



ADDRESSING ANTHROPOCENTRISM THROUGH UNIVERSAL DIALOGUE

Josephat Ugo Umeoguego

Department of Philosophy, Rivers State University

josephatugo@gmail.com

Abstract

The environmental crisis bedeviling the world today has led to a growing interest in the field of environmental ethics, an academic discipline whose concerns involve the articulation of moral obligations of humans towards the natural environment and justifications of such obligations. Among the theoretical frameworks in this enterprise is anthropocentrism, whose tenets include the view that only humans have intrinsic value, while nonhuman entities have instrumental values to satisfy human interests. The critics of the theory accuse it of being the cause of environmental crisis. As a remedy to the crisis, they generally argue that nonhumans too have intrinsic value. In defense of anthropocentrism, Norton and Hayward argue that it is not anthropocentrism that causes environmental degradation. The former holds that the cause is rather 'felt preferences,' while the latter holds that it is 'illegitimate human desires.' Both regard these causes as not being essentially anthropocentric, but anti-anthropocentric. By employing an expository and analytic method, this paper advances the argument against anthropocentrism by demonstrating that the solution to environmental degradation is attainable through universal dialogue, whereby the intrinsic values of all beings, whether human or nonhuman, are recognised, enabling humans to understand themselves as beings in a dialogical relationship with other beings. In this dialogical relationship, the survival and interests of all entities are respected.

Keywords: environmental crisis, environmental ethics, anthropocentrism, nonanthropocentrism, intrinsic values, universal dialogue

Introduction

Environmental crisis results from the deterioration of natural components of our surroundings. It includes the problems of climate change, pollution, desertification and other devastating effects of environmental damage. This damage entails depletion of both biotic and abiotic resources that make up human habitat, namely air, water, soil, plants, animals, and all other living and non-living elements of the earth. It happens through human causes, like modern urbanization, industrialization, population growth, deforestation, etc., and so, anthropogenic, and also through natural causes, like floods, typhoons, droughts, rising temperatures, fires, etc. "Today, different kinds of human activities are the main reasons for environmental degradation. The automobile and industries increase the number of poisonous gases like SO_x, NO_x, CO, and smoke in the atmosphere."¹ This raises the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, with resultant problems of global

¹P.K. Maurya, et al. 'An introduction to environmental degradation: Causes, consequence and mitigation.' In: Kumar, V., Singh, J. & Kumar, P., (eds). *Environmental Degradation: Causes and Remediation Strategies, Vol 1*. 1-20, (2020) <<https://doi.org/10.26832/aesa-2020-edcrs-01>>



warming and climate change. The causal role that human activities occupy in the problem of environmental degradation has led to a growing interest in environmental ethics.

Central concerns of environmental ethics include the moral obligations of human beings towards the natural environment and their justifications, with the aim of environmental preservation against destructive human acts. Although so many philosophers have written on this throughout history, “environmental ethics really only developed into a specific philosophical discipline in the 1970s.”² The emergence of the discipline at that time was largely spurred by the increasing awareness, in the 1960s, of how technology, industry, economic expansion, population growth and other human activities lead to degradation of ecosystems, dwindling of plant and animal biodiversity, loss of wilderness, climate change, global warming and other environmental havoc. Crochane writes that two publications aided the development of such awareness, namely, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, a book published in 1962 on how widespread use of chemical pesticides poses a serious threat to public health and is destructive to wildlife; and *The Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich, published in 1968, which warns against the devastating effects of the booming human population on the resources of the planet.³

More still, another important publication in the 1960s, which several authors, like Rae,⁴ Goralnik and Nelson,⁵ see as the seminal essay in environmental ethics is ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis’ by Lynn White, published in 1967. In it, the author argues that anthropocentrism rooted in a Judeo-Christian worldview is responsible for the current ecological crisis and that “more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.”⁶

Anthropocentrism is “the view that humans are the sole bearers of intrinsic value on our planet, whereas all nonhuman aspects of the biosphere, whether biotic or abiotic, are of merely instrumental value to the satisfaction of human interests.”⁷ It has been a longstanding theoretical framework historically rooted not only in religious faiths but in philosophical thought, as Rai *et al.* observe, “Anthropocentrism is a strong element within the Abrahamic faiths. Anthropocentrism has also been a central doctrine in Western emphasis on human reason.”⁸ Broadly speaking, a moral obligation towards the environment is justified on anthropocentric grounds if the obligation is to serve the interests of human beings; whereas on non-anthropocentric grounds, it is justified for the sake of the environmental entities themselves irrespective of their utility to humans. The blame of anthropocentrism as the cause of the ecological crisis bedeviling the world is common among critics of the theory. As a remedy to ecological havoc, they argue that not only humans but also nonhuman entities have intrinsic value.

²A. Cochrane. ‘Environmental ethics.’ *LSE Research Online*. <<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/21190/>> accessed 28 October 2023

³Cochrane, ‘Environmental ethics.’

⁴G. Rae, ‘Anthropocentrism,’ *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics*, (2014), 6. <DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-05544-2_24-1> accessed 15 October 2023

⁵L. Goralnik, & M. P. Nelson, ‘Anthropocentrism,’ in Chadwick, R (ed), *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, Second Edition, volume 1 (San Diego: Academic Press, 2012), 146 <DOI: 10.13140/2.1.1777.6324> accessed 30 November, 2023

⁶L. White, ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis.’ *Science* 155 (1967) 1206

⁷K. Burchett, ‘Anthropocentrism and Nature: An Attempt at Reconciliation,’ *TEORIA* 2 (2014), 137

⁸J. S. Rai, *et al.* ‘Universalism and Ethical Values for the Environment’ *Ethics and Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific (ECCAP) Project*, (Bangkok: RUSHSAP, UNESCO, 2009), 11



This paper advances the argument against anthropocentrism by demonstrating that the solution to environmental degradation is attainable through universal dialogue, whereby the intrinsic values of all beings, whether humans or nonhumans, are recognised, enabling humans to understand themselves as being in a dialogical relationship with other beings. Before expounding this dialogical approach properly, the paper examines the historical development of anthropocentrism, its criticisms, the alternative theories propounded by non-anthropocentrists, and the defence of anthropocentric philosophers, especially those of Bryan G. Norton and Tim Hayward, that anthropocentrism is not what causes environmental degradation.

Historical Development of Anthropocentrism

Historically, human concerns about their place and role in the world in relation to other existents date back to ancient times. A prominent and dominant theory that evolved as a way of addressing the issues from antiquity is anthropocentrism, which is a belief in the centrality of mankind amidst other things existing on earth. Aristotle is a typical example of an ancient philosopher who expressed an anthropocentric viewpoint, evident in his statement: “All animals must have been made by nature for the sake of man.”⁹ This position downgrades the nonhuman world in relation to the human world. Some scholars believe that anthropocentrism is also evident in Judeo-Christian tradition in the account of creation, which says, “God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”¹⁰ However, this is a matter of interpretation of the Biblical text through history, as Michael Ufok Udoekpo, among other scholars, argues that the text does not encourage anthropocentric destruction of the environment. He writes, “Genesis 1-2 discourages abuse, exploitation, inordinate anthropocentric and instrumentalist domination of nature, biodiversity, and the environment (1:26-28).”¹¹

Anthropocentrism continued to hold sway for centuries, from ancient times through the medieval era. In the modern period, it was promoted further through new philosophical justifications by some prominent philosophers of the time. Descartes, through his *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), makes thinking the proof of his existence and his essence. He projects thinking as the foundation of all there is, favouring humans over nonhumans. Descartes further makes claims of how distinct and special humans are in relation to machines and animals. He holds that humans are distinguished from machines on account of their higher level of spontaneity and linguistic capabilities, and that they are distinguished from animals because of their capability to employ reason, which animals, defined by instinct, lack.¹²

The influence of Descartes’ anthropocentric way of thinking manifests in the thoughts of Immanuel Kant as shown in the expression: “To know the human being according to his species as an earthly being endowed with reason especially deserves to be called knowledge of the world, even though he constitutes only one part of the creatures on earth.”¹³ In another text, he says “As the sole being

⁹Aristotle, *Politics*. Barker E. (trans). (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Book 1, Chap. 8

¹⁰Genesis, 1:26

¹¹M. U. Udoekpo, ‘Genesis 1:26-28- African Perspectives,’ *Ochendo: An African Journal of Innovative Studies*. 4/3, (2023) 59

¹²R. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 31-32.

¹³I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Louden R. B. (trans), (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 1.



on earth who has reason, and thus a capacity to set voluntary ends for himself, [man] is certainly the titular lord of nature, and, if nature is regarded as a teleological system, then it is his vocation to be the ultimate end of nature.”¹⁴

The perception of humans as privileged over other things in the world in such a way that nonhuman things are ordered towards humans to serve their purposes later gave rise to new developments to aid human utility of nonhuman entities. Among such are developments of economics as a discipline; and debates on how to use available resources for the benefit of humans, what qualifies as a human/person, how they ought to be treated, what constitutes natural human rights articulated in the 1945 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the justification on the ground of equal human dignity. In all, all considerations are about humans while nonhuman beings are treated as instrumental in achieving human goals.¹⁵

Criticisms of Anthropocentrism

A recurrent criticism of anthropocentrism is its blame as the cause of ecological crisis. Speaking on this, Yu and Lei say, “In discussing the cause of the environmental crisis, many people believe that the anthropocentric view that humans dominate over and rule nature encouraged human exploitation of nature, and thus was the ideological cause of the environmental crisis.”¹⁶ This indicates that an ontological view of reality has ethical implications. Justification of how humans ought to act towards the environment has a lot to do with the nature of humans in relation to nonhuman entities.

Practically, anthropocentrism has led humankind into a difficult situation. ... [it] directed human behavior and represented itself in practice as possessive utilitarianism, selfishness, which developed into economism, consumerism, and individualism. In economic development, economic growth was the only goal, often at the expense of the environment and resources, which led to environmental pollution and resource shortages on a global scale.¹⁷

Sigmund Freud speaks of three-fold challenges to anthropocentrism (human narcissism, in his words). The first is the Copernican revolution, which challenged the prevailing conception of the Earth, the human habitat, as the center of the universe. The prevalent notion of the Earth as the center of the universe supports the anthropocentric view that humans are the center of the universe, but the Copernican revolution reveals that the Earth does not occupy the central position; rather, it revolves round the sun. The second is Darwinism, the theory of evolution by natural selection, which subjects both human and nonhuman beings to evolutionary changes, thereby undermining the fundamental cleavage which the anthropocentric view makes between animals and privileged mankind. The third is psychoanalysis, which challenges the anthropocentric conception of humans as rational beings in perfect control of themselves, by virtue of which they are said to be essentially different from nonhuman entities in the world. This is challenged by Freudian discovery of the primordial influence of the unconscious libidinal id on human beings, which makes them not in perfect rational control of their action.¹⁸

¹⁴I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 298

¹⁵Rae, ‘Anthropocentrism,’ 2

¹⁶M, Yu, & Y. Lei, ‘Anthropocentric Ethical Theories: Relations with Non-Human Beings,’ *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS)* Vol. II

¹⁷Yu & Lei, ‘Anthropocentric Ethical Theories’

¹⁸S. Freud, ‘A difficulty in the path of psycho-analysis,’ In J. Strachey (ed.), *The complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud: An infantile neurosis and other works Vol.17*, (London: Vintage, 2001), 140-141.



In the twentieth century, questions of anthropocentrism generated a renewed interest among philosophers, especially for its lack of geo-historical awareness. Among the most influential of the critics was Michel Foucault. He employed a genealogical methodology through which he traced the history of anthropocentrism back to the time during which he believes alterations occurred in the understanding of human beings in Europe in the sixteenth century. He claims that the epistemic conditions that resulted in the modern version of anthropocentrism were not universal but only occurred at a particular geo-historical location. Foucault asserts that those historical conditions are not constant but are changing; and so, he concludes that “man is an invention of recent date . . . [a]nd one perhaps nearing its end.”¹⁹

Foucault’s thesis on ‘death of man’ influenced some notable scholarly criticisms and rejection of anthropocentrism in several academic disciplines. Some of such developments include environmental studies which challenge the beliefs that humans are distinct from their environment, and that they can and should use the environment to serve their own needs; animal studies which reject the cleavage anthropocentrism makes between humans and animals; some strands of feminism, ecofeminism, which argue that anthropocentrism is not really concern about humans as such, that rather it is a development which confines itself with concerns of the Western male and downgrades women to the status of nonhumans; and posthumanism which sets out to expose how Cartesian human/machine dichotomy is a misunderstanding of the entwined nature of human/nonhuman relationship.²⁰

Yu and Lei refute anthropocentric separation of humans and nature, and the creation of tension between them, fortified by Cartesian dualism that portrays the distinction as a subject-object, with humans as the subjects and nature as the object. They argue that existing interrelatedness between humans and nonhumans is more fundamental than their distinctions and that there are intelligible activities observable in some nonhuman beings, like animals. They contend that some animals exhibit a rich communication system. They make and use tools. They solve problems and educate their offspring. They develop complex social organizations and possess aesthetic consciousness, etc. Hence, they only differ from humans in these qualities in degree.²¹

Alternatives to Anthropocentrism

As a way of curbing the perceived effects of anthropocentrism on the environment, some philosophers have developed some theories to remedy the situation. An observable trend among the theories is an attempt to extend the scope of moral subjects with intrinsic moral value to include nonhuman entities at various levels. As biocentrism advocates for inclusion of all living beings, ecocentrism seeks the same for the whole of the ecosystem, and cosmocentrism extends it to all there is in the cosmos.

Biocentrism

Biocentrism is a theory that includes all living beings within the scope of moral relevance. It is of the view that it ascribes intrinsic value to not only to human beings, but also to other living organisms, plants, and animals. It sees humans as one among all living things and does not consider

¹⁹M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 387

²⁰G. Rae ‘Anthropocentrism,’ 3

²¹Yu & Lei, ‘Anthropocentric Ethical Theories’



them as more important than others. So, there is no basis for claiming that only humans have intrinsic value while relegating instrumental value to nonhumans.²²

The biocentric view accords with some traditional beliefs and cultural practices, like some Indic traditions which have a metaphoric figure of 8.4 million as a number of different living species through which transmigration of souls occur as cycle. Some traditions have elaborate rituals and practices through which they offer respect to nonhuman forms of life. This involves, among others, food offerings to animals as well as worship of animistic deities.²³ Another instance of this is in Igbo culture, where it is a taboo to kill *eke* (python). “In Anambra State..., *eke* (the royal python) is regarded as a totem, and nobody can deliberately kill it without incurring the ostracism of the people.”²⁴

Ecocentrism

Ecocentrism transcends biocentrism by not only considering living beings within the scope of moral relevance but also the whole ecosystem, including inanimate things. Leopold advocates that ethics should be extended beyond relationships among humans to include land. Land inclusion would incorporate animals and plants that grow in the land. He sees such an ethics as “an evolutionary possibility and ecological necessity.”²⁵ “It holds that the ecosphere (inclusive of everything organic and inorganic), rather than individual life forms, is the source of all existence, thus promoting a holistic approach towards the environment, politics, culture and lifestyle.” Ecocentrism takes a broader approach towards the environment than biocentrism.

Traditional ecocentric philosophies are intertwined with religious or cultural outlooks, giving a strong faith-based approach. Ecocentrism tends to encourage people to be in awe of the world around them, and it limits human encroachment on the environment. It also upholds that the ecosphere will punish those who have damaged the environment.²⁶

Cosmocentrism

Cosmocentrism is of the view that Earth is only a part of one solar system among many other existing solar systems, and that it is ultimately just a part of the whole cosmos; and these solar systems go through a series of cycles. Along the line, they collapse while new ones are formed elsewhere. Moral consideration in this manner of thinking widens to accommodate all components of the cosmos as having intrinsic value. It gets broader than ecocentrism in its moral consideration.²⁷

Defence of Anthropocentrism

A fundamental assumption that informs the development of the criticisms of anthropocentrism in the field of environmental ethics is that it is the cause of the ecological crisis. Hence, the critics developed theories that would counter anthropocentrism as a remedy to the crisis. In response to such critics, some philosophers have argued in defence of anthropocentrism. Some uphold the traditional conception of the theory, while others propose modified versions of the theory as apt for

²²Rai *et al*, ‘Universalism and Ethical Values for the Environment,’ 11

²³Rai, ‘Universalism and Ethical Values for the Environment,’ 11

²⁴C. O, Okeke; C. N. Ibenwa & G. T. Okeke, ‘Conflicts Between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Eastern Nigeria: The Igbo Example,’ *Sage* 1/10 (2017), 5 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017709322>> accessed 6 December, 2023

²⁵A. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*. (Oxford: University Press, 1947), 164

²⁶Rai *et al*, ‘Universalism and Ethical Values for the Environment,’ 11

²⁷Rai, ‘Universalism and Ethical Values for the Environment,’ 11



environmental preservation. Kopnina makes a general summary of the view of the defenders of anthropocentrism; according to him, they contend:

First, that criticism of anthropocentrism can be counterproductive and misleading by failing to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate human interests. Second, that humans differ greatly in their environmental impacts, and consequently, addressing human inequalities should be a precondition for environmental protection. Third, since ecosystems constitute the ‘life-support system’ for humans, anthropocentrism can and should be a powerful motivation for environmental protection. Fourth, human self-love is not only natural but helpful as a starting point for loving others, including nonhumans.²⁸

More specifically, Hayward argues in favour of anthropocentrism by making the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate human desires, stating that legitimate desires involve care for the environment while illegitimate desires lead to speciesism and human chauvinism. For him, “it is not the concern with human welfare per se that is the problem here, but the arbitrary privileging of that welfare over the welfare of members of other species.”²⁹ He is of the view that not every action done by humans for their interests is human-centered (anthropocentric). Those done for the selfish interest of a few but do not serve the general view of humans are illegitimate and cannot be rightfully regarded as anthropocentric. Even when it is not human interests that are directly harmed but those of other species, the harm indirectly affects humans negatively and cannot be qualified as human-centered.

In the case of hunting a species to extinction, this is not helpfully or appropriately seen as ‘anthropocentrism’ since it typically involves one group of humans who are actually condemned by (probably a majority of) other humans who see the practice not as serving human interests in general, but the interests of one quite narrowly-defined group, such as poachers or whalers. A similar point can be made regarding the destruction of the forest – for those who derive economic benefit from the destruction oppose not only the human interests of indigenous peoples whose environment is thereby destroyed, but also the interests of all humans who depend on the oxygen such forests produce.³⁰

Similarly, Norton defends anthropocentrism by making a distinction between strong and weak anthropocentrism; while dismissing the former, he upholds the latter as a valid and effective theory in environmental ethics. Two kinds of preference make the difference between the two. On the one hand is the felt preference, which refers to uncritical human interests. Their satisfaction makes up the strong anthropocentrism. On the other hand is a considered preference, which refers to critical human interests. The satisfaction of such is what makes up the weak anthropocentrism. The felt preference and considered preference distinction of Norton is similar to the distinction Hayward makes between illegitimate and legitimate desires, respectively. Norton defines the two preferences in more detail as follows:

A felt preference is any desire or need of a human individual that can at least temporarily be sated by some specifiable experience of that individual. A considered preference is any desire or need that a human individual would express after careful deliberation, including a judgment that the desire or need is consistent with a rationally adopted worldview – a worldview which includes fully supported

²⁸H. Kopnina, ‘Anthropocentrism: More than Just a Misunderstood Problem,’ *The International Journal of Ecopsychology (IJE)* 3/1(2021), 3

²⁹T. Hayward, ‘Anthropocentrism: A misunderstood problem.’ *Environmental Values*, 6/1 (1997), 59

³⁰Hayward, ‘Anthropocentrism,’ 57-58



scientific theories and a metaphysical framework interpreting those theories, as well as a set of rationally supported aesthetic and moral ideals.³¹

Because strong anthropocentrism is bent on satisfying felt preferences which are not subjected to questioning, checking, or criticism, it leads to a use of natural entities in an exploitative and degrading manner. But in weak anthropocentrism, with its considered preferences which are subject to questioning, checking, or criticism to attain coherence with a rational worldview, the exploitative and degrading value system towards nature is arrested. Based on this rational consideration inherent in weak anthropocentrism, the theory embodies two important ethical resources for environmental ethics: first, it is a resource for recognition of ideals of human behaviours which are harmonious with nature; second, it is a resourceful ground for value formation inherent in human encounter with nature. "Nature need no longer be seen as a mere satisfier of fixed and often consumptive values. It also becomes an important source of inspiration in value formation."³²

In this way, Norton argues that with the consciousness of maintaining harmony with nature, and with the disposition of formation of human attitudes through encounter with nature, which reveals in itself principles of that harmony, the satisfaction of considered preferences in weak anthropocentrism, in a non-individualistic manner, would lead to a sound ethical care of the environment. "Ideals such as that of living in harmony with nature imply rules proscribing the wanton destruction of other species or ecosystems even if the human species faces imminent extinction."³³

Norton affirms weak anthropocentrism as an adequate environmental ethical theory. He hypothesises that policies of environmental preservation drawn from weak anthropocentrism would, in the final analysis, converge with those drawn from nonanthropocentric theories for environmental protection; for human and environmental needs do coincide. He sees maintenance of the environment to serve human material needs as the strongest motivation for protection of the environment and maintains that anthropocentric motivation stands as the best argument for caring for the ecological systems on which humans depend.

In addition to these arguments in favour of anthropocentrism, I argue that the causal link which critics of anthropocentrism make between ecological crisis and anthropocentrism is questionable. The critics claim that the anthropocentric conception of humans as the only entities that have intrinsic value is the cause of ecological crisis. This criticism is itself founded on the assumption that if nonhuman entities are considered as having intrinsic value, the ecological crisis we are passing through would be curbed. Humans would not exploit nature as mere instruments to satisfy their needs. Destruction of wildlife, environmental pollution and degradation, as well as other environmental hazards would be prevented. Such necessary connection, which critics of anthropocentrism assume exists between the ascription of intrinsic value only to humans and ecological crisis, is challenged by the fact that humans cause humanitarian crises for their fellow humans, despite their anthropocentric worldview.

If ascription of intrinsic value is what is required to arrest crisis, then manmade humanitarian crisis caused by fellow human beings would not be known in a world dominated by an anthropocentric worldview. One of the criticisms of opponents of anthropocentrism is that the Universal Declaration

³¹B. G. Norton, 'Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism.' *Environmental Ethics* 6/2, (1984) 164

³²Norton, 'Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism,' 165

³³Norton, 'Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism,' 166



of Human Rights is anthropocentric as it recognises the rights and dignity of humans and has no consideration for nonhuman entities. Be that as it may, time has shown that despite the universal recognition of human rights and dignity, humanitarian crises meted out by fellow humans keep occurring both at national and international levels. The records of wars, genocides, terrorism, human trafficking, torture, racism, and other dehumanising actions against humans caused by fellow humans in history and in the contemporary world show that recognition of intrinsic value in an entity does not necessarily prevent human destructive actions towards that entity. This understanding accords with Hayward's view that "proposals for 'rejection' of anthropocentrism are unhelpful because they cloud the real problem they think to address."³⁴ To support this view further, Burchett argues that it is a mistake to equate anthropocentrism with conducts destructive to the environment since such conduct does not serve the common good of humans. He writes:

Besides, those who directly benefit from ecological irresponsibility and degradation represent a very small portion of humanity. Unless anthropocentrism is necessarily equated with an attitude that condones policies favoring the short-term interests of the few over the long-term interests of the many, it is not exactly obvious why being human-centered is so toxic to the environment.³⁵

Hence, apart from the longstanding interest in increasing the scope of entities endowed with intrinsic value, which has given rise to several theories in environmental ethics, it is important for scholars of environmental ethics to explore more fundamental factors that cause environmental crisis. The more fundamental causes of environmental crisis are captured by Norton's concept of felt preferences distinguished from considered preferences and Hayward's idea of illegitimate interests distinguished similarly from legitimate interests, as discussed above.

A Universal Dialogical Approach

While the defense of Norton and Hayward helps to highlight the dimension of human disposition that causes environmental degradation, it does not do away with the problem of anthropocentrism. The assumption that humans are at the center and measure of all things, which is essential to anthropocentrism, cannot guarantee environmental preservation; it also cannot lead to peace among people, for it distorts the proper place of humans in the world. It can lead individuals or groups of persons to place themselves at the center of all things and lose sight of dialoguing with others. The consequence is an endless clash with others in line with Samuel Philips Huntington's theory of clash of civilisation.³⁶

Without denying the special place of humans among all created things, that special place needs proper interpretation that would not lead to the exaggeration of their special endowment to the detriment of nonhuman existents and humans themselves. The idea of universal dialogue is key to avoiding such exaggeration, which also entails avoiding the problem of centralising any entity among existents, as critics of anthropocentrism have done in their proposals of biocentrism, ecocentrism, and the like, as their way of countering anthropocentrism. Unlike those proposals against anthropocentrism, universal dialogue does not place any party at the center but sees all parties as being equal in a roundtable discussion addressing a problem together with due consideration of the interests of all.

³⁴Hayward, 'Anthropocentrism,' 57

³⁵Burchett, 'Anthropocentrism and Nature,' 121

³⁶S. P. Huntington, 'Clash of Civilisations?' *Foreign Affairs* 72/3 (1993), 22



Albert A. Anderson discusses universal dialogue as a dialogue that is common to all people, which is action-oriented, rooted in nature, and touches all spheres of life.³⁷ Marie Pauline Eboh expounds that this kind of dialogue extends beyond humans to nonhuman existents and that it is what can guarantee universal harmony. She writes, “Whenever culture-nature interaction is in equipoise and equitable, ethical and aesthetic, there is harmony. On the contrary, when culture tries to take undue advantage of nature, such disasters as pollution, overflowing, landslides, global warming, and heat waves, etc. occur.”³⁸ Universal dialogue seeks not only the interests of humans but that of the environment. Udoekpo’s interpretation of the Genesis account of creation shows that, instead of making humans the center of all things, it rather indicates that humans are part of the family of creation with other creatures and are invited to all-inclusive dialogue. He writes:

Genesis account also reveals that humans, like all other living things, are earthy creatures; they are known by God, formed from the dust or soil (*hā’ādāmā*) of the earth, ‘*adām* from the ‘*ādāmā*, making us members of the community of creation. This revelation discourages abuse, exploitation, human segregation, and inordinate anthropocentric and instrumentalist domination of the natural environment, including trees, water, and soil (1:26-28; Ps 8:4-8). It exhorts humanity, God’s image (*imago Dei*), everywhere, on every continent, to a communal, inclusive, harmonious dialogue and care for one another, particularly the planet (2:15).³⁹

This interpretation helps to surmount the interpretation of the text as a root of anthropocentrism. It sheds light on the obligation of humans to be in a universal dialogue, an interdependent dialogue with all creatures, whose consequence is the care of not only humans but the environment.

Conclusion

The concern to address the environmental crisis bedeviling the world has led to criticisms of anthropocentrism as the cause of environmental degradation. Biocentrism, ecocentrism and cosmocentrism are some of the theories propounded as alternatives to anthropocentrism. However, the defendants of anthropocentrism argue that the real cause of environmental crisis is not the theory but the satisfaction of some human desires that are inimical not only to the environment but also to human wellbeing and are hence not anthropocentric. Norton calls such desires felt preferences, and Hayward calls them illegitimate desires. While the defenders of anthropocentrism shed light on the dimensions of human dispositions that directly cause environmental degradation, it does not do away with the problem of anthropocentrism, which, even if it does not directly lead to environmental degradation, distorts the place of humans among the created world, undermining the necessity of their interdependence with other existents. An important key to addressing this problem is universal dialogue in which humans see themselves as part of the family of creation where every creature has their intrinsic value and their interests count in the dialogue. Unlike those proposals against anthropocentrism, like biocentrism and ecocentrism, which still create some impression of centralising some existents among others, universal dialogue does not place any party at the center but sees all parties as being equal in a roundtable discussion addressing a problem together with due consideration of the interests of all. The outcome of such a dialogical approach is the safety of both humans and all existents, including the environment.

³⁷A. A. Anderson, ‘Universal Dialogue.’ *Dialogue and Universalism* 8/10 (1998), 10

³⁸M. P. Eboh, *Dialogue, Democracy and Morality, President Obasanjo’s Moral Foundations for Our Polity & Other Nigerian Ethical Policies Revisited* (Owerri: Springfield Publishers, 2001), 72

³⁹Udoekpo, ‘Genesis 1:26-28- African Perspectives,’ 59