman living things, independently of this contingent fact (198).

This absolute commitment to the good of humans and the lack of commitment to the intrinsic value of nonhuman nature is the main problem of the anthropocentric ethical system. This reveals a lack of love for parts of nature that are not human and this is what this new ethic seeks to redress.

Biocentric or Life-Centred System

In the words of Taylor,
“From the perspective of a life-centered theory, we have prima facie moral obligations that are owed to wild plants and

animals themselves as members of the Earth's biotic community. We are morally bound (other things being equal) to protect or promote their good for their sake. Our duties to respect the integrity of natural ecosystems, to preserve endangered species, and to avoid environmental pollution stem from the fact that these are ways in which we can help make it possible for wild species populations to achieve and maintain a healthy existence in a natural state. Such obligations are due those living things out of recognition of their inherent worth" (198).

This kind of environmental ethic urges the recognition of nonhuman living beings as having an inherent moral worth. They are to be seen from the perspective of having an intrinsic rather than instrumental value. Asuo and Maduka explained that this ethic assumes that life should be the superintending value in ethical considerations. So in environmental relationships, the aim should be to protect life in all its ramifications and not just human or animal life (17).

Even though this brand of environmental ethics is more encompassing than the anthropocentric system yet it has some loopholes that need to be plugged. The major problems of this brand of environmental ethics were uncovered by Asuo and Maduka in their work "Environmental Philosophy: Concepts, Issues and Perspectives". According to them;

The major difficulty with this view is that the life possessing members depend on the nonliving components for survival. An ethic that undermines the protection of the abiotic factors of the environment eventually leads to the degeneration of the very biotic factors that it seeks to protect (18).

The problem highlighted above is important for the consideration of an environmental ethic. An ethic that gives consideration to life alone will surely be insufficient to handle the intricacies of the environment bearing in mind the network of the relationships and interconnectedness between living and nonliving parts of every ecosystem on Earth. How, for instance, can we give moral consideration to the fish in the sea and not the water itself or the insects in the soil are not the soil itself. The problem is obvious and needs to be fixed by a more encompassing environmental ethic.

Organicist or Holistic Systems

This type of environmental ethic sees the whole natural order of the earth as a complex but unified web of interconnected organism, objects, and events. The ecological relationships between any community of living things and their environment form an organic whole of functionally interdependent parts (Taylor 212). By the teachings of this system, every part of the ecosystem is important and needs to be preserved for the good of others. The forests need the crickets just as much as humans need the rivers. Realizing this should make humans more careful in making their moral decisions knowing that no part of the environment is

dispensable but all are needed for the well being of all. Like ecofeminism, it is an ethic based on good relationships.

According to Paul Taylor, this ethic is predicated on respect for nature (211). This respect is gained by understanding that there is inherent worth in nature regardless of the ontological ranking or grading that men might want to ascribe to nonhuman nature. The problem however is very few people are willing to grant such an ontological status to nonhuman nature.

This ethic could be said to be better than the others but there is still a challenge with ecological holism. It is still based on a selfish motive. It urges the careful handling of other aspects of the environment because doing otherwise will adversely affect others. It is not based on love nor consideration of the inherent moral worth of other parts of the environment. This shortcoming also needs to be taken care of by a more love-centered ethic. Furthermore, an ethic based on respect rather than love can prove challenging. It is possible to respect a thing and still harm it but this is not the case with love.

AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC BASED ON THE GOLDEN RULE-LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF

After a careful consideration of different systems of environmental ethics, we have come to the conclusion that there is need for a more viable ethic, one that derives from the wisdom-inspired words of the master-philosopher, Jesus Christ. As Carson rightly puts it “Jesus wielded the kind of moral authority in both his teaching and his example that compelled followers to build their ethics around a single theme” (19). The theme this time is that of love.

In Mark 12: 28-32 Jesus unraveled one of the greatest solutions to the problems of man and the Earth. According to this portion;

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating.

Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him “of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

29 The most important one “answered Jesus”, is this: hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart, might and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

31 The second is this: “love your neighbour as yourself”. There is no commandment greater than these”.

32 Well said, teacher, “the man replied. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him”.

33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices”.

The debate between the scholars was aimed at coming up with an accepted ethical background. Not being able to arrive at a compromise, the master was asked what he thought and the reply is what we read above. That ethic must be based on building horizontal and vertical relationships of love- love God and love your neighbour as yourself. These answers suggest that it may be difficult to love

neighbours when love for God is flawed or non-existent. The common ground with others (neighbours) is having the same creator and this should be the base for any ethical consideration.

It is almost always the case that most bible scholars limit their interpretation of neighbours and neighbourhood to humans and human societies and thereby leave this most important ethical teaching with a purely anthropocentric coloration. We are however, by this paper, advocating for a clearer and more correct understanding of this scripture, not from an anthropocentric but a more encompassing ethical positioning. If Christ started from God the creator of all, then he evidently wanted neighbours to go beyond humanity, for God's creations go beyond humanity. Secondly, Christ had the objective of directing the moral priorities of men. He reminded man by this Golden Rule that there are two spheres of relationship – the vertical relationship that involves God and doing all to please Him; and the horizontal relationship which needs us to deal with neighbours with the gloves of love. Neighbours are those that come into the immediate sphere of human actions. Those affected by human physical actions are neighbours and these evidently transcend the human social environment to include even the nonhuman nature around him. The actions of man affect not just fellow men but also nonhuman parts of nature. Therefore the moral consideration of man should go further than humanity. Man's neighbours also include nonhuman nature amongst other things.

Having looked at the concept of neighbour, it is essential that we also look at love. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines love as a feeling of affection for someone or something. This is supported by D.A. Carson who contends that the commandment of love must not be stripped of its affective content (21). It is necessary to add that love is affection governed by goodwill. Ordinary affection may lead to harm to the other but affection supervised by goodwill can only bring good. It is this affection that enables men to fear God and obey Him as well as reach out to neighbours for their own sake. It is the affection that draws us to seek the well-being of the other even though he (it) is the other and evidently different from us.

THE NATURE OF A LOVE-BASED ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC

The love-based ethic that is being advanced here may share one or more characteristics with the ones we have spoken about earlier on, but this does not mean it is same with them. Rather it shows that it shares certain concerns about the environment that others also do. The following could be said to be the attributes of an ethic of love towards the whole of nature:

1. It is holistic: This ethic does not limit love to human members of the environment. Love and the feelings of love transcend man and humanity. Even though in our context man is the executor of the command to love, the recipients of his affection should not be limited to fellow men. The recipients of human affection should also include forests; wild animals, sea creatures, atmospheric and climatic conditions, rocks, water bodies, flowers, insects, etc. When these are captured within the ambit of peoples'

love, the ethics of love would mandate that they be treated as we would want to be treated.

2. It is not optional or conditional: This ethic is given in the form of a command. In other words, it is mandatory to love God and one's neighbours. In Leviticus 19: 18, Mathew 22: 39, and Mark 12: 31 all showed that loving one's neighbour as co-creatures of God, is unconditional. There is no such condition as love those that are human, rationally able to reciprocate your love, beautiful, sentient etc. These are the basic premises of other ethics of environment. We are commanded to love, on the one hand God and on the other hand those who are not God but are technically called neighbours. This characteristic of the love-based ethic makes it a moral duty to extend affection to all of nature around us and not merely those who we think deserve our love or care.
3. It is selfless: Love, well defined, is neither selfish nor altruistic. This love-based environmental ethic rejects the tendency to be selfish in relating with other parts of nature. It is difficult to seek to please oneself only without at the same time depriving the neighbour of his (its) rights or duties owed to him/it. It is not also altruistic because it is not a favour that is understood. By the teachings of Christ the neighbour deserves this love and it is sinful and evil to either deprive him/it of it or give it like what is not deserved.
4. It melts the boundaries of superiority/inferiority dualism. It is clear from the Golden Rule that ethical codes and relationships should assume the oneness of the creatures of God. If there is a superior, then that should be God, but human beings should understand that they share the attributes of creatures and love others as ontologically equal at that level of being God's creatures. The lack of understanding of this truism has been the major cause of most environmental problems e.g. deforestation and molestation of animals in the wild. The assumption (wrong) has been that other creatures are inferior to man; hence need no special loving care and attention. This does not however, amount to arguing that a gorilla and man are the same beings. Rather, we are of the reasoning that the similarity between them should be the point of love and this is the fact that they are both creatures of God, hence neighbours in the Earth. Ethics of love do not seek to highlight ontological discriminations but to bind with the cords of kinship.
5. It is based on shared interest: This kind of ethic forbids the practice of putting the interest of man above and beyond that of other nonhuman parts of nature. It assumes and rightly too, that the sustainability of the environment is in everybody's interest whether that body is human or nonhuman. Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) should therefore not be exclusively based on what effects the siting of a company would have on the human population only but on what impact the waste would have on the marine biology, on what effect the building would have on the serenity of the mountains or hills and on what the blasts of the dynamites would

have on the burrowing insects and rodents. It is an ethic based on mutual interest.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

The world today is bending under the weight of environmental crises. Climate change, ozone layer depletion, flooding, deforestation, extinction of different species of animals, pollution of air, water and soils etc. Most of these environmental problems are directly or indirectly linked to human causes. They are results of human relationship with nonhuman nature. These relationships that have orchestrated doom for the environment come on the leas of diverse understanding of how men ought to relate with the environment, what is technically termed an environmental ethic.

This paper has highlighted various environmental ethics and exposed the shortcomings that had allowed the environment and nonhuman nature to continue to groan under the high handedness of human chauvinism. Since this scenario plays even against the human specie as experienced in the climate change problem, there arises the need for a more viable ethic of the environment. The answer to that need is in the words of Christ, often called the Golden Rule, which enjoins us to treat our neighbours, in this case, nonhuman nature, as we would want to be treated. It is called an ethic of love or love-based ethic since Christ admonished us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. It is the reasoning of this paper that an environmental ethic anchored on love will restructure our thinking about the environment and eventually ease out the environmental crises that man and nonhuman nature have suffered and are still suffering.

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