

# BIOCENTRIC EGALITARIANISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM TOWARD ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

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**Abstract.** Available evidence in literature has shown that many theories have been propounded to tackle global environmental challenges. Nevertheless, the continuing degradation and pollution of the air, water and land worldwide, particularly in developing nations indicate that the battle against environmental degradation and pollution have recorded little or low success. The fundamental objective that necessitates this paper is to show that an anthropocentric perspective of the environment will make the world uninhabitable in the long run. To expatiate, there are two main approaches, namely, the human-centred and life-centered approaches. The human-centred approach argues that our moral duties as human beings are ultimately to one another. Whereas, the life-centered approach maintain that our duties towards the earth's non-human forms of life are grounded on their status as entities possessing inherent worth. Hence, the human-centered approach conceives human being as superior to other non-human organisms of the environment, and submits that the scope of moral consideration should not be expanded beyond the class of homo-sapiens. In this paper, the critical analysis method is employed. Finding shows that global environmental challenges, occasioned by man's ill-treatment and exploitative attitude towards the natural environment, can be appropriately addressed through practical implementation of insights drawn from Paul Taylor's biocentric egalitarianism theory. In conclusion, I show that biocentric egalitarianism theory entails peculiar (win-win) approaches to environmental issues.

**Keywords:** Anthropocentrism, Biocentric Egalitarianism, Environmental Sustainability.

## Introduction

A number of holistic studies in the area of environmental challenges facing humankind revealed the level of hostile relationship that exists between humans and nature or the environment. In the words of Ogun-

dowole, primitive humans engaged in activities that impacted on the environment activities geared toward the liberation of him/her from both visible and invisible forces in the universe<sup>1</sup>. It is regrettable that since the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century, human beings contributed much more toward environmental degradation, as well as, the reduction in bio-diversity than any organism on earth<sup>2</sup>. Since modern human beings are the successor of ancient men and women, it then suggest that s/he must do something decisive to minimize the rate of environmental degradation in a bid to make the environment not only habitable for themselves but also for other organisms that share the environment with them.

In view of the above, it is imperative to come up with a robust and serviceable environmental philosophy. This is simply because mismanagement of the environment is capable to wipe away the entire human population. Ogundowole argued that if man was not the first form of life on the planet earth, then man can equally become extinct if his life-style is self-destructive<sup>3</sup>. Apparently, it is a manifestation of anthropocentric hubris to believe that human appearance on earth is the final stage of evolution, simply because no one knows for certain the future trajectory of evolution despite the present domination of the planet earth by human beings. The main point in the foregoing analysis is that human beings need the environment to survive and not vice versa. This suggests that nature can conveniently dispense with or without humans, but humans cannot exist without natural environment. Chakkaravarthy buttressed the foregoing point when he declares that the very basis of human survival hinges on the sustainable inter-linkages with the environment<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, it does not require extra-ordinary intelligence to understand and appreciate the impact of climate change in any part of the

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- 1 Ogundowole, E. Kolawole, *Nature of Man: History and Philosophy of Science in 10 Modules*, (Lagos: Correct Counsel Limited, 2003), 93.
  - 2 Reeta, Toivanen and Fabritius, Nora, “Arctic Youth Transcending notions of “Culture” and “Nature”: Emancipative Discourses of Place for Cultural Sustainability”, *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*. 2020, 43: 61.
  - 3 Ogundowole, Op.cit, 4.
  - 4 Chakkaravarthy, Q. A., “Human Survival and Environmental Pollution”. Martin, J. et al (Eds.). *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Environment and Health*. Chennai: University of Madras, 2003, 67.

world today<sup>5</sup>. Again, if one considers the rate at which our polar ice caps are melting; the protective ozone shield thinning out, the soil degenerating, fresh water becoming scarce commodity in many regions of the world and species after species that are supposed to contribute to the balance of ecosystem are being pushed to extinction by human activities with impunity, then one can argue that human beings will soon be an endangered species. Similarly, if one considers what human beings has learnt over the years by unraveling the mysteries of life, conquering diseases, epidemics and prolonging life, the pertinent questions to ask is: why is it difficult for human beings to master how to live in harmony with nature/environment?

It is against the foregoing analysis and exposition that this research study posits that an understanding and disciplined appropriation of Paul Taylor's theory of biocentric egalitarianism can serve as an antidote to the delusion of grandeur which distorts human's relationship and interaction with nature. Consequently, this research study interprets Taylor's theory as a better alternative to other theories aimed at proffering lasting solutions to environmental challenges occasioned by human's misuse of their natural environment.

### **Attempting Paul Taylor's Biocentric Egalitarianism Theory**

The main key of Taylor's biocentric egalitarianism is enshrined in the four beliefs that constitute the biocentric outlook and the attitude of respect for nature. According to Taylor<sup>6</sup>, these beliefs are as follows:

- i) The belief that humans are members of the Earth's community of life in the same sense and on the same terms in which other living things are members of that community;
- ii) The belief that the human species, along with all other species are integral elements in a system of interdependence such that the survival of each living thing, as well as, its chances of faring well or poorly is determined not only by the physical conditions of its environment but also by its relations to other living things;

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5 Afolabi, Oladapo, "Is Climate Change Real in Nigeria?" *Yaba College of Technology Fourth Research and Development Public Lecture*, 2020, 8.

6 Taylor, Paul, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, *Studies in Moral, Political and legal Philosophy*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 99–100.

iii) The belief that all organisms are teleological centers of life in the sense that each is a unique individual pursuing its own good in its own way; and

iv) The belief that humans are not inherently superior to other living things.

In the words of Schmidtz, Taylor does not claim that these beliefs outlines are valid arguments, but he thinks that if we concede items (i), (ii) and (iii) above, it would be unreasonable not to move to (iv) and then to his egalitarian conclusion<sup>7</sup>.

The crux of the matter is that the world will continue to witness life-threatening environmental challenges if the belief systems that encourage ceaseless environmental degradation are not replaced with a belief system that affirms environmental amelioration and sustainability. Taylor argued that if environmental ethics is concerned with the moral relations that hold between human and natural world, then the most suitable ethical attitude that should govern such relations is the attitude of respect for nature<sup>8</sup>.

Generally, Taylor's theory of biocentric egalitarianism has been criticized on certain grounds, especially the fear that the theory would not allow for the continued existence of human beings should it be fully embraced as a guiding principle of actions by all human beings.

In spite of the copious writing on man and the environment, one work that stands out in contemporary times is Taylor's environmental theory. In his book entitled, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics, Studies in Moral, Political and legal Philosophy*, Taylor's environmental ethics had reached advanced stage. According to Taylor, there are four distinct areas of inquiry in environmental ethics<sup>9</sup>. They could only be known through a set of closely connected questions as follows:

1. Is human conduct in relation to natural ecosystems properly subject to moral constraints, or are such constraints only applicable to the ways human beings treat one another? Do we have duties and obligations with regard to the natural world independent of our duties and obligations with regard to human?

2. If the answer to any of the foregoing questions is yes, what are

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7 Schmidtz, D., "Are all Species Equal?" *Journal Applied Philosophy*, 1998 15(1), 58.

8 Taylor, Op. cit, 3.

9 Ibid, 4-6.

the moral constraints involved, and how do they differ from those that govern our actions in relation to other human beings? What standards of good character and what rules of right conduct apply in that ethical domain?

3. How would one justify those standards and rules? Can a moral commitment to follow principles of environmental ethics be shown to rest on rational grounds? Can we establish that there are valid principles of environmental ethics, binding upon everyone alike?

4. Finally, how are our obligations and responsibilities toward the natural world (supposing we have them) to be weighed against human values and interests?<sup>10</sup>.

Any attempt to systematically answer the above questions leads to what he calls a theory of environmental ethics. Consequently, Taylor makes a distinction between two sides of environmental ethics, human-centered (or anthropocentric) and life-centered (or biocentric)<sup>11</sup>.

On the side of human centered theory of environmental ethics, it holds that our moral duties with respect to the natural world are ultimately derived from the duties we owe to one another as human beings. On the side of life centered theory of environmental ethics, our duties toward nature do not stem from the duties we owe to humans. In the words of Taylor, environmental ethics is not a sub-division of human ethics<sup>12</sup>. When a life centered view is taken, the obligation and responsibilities we have with respect to the wild animals and plants of the earth are seen to arise from certain moral relations holding between ourselves and the natural world itself.

Obviously, the key idea encapsulated in Taylor's works is that moral agents are morally obliged to respect living things in the natural environment because the latter possess inherent worth. This moral requirement compels moral agents "to do or refrain from doing certain acts insofar as those acts bring benefit or harm to wild living things in the natural world"<sup>13</sup>. In this direction, Taylor recommends five priority principles for fair resolution of competing moral claims between human and non-hu-

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 10–11.

man lives in the environment. Taylor declares thus:

These priority principles must satisfy the five formal conditions of morality, since they are themselves moral principles. As far as their material condition is concerned, they must embody the concept of *fairness*. Their content must be such that when decisions are made on their basis, all parties to the conflict are treated fairly. They must therefore be general in form, universally applicable, disinterested, advocated for all agents, and considered as properly overriding any non-moral norms<sup>14</sup>.

Taylor names these priority principles as “the principle of self-defense, the principle of proportionality, the principle of minimum wrong, the principle of distributive justice and the principle of restitutive justice”<sup>15</sup>. By so doing, every action of a moral agent ought to be sanctioned by the priority principles otherwise such action is an expression of presumed human superiority.

The foregoing claim marks my point of departure from Taylor’s theory of biocentric egalitarianism simply because his priority principles tend towards class preference rather than inter-class egalitarianism. Evidently, Taylor’s priority principles are implicitly biased in favour of human species, the very notion his theory initially set out to correct. For instance, the principle of self-defense permits moral agents to defend themselves against harmful or dangerous organisms that are not moral agents. The principle also sanctions the killing of humans, such as the insane and severely retarded, by nonhuman moral agents if the actions of humans who are not moral agents endanger the lives of nonhuman moral agent like whales, dolphins, elephants and primates to name a few. Surprisingly, this principle is silent on what nonhuman moral agents should do when the actions of human moral agents who are neither insane nor severely retarded endanger their lives. This shows that Taylor’s principle of self-defense is implicitly biased against nonhuman moral agents.

The principle of restitutive justice is meant to placate and to bring the titled scale of justice back into balance after a moral subject has been wronged. To achieve this task, Taylor holds that the moral agent is obligated to make reparation or pay some form of compensation to the moral

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 260.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 263.

subject in question. But would a moral subject who lost its life as a result of a moral agent's harmful and wicked action get justice or get compensated satisfactorily without making an implicit recourse to human values? This is simply because justice is not only meant to be done but must also be seen to have been done impartially. This way, my research study intends to modify Taylor's theory priority principles such that it becomes implicitly and explicitly impartial to both human and nonhuman species in the environment.

In his essay entitled, "A Critique of Anti-Anthropocentric Biocentrism", Richard Watson describes Taylor's biocentric egalitarianism as a theory wallowing in contradiction<sup>16</sup>. According to Watson, "the real reason humans should reduce their destructive behaviour in relation to other species is not because we are equals, but because the destruction of other species will also result in our own destruction"<sup>17</sup>. This position clearly shows that Watson is lacking in the understanding of equality of life, especially from the biological point of view.

In his book entitled, *Foundation of Environmental Ethics*, Eugene argues that naturally evolving ecosystems have a special kind of beauty, and that moral agents have prima facie duties to protect and promote the existence of such beauty in the world<sup>18</sup>. Hargrove's position is consonant with Passmore's submission that the metaphysical tradition of individualism is the root of global environmental problems. For Hargrove believes that human domination of nature always destroys the beauty and autonomy of the natural world. Hargrove's overall goal is to create a middle position between an instrumental justification for environmental policy based on human interests and an intrinsic justification based on the direct consideration of nonhuman value. However, the loophole in Hargrove's argument is the conflation of aesthetic valuation of nature with respect for nature.

In his article entitled, "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis", Segun Ogungbemi brings to focus the African approach to en-

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16 Richard, Watson, "A Critique of Anti-Anthropocentric Biocentrism". *Man's Impact on Environment*, (New Jersey: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 9.

17 Ibid, 10.

18 Eugene, C. H., *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 11.

vironmental sustainability. Ogungbemi explains that “the ethics of care is essential to traditional understanding of environmental protection and conversation”<sup>19</sup>. This research study agrees with Ogungbemi’s analysis of African’s ethics of care except that no mention is made on how to settle conflicting moral claims between human and nonhuman components of the environment.

In his *magnus opus* entitled, *Global Environmental Ethics*, Louis Pojman, praises Taylor’s theory for correcting the holism of land ethic by rightly identifying the individual as the primary locus of value<sup>20</sup>. However, Pojman accuses Taylor of biocentric chauvinism since his theory ascribes intrinsic value to living things only and not to nonliving things like robots, computers, cars, rocks, air and so forth. He also accuses Taylor of moral misanthropy and value of nihilism. Pojman concludes that Taylor should stop confusing “being a moral patient with moral agency”<sup>21</sup>. This research study disagrees with Pojman because he unjustifiably demands for the inclusion of nonliving things to the scope of biocentrism.

John Mizzoni supports Taylor’s theory and enthusiastically defends its relevance to today’s clarion call for environmental sustainability. In his article entitled, “St. Francis, Paul Taylor and Franciscan Biocentrism”, Mizzoni affirms that “a holistic environmental ethic that accords moral standing to holistic entities (species, ecosystems, biotic communities) is more vulnerable to these changes in ecology than an environmental ethic that accords moral standing to individuals”<sup>22</sup>. Thus, he concludes that environmental sustainability could only be won through biocentric attitude toward the environment.

In his article entitled, “Sustainable Environment in a Democratic Space”, Akinjide Osuntokun reiterates the urgency of environmental sustainability holistic wellbeing<sup>23</sup>. The kernel of his position is that Africa, and

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19 Ogungbemi, Segun, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis”. *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory*, 2016, 54.

20 Louis, Pojman, *Global Environmental Ethics*, (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000), 193.

21 Ibid, 194.

22 Mizzoni J., “St. Francis, Paul Taylor, and Franciscan Biocentrism”. *Environmental Ethics*, 2004, 26(1), 41.

23 Osuntokun, Akinjide, “Sustainable Environment in a Democratic Space”, (Lagos: Frankad Publishers for Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2004), 9.

Nigeria in particular must waste no time again to adopt green attitude (a responsible behaviour that put environmental protection on the forefront), which Osuntokun thinks is the only way the country and the continent as a whole can contribute positively to global environmental enhancement. Now, although some of Osuntokun's suggestions are commendable, his article only addresses the symptoms/effects of environmental problems and not the root cause.

In his article entitled, "Environmental Ethics and values in the 21st Century: An Africanist Philosophical Analysis", Chigbo Ekwealo argues that African environmental philosophy is a functional philosophy which deals with the fundamental principles that govern human–nature relationship based on African worldview<sup>24</sup>. Ekwealo also sees African environmental ethics as an ethics with universal application. The shortfall of Ekwealo's perspective to African environmental ethics is on the question of whose interest is African culture of respect, dignity and accommodation for all beings serving. Conspicuously, his article failed to specify theory of ethics that ought to guide African man in his relations with nature.

### **The Concept of Environmental Sustainability (ES)**

The concept of ES simply means the rates of renewable resource harvest, pollution creation, and non–renewable resource depletion that can be continued indefinitely<sup>25</sup>. If they cannot be continued indefinitely then they are not sustainable. The notion of sustainability is important for many reasons including: environmental quality. In words of Apergis, environmental quality theorist suggests that in order to have healthy communities we need clean air, natural resources, and a non–toxic environment<sup>26</sup>. Arguably, sustainability and health care are intricately related since the quality of our environment affects public health. For instance, solar and wind power prevent the consequences of man–made global warming. Policies to ensure the environment of the planet does not deteriorate to a point

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24 Ekwealo, Chigbo, "Environmental Ethics and values in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Africanist Philosophical Analysis". *African Journal of Environmental Ethics and Values*. 1(1), 7

25 Toivanen & Fabritius, Op. cit, 63.

26 Apergis N., "Renewable Energy and its Finance as a Solution to the Environmental Degradation", *Environmental Kuznets Curve*, 2019, 38 (6), 61.

where future generations face water shortages, extreme weather events, as well as excess temperature<sup>27</sup>.

It is imperative to underscore that ES is one of the few words drawn from technical jargon that have emerged in recent discussions on the environment. Others are environmental or green stewardship, environmental or green citizenship. ES is a guideword that is used in reference to policies and actions that have to do with the maintenance of natural resources such as wildlife and habitat, and ecosystems<sup>28</sup>. It is generally distinguished from ecological sustainability where the latter is concerned with activities directed at meeting human needs without compromising the health of ecosystems and the former is concerned with activities directed at meeting the resource and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them.

In terms of resource and services required in meeting the needs of humans both present and future, ES as earlier remarked is very important and useful for the project at hand. The reason is that if the goal of ES is concerned with human interactions with the environment in order to meet the resource and services needs of current and future generations in ways that does not compromise the health of the ecosystems that provide them, then the norms circumscribing such interactions must be driven by an idea of the common good<sup>29</sup>. This is because if we understand ES as a global issue, then solutions to the problem would have to be sensitive to the idea of a shared concern, whereby an individual's flourishing is enhanced simply when the interests of all is enhanced. I will attempt to show later on in this article that simply because Ifa's fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, as well as, values of caring and sharing and their associative attitudes are about the common good it contributes positively to ES.

ES primarily focuses at activities that will help maintain and sustain the capacity of the earth in meeting the needs of humans. ES constitutes a set of constraints on the four major activities regulating the scale of the

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27 Afolabi, Op.cit, 17.

28 Etieyibo, Edwin, "The Ethical Dimension of Ubuntu and its Relationship to Environmental Sustainability." *African Journal of Environmental Ethics and Values*. Ekwealo, Chigbo J. (Ed.), (Lagos: Medilag Ventures Limited, 2011), 1 (1), 120.

29 Desjardins, J. R., *Environmental Ethics: Concepts, Policy, and Theory*, (London: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1999), 23.

human economic sub–system: the use of renewable and non–renewable resources on the source side and, pollution and waste assimilation on the sink side”<sup>30</sup>. These constraints are necessary given the precarious nature of the NE mostly due to the extent that humans have been exploring it.

Admittedly, human interaction with the NE could either be ES or environmentally unsustainable. It is considered unsustainable just in case the exploration of resources leads to the depletion of natural resources, measured in terms of global ecological footprint<sup>31</sup>. The global ecological footprint is a measure of the demand or extent of human activity placed on the bio–sphere or eco–systems. The recent report to the estimate of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the human ecological footprint exceeds the planet’s re–generative capacity by about thirty percent<sup>32</sup>. The implication of this estimation is that humans are exploiting the environment more rapidly than it can renew itself.

The estimate of the WWF provides us one reason for thinking of ES as a global problem. There is another reason for thinking of ES as a global challenge, and this form the view–point of the present state of bio–diversity. If we take bio–diversity as a common resource, which it is since as it supports eco–system services including regulating the climate, the chemistry of our atmosphere, water supply and purification, insect pollination, and prevention of soil erosion, then it is clear that insofar as bio–diversity is critical to sustainability, then ES is considered as a global challenge.

Previously, the question of human ecological footprint exceeding the planet’s re–generative capacity was not an issue. The reason is due to the fact that human economic sub–system was very small. Then, the regenerative and assimilative capacities of the environment appeared infinite. But, this has changed in the last four decades or thereabout, especially since 1975 when for the first time the ecological footprint exceeded bio–capacity by 0.1. It is now clear to us that even though sources and sinks are large, these capacities are finite and that the scale of the human

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30 Robert, G., “The Concept of Environmental Sustainability”, *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematic Studies*, 1995, 26, 10.

31 Apergis, Op. cit, 62.

32 World Wildlife Fund “What is the Living Planet Report?” The latest ecological footprint report, 2018. Retrieved from [https://wwf.panda.org/knowledge\\_hub/all\\_publications/living\\_planet\\_report\\_2018/](https://wwf.panda.org/knowledge_hub/all_publications/living_planet_report_2018/) (accessed March 25, 2020).

economy has exceeded them. This implies that there is urgent need for meticulous action to take ES seriously. Thus, given the precarious unsustainable state in which the world finds itself today and given that urgent action is required on our part, it is imperative then that more than ever before that we acknowledge solutions that are possible from different cultures of the world<sup>33</sup>.

### Conclusion

I have shown how far scholars have painstakingly bring to limelight the causes and impact of environmental degradation in our communities, particularly in contemporary society. Collectively, the selected articles in this research study have contributed immensely to the understanding of environmental challenges. But there is still a lacuna in scholarship, which this research has identified and filled in its approach to Paul Taylor's theory of biocentric egalitarianism.

As earlier elaborated, four cardinal principles or beliefs are germane for in depth understanding and analysis of Taylor's biocentric egalitarianism. As compelling as these beliefs are, I argued that Taylor's theory requires some modification to avoid error of anthropocentrism. Through rigorous environmental education, a modified version of biocentric egalitarianism would reduce, if not put an end to all environmental challenges occasioned by human attitude of disrespect for nature<sup>34</sup>. This is how Taylor's theory can serve as a viable philosophical paradigm for environmental sustainability globally.

To make the global quest for environmental sustainability a reality, the following items are recommended: (i) Human-centered approach to environmental sustainability should be deemphasized globally. This will help to discourage the assumption that nature is merely an assemblage of natural resources that can be exploited recklessly without due regard to other forms of life; (ii) Attitude of respect for the environment, which is encapsulated in my modified version of Taylor's theory, should form the code of conduct of humans in relation to both natural and artificial environments. The way the attitude of respect for persons as persons has the

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33 Ekwealo, Op. cit, 5.

34 Taylor, Paul, "Inherent Value and Moral Rights". *The Monist*, 1987, 70 (1), 17.

basis for the charter on human rights in the United Nations, respect for nonhuman lives of the environment should be given priority in our educational curriculum. This way, education is designed to achieve our desired behaviour change; (iii) Laws for environmental protection and penalties for the abuse of the environment should be straightened globally. Available evidence in literature have shown that a great number of developed countries have enshrined environmental protection laws in their constitution. This culture of environmental ethics should be emulated by every country in the world and; (iv) For effective environmental sustainability, we humans must impose limits on our population, our habits of consumption and our exploitative technology.

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