

## AFRICAN CARE ETHICS AND CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Emmanuel Adetokunbo **OGUNDELE**  
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,  
Augustine University, Lagos State  
Nigeria.  
emmanuel.ogundele@augustineuniversity.edu.ng

### Abstract

Africa is a continent blessed with good soil, weather, and natural resources. However, the narrative is gradually changing based on the exploitation and reckless use of the environment by humans. The continuous exploitation of Africa by both Africans and non-Africans demands a sustainable and urgent solution. Africa today is nearly overwhelmed by numerous environmental problems, ranging from gully erosion, desertification, flooding, overpopulation, water pollution, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from cars and engines. The depletion of the ozone layer is one of the many environmental problems faced by the world at large and not just Africans alone. There are, however, other environmental problems that are happening in Africa as a continent, some of these are: air pollution, deforestation, climate change, water pollution, and pesticide use. It therefore presupposes the need for an African-based environmental ethics. As such, diverse African views will be examined to postulate an African-based ethics of care that will serve as a panacea to environmental problems in Africa. Hence, Segun Ogungbemi's 'ethics of naturerelatedness' and Godfrey Tangwa's 'eco communitarianism' will be studied, with the intent to postulate the right attitude Africans ought to have for the continuous existence of the environment.

**Keywords:** Environment, African Care Ethics, communitarianism, climate change.

### Introduction

The depletion of the ozone layer is one of the many environmental problems faced by the world at large and not just Africans alone. These environmental concerns listed above are problems that can be avoided or prevented through the application of the ethics of care. It is pertinent to state at this point that the notion of care is not restricted to just humans and animals alone. The environment also requires care by humans. In this part of the world, care is not often associated with non-human entities. Despite this, the need to care for the environment and also protect it cannot be overemphasized, given the fact that the protection of the environment is inversely protecting humanity from harm. There have been concerns raised on the interdependence of humans and the environment, as to whether humans need the environment more than the environment needs humans. In either case, both are in a relationship that requires an attitude of care.

Care ethics is considered a viable solution to environmental concerns in Africa. Environmental concerns, though, might be a global problem; however, there are some of these concerns that are peculiar to certain locations. The environmental concerns in Africa, therefore, require an indigenous approach. As such, African care ethics is being proposed as a possible solution to them.

This study is an attempt to proffer African care ethics as a solution to the environmental concerns in Africa. The question, however, is whether there is such a thing as African care ethics? Do Africans have any beliefs or philosophy on environmental protection and care? If there is such a thing as African care ethics, is it sufficient to prevent and address the environmental concerns in Africa? Or how can it be used to address these concerns? To address these and many more questions, care ethics will be conceptualised using the position of key proponents of care ethics such as Nel Noddings and Carol Gilligan. And African Philosophy will be examined to escalate the plausibility of an African care ethics. Also, some environmental concerns will be examined in the light of their harmful effects on the African continent. In addition, this study will interrogate how African care ethics can provide answers to the environmental concerns in Africa.

### **Conceptualization of Care Ethics**

Care ethics comprises two words - care and ethics. Ethics is one of the traditional branches of philosophy that prescribes what a right or wrong action is. It is a practical aspect of philosophy, which means that it is not abstract. It is important to note that ethics does not describe right or wrong actions; neither does it tell what action a person should engage in. It is safe to say that it is not a rule of dos and don'ts;<sup>35</sup> Hence, it uses the term 'ought' and not 'must.' Ethics interrogates the rightness or wrongness of an action.

Ethics is derived from the Greek word 'ethos', which means customs, norms, habits, or conventions. Christoph Bartneck believes that 'ethos' originally referred to a place of dwelling, location, but also habit, custom, and convention. It was translated from the Greek term into Latin with "mores" (ethos, customs), from which the modern concept of morality is derived."<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Christoph Bartneck, et al. "An Introduction to Ethics in Robotics and AI", *Springer Briefs in Ethics*. Retrieved 15 January 2023. From [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51110-4\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51110-4_3). 17.(2021), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Christoph Bartneck, et al. "An Introduction to Ethics in Robotics and AI", 1.

Wilson Jose defines ethics as “the systematic study of human actions from the point of view of their rightfulness or wrongfulness, as means for the attainment of the ultimate happiness.”<sup>37</sup> It implies that ethics preoccupies itself with studying human actions to prescribe what makes an action right or wrong. In the same vein, Williams Lillie defines ethics as “a normative science of the conduct of human beings living in societies - a science which judges this action to be right or wrong, good or bad or in some similar way.”<sup>38</sup> Ethics interrogates and judges actions using certain principles; however, it does not dictate which action is to be carried out by humans. Humans have the prerogative to decide which action to engage in, having known which is right or wrong.

Ethics is a field of philosophy that cuts across various areas of human existence; relationships with other humans, animals, plants, non-living things, and the non-human component of the environment. There are essentially three basic branches of ethics, which are: normative, applied, and meta-ethics. Care ethics is an example of normative ethics, and it is also referred to as the ethics of care. It is a moral theory that can be traced back to the works of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings in the 1980s.<sup>39</sup> It emphasises the relevance of interpersonal relationships as well as the moral implications of care.<sup>40</sup> Care ethics is a reactionary theory that was propounded to address the misconception of psychologically conditioning women to the responsibility of care.<sup>41</sup> The girl child, particularly in Africa, is taught from a tender age how to care for her male counterparts, her husband, and children when she eventually becomes a wife and a mother. Hence, care ethics is regarded as a female-derived normative ethics.

There is, however, the position that care ethics is a replacement of traditional ethical principles that have dominated the ethical space.<sup>42</sup> Some of these traditional ethical theories

---

<sup>37</sup> Wilson Jose, “An Introduction to Ethics”, Retrieved 2nd January, 2023. From <https://insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/introduction-to-ethics.pdf>. (2013), 1.

<sup>38</sup> Williams Lillie, “An Introduction to Ethics”, 4th Ed. London. Methuen and Co. Ltd. (1955), 2.

<sup>39</sup> P. Seton Bennett, “Care ethics, needs-recognition, and teaching encounters”, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, (2023), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Nel Noddings, “The Language of care ethics”, *Knowledge Quest*, 40(5), (2012), 52.

<sup>41</sup> Adeline John-Putra, “Environmental Care Ethics: Notes Toward a New Materialist Critique”, *Symploke*, Volume 21, Numbers 1-2, (2013), 128.

<sup>42</sup> Virginia Held, *Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. (2006), 29.

include virtue ethics, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, situation ethics, and so on. Care ethics prioritises care more than any other principle in its interrogation of right or wrong actions. As a reactionary theory, care ethicists believe that other ethical principles do not address the real-life dilemmas of women. M. P. Eboh and Maraizu Elechi contend that “Care ethics is empathy-driven ethics as opposed to the traditional ethics, which is male-oriented and prevalent in masculinised theories of justice”.<sup>43</sup> This raises questions such as: What is care ethics? Is it just a moral philosophy for women? Or is it the case that it is also applicable to men?

According to Stephanie Collins,

[C]are ethicists are not just concerned with ‘what women think.’ Instead, they believe their theory can -- indeed, should -- guide all of us in moral decision-making, regardless of our gender and the particular dilemmas we face. Through reflection on the lived reality of ethical decision-making, care ethicists are led to the following ideas: that responsibilities derive from relationships between particular people, rather than from abstract rules and principles; that decision-making should be sympathy-based rather than duty- or principle-based; that personal relationships have a value that is often overlooked by other theories...<sup>44</sup>

This will mean that care ethics can be applied by both women and men; it is not a gender based theory. As a moral theory, it stresses the importance of relationships, care, and responsibility in determining actions that are morally right or wrong. Unlike other traditional ethical principles that prioritise principles, care ethics prioritises care and interpersonal relationships. Virginia Held, in like manner, asserts that, “To the ethics of care, morality is less a matter of rational recognition and more a matter of taking responsibility for particular other persons in need”.<sup>45</sup> It implies that care is paramount and not principle or rational-based mode. Nel Noddings holds that “it is not just that highly mathematicized schemes are inevitably artificial ... but they tend to fix our attention on their game-like quality. We become absorbed

---

<sup>43</sup> M. Pauline Eboh and Maraizu Elechi, “Ethics of Care Inherent in Igbo Traditional Practices”, *RSU Journal of Humanities JOH* (1:1). Retrieved 12 January 2025. From: <https://rhycekerex.org/upload/8%20ETHICS%20OF%20CARE%20INHERENT.pdf>, (2020), 108.

<sup>44</sup> Stephanie Collins, *The Core of Care Ethics. Moral Reasoning: A Text and Reader on Ethics and Contemporary Moral Issues*. D. Morrow. Ed. New York. Oxford University Press. (2017), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Virginia Held, “The Ethics of Care as Normative Guidance: Comment on Gilligan”, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 45(1), (2014), 107.

in the intricacies of the game instead of the plight of real people”.<sup>46</sup> This will mean that before a person engages in an action, she/he ought to ask questions as to whether their actions will hurt others or cause any sort of harm, and not just be concerned about the rightness of the action.

K. P. Whyte and Chris Cuomo describe care ethics as

[A] Approaches to moral life and community that are grounded in virtues, practices, and knowledge associated with appropriate caring and caretaking of self and others. In contrast to ethical theories that assume the paradigm of moral reasoning to be an isolated agent making impersonal, abstract calculations—a dominant view in western philosophy—ethics of care highlight the affective dimensions of morality, the inevitability of dependence and interdependence, the importance of caretaking and healthy attachments in the basic fabric of human well-being, and the relational and contextual nature of any ethical question or problem.<sup>47</sup>

There are varying positions as to what care ethics is about, however, there are certain key elements that serve as unifying factors. They include care/sympathy, interpersonal relationships, and responsibilities. Noddings believes that care and direct attention are important criteria to consider when deciding on an action to carry out.<sup>48</sup> Collins also agrees with Noddings, but she went further to state that principles also have roles to play in the deliberation of actions. “A key care ethical insight is that sympathy and direct attention to concrete particulars are important in deliberation. I have suggested that principles should also have some role in deliberation, and that care ethicists can preserve a place for principles in justification.”<sup>49</sup> This implies that, as much as care is considered before an action is carried out, principles should also be taken into consideration.

---

<sup>46</sup> Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*. Los Angeles. University of California Press. (2002), 60.

<sup>47</sup> K. Powys Whyte and Chris Cuomo, “Ethics of Caring in Environmental Ethics: Indigenous and Feminist Philosophies”, Eds. S. M. Gardiner and A. Thompson. *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2770065](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2770065), (2016), 2.

<sup>48</sup> Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*. 60.

<sup>49</sup> Stephanie Collins, “The Core of Care Ethics.” *Moral Reasoning: A Text and Reader on Ethics and Contemporary Moral Issues*. 7.

Another key unifying factor among care ethicists is interpersonal relationships. These are relationships that exist between individuals who have a certain shared history in which the interest of one is regarded as that of others.<sup>50</sup> This implies that when a person is in any form of relationship with other humans, animals, the environment, etc., the interest of each party in the relationship is considered in the deciding actions to engage in. Interpersonal relationships are very important in the consideration of actions. It suffices to say that an action is regarded to be morally right if it promotes, preserves, and values relationships.<sup>51</sup> Joan Tronto opines that,

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.<sup>52</sup>

Humans are in a web of relationships; they are in a relationship with their fellow humans and their environment. The ethics of care is based on the conception of humans as relational beings, rather than self-sufficient individuals.<sup>53</sup> Just as they apply the principle of care in their relationship with their fellows, they are to do the same in their relationship with the environment. Care ethics advocates for a universal moral principle in which care for others is prioritised over individual rights or preferences.<sup>54</sup> Thaddeus Metz avers that "A care ethic takes relationship to be the fundamental unit of moral analysis and prescription, where a relationship is a complex form of interaction in which one individual has mental states about another and also knowingly affects the other in certain ways."<sup>55</sup>

Care ethicists champion the opinion that the notion of care is not just the responsibility of women and that caring is an orientation accessible to all, and reject the notion that caring

---

<sup>50</sup> Stephanie Collins, "The Core of Care Ethics." *Moral Reasoning: A Text and Reader on Ethics and Contemporary Moral Issues*. 12.

<sup>51</sup> Nel Noddings, "Two Concepts of Caring." *Philosophy of Education*. (1999).36–39.

<sup>52</sup> Joan Tronto, *Moral boundaries: A political argument for the ethics of care*. New York. (1993), 103.

<sup>53</sup> M. Pauline Eboh and Maraizu Elechi, "Ethics of Care Inherent in Igbo Traditional Practices", 109.

<sup>54</sup> Joan Tronto, *Moral boundaries: A political argument for the ethics of care*. New York. 138.

<sup>55</sup> Thaddeus Metz, "The western ethic of care or an Afro-communitarian ethic? Specifying the right relational morality," *Journal of Global Ethics*, 9:1, Retrieved 11th January 2025. From <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2012.756421>, (2013), 78.

and caretaking ought to be 'women's work.' Based on its emphasis on care and relationship, care ethics is a compelling foundation for environmental ethics. Whyte and Cuomo opine that, "Ethical paradigms centered around caring can acknowledge the significance of caring for all kinds of others, as well as the complex value of ecological interdependencies and the limitations of worldviews that deny reliance on nature."<sup>56</sup> The implication of this is that care ethics can be used to address environmental concerns, given the fact that it supports the care of the environment as against the view that the environment relies on humans and so should be used by humans the way they want. It can also be used to develop caring actions that can be adopted by humans in their relationship with the environment.

### **African Care Ethics**

Africa is a continent with diverse traditions and cultures. Africans generally have a notion of care ethics that is not restricted to just females or women alone. It is pertinent to note at this point that saying that Africans have an attitude of care does not translate to the fact that all Africans have this attitude. It only means that it is a salient attitude or belief among Africans. Eboh and Elechi assert that

[E]thics of care may be key to human survival because solidarity is essential for no man is an island, but care ethos is not the preserve of females; every village community customarily cares for/about its people. We are using care ethics from this perspective; we find it an appropriate terminology to express the communal practice of compassion and solidarity inherent in the Igbo system of communality, which is the normal way of life of the people.<sup>57</sup>

Africans may not necessarily term their practice of care 'care ethics,' however, a critical analysis of this practice reveals its similarities with care ethics. Hence, when there is a misunderstanding between people who share bonds, oftentimes justice is not the major factor considered in restoring the relationship, but concerns, love, and the relationship they share. Also, African ethical, religious, and metaphysical ideas have, over the ages, been influenced, shaped, and coloured by this background of diversity.<sup>58</sup> The position presented here is the

---

<sup>56</sup> K. Powys Whyte and Chris Cuomo, "Ethics of Caring in Environmental Ethics: Indigenous and Feminist Philosophies," 3.

<sup>57</sup> M. Pauline Eboh and Maraizu Elechi, "Ethics of Care Inherent in Igbo Traditional Practices", 209.

<sup>58</sup> Godfrey Tangwa, "Bioethics: An African Perspective." *Bioethics*, 10: 183-200. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8519.1996.tb00118.x>. (1996), 192.

traditional view of Africans on care ethics as regards the environment.

African care ethics identifies the need to show empathy and care for people and nature, particularly in the community. Africans have a belief that humans and nature are interconnected.<sup>59</sup> This presupposes that humans have a responsibility towards preserving and protecting the environment. This belief is in line with Ubuntu, which highlights the interdependence of all entities, including animate and inanimate entities.<sup>60</sup> In the same vein, Godfrey Tangwa argues that the indigenous African knowledge system is eco-communitarian, meaning that it recognises the interdependence of living things and also the non-anthropocentric perspective on the environment.<sup>61</sup> This position indicates that Africans do not see the environment as insignificant but as an entity that ought to be treated with care.

According to Segun Ogungbemi,

In our traditional relationship with nature, men and women recognize the importance of water, land, and air management. To our traditional communities, the ethics of not taking more than you need from nature is a moral code. Perhaps this explains why Earth, forests, rivers and wind, and other natural objects are traditionally believed to be both natural and divine. The philosophy behind this belief may not necessarily be religious, but a natural means by which the human environment can be preserved. The ethics of care are essential to the traditional understanding of environmental protection and conservation.<sup>62</sup>

This position indicates an attitude of care for the environment, which is geared towards the preservation and protection of the environment. Traditional African views the environment as a divine entity that ought to be revered and not misused. Ojomo, in describing African care ethics, opines that it is “an orientation in which one does not take from nature more than one

---

<sup>59</sup> Segun Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis”. Pojman, Louis, J. ed. *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company. (1997), 204.

<sup>60</sup> A. Philomena Ojomo, “An African Understanding of Environmental Ethics”, *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK) New Series*, Vol.2 No.2, Retrieved 12th January 2025. From <http://ajol.info/index.php/tp/index>, (2010), pp.49-63. 58.

<sup>61</sup> Godfrey Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics”. Wiredu, Kwasi ed. *A Companion to African philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell publishers. 2004. 389.

<sup>62</sup> Segun Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis.” 204.



needs.”<sup>63</sup> The environment is seen to be an entity just like humans, and so humans are to co-exist with it and not exploit it. According to Ogungbemi's ‘ethics of naturerelatedness’

[E]thics of nature-relatedness asserts that our natural resources do not need man for their existence and functions .... The ethics of nature-relatedness can be succinctly stated as an ethics that leads human beings to seek to co-exist peacefully with nature and treat it with some reasonable concern for its worth, survival, and sustainability.<sup>64</sup>

In like manner, Tangwa opines that in Africa, the environment is seen as a metaphysical entity that co-exists with humans and other entities. He holds that in African care ethics, there is “recognition and acceptance of inter-dependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals, and humans.”<sup>65</sup> Hence, Africans have an attitude of care towards plants, animals, and inanimate objects, and also the intangible forces in the world. This is the inclusive nature of African ethical thinking. And as such, there is the attitude of ‘live and let live’ that Africans have towards them. This is the reason there seems to be little or no demarcation between plants, animals, and inanimate objects, the community and the individual, physical and non-physical in African metaphysical belief.<sup>66</sup> Hence, the belief in the transmigration of the souls of humans into animals, plants, or even inanimate objects. These beliefs are crucial to how Africans treat and see the environment. Tangwa went a little further to explain that in Nso, an ethnic group in Cameroon, the attitude exhibited towards the environment is that of a respectful co-existence, conciliation, and containment.<sup>67</sup> Suffice it is to say then that “African ethic includes everything that care ethicists prize, but it also includes a certain kind of relationship that they typically do not, or at least not explicitly in the standard form of their view. African moralists tend to value not merely caring for others’ quality of life, but also sharing a way of life with others.”<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> A. Philomena Ojomo, “An African Understanding of Environmental Ethics.” 56.

<sup>64</sup> Segun Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis”. 208-209.

<sup>65</sup> Godfrey Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics.” 389.

<sup>66</sup> Godfrey Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics.” 389

<sup>67</sup> Godfrey Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics.” 390.

<sup>68</sup> Thaddeus Metz, “The Western ethic of care or an Afro-communitarian ethic? Specifying the right relational morality,” 85.

J. N. Ogar and S. A. Bassey are of the view that “The relationship between the African people and their environment is much like the two sides of a coin.”<sup>69</sup> The affinity Africans have towards the environment necessitates the need to care for and preserve it. According to L. O. Ugwuanyi, “The environment in Africa ought not to be seen and understood as an economic item only, but where and why to locate the significance and relevance of life itself.”<sup>70</sup> It means that what is obtainable in the environment today is alien to the traditional African society, where the environment is seen beyond just an economic entity that should be exploited. B. R. Mogobe is of the view that humans are part of the environment, although a privileged and special part of the environment. So, misuse of the environment definitely affects the whole part, humans inclusive.<sup>71</sup> This emphasizes the cruciality of care for the environment. Tangwa however disagrees with Ramose that humans are more special entities than the environment, “it does not suppose that human beings have any mandate or special privilege, God-given or otherwise, to subdue, dominate, and exploit the rest of creation, as is the case with the western outlook.”<sup>72</sup> Despite the disparity, one thing is however clear that humans are part of the world just like every other element in the environment is. Given the above position, is it safe to say that there is African care ethics? If there is, is it sufficient to tackle the environmental concerns in Africa?

### **Environmental Concerns in Africa and The Dangers**

Africa is a continent blessed with good soil, weather, and natural resources. However, the narrative is gradually changing based on the exploitation and reckless use of the environment by humans, thereby causing incalculable harm to the environment both human and non-human. In the words of Tangwa,

Variety is the most remarkable attribute of the African continent. Africa is one of the richest and most variegated continents on earth, ecologically, geographically, climatically, biologically, historically, culturally, linguistically, natural-

---

<sup>69</sup> J. Nkang Ogar, and S. Akpan Bassey, “African Environmental Ethics,” *RAIS Journal for Social Sciences* | VOL. 3, No. 1, (2019). 72.

<sup>70</sup> L. Ogbo Ugwuanyi, “Advancing environmental ethics through the African world-view.”, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(4), ( 2011), 6.

<sup>71</sup> B. Ramose Mogobe, “Ecology through Ubuntu” In *Journal of African Ethics*, (Harare: Mond Press). 309.

<sup>72</sup> Godfrey Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics”. 389-390.

resources-wise, etc. Almost any ecological niche, taken at random, anywhere in Africa, presents remarkable and fascinating diversity.<sup>73</sup>

The continuous exploitation of Africa by both Africans and non-Africans demands a sustainable and urgent solution. Africa today is cumbered with numerous environmental problems ranging from gully erosion, desertification, flooding, overpopulation, water pollution, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from cars and engines etc.

Traditional African states have always been humane, peaceful, and also guided by ethics that have helped in the preservation of the environment. Over time, due to the introduction of certain innovations and changes, African states are now undergoing environmental changes, leading to a lot of negative effects on the environment. Although the environmental crisis is a global crisis, given that no society is exempt from the threats posed by it, each society has some peculiarities regarding the environmental concerns it faces. Africa, for instance, has a large area of land endowed with diverse natural resources, hence, the environmental crisis it faces might be different from that of the Western world. The following are some environmental challenges bedevilling Africa.

### **Desertification**

Harm DeBlij, Alexander Murphy, and Erin Fouberg define desertification as “the encroachment of desert conditions on moister zones along the desert margins, where plant cover and soils are threatened by desertification- through over-use, in part by humans and their domestic animals, and, possibly, in part because of inexorable shifts in the central government.”<sup>74</sup> Desertification is mainly caused by the activities of humans and climate change.<sup>75</sup> A. T. Salau notes that about 6.6 million square kilometres of land in Africa is at a high to very high degree of desertification.<sup>76</sup> Also about two thirds of Africa is arid or semi-arid and as such so many farmlands are dry. The result is that those farmlands become desert

---

<sup>73</sup> Godfrey Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics”. 389.

<sup>74</sup> Harm DeBlij, Alexander B. Murphy, and Erin H. Fouberg, *Human Geography: People, Place, and Culture* (8th Ed.). New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 6.

<sup>75</sup> C. Christopher Eze and Innocent Nwaiwu, “Africa in the 21ST Century: The Challenges of Environmental Degradation”, *International Journal of Environmental Sciences*, Vol. 1 No. 4. (2012), 266.

<sup>76</sup> A. Tokunbo Salau, “Global Environmental Change: A Research Agenda for Africa.”Working Paper 2/1992. *Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa (CODESRIA)*., (1992).

hindering farmers from planting and affecting their source of income. Desertification is mostly caused by climatic fluctuations, overgrazing, woodcutting, soil exhaustion and land misuse.<sup>77</sup>

### Deforestation

Deforestation is another form of environmental crisis experienced in Africa. DeBlij, Murphy, and Fouberg defined deforestation as “the clearing and destruction of forests to harvest wood for consumption, clear land for agricultural uses, and make way for expanding settlement frontiers.”<sup>78</sup> This is mostly driven by economic pressure of moving to more farmland to sustain cash crop production.<sup>79</sup> The use of trees for timber and domestic purposes is also one of the reasons for the great loss of forests in Africa. P. Mathieu avers that although there has been an intervention at reforestation, it has only succeeded in replacing just 10% of the annual loss.<sup>80</sup> The loss of forest in Africa is greatly affecting the environment, leading to significant environmental concerns. For C. C. Eze and Innocent Nwaiwu, “In Nigeria, about 5% of the forests are lost yearly...”<sup>81</sup> There are reports that annually, there is an average deforestation of 400,000 ha between 1981 and 1985.<sup>82</sup> The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) also reported that forested land that was converted into farmland greatly increased from 1981 to 1990.<sup>83</sup> Deforestation that is done through clearing

---

<sup>77</sup> Harm DeBlij, Alexander B. Murphy, and Erin H. Fouberg, *Human Geography: People, Place, and Culture*.

<sup>78</sup> Harm DeBlij, Alexander B. Murphy, and Erin H. Fouberg, *Human Geography: People, Place, and Culture*.

<sup>79</sup> P. Mathieu, “Population, poverty and environment degradation in Africa.” *Natures Sciences Societes* 6(3): 27–34. Retrieved from <http://www.scopus.com/inward/record.url?eid=2s2.00242519471&partnerID=40&md5=ed0b1d56c3431bce3b4154f9d8dfe16b>. (1998.).

<sup>80</sup> P. Mathieu, “Population, poverty and environment degradation in Africa.”

<sup>81</sup> C. Christopher Eze, and Innocent Nwaiwu, “Africa in the 21ST Century: The Challenges of Environmental Degradation”, 264.

<sup>82</sup> World Resources, “World Resources, 1992-93” A Report by the World Programme Institute in Collaboration with the United Nations Environmental Programme and the United Nations Development Programme, New York; Oxford University Press. (1992).

<sup>83</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), “Land and Water Division Soil and Water Conservation in Semi-arid Areas”, Soil Resources, Management and Conservation Service Division Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Rome, 1987

and burning brings about the release of carbon into the atmosphere. The result of this is an increase in the amount of atmospheric greenhouse gases that end up affecting biodiversity.<sup>84</sup>

### **Air and Water Pollution**

Air and water pollution are rampant in Africa. They range from toxic littering by Western multinational companies given their operations in African oil fields, to the release of harmful substances into the air.<sup>85</sup> The use of firewood and charcoal for cooking by many households in Africa also releases a large amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.<sup>86</sup> This means that Africans are exposed to both indoor and outdoor air pollution, particularly those who are in households where woods are used to generate energy. This brings about health problems and also endangers the environment. Eze and Nwaiwu notes

The greatest air pollutant is the emission of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere through anthropogenic factors that release chlorofluorohydrocarbons like CO<sub>2</sub>, CH<sub>4</sub>, N<sub>2</sub>O etc which consequently exacerbate climate change. The impact of climate change to the food security status of Africa and the overall existence of life on earth need not be over-emphasized.<sup>87</sup>

The aftermath of air pollution is not just on the environment alone but also on humans.

Water pollution is also an environmental issue. In many places in Africa, it is difficult to access good and drinkable water because Africa accepts the solid waste from the United States, the European Union, and Japan. Africa is paid for accepting the waste, but they are not able to treat it properly to make it non-harmful to the environment and to the people of Africa.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> J.S. Orebiyi , C.O., Korie , D.O. Ohajianya, C.S. Onyemuwa , S.U.O. Onyeagocha, A.I. Ugochukwu, V.C. Eze and C.A.O. Awulonu (2010) , “Food Production , Agrobiodiversity and Sustainable Rural Development : Nigeria in Perspective” .Contributed paper presented at the 84th Agricultural Economics Society of United Kingdom, held at Edinburgh University, 29th march - 1st April 2010.

<sup>85</sup> Zerrin Savaşan, “Pollution, Land.” *In Encyclopedia of Big Data* (pp. 1–4). [http://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32001-4\\_168-1](http://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32001-4_168-1), (2017).

<sup>86</sup> Akin Mabogunje, “The Environmental Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Environment*, 37.4, (1995), 4-11.

<sup>87</sup> C. Christopher Eze, and Innocent Nwaiwu, “Africa in the 21ST Century: The Challenges of Environmental Degradation,” 266.

<sup>88</sup> C. Christopher Eze, and Innocent Nwaiwu, “Africa in the 21ST Century: The Challenges of Environmental Degradation,” 267.

## Extinction of Wildlife

The gradual disappearance of wildlife from Africa is something to be worrisome. According to Ogar and Bassey, “Population pressures, poaching, and the tradition of separating wildlife from human populations have resulted in the loss of vast numbers of Africa’s wildlife.”<sup>89</sup> For instance in Kenya alone within the space of 20 years the numbers of elephants dropped from 165,000 to 16,000.<sup>90</sup>

The question, however, is, “Who or what is responsible for these problems?” It is important to know the root cause of a problem to be able to proffer a workable solution. A. P. Ojomo was of this contention when he notes that knowing the cause of environmental pollution, degradation, environmental injustice, and so on, is very important in the establishment of an African environmental ethics.<sup>91</sup> C. S. Ifeakor and Andrew Otteh aver that there are mainly two factors responsible for the environmental concerns in Africa, “Challenges to our environment in the 21st century have been an issue of great concern. Few factors in the writer’s view have contributed to these challenges. The first is nature. By this I mean an ageing world and its implications.”<sup>92</sup> They believe that the environment is old and that certain things come with old age, some of which are the results of the environmental issues humans are faced with. The second cause, which is regarded as the most important one, is “the activities of man since Science and technology brought with it industrialization. Even though man has tried to explore and improve his life on earth, it has come with some disadvantages.”<sup>93</sup> The activities of humans on Earth are considered to be the major cause of environmental issues in Africa. This study agrees with the second cause, given the fact that the Earth, even though old, is self-regulating.

---

<sup>89</sup> J. Nkang Ogar, and S. Akpan Bassey, “African Environmental Ethics,” 72.

<sup>90</sup> Brian Morris, “Wildlife conservation in Malawi.” *Environment and History* 7(3), Retrieved 12th January 2022. From <http://doi.org/10.3197/096734001129342513>, (2001), 357–372.

<sup>91</sup> A. Philomena Ojomo, “An African Understanding of Environmental Ethics,” 56

<sup>92</sup> C. Stephen Ifeakor and Andrew Otteh, “African environmental ethics: A non anthropocentric African environmentalism: The journey so far,” *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 3 No 6, (2017), 67.

<sup>93</sup> C. Stephen Ifeakor and Andrew Otteh, “African environmental ethics: A non anthropocentric African environmentalism: The journey so far,” 68.

So the activities of humans, which could be intentional or unintentional, are significantly responsible for environmental issues in Africa.

These environmental issues mentioned above, such as desertification, deforestation, pollution of land and air, have brought about grave dangers for the environment and for humans too. Frederick Ferre, in identifying the dangers of technology on the environment, noted how the environment is gradually losing its life,

By the time organisms are sufficiently artificial to be patentable, it is clear that the relative weights of nature and culture have reversed themselves. Culture is in the driver's seat, and nature is hanging on for dear life (literally) as we hurtle down unexplored roads with poor visibility and with uninspected and untried brakes.<sup>94</sup>

Africa is regarded as one of the most vulnerable continents to climate change and environmental issues. The effect of environmental issues on the African environment and Africans themselves calls for an urgent indigenous solution.

### **African Care Ethics: A Solution to Environmental Concerns in Africa**

It is pertinent to note that addressing these environmental issues is crucial based on the fact that their a serious negative impact on humans. Akinjide Osuntokun contends that the environment is not only made up of lands, animals, and natural resources, but that humans, their immediate environment, and the entire ecosystem contribute to that make-up.<sup>95</sup> The truth is, there have been several attempts and solutions targeted by the government, non-governmental organisations, and individuals to solve these environmental issues. For instance, the Nigerian government has taken the initiative of planting trees and also preserving vegetation that is natural to certain locations, and three million hectares of land have already been restored.<sup>96</sup> In Niger state of Nigeria, about 20 to 25% more trees were found by surveyors in 2005 than thirty years earlier in the same area.<sup>97</sup> This is an example of a measure that has

---

<sup>94</sup> Frederick Ferre, "Technology, Ethics and the End of Nature," In H. Odera Oruka (ed) *Philosophy and Ecology; Philosophy of Nature and Environmental Ethics*. Nairobi, Kenya. ACTS Press, (1994). 220.

<sup>95</sup> Akinjide Osuntokun, "Environmental Problems of the Niger-Delta," Ibadan: Davidson Press. (2001), 293.

<sup>96</sup> C. Christopher Eze, and Innocent Nwaiwu, "Africa in the 21ST Century: The Challenges of Environmental Degradation," 265.

<sup>97</sup> Niamey, "Tide Turning on Desertification." Retrieved October 15th 2006 from <http://www.allafrica.com/stories/200610110683.html>.

been put in place to address the problem. With these efforts, have these problems been solved? These environmental issues are getting worse than they have ever been. The implication of this is that there is a need to proffer a solution that has been proven and helped to preserve the environment before it was tampered with. This solution is an African attitude of care which indigenous Africans had towards the environment that helped in the preservation and protection of the environment.

Ethics of care presented above is an African philosophical approach based on the acknowledgment of the fact that humans are interconnected with nature. According to Ifeakor and Otteh, "For a theory to be fully African, it has to show mastery of African ontology otherwise it lacks the characteristics of being African. The human being and the interconnectedness of being are two of the salient values in African ontology which are relevant to the environment."<sup>98</sup> The attitude of care is therefore not strange or foreign to Africa. It is one in which the human component of the environment sees the environment as part of an interconnected whole having rights and requiring protection and care just like they are. So, the idea of care in human relationships extends to the environment and guides human conduct and the use of the environment. The relationship that exists between humans and the environment is not one of domination or exploitation, it is one in which Africans have the responsibility of caring for the environment. Ifeakor and Otteh assert that in this relationship,

It is human capacity for obligation, for action, for taking responsibility that singles her out in the ecosystem. The privilege humans enjoy stems from the fact that he is saddled with the responsibility of tending, caring for the whole of the ecosystem, which they are a part of. I call it obligatory anthropoholism.<sup>99</sup>

This is what African care ethics is about: the tending of the environment by humans as a part of the ecosystem.

The recognition that the environment is not an entity to be conquered and dominated will influence human attitudes to the environment. African care ethics is not saying that the environment should not be used by humans; it is instead saying that an individual should not take from nature more than what s/he need. It has been revealed that the major cause of

---

<sup>98</sup> C. Stephen. Ifeakor and Andrew Otteh, "African environmental ethics: A non anthropocentric African environmentalism: The journey so far," 71.

<sup>99</sup> C. Stephen. Ifeakor and Andrew Otteh, "African environmental ethics: A non anthropocentric African environmentalism: The journey so far," 72.



environmental issues in Africa is humans. It means that any philosophy that will be proposed ought to be human-focused. African ethics of care, as propounded by Ogungbemi, identifies that humans essentially rely on the environment for survival, and as such, they are expected to treat the environment with adequate care and respect.<sup>100</sup> It implies that humans are the ones saddled with the responsibility of caring for the environment. This philosophy brings about the consciousness that humans need the environment more than the environment needs them, and so it brings about the need to ensure the continuous existence of the environment. In the same vein, Ifeakor and Otteh hold that

Humans have a place in the ecosystem, and such a place is not rights-based where humans have the legal or whatever right to kill, eat, and dominate the world; rather, it is a place, an obligatory place, a task-based, job-oriented place. It is humans who should take responsibility for the whole of ecosystem.<sup>101</sup>

African ethics of care shows the attitude of care, respect and awe that indigenous Africans have towards the environment. It must be an attitude of a total embrace of the environment as an extension of ourselves. This same attitude if adopted today can help to reduce environmental issues in Africa to its barest minimum.

One of the reasons that made Africans take decisions that are now affecting the environment is greed. But the ethics of care does not encourage greed – it gives room for the coexistence of entities in the ecosystem. As such, there is the dictum of ‘live and let live.’ This is the attitude that can help protect and conserve the environment. When every African knows that an action s/he are about to take will be injurious to the environment and may bring about environmental issues, such action will not be carried out. The truth is that the negative effects of the actions of humans on the environment are directly suffered by humans themselves.

Taking a broad view of all that this paper has considered, several questions may be raised: Is there a need to propose an African care ethics when there is a Western position in place? If every part of the world faces environmental challenges, why is there a need to propose an African care ethics? This study is not to undermine the efficacy of Western care ethics, it is

---

<sup>100</sup> Segun Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis”. 207.

<sup>101</sup> C. Stephen. Ifeakor and Andrew Otteh, “African Environmental Ethics: A Non–Anthropocentric African Environmentalism. The Journey So Far.” 90.

to present the African which recognises and relates well with environmental concerns in Africa. This is succinctly put by Ogar and Bassey,

An African environmental philosophy is necessary to define how Africans ought to live in relation to the environment—an African environmental ethic is the moral canvas upon which Africa itself may advance its own response to African ecological problems, and in turn address its role in deforestation and land degradation.<sup>102</sup>

Revisiting the African belief in interconnectedness reveals that an African indigenous ethics of care is sufficient to address environmental issues in Africa. Ogungbemi holds that one of the reasons that contributed to environmental issues in Africa is that Africans have forsaken practices that make them who they are to the core. He went on to say that the exploitation of the environment in modern Africa is contrary to what was obtainable in traditional Africa.<sup>103</sup> It implies that simply going back to old habits will help reduce, if not completely solve, the environmental issues in Africa. The implementation of African care ethics will greatly help in solving the environmental concerns in Africa.

Given the above analysis it is evident that African care ethics is a viable solution to environmental issues in Africa. The problem however lies in its implementation. There have been other methods that have been proposed over time to solve this problem but the problem persists. One may ask what differentiates African care ethics from other theories that have been proposed, and what is necessary for its implementation. The challenges associated with African care ethics will be highlighted briefly below.

### **Challenges**

African care ethics has a lot of potentials as regards the preservation and protection of the environment. There is however some challenges and some unanswered questions about the theory. Ogungbemi for instance holds that in order to preserve and protect the environment, humans should not take more than what they need.<sup>104</sup> This raises questions like, “What is the measure of the need of the people?” “How do we know how much we need, given man’s

---

<sup>102</sup> J. Nkang Ogar and Bassey, S. Akpan, “African Environmental Ethics”, 76.

<sup>103</sup> Segun Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis”. 206.

<sup>104</sup> Segun Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis”. 204.

insatiability?” “Who judges whether we are taking more or less of the natural resources than we need?” “If we have been taking more than we need, what are the penalties, and how fair are they?”<sup>105</sup>

There is also the challenge of implementing the theory. Present-day Africans do not practice what was obtainable in traditional Africa. It may be due to ignorance or the assumption that those practices are out-dated. Having Africans adhere to this ethics would then pose a challenge, and as Tangwa notes: “In the domain of morality, correct practice without theory is preferable to correct theory without practice.”<sup>106</sup> It is not enough to know that the environment is the responsibility of humans to tend and care for, measures must be put in place to ensure the environment is truly cared for.

## **Conclusion**

It is pertinent to note that there is no theory without inadequacies; as such, some of the inadequacies of African care ethics have been identified above. One factor that gives African care ethics an edge is that it is centered on humans, who are the major cause of environmental issues. The problem of implementation can be solved if the government puts in place strict measures that are in line with the principles of African care ethics and are adhered to. Additionally, Africans should be sensitised to the need to care for the environment and the dangers attached when they do otherwise. This will help to ensure compliance from humans.

This paper closes on the note that an environmental ethics that is potent to solve environmental concerns in Africa is African-oriented. This is not to discredit Western ethics, but an attempt to address a concern that is particular to Africa using African-generated ethics. This is what is indigenous to Africa and rooted in the African people. As such, African ethics of care is a viable solution to environmental concerns in Africa if it were aggressively enforced.

## **Bibliography**

Bennett, P. Seton. “Care Ethics, Needs-Recognition, and Teaching Encounters.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (2023): 2.

---

<sup>105</sup> Segun Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis”. 208.

<sup>106</sup> Godfrey Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics”. 389.

- Bartneck, Christoph, et al. "An Introduction to Ethics in Robotics and AI." *Springer Briefs in Ethics*. Retrieved 15 January 2023. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51110-4\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51110-4_3). (2021): 1.
- Collins, Stephanie. *The Core of Care Ethics. Moral Reasoning: A Text and Reader on Ethics and Contemporary Moral Issues*. D. Morrow, Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- DeBlij, Harm, Alexander B. Murphy, and Erin H. Fouberg. *Human Geography: People, Place, and Culture*. 8th ed. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006.
- Eboh, M. Pauline, and Maraizu Elechi. "Ethics of Care Inherent in Igbo Traditional Practices." *RSU Journal of Humanities JOH* 1, no. 1 (2020): 108–209. Retrieved 12 January 2025. <https://rhycekerex.org/upload/8%20ETHICS%20OF%20CARE%20INHERENT.pdf>.
- Eze, C. Christopher, and Innocent Nwaiwu. "Africa in the 21st Century: The Challenges of Environmental Degradation." *International Journal of Environmental Sciences* 1, no. 4 (2012): 264–267.
- Ferre, Frederick. "Technology, Ethics and the End of Nature." In H. Odera Oruka (ed.), *Philosophy and Ecology: Philosophy of Nature and Environmental Ethics*. Nairobi, Kenya: ACTS Press, 1994.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). "Land and Water Division Soil and Water Conservation in Semiarid Areas." *Soil Resources, Management and Conservation Service Division Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*. Rome, 1987.
- Held, Virginia. *Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Held, Virginia. "The Ethics of Care as Normative Guidance: Comment on Gilligan." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 45, no. 1 (2014): 107.
- Ifeakor, C. Stephen, and Andrew Otteh. "African Environmental Ethics: A Non-Anthropocentric African Environmentalism: The Journey So Far." *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* 3, no. 6 (2017): 67–90.
- John-Putra, Adeline. "Environmental Care Ethics: Notes Toward a New Materialist Critique." *Symploke* 21, no. 1-2 (2013): 128.
- Jose, Wilson. "An Introduction to Ethics." Retrieved 2 January 2023. <https://insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/introduction-to-ethics.pdf>. (2013): 1.
- Lillie, Williams. *An Introduction to Ethics*. 4th ed. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1955.
- Mabogunje, Akin. "The Environmental Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Environment* 37, no. 4 (1995): 4–11.
- Mathieu, P. "Population, Poverty and Environment Degradation in Africa." *Natures Sciences Societes* 6, no. 3 (1998): 27–34. Retrieved from <http://www.scopus.com/inward/record.url?eid=2s2.00242519471&partnerID=40&md5=e d0b1d56c3431bce3b4154f9d8dfe16b>
- Metz, Thaddeus. "The Western Ethic of Care or an Afro-Communitarian Ethic? Specifying the Right Relational Morality." *Journal of Global Ethics* 9, no. 1 (2013): 78–85. Retrieved 11 January 2025. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2012.756421>.
- Mogobe, B. Ramose. "Ecology through Ubuntu." In *Journal of African Ethics*. Harare: Mond Press, 2017.
- Morris, Brian. "Wildlife Conservation in Malawi." *Environment and History* 7, no. 3 (2001): 357–372. Retrieved 12 January 2022. <http://doi.org/10.3197/096734001129342513>.

- Niamey. "Tide Turning on Desertification." Retrieved 15 October 2006. <http://www.allafrica.com/stories/200610110683.html>.
- Noddings, Nel. *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002.
- Noddings, Nel. "The Language of Care Ethics." *Knowledge Quest* 40, no. 5 (2012): 52.
- Noddings, Nel. "Two Concepts of Caring." *Philosophy of Education* (1999): 36–39.
- Ogungbemi, Segun. "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis." In Louis J. Pojman, ed., *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997.
- Ojomo, A. Philomena. "An African Understanding of Environmental Ethics." *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK) New Series* 2, no. 2 (2010): 49–63. Retrieved 12 January 2025. <http://ajol.info/index.php/tp/index>.
- Ogar, J. Nkang, and Bassey S. Akpan. "African Environmental Ethics." *RAIS Journal for Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2019): 72–76.
- Osuntokun, Akinjide. "Environmental Problems of the Niger-Delta." Ibadan: Davidson Press, 2001.
- Salau, A. Tokunbo. "Global Environmental Change: A Research Agenda for Africa." Working Paper 2/1992. *Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa (CODESRIA)*, 1992.
- Savaşan, Zerrin. "Pollution, Land." In *Encyclopedia of Big Data*, 1–4. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32001-4\\_168-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32001-4_168-1), 2017.
- Tangwa, Godfrey. "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics." In Kwasi Wiredu, ed., *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2004.
- Tangwa, Godfrey. Bioethics: An African Perspective. *Bioethics* 10 (1996): 183–200. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8519.1996.tb00118.x>.
- Tronto, Joan. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for the Ethics of Care*. New York, 1993.
- Ugwuanyi, L. Ogbo. "Advancing Environmental Ethics through the African World-View." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 2, no. 4 (2011): 6.
- Whyte, K. Powys, and Chris Cuomo. "Ethics of Caring in Environmental Ethics: Indigenous and Feminist Philosophies." In S. M. Gardiner and A. Thompson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*. Retrieved 12 January 2025. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2770065](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2770065), 2016.