

Ethical Relativism, Environmental Ethics, and Global Environmental Care

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Abstract. This study analyses the implications, which ethical relativism would have when applied in environmental study and conservation. It examines whether the complex questions raised in environmental ethics and about environmental sustainability at a global scale can be resolved within the context of ethical relativism. It also concurrently inquires whether the challenges posed by the natural environment can be resolved or mitigated within relativist context. The study discusses the nature of ethical relativism and draws attention to the limitations of the standpoint of this theory. Thereafter, it discusses the nature of environmental ethics and its relation to ecological degradation and sustainable environment. It then argues that ethical relativism is a bad marriage in environmental ethics and sustainability, and a bad candidate in resolving the challenges posed by the natural environment, given not only the fact that most environmental problems transcend cultural borders but also that the domestic ones can assume global dimension. By extension, the study exposit the challenges of ineffectiveness faced by relativism in restoration ecology, environmental law and environmental justice. It argues that in the present state of environmental challenges, ethical relativism cannot be relied upon in addressing successfully, issues in environmental ethics and in sustaining the natural environment. To meet the objective of this inquiry, the study raises significant issues about ethical relativism and the environment, and interrogates them stage by stage to enable adequate attention and instantaneous response to

the issues raised. The study adopts the conceptual and critical methods of philosophical analyses.

Keywords: Culture-dependent morality, Trans-cultural relations, Global environment, Moral chaos, Environmental ethics, Sustainable environment, Cross-cultural environmental ethic, International cooperation

1. Introduction

This study in theoretical and applied moral philosophy focuses on environmental ethics with the lens of ethical relativism, *vice versa*. The study is about what ethical relativism would imply in environmental ethics and the sustainability of the environment. Environmental ethics is about the moral means of protecting the natural environment and resolving extant challenges; it probes into how best to resolve these challenges and the scope of, and reason for moral attribution in nature. Although the study draws attention to the incapacity of ethical relativism in resolving challenging environmental crises, that is, the limitations of ethical relativism when applied to the natural environment, it does not deny that there are values in cultures that can enhance human relations with the natural environment because some traditional cultures established human moral relations and care for nature. But it rejects the view that each culture is supreme and whatever it legislates about the environment is correct in that culture and unquestionable elsewhere; it also rejects the claim that each

culture is to legislate what is morally right and wrong, good and bad, correct and incorrect about the environment. Since environmental issues and problems transcend cultures and are sometimes global, relativist stance cannot be a good candidate in environmental ethics and sustainability and in resolving such global challenges.

To achieve the goal of this inquiry, the study analyses the nature and problems of ethical relativism as well as the nature of environmental ethics. It exposit some values in some cultures, which care for the natural environment. It then brings to fore some reasons ethical relativism cannot yield the desired results when applied in environmental ethics and in the quest for sustainable environment; and why it cannot be relied upon in dealing with environmental challenges that transcend cultures. The study projects the view that the solution to global environmental challenges cannot be localised and addressed with the value parameter of any of the particular cultures with shared natural resources and divergent cultural values. Since most, if not all multinationals operating in developing countries hardly voluntarily and desirably assuage the negative feedbacks resulting from their operations, international agreements and co-operations are required to addressing such problems. And restoration ecology, environmental law, and environmental justice are keys in this regard. The study concludes by holding that although there are some cultural values, the engagement of ethical relativism would constitute moral danger or anarchy in environmental ethics and sustainability. Thus, while recognising that there are some values in some cultures, it rejects the view that environmental challenges should be addressed with cultural normality.

2. Understanding the Nature of Ethical Relativism

Ethical Relativism is an opinion widely current in philosophical circles. It is an opinion of a group of philosophers who made a revolutionary departure from ethical absolutism and ethical universalism, which hitherto gained dominance in the discourse of the status of moral claims. It

argues that moral principles derive their validity from cultural approval. According to this theory, there are no moral absolutes or universals; rather the morality or otherwise of an action is relative to cultures; in other words, morality is culturally defined. This is why some people do call it cultural relativism. However, cultural relativism, which in moral discourse is the view that different cultures have different moral ideas and codes, is not a perfect conceptual substitute since it is wider in scope than ethical relativism. Cultural relativism in the wider sense extends to postmodernists epistemology and philosophy of science, among others. The analysis here will exclude these, and it shall be discussed only with reference to ethics. Ethical relativism, the view that moral rights and wrongs are culture or context-dependent, is according to William Frankena and John Granrose, “one of the main obstacles to be faced by anyone who thinks that ethical judgements can be justified in some intersubjectively valid ways” (Frankena and Granrose, 1974: 423).

The proponents of *ethical relativism* (Bank, 2009: 8) argue that every society has a different moral code that explains what acts are permitted or not permitted. They argue that we cannot judge one moral code to be superior to another because there is no objective standard to apply for such a judgement. Hence, the moral code that people of a particular nation or culture subscribed to is not special because it is simply one moral code among many. Since it is the moral code of a particular society that determines that a certain act is right, then the act is right within that society. Therefore, we should not judge the conducts of people in other societies but tolerate them.

It may appear at first sight as if relativist theory is viable in some instances, such as religion, professional codes and other institutions. For example, what is morally acceptable in religion, maybe morally unacceptable in commerce, education and so on, *vice versa*. Even in religion’s circle, what is morally acceptable in one religion such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and so on, may not be morally acceptable in another, *vice versa*. The controversial number of wives in marriage –

monogamy or polygamy – lays credence to this. Within Christianity, what is morally unacceptable to one denomination may be acceptable to another, and so on, *vice versa*. This is evident for instance, in the morality or otherwise of abortion at certain stages of conception. In the same vein, the required or acceptable mode of conduct in nursing may differ from those of medicine, engineering, pharmacy, architecture, law and so on, *vice versa*. What is acceptable in one social situation or context may be prohibited in another, *vice versa*. These may seem to authenticate relative morality. However, acceptance does not automatically authenticate morality. In other words, acceptance is not an automatic reflection of what is moral because people can accept what is immoral; hence people can talk about collective injustice. Added to this is the axiom that “a whole community can be wrong”.

Even if acceptance were to be a yardstick for what is moral, that is, what is correct, right, good or just in moral domain regarding the immediate preceding, can the same be said of environmental ethics? For instance, what one environmental movement requires or permits may be prohibited by another. Within the same environmental ethics, what one theory proposes to be the moral requirement for safe human interaction with nature may be rejected by other controversial ones, *vice versa*. This is evident in anthropocentrism, sentientism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, deep ecology, social ecology, ecological feminism, environmental pragmatism, environmental virtue ethics, and so on. Cultural relativism would validate all of them, holds each supreme and would not allow any of them to be assessed with the canon of another. This is a kind of moral absurdity capable of precipitating both local and global environmental chaos and collapse.

Cyndi Banks (2009: 9) argues that at first, the notion of cultural relativism seems to reflect the way many of us see the world. However, there are some objections to cultural relativism that show that it cannot be a viable approach to ethical issues. For instance, cultural relativists are not able to explain which ethical standard should apply when cultures overlap. In her view,

cultures are not "totally isolated from each other, and it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid interacting with other cultures. This raises the problem of deciding whose ethical standards are to apply". Another problem which Banks noted is that because "[i]n all society, standards of conducts change over time, ... the cultural relativist is faced with the problem of acknowledging these changes while arguing that morality is relative to a culture". But given the fact that the standards of conducts change over time, the challenge which cultural relativism faces is that which values, and in which historical period should apply? Since the values applying in all period have equal validity, there is no overall standard to apply for the cultural relativist.

Another major problem with cultural relativism noted by Banks is that it operates as moral isolationism. The argument that everything is relative suggests that cultural verdict must be the end of the issue and all debate must stop at that level. Therefore, cultural relativism fails to provide us with answers to issues and tends to close off debate altogether (Banks, 2009: 9). Moral requirements, beliefs and practices need to conform to a standard and need not be arbitrary if they are to be good, just or right. There must be something inherent in them that make them either morally praiseworthy or moral blameworthy. Hence, any kind of conduct wherever and whenever it exists can be assessed.

3. Understanding the Nature of Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics can be conceived as “the attempt to bring the traditions, history, and skills of philosophy to bear on the questions of how to maintain the long-term sustainability of a diversity of life on this planet” (Light, 2003: 231). It is concerned with human responsibility to the natural environment and its constituent parts. It focuses on "who or what is the proper object of moral concern" (White, 2009: 362). Joseph Desjardins puts it that, “[i]n general, environmental ethics is a systematic account of the moral relations between human beings and their natural environment”. It attempts to explain the norms which “govern human behaviour

toward the natural world... to whom or to what humans have responsibilities, and how these responsibilities are justified” (DesJardins, 2006: 12). In the opinion of Allan Holland, environment ethics addresses the normative significance of the “relations between human beings and their non-human environment” (Holland, 1999: 268). This normative stance is necessary because of the deterioration of the natural environment. There are different approaches put forward to address such deterioration. According to Holland, proposed remedies would typically require “a reorientation or new “ethic” that recognizes “intrinsic value” in the natural world ... [E]nvironmental ethics.... encompasses global as well as local issues, and considers the longer-term ecological, and even evolutionary, fate of the human and non-human world” (Holland, 1999: 268). It challenges the conventional inter-human ethics, which limits moral standing, intrinsic value and human moral obligation to only human beings, by widening the scope and grounds of human concern for the non-human natural world. It... debates how to balance the interests or entitlements of “present and future, human and non-human, sentient and non-sentient, individuals and wholes....” (Holland, 1999: 269).

Environmental ethics also “examines the moral basis of environmental responsibility....” *This is necessary because it is mainly human activities that deplete and degrade the quality of the environment.* “Toxic waste contaminates groundwater, oil spills destroy shorelines, fossil fuels produce carbon dioxide thus adding to the greenhouse effect, and use of fluorocarbon gasses depletes the earth’s protecting ozone layer”. *Similarly, logging depletes forest and lead to erosion, desertification and global warming; concretization precipitates flooding, and chemical use contaminate air, land and water.* Therefore “we need to be environmentally responsible.... The goal of environmental ethics... is not *only* to convince us that we should be concerned about the environment... *it also* focuses on the moral foundation of environmental responsibility, and how far this responsibility extends” *italics - mine* (Fieser and Dowden, 1998). According to

Richard Saunier and Richard Meganck, there are different environmental challenges which our planet earth is facing today and which put in precarious condition our shared asset and its capacity of sustaining human life at present and far into the future. Some environmental problems that are of fundamental concerns include “global warming, acid rain, ozone depletion, tropical rainforest destruction, destruction of ecosystems... species extinction, desertification, water pollution and environmentally induced afflictions”; *as well as* environmental issues *that are* “related to energy, population, food, *and* water”. Also of fundamental concerns are “environmental ethics, policies, disease caused by environmental change, waste treatment and recycling” (Saunier and Meganck, 2007: 118), among others.

In environmental ethics, the distinction between instrumental value and intrinsic value is of considerable importance. While instrumental value is the value of things as means to further some other ends, intrinsic value is the value of things as ends in themselves regardless of whether they are also useful as means to other ends. Whatever is intrinsically valuable “is that which is good as an end in itself”, and the “possession of intrinsic value generates a *prima facie* direct moral duty on the part of moral agents to protect it or at least refrain from damaging it” (Brennan and Lo, 2014). In the opinion of Simon Blackburn, “[t]he central problem specific to thinking about the environment, is the independent value to place on such things as the preservation of species, or protection of the wilderness” (Blackburn, 2005: 116). Philosophers have divergent opinions regarding the preceding view about instrumental and intrinsic values. While some argue that environmental moral standing and protection are validated on the ground that they are means to meeting human ends, many others argue otherwise and lay claim to independent value for the existence of wilderness and species. This set of thinkers argues that the values of wild things and wild places are not instrumental; they are intrinsic and thus independent of human values. The denominator of the argument in this section is the extension of morality from human to non-human environment.

Is environmental ethics theoretical or applied? The theoretical and applied status of environmental ethics seems contentious. It is considered by some thinkers to be “a topic of applied ethics which examines the moral basis of environmental responsibility” (Fieser and Dowden, 1998: 1). Some others consider it to be a part of philosophy or ethics, one of the main branches of philosophy. According to Bernard Gert, applied ethics includes professional ethics, as well as practical ethics of which environmental ethics is a part (Gert, 1999: 34). Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu opine that applied ethics, also called practical ethics is “[t]he study of how to apply ethical principles, rules, and reasons to analyze and deal with moral concerns arising in practical and social areas”. According to them, “[s]uch a practical application of ethical theory has been a dimension of traditional ethics.... However, applied ethics as a distinctive discipline, in contrast to other aspects of ethics, such as metaethics, normative ethics, and ethical theory, started to flourish in the middle of the twentieth century...” (Bunnin and Yu, 2004: 41). Part of the fundamental task of applied ethics is the application of moral principles to particular situations and professions. In the view of Richard Saunier and Richard Meganck, environmental ethics is both “a theoretical and applied field of study that seeks a reunification of humans with nature” (Saunier and Meganck, 2007: 121). It attempts to establish human responsibility toward individual natural entities and nature as a whole. It is not merely applied ethics; it also involves in establishing a distinctive and original theoretical framework as evident in its various approaches and theories that do not appeal to traditional ethics or philosophy.

4. Can there be Environmental Values in Cultures?

In his *The Case for a Practical Pluralism*, Andrew Light argues that if cultural relativism prevails, we would not be able, on any ground, to refute the abundant cultural claims, which deny that we have ethical obligations to non-humans or ecosystems (Light, 2003: 243). Light would be in error if he refers to all cultures, in

thinking that all traditional culture without exemption deny that we have ethical obligations to non-human ecosystems. Some traditional African, Asian and American cultures have some tendencies to extend morality to the non-human parts of the environment; that is to say, they are predisposed to treating nature with moral care. For instance, from the African perspective, Apeiker Jerry Hulugh articulates the various reasons the tradition Tiv in Nigeria have reverence for nature, why they do not separate themselves from nature and then preserve the environment. Put in summary, these reasons include their conceptions that the environment is a product of divine creation, we are one with nature, and nature is the source of livelihood. Besides, the traditional myth (of white lies in Platonic sense), the agricultural engagement of the people and the medicinal values in nature also reinforce this moral concern (Hulugh, 2015: 38-49). The work of Munamoto Chemhuru and Dennis Masaka reflects on the positive cultural attitudes to nature by the Shona people. The appropriation of taboo wisdom in Shona society is meant to promote harmony between individuals and their communities as well as between human and non-human communities (Mangena, 2015: 9). Fainos Mangena cites Chemhuru and Masaka arguing that “the observance of taboos promotes... life that fosters a desirable environmental ethic, while the breaking of taboos leads the moral agent to a vicious life that disregards not only the moral standing of the environment but also its sustainability” (Mangena, 2015: 9; Chemhuru and Masaka, 2010: 123).

There is also an inferred inclusive environmental ethics based on the metaphysical union which exists among beings in traditional Esan culture. The traditional Esan does not dichotomize man from nature. He recognizes the independent energy inherent in nature and makes himself one with it. Such beliefs influence how traditional people relate with the natural environment in their cultural milieu (Airoboman, 2017: 163, 202). Chigbo Ekwealo argues that as a field of research, African environmental ethics believes that the natural environment and man are composed of invisible energies. It gives recognition, respect and values to all inanimate

and animate plants and animals believing that all of them spring from the same source but only of different vibrations (Ekwealo, 2017: 52; Ekwealo, 2012: 91). He maintains that African environmental ethics recognises and establishes the right of all entities to existence and living. (Ekwealo, 2017: 53, 54).

The exposition of some cultural values here does not in any way suggest that the solutions to environmental challenges should be culture-dependent or that the various theories concerning the environment should be patterned according to culture specifics. What they suggest instead is that some of the beliefs and ensuing practices in these cultures are environmentally affable, innocuous and salubrious. Even if they cannot resolve threatening existent crises globally, but when universally upheld, they can prevent or at least mitigate some environmental problems. Summarily they portend that the beliefs or value contents of some specific cultures can be harnessed to establish global environmental ethics.

Some non-African cultures also have and even enforce some of these values. John Baird Callicott and Roger Ames (1989) brought together in an edited work, *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, various Asian cultural heritages that will be of immense value to contemporary environmental thinkers and those involved in defending natural resources, and that may help in managing the global environment. In a forward to this work, Eugene Hargrove argues that “from an environmental point of view, there is no evidence to show that Eastern environmental attitudes and values have been pragmatically ineffective”. According to him, “[p]rior to Western influence, Easterners may... have been environmentally well-intentioned”. Although “Asian environments were degraded prior to intrusive cultural disturbance from the West”, they were nevertheless, “unaware of the consequences of their actions” (Hargrove, 1989: xix). It seems this ignorance accounts for most degradation, where they exist, in every traditional society.

In their book, *Culture and Environment*, Irwin Altman and Martin Chemers (1984: 21-24) capture different cultural attitudes, beliefs and values in some different parts of the world that portray human harmony with nature, see man as part of nature and enhance, enforce or encourage human oneness, respect, care, and reverence for nature. They cite as instances ideas of Oriental philosophy and religion, Pygmies of the Ituri Forest of Zaire, American Indians and Pueblo Indians, upon which modern ecology and thoughts of human links with nature, as well as rediscovering self through nature, establishes human as part of nature. What the foregoing arguments indicate is that traditional beliefs, attitudes and values can enhance the quality of the environment when adopted, even if they cannot radically resolve alarming environmental crises.

5. Thinking about Moral Relativism in Environmental Ethics, Care and Sustainability

This section reflects on the capacity or otherwise of ethical relativism to redressing the moral challenges of environmental crises. In other words, it inquires whether cultural relativism is capable of proffering solution to environmental crises. The section is also a guide on how, and how not to think about relativism in environmental ethics, care and sustainability. Most environmental problems are global in nature; hence the solutions to these challenges cannot be localized. This implies that environmental ethics and the other solutions to environmental challenges cannot be relativized, in both application and theory, if they are to address existent problems or prevent problems from arising.

But as noted earlier, some of the beliefs and practices of some cultures can be harnessed to establish global environmental ethics. We can talk for instance, of approaches in environmental ethics without peculiarizing it. In this regard, it is more proper, intellectually inclined and humane to think and philosophised about perspectives of, or approaches to environmental ethics, as it ought to be in other aspects of philosophical inquiry, such as logic,

metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics and so on, than to philosophise about peculiar environmental ethics, logic, metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics regarding any culture. The reasons for these submissions are not farfetched.

Anthony Weston argues that “if values are thoroughly relativized to culture, rational criticism of values may become impossible” (Weston, 1995: 229). This can be substantiated. For example, since plants are plants and animals are animals wherever they may be found, the question of whether they have moral standing cannot be consigned to cultures. If they have moral standing, they should have in time and space and not only in some specific cultures. Mick Smith submits that cultural relativism, the view that one ethic cannot be judged better than another... takes cultures as isolated and essentially incommensurable. In an account with modest positionality, however, there could be similarities and differences at all levels. Moral values in different communities might converge because of similarities in geography, biology, cultural practices, problematic, histories, or any combination of these or other aspects of place (Smith, 1995: 270-271).

This suggests that there are some alliances in beliefs, values, attitudes, or practices of some different cultural traditions and that cultures are not completely opposed. Irving Copi and Carl Cohen (2005: 84-85) explicate the possible occurrences of agreement or disagreement in beliefs and attitudes. They argue that "it is possible for parties discussing some controversial matters, to be in agreement (or disagreement) about what the facts really are, and at the same time to be in agreement (or disagreement) in their feelings about those facts". While agreement or disagreement about what the facts are pertains to belief (and is commonly referred to as agreement or disagreement in belief), agreement or disagreement in their feelings about those facts pertains to attitude (and is commonly referred to as agreement or disagreement in attitude). In this parlance, it is possible either to agree in both belief and attitude, or disagree in both belief and attitude, or agree in belief but disagree in

attitude or disagree in belief but agree in attitude. These help to explain further, possible alignment and differences among cultural beliefs and attitudes.

Rosalind Hursthouse puts it that on the view of cultural relativity, "the same virtues and vices can be manifested differently in different cultures. There is much variety, for instance, in what counts as 'honouring one's dead..." While some cultures bury or burn the dead as a mark of respect for them, other cultures show proper respect to the dead by eating them (Hursthouse, 1987: 293). Hursthouse argues that “[t]his does not mean that whatever people in another culture do is right as long as they believe it is”. *If this is the case, then, we should not expect them to always be right as well in their decisions and practices about environmental ethics and issues. Hence, “[t]here is no theoretical reason why we should not criticize another culture for having the wrong idea of human as well as ecological flourishing” italics mine* (Hursthouse, 1987: 293) since different cultures can be wrong in their conception of a virtuous act.

Even if there were to be uniformity in beliefs, values and attitudes among different cultures regarding appropriate honouring and disposing the dead, there would still be problems in applying ethical relativism in environmental ethics, and to other environmental issues and problems. This is because there is a difference between the relative application of morality to the dead and the relative application of morality to the environment. Burying, burning or eating the dead is an end result. The dead has been buried, burnt or eaten, full stop. Such practice or decision may not have further material corollary. But any practice or decision made about the environment has much after effects. Such relative moral decision and practice, unlike the one concerning the dead, would have enduring consequences, which could be positive, negative or catastrophic for the present and the future, both of people and the environment. This is partly why ethical relativism would inevitably face some challenges when considered in environmental ethics and sustainability. So, where there is any suspicion of credibility, (as this study indicates regarding the application of

ethical relativism to global issues and problems), there would be the need to reassess, revise or change our beliefs, practices and actions, (including their sources and bases), considered to be inimical. The actual revisions or changes in moral beliefs, values and practices in time imply that something was inherently wrong with them *ab initio*.

6. Ethical Relativism and Global Environmental Challenges

The task here is to consider the implications, which the application of ethical relativism would have on environmental ethics and sustainability globally. The kernel of the argument is that since most environmental issues and problems are global, global approaches, universal theories and policies are needed to address them. This is because ethical relativism, which is culture-dependent and which adopts right and wrong from distinct cultures cannot be relied upon in addressing issues that transcend individual cultures. It cannot be a veritable mean to addressing the prevailing existential issues of environmental challenges, just as it cannot account for how various problems of environmental ethics can be genuinely brought under control. It cannot also offer a systematic philosophical account of what is right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust about global environmental issues. Thus, when this theory is tested against the difficult and topical issues and challenges of the global environment, it will not stand the test of time. It would be suicidal to rely on it in resolving intercultural, interstate, international and global challenges. Hence, ethical relativism cannot be relied upon in the current debate in environmental ethics. It cannot correctly “investigate the underlying questions about values and meaning” (Hursthouse, 1987: blurb) in environmental ethics.

It is not difficult to illustrate and authenticate with practical examples, the fact that environmental challenges are global and so would require global solutions. For instance, Lake Chad is located at the fringe of many countries, whose inhabitants rely on it for domestic, agricultural, commercial and other

occupational activities. Anthony Akaeze with Emmanuel Obe, Juliana Uche-Okobi and Olusegun Adeosun stated a known fact that Lake Chad was famous not only as an important source of water to communities bordering it in Nigeria, Cameroun, Niger and Chad but also as a sanctuary of not less than five fish species. According to some analysts, these fish species and water have dwindled in the last five decades due to human factors like overgrazing and poor irrigation. As a result, the local population including residents of border communities in Nigeria, whose livelihood depends on trading on fish from the Lake, are adversely affected. The shrinking of Lake Chad made a lot of people to either lose their means of livelihood or saw their earnings plummet. This makes it easier for the jobless people to be recruited as terrorists. For instance, the rise in conflict and insecurities in the northeast region of Nigeria as manifested in the Boko Haram insurgencies has been linked to the shrinking of Lake Chad and the aftermath joblessness. The eventual loss of means of livelihood by the people who depend on the lake also creates competition over the small water body that exists. It causes hunger and violence as inseparable outcomes. People have also migrated to other places because the existing land there has been lost to desertification. Most frontline states of the north are experiencing the challenges of the desert encroachments and the resultant decline in agricultural productivity. These reinforce hunger, ill-health, insecurity and some other social and political problems. (Anthony Akaeze with Emmanuel Obe, Juliana Uche-Okobi and Olusegun Adeosun, 2017: 12). Just as it is the case in Nigeria, so it would likely be with other bothering nations of the Lake Chad. Since it is the activities of people of different cultures that have led to this menace, so, resolving the problem would demand intercultural or global approach.

The preceding paragraph indicates that Lake Chad which was once a bastion of economic activities such as agriculture, fishing, commerce, and so on, and a source of livelihood to many multicultural inhabitants in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroun and Niger, has been grossly depleted due to human mismanagement and interference. Any attempt to address these depredations will

not depend on any of the beneficiary cultures alone but on cooperation among the nations who benefit and whose inhabitants depend on the Lake for their livelihood and survival. Any specific cultural or domestic approach can only at best yield palliative result. Thus, ethical relativism cannot be viable in resolving environmental challenges that are not culturally situated.

Environmental problems are not limited to cultural confines because there are some resources which cut across borders; hence the resultant situations sometimes of cross-cultural disagreement over a common problem. For instance, while in most Western countries there is support for the ban on whaling; but there was a popular instance in Norway and Japan that whaling is an important cultural institution that must be continued (Light, 2003: 243). Now, whose cultural belief should be adopted in resolving this cultural disagreement over a transnational issue?

Environmental problems or the by-products of human impacts on nature, most often, are transnational and sometimes transcontinental. Even those generated domestically, that is, within the neighbourhood and by individual nations) can assume global dimensions. Elizabeth Economy made a lucid exposition of this while analysing China's impacts on the environment. As far back as 2007, Economy writes that "China's environmental problems are mounting" ranging from pollution, water scarcity, health danger, desertization, land degradation, illegal timber trade, climate change, and their aftermath impacts on her economy, public health, social stability and international reputation. According to her, China is "a top contributor to some of the world's most vexing global environmental problems..." (Economy, 2007: 38). She argues that

C[hina's environmental] problems are already affecting the rest of the world. Japan and South Korea have long suffered from the acid rain produced by China's coal-fired power plant and from the east-bound dust storms that sweep across the Gobi Desert in the spring and the dump toxic yellow dust on their land.

Researchers in the United State are tracking dust, sulfur, soot, and trace metals as they travel across the Pacific from China. The U.S Environmental Protection Agency estimates that on some days, 25 per cent of the particulates in the atmosphere in Los Angeles originated in China. Scientists have also traced rising levels of mercury deposits on U.S. soil back to coal-fired power plants and cement factories in China. (When ingested in significant quantities, mercury can cause birth defects and developmental problems). Reportedly, 25-40 per cent of all mercury emissions in the world come from China (Economy, 2007: 44).

Economy states further that:

[w]hat China dumps into its waters is also polluting the rest of the world. According to the international NGO, the World Wildlife Fund, China is now the largest polluter of the Pacific Ocean. As Liu Quangfeng, an adviser to the National People's Congress puts it, "almost no river that flows into the Bo Hai [a sea along China northern coast] is clean." China releases about 2.8 billion ton of contaminated water into the Bo Hai annually, and the content of heavy metal at the mud at the bottom of it is now 2,000 times as high as China's own official safety standard. The prawn catch has dropped by 19 per cent over the last 15 years. In 2006, in the heavily industrialized southeastern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, almost 8.3 billion tons of sewage was discharged into the ocean without being treated, a 60 per cent increase from 2001. More than 80 per cent of the East China Sea, one of the world's largest fisheries, is now rated unsuitable for fishing, up from 53 per cent in 2000 (Economy, 2007: 44-45).

China rapidly growing contributions to climate change is already attracting international attention. A 2007 report on the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency puts it that, China has already Surpass the United States as the world's largest contributor of carbon dioxide, a leading greenhouse gas, to the atmosphere. Fatih Birol, the chief economist of the International Energy Agency warned that "[u]nless China rethinks its use of various sources of energy and adopts cutting-edge environmentally friendly technologies..., in 25 years China will emit twice as much carbon

dioxide as all the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development combined” (Economy, 2007: 45).

Elizabeth Economy puts it that:

China's close economic partners in the developing world face additional environmental burdens from China economic activities. Chinese multinationals, which are exploiting natural resources in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia in order to fuel China's continued economic rise, are devastating these regions' habitats in the process. China's hunger for timber has exploded over the past decade and a half, and particularly since 1998, when devastating flood led Beijing to crack down on domestic logging. China's timber import more than tripled between 1993 and 2005 (Economy, 2007: 45).

Economy (2007: 45) writes that "China is already the largest importer of illegally logged timber in the world". She points out that "an estimated 50 per cent of its timber imports are reportedly illegal". She argues that "[i]llegal logging is especially damaging to the environment because it often targets rare old-growth forests, endangers biodiversity, and ignores sustainable forestry practices". She cites an example that in 2006, the government of Cambodia ignored its own laws and awarded China's Wuzhishan LS group a 99-year concession that was 20 times as large as the size permitted by Cambodian law. The company's practices, including the spraying of large amount of herbicides, have prompted repeated protest of local Cambodians. According to the international NGO Global Witness, Chinese companies have destroyed large parts of the forest along the Chinese-Myanmar border and are now moving deeper into Myanmar forests in their search for timber. In many instances, illicit logging activity takes place with the active support of the corrupt local officials. Central government officials in Myanmar and Indonesia countries where China's loggers are active, have protested such arrangements to Beijing, but relief has been limited. These activities, along with those of Chinese mining and energy companies, raise serious environmental concerns for many local populations in the developing world (Economy, 2007: 45-46).

The preceding is an instance of global threats from only China nation and multinationals' environmental activities. If this was the case in a 2007 write-up, today, thirteen years after, China would have probably wielded much more influence and spread more tentacles of ecological depredation, and this is expected to continue with intensification as the years roll by. China's environmental activities transcend the exploitations of her resources to the exploitations of the resources of other nations. But while it enjoys the benefit of these activities, the burdens of the resultant negative feedbacks and their associated problems are shifted to, felt and suffered by some other countries of the world, and it is now globally worrisome and wearisome. Some other nations or their multinationals may have the same attitude, but probably of a different kind and lesser degrees. Resolving these kinds of problems would demand morality, law, and justice that transcend Chinese culture or nation; it would demand intercultural and global approach.

Generally, most multinationals in the underdeveloped and developing world are owned and run by foreigners and technocrats in developed countries, who do not always care about the negative impacts their activities have or would have on host communities, nations and their inhabitants; hence do not also devote the desired attention to assuage these problems. These inhabitants are either grossly ignorant of these impacts or tolerate them due to poverty and lack of knowledge of long-term consequences. While these multinationals despoil their host environment for their mammoth gains, they pretend or claim to compensate the indigenes with employment (mostly menial and few) of starvation wages and wage slavery. These host communities misconstrue the dispossession, abuse and ravaging of their environment and its resources for favour and development. The authorities of the companies renege in their corporate social responsibility or make it inadequate, where there is any, sometimes with the connivance of some corrupt indigenes, indigenous government officials, and community elites. Even host governments are either not sensitive to these exploitation menaces and their aftermath

immediate and remote consequences, or ignore sensitivity for menial aggrandizement, cheap and fake popularity, immediate reward, inconsequential palliatives and transitory benefits. But the foreign personnel assuage these problems in their own countries. There is, therefore, the need for a change in this careless, egoistic attitude globally. It is only international agreements and universal moral approaches that can remedy the problematic challenges of these magnitudes. In other words, no single nation or culture can remedy this kind of problems; rather it needs cooperation and commitments among nations and cultures. Hence, there is a need for global environmental ethics and policies.

7. Ethical Relativism versus Restoration Ecology, Environmental Justice, and Environmental Law

Relativist approach may not also be a good option in restoration ecology, environmental law, and environmental justice. Restoration ecology "refers to the science and social practice of re-creating ecosystems that have been damaged or destroyed by human activity or natural events..." (Light, 2009: 236). Issues of ecological restoration, just as the issue of environmental justice cannot be addressed with culture-dependent theory. Environmental justice addresses theoretically and practically, a wide range of issues concerning social justice and environmentalism. It deals with issues of distributive justice occasioned by the disproportionate burden of environmental harms. It has activists and international movements such as the environmental justice movement (EJM), which advances issues and principles of distributive fairness. Environmental justice movements pose questions relating to how environmental benefits and burdens are distributed across populations, the ways citizens are compensated for inequities in environmental burdens, and the acceptable moral, social, and physical criteria for the distribution of environmental burdens (Figueroa, 2009: 341-342, 346). The activities of these movements go beyond ethnic, cultural and national boundaries; and the issues they raised cannot be resolved under any relative enclave, since they are not restricted to confines of cultures. Ethical

relativism would also have the difficulty of addressing environmental issues in a single population of multi-cultural components, that is, an agglomerated population of diverse cultures, where a dominant culture or segment of the population lords it over others. It is only moral probity that goes beyond the boundaries of cultural normality that can arbitrate or remedy these difficulties. The solution to the problem of environmental racism, which is one of the concerns of the environmental justice movement, is also beyond the capacity of any specific culture.

Environmental law deals with the protection of nature, human health and welfare, including the physical and socio-economic impacts they may create (Sax, 2009: 348). Because of the global nature of environmental issues, environmental law is vital in addressing common areas of interests and in arbitrating or mediating over other areas of conflicts among cultures and nations. For instance, natural processes of importance to the larger community may be ongoing in a particular culture or community; but ecologically sensitive cultures would understand that even within one's borders, there is the need for some public restriction of ethnic or private uses since the World is a common home for all inhabitants of different cultures. As Joseph Sax states, natural processes, habitat and biodiversity are important public values; and some natural resources such as air, land and waters, are in some respects a common in which the society at large has legitimate interests. Such a commons *transcend cultural boundary*; besides a culture coexists with other cultures. These justify and require public restrictions of private use of such commons. Sax is therefore correct when he argues that "[m]any of the most important environmental issues are of international scope, transcending national boundaries just as they transcend individual land ownership boundaries" (Sax, 2009: 348). In his contention, international regime of governance is appropriate for such issues, but this should not ignore national sovereignty, but requires the adoption of mutual obligations for mutual benefits. He cites an instance that two nations may share several rivers, and this may exact environmental concessions on one nation for

mutual benefit. According to him, such practical motives and incentives underlie many bilateral international agreements (Sax, 2009: 353-354). Sax avers that despite its limitations international law can constitute an essential institutional component of a global ecological commons. This indicates that international agreements are important steps toward recognition of the earth as a global commons. This recognition defies the capacity of ethical relativism since such issues cannot be realized with cultural barometers or lenses.

When the above views are put into consideration, Andrew Light would be judged correct in arguing that we ought to avoid relativism when our goal is to form a moral response to the deepening environmental crises, because it denies that some moral stances are better than others in guiding "our ethical claims about how we should treat nature". If relativism is accepted, then it would be needless to advance arguments against the cultural claims which allows or encourages the abuse or destruction of the ecosystem, species or parts thereof. Light avers that "given the trans-cultural nature of environmental problems", if relativism is adopted, we would have no ground to advance a moral viewpoint with which "we could critique different cultures' treatment of the environment". And this would make it impossible for us to contribute an ethical response to environmental crises. He deduces that "[a] relativist environmental ethics might not be adequate to protect the environment with any kind of normative force" (Light, 2003: 231-232).

Regarding the kind of ethics that is capable of meeting cross-cultural, trans-national or trans-continental moral demand, John Baird Callicott, relying on the divergences he observed in his survey on different cultures of the world, proposes what he calls the "one-many problem", that is, "the need to have a single cross-cultural environmental ethic consistent with the science of ecology while at the same time acknowledging the importance of a multiplicity of "traditional cultural environmental ethics, resonant with such an international, scientifically grounded environmental ethic..." (Light, 2003: 231-232, Callicott, 1994: 186).

"The "one" and the "many" represent, respectively, our quality of being one species facing a global environmental crisis and the historical reality that we are many people from many cultures and different places" (Light, 2003: 242). Callicott submits that these two aspects of human experience need to be integrated into a unified world ecological view. Callicott is making a significant point. But as plausible as this may sound, how to realise this single cross-cultural environmental ethic that can take into consideration traditional cultural and international environmental ethics is another herculean task, given the multiplicities of cultures all over the world.

8. Conclusion

It is evident in this study that environmental resources are globally shared among nations just as they are shared across cultures. The negative impacts from the use, abuse or misuse of these resources can transcend cultures and nations from which they are generated. Hence, relative or domestic approach by nations to resolving environmental problems can only be palliative and temporary. It would be morally suicidal to take solace in or resort to ethical relativism in the management of global environmental challenges and in matters of common interests among different cultures, nations and peoples. This is because the application of relativism would lead to moral anarchy in the making of decision for collective resolve for common good. Ethical relativism cannot correctly answer questions or address issues of universal scale about the natural environment. If it does, it would only be by a mere coincidence of share moral luck. Therefore, ethical relativism, that is, culture-validated morality, cannot be a good option or theory in the moral economy of nature. The adoption of culture-centred morality would plunge us into a world of vicious moral trepidation and perturbation, because every culture, context and institution would become moral arbiter even in every issue where they do not have informed knowledge, including environmental subject-matters. And these would forebear moral chaos. Thus, the study exposes the incapacity of relativism in the quest for moral solutions to environmental challenges and

its undesirability and impracticability in environmental ethics' quest for ecological sanity and sanctity.

While the study discountenances that the application of ethical relativism is the right approach to addressing current environmental issues, that is, while it rejects the claim that the solutions to environmental challenges should be relative to culture or defined by cultural normality, it nevertheless recognizes that there are some values in some cultures that are harness-able in addressing environmental challenges beyond the boundaries of such cultures. Even if all of these values, their antecedent beliefs and ensuing practices cannot resolve threatening environmental problems of high magnitude, at least, they can prevent some environmental problems from occurring when they have not yet occurred. In resume, the study discountenances that relativism is or should be the methodic approach to environmental ethics, issues, challenges, care and sustainability.

This critical assessment is important because any decision made about the natural environment, and any adopted approach to environmental ethics will have enduring consequences for both present and future people and the environment. Although cultural relativism seems to be the moral response of some people to issues confronting them, this relative approach cannot yield the desired result in environmental issues. Besides, although the right attitude to be established towards interaction with the environment may differ according to different theories and policies, but this does not grant the dissimilarity latitude of any kind of ethical relativism.

It is evident in the study that overall improvement in environmental quality will depend on collective resolve and concrete commitment to treat nature with care and use its resources with prudence. These cannot be achieved within the confine of individual nations or cultures, which can lead to complete relativism, complete moral anarchy, and complete catastrophe – a reverse of Garrett Hardin's *tragedy of the commons* (Hardin, 2000: 39-47). It would therefore be a misconceived

position, a moral misgiving, to think that ethical relativism can resolve environmental challenges when applied in environmental ethics. The contention here is that since environmental crises and challenges transcend individual cultures, the solutions to these challenges cannot be localized or laid in the ambient of a particular culture. This is because, any ethical theory that cannot consistently offer a standard "systematic philosophical account of the differences between right and wrong, good and evil, justice and injustice" (Hursthouse, 1987: blurb) about trans-cultural and transnational issues, including those of the natural environment cannot be viable in resolving issues of global importance or any other issue of general concern. And applying it would be moral gambling – a moral risk. Moral issues should not be gambled since morality is not about gambling.

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