



Kant and Heidegger on Environmental Ethics: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

Immanuel Kant is a German modern philosopher. His contribution to philosophy is that he reconciled rationalism and empiricism. However, Kant believes that human beings are the cause of environmental hazards and not animals directly. Martin Heidegger is a German contemporary philosopher. He is called “the philosopher of Beings”. He is not against science and technology but the abuse that destroy nature. From him, he says: “Let beings be”, The problem is that both Kant and Heidegger accept that human beings are the cause of environmental troubles. Humans are to be warned and they should know that we are only care takers of nature and we should not destroy it so that generations after us will not suffer. Our method is textual analysis. It means a critical look at the original works of Kant and Heidegger and commentaries written on them by other writers to discover the similarities and differences in our authors.

INTRODUCTION

Many traditional western ethical perspectives, are anthropocentric or human-centered in that they either assign intrinsic value to human beings alone than any non-human things such as the protection of promotion of human interests or well-being at the expense of non-human things turns out to be nearly always justified. Kant’s environmental ethics is anthropocentric that is human being based. Whereas for Heidegger let “beings be”, it involve both human beings and non-human beings. In this work, we are reflecting on what is environmental ethics, Kant on environmental ethics, Heidegger on

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environmental ethics, similarities and differences in Kant and Heidegger, evaluation and conclusions. Let us begin with what is environmental ethics.

Environmental ethics

One cannot discuss environmental ethics without understanding what is environment? Environment is your surroundings and what is around you. The environment is your house, your gender, your town, your shops, the hills and rivers, the ocean, the atmosphere. The concept of the natural environment can be distinguished as natural system without massive human intervention. These include all natural vegetation, micro-organism, soil, rocks, atmosphere and natural phenomenon. Michael Barbier writes:

An environment is the complex set of physical, geographic, biological, social, cultural and political conditions that surround an individual or organisms and that ultimately determine its form¹.

The environment influences how people live and how societies develop. For that reason, people's progress, economic development and environment are closely linked. We need to explore, tend and protect our environment in order to live happily. All plants and animals adjust to the environment in which they are born and live. A change in any compound of environment may cause discomfort and affect normal life. In continuation Barbier remarks: "Any unfavourable change or degeneration in the environment is regarded as environmental pollution"². Modern industrialized man has modified his physical surrounding so much that the physical factors with which he interacts are mainly of his making. These factors such as noise, tobacco smoke or industrial chemicals are very recent and they are commonly remain within human residence. Consequently, diseases such as cancer, asthma are becoming more rampant.

What is Ethics? Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the rightness or wrongness of human actions. It deals with how men and women ought to behave. Ethic studies the reason why certain kinds of actions are morally wrong and why other kinds of actions are morally right and commendable. Omoregbe says:

To live a moral life is the law of man's one very nature and to throw this law to the winds and behave any how can never, in the final analysis be in man's own interest.³

The way to happiness is the moral way of life, that is, the way of life in compliance with the law of one's own nature. What is environmental ethics? Environmental ethics is the part of the environmental Philosophy that considers extending the traditional boundaries of ethics from solely humans to include non-human in the world. It exerts influence on a large range of disciplines including law, sociology, theology, economics, ecology and geography. There are many ethical decisions that human beings make with

respect to the environment. For example, should we continue to clear cut forests for the sake of human consumption? Should we continue to propagate? Should we continue to make gasoline to power vehicles? What environmental obligation do we need to keep for future generation? Stanford education on environmental ethics states:

Environmental ethics is the discipline of philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents.⁴

The challenge of environmental ethics to anthropocentric that is human centeredness embedded in traditional western ethical thinking. The early development of the discipline in 1960's and 1970's. The connection of deep ecology, feminist attempt to apply traditional ethical theories include consequentialism, deontology, and the virtue ethics, to support contemporary environmental concerns. The focus of environmental literature on wildness, the possible future development of the discipline. Let us now discuss Immanuel Kant on environmental ethics.

Immanuel Kant on Environmental Ethics

Kant's ethical theories include natural law and categorical imperative, would not allow us to damage the environment as it is. Before one can really understand Kant environmental ethics he/she must understand these theories fully. For Kant, only one thing that is good without qualifications, and this is a good will. All other things we generally consider as good are not unconditionally good; their goodness needs to be qualified because they can be misused. Intelligence is good, but it can become bad when it is used to commit crimes. According to Kant, a good will is a will which acts for the sake of duty. Kant distinguishes between "acting for the sake of duty" and "acting according to duty". To act for the sake of duty is to act, not because one hopes to gain anything from the action. It means one has the natural inclination to do such things purely out of reverence for the moral law. Omoregbe reflecting on Kant says:

If we simply follow our natural inclinations in our actions or if we have some material benefits from such actions, our actions have no moral value. The moral value of an action does not depend on the result of the action, but on the fact that it was performed strictly for the sake of duty.⁵

According to Kant, the yardstick is the principle of universalization. If you want to know whether the action you intend to perform is morally right or wrong, look at the maxim of the action underlying principle and universal

law. Simply put do unto others what you want them to do to you. Another example given by Kant is that of a man who finds himself in a financial difficulty. To get out of this problem he decide to borrow money with a promise to pay it back within a fixed time but he knows that he will never pay it. He show now ask himself whether he would like this maxim become a universal law. "How would things stand if my maxim become universal law"⁶. It is very clear that this maxim cannot be a universal law without contradicting itself. For if it were to become a universal law that anybody in a financial difficulty should borrow money with an insincere promise to pay it back although the money will really not be paid back, that would be the end of borrowing and lending since nobody would take such a promise seriously to lend money to anybody or the basis of such a promise.

The categorical imperative. There are, according to Kant, two types of imperative; such as a hypothetical imperative and categorical imperative which commands imperative. A hypothetical imperative is a conditional imperative which commands a person to do something which is a means to an end. Kant further distinguishes between "problematic hypothetical" imperative and "assertoric hypothetical" imperative. An example of a problematic imperative is the following: if you want to be a physician, you must study medicine. Kant also calls this the imperative of skill. Any imperative which commands one to do something as a means to happiness is an assertoric hypothetical imperative. In short a hypothetical imperative is an imperative which command an action because it is a means to an end.

In contrast to categorical imperative which is an unconditional imperative. It does not command one to do something which is a means to another end; what is commands is good in itself. It commands actions not as means to ends but good in themselves. It admits no exception; "if" or condition is attached to it. Hence it obliges all men without exception. This is the moral imperative that is the imperative of moral law. The imperative of morality is absolute and categorical and nobody can be exempted from it. Kant also calls it an "apoclectic practical principle"⁷. How is the categorical imperative formulated? Kant gives six different formulations of the categorical. They are as follows (1) Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. (2) Again "I am never to act otherwise than so my maxim should become a universal law (3) Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature. (4) So act as to use humanity both in your own person and in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never simply as a means (5) So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim. (6) So act as if you were always through your maxims a law-making member in a universal kingdom of ends.

Does Kant have anything to teach us about environmental ethics? For Kant, environmental ethics should be applied to only beings that have reasons and also apply to non-human indirectly. Kant talking about

environmental ethics he made a distinction between instrumental value and intrinsic value (meaning “non-instrumental value) has been of considerable importance. The former is the value of things as means to further some other ends. Whereas, the latter is the value of things as ends in themselves regardless of whether they are also useful as means to an end. For instance, certain fruits have instrumental value for bats. However, it is not widely agreed that fruits have value as ends in themselves. We can likewise think of a person who teaches others as having instrumental value for those who want to acquire knowledge.

Yet, in addition to any such value, it is normally said that a person as a person has intrinsic value. That is value in his or her own right independently of his or her prospects for saving the ends of others. For example, a certain wild plant may have intrinsic value because it provides the ingredients for some medicine or as an aesthetic object for human observers. But if the plant has some value in itself independently of its prospects for furthering some other ends such as human health, or the pleasure from aesthetic experience, then the plant also has intrinsic value. This is because the intrinsically value is that which is good as an end in itself, it is commonly agreed that something’s possession of intrinsic value generates a *prima facie* direct moral duty on the part of moral agents, to protect it or at least refrain from damaging it. Kant believes and draw inspiration from Aristotle thus:

Nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man and that the value of non-human things in nature is merely instrumental.⁸

Generally anthropocentric positions find it problematic to articulate what is wrong with cruel treatment of non-humans that is animals, except to the extent that such treatment may lead to bad consequences for human beings. Kant on his duties to animals and spirit gave an example of a dog. He suggests that cruelty towards a dog might encourage a person to develop a character which would be desensitized to cruelty towards human. From the stand point, cruelty towards non-human animals would be instrumentally, rather intrinsically wrong. Likewise, anthropocentrism often recognizes some non-intrinsic wrongness of anthropogenic environmental devastation. Such destruction might damage of human beings now and in the future, since our wellbeing is essentially dependent on a sustainable environment.

In summation, Kant believes that environmental ethics should be applied to agents that have reason and that is man and in directly to non-humans. Let us now discuss Heidegger on environmental ethics.

Martin Heidegger on environmental ethics

For Heidegger, his own entire career is to recover the real meaning of Being that other philosophers seem to have forgotten. Heidegger calls it the "Oblivion of Being". According to Heidegger, some philosophers such as Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes believe that nature should be exploited; saying that, "One should twist the tail of the tiger to see the reaction". The ground should be cut open and explorations carried out so that there would be gasoline for human utilization. Trees and flowers should be exploited so that new ones will grow. The above ideas had influenced science and technology that nature is now destroyed and we have a lot of problems in the society today. But Heidegger's notion of "letting things be" has made his thinking attractive for a radical environmentalist interested in transforming humanity's currently destructive attitude towards nature. Heidegger is not against science and technology but the abuse. For him, "let beings be".

Heidegger believes that in this contemporary era human beings cannot be separated from his environment. He says one's environment speaks volume, about the person. After the second world war, Heidegger had a rethink concerning science and technology. This is because of the devastating effects of science and technology on human beings and non-human beings alike. We are now slaves to what we have produced for example cell phones and computer. We are now annihilated human beings, strangers to ourselves and our environment. Heidegger remarks:

The decision question of science and technology today is no longer where do we find sufficient quantities of fuel? The decisive question now is, in what way can we tame and direct the unimaginably vast amounts of atomic energy and so secure mankind against the danger that these gigantic energies can destroy nature.⁹

According to Heidegger nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry. This relation of humans to the world as in principle is a technical one. If the taming of atomic energy is successful; it will be new era of technical development this is because whatever we know today starts from somewhere. For Heidegger, one must learn what it means to "let beings be" Heidegger's thought has influenced a radical form of environmentalism called deep ecology. Guignon commenting Heidegger writes:

Unlike reform environment which fights pollution but remains anthropocentric, deep ecology argues that only a transformation of western anthropocentrism can save the bio-sphere from destruction¹⁰.

For Heidegger, it means that nature should not be tampered with, it should be cared for and protected. In understanding Heidegger properly, one must live an authentic life and it means one should not bend nature to his own will through science and technology because it will make one not to be the “guardian of Being”

To understand modern science and technology it is important to go beyond their practical instrumentality and investigate into the mathematical and axiomatic as well as modern subjectivity. The man of science and technology are conscious of what happens in the age and this is about truth. Science and technology should produce things that will develop human beings and protect our environment because human and non-humans relate to Being who is a mystery. Heidegger say:

The meaning pervading technology hides itself..that which shows itself and at the same time withdraws is the essential trait of what we call the mystery. I call the comportment which enables us to keep open “the meaning hidden in technology, opened to mystery.”¹¹

The German believe that every day “experience” of what it mean” for things to be”. Shaped by gestates that organize the concrete contents or phenomena. There are no primary qualities, substance or essence of things. Indeed, there are beings we related with; there is no ultimate ontological division between seed and nature.

How did Heidegger cope with environmental hazards? To cope with hazards Heidegger believes that human beings and non-humans relate to the higher Being. What is this Being? For Heidegger this “Being” is a mystery and it is only through silent mediation that one can approach it out we cannot penetrate; since it conceals and unconceals.

Today, we have a better understanding of Heidegger’s “Being” which is not anchored on space and time. For us now, is the “Pure Being” who is the originative cause of all things all created things terminate in him (Terminus ad quem). For Heidegger, to cope with the hazards we must let nature be and must prevent the problem rather than control. In philosophy when a system is not working one removes it and brings another, it is only in the sciences that they manage problems. In short, for him, prevention is better than cure.

Though human beings have gone to the moon and other planets and also advancing in science and technology to make life comfortable, still human beings have no peace, human beings need peace among themselves and in their environment by returning to God. Therefore, societal well-being and environment cleanliness could not be active by mere economic and societal arrangements but through individual and collective decision to return to the proper understanding of the meaning of “Being”, there is need for human and societal orientation and rehabilitation. It is an in depth understanding of

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“Being” that can aid human beings live above all these ills in the society and the environment.

However, since we are discussing African environmental ethics. Africans also believe in the existence and reality of being. There are varieties of opinions in this regard. Being for some is that which other contingent beings participate in while the Supreme Being governs the theocratic universe. Being is also eternal and unchangeable. According to placid temples “Being is the concept of “vital force”, force in the nature of being; force is Being and being is force. For Temples, force there is understood as life, energy, strength, power, and dynamism or what could be technically referred to as vital force. Among the Yoruba of western Nigeria as in other African societies E.B. Idowu says:

First in the hierarchy of existence is the “Supreme Being” Olorun, after him the ancestors who are acting as intermediaries most powerful of them is “Orumiea”.¹²

Indeed, Idowu accepts the gradation of beings in African societies but among the Yoruba, the most powerful and strongest is the orumila. For Africans, human life is a cycle of birth, puberty, marriage procreation, death and after life. One could not stay in one stage forever, he must move on to the next, considered to be the seat of the Supreme Being. Therefore, Being is not static but dynamic. It is also a mystery one cannot understand or comprehend. Let us now reflect on the similarities and differences in Kant and Heidegger on environmental ethics.

Similarities and differences in Kant and Heidegger on environmental ethics

Similarities

- Both Kant and Heidegger believe that there is environmental hazards.
- They also accept that human beings are those who have destroyed our environment.
- Kant and Heidegger are of the opinion that our environment need to be cared for, protected for future generations since we are only care takers, that one day we shall give an account of our stewardship.

Differences

- For Kant, environmental ethics is only applied to beings that have reasons and not non-humans. If we are to apply it to no-human it will be indirectly.
- Kant belongs to the loco-anthropocentric group.
- Kant mentioned for example a dog that cruelty towards a dog might encourage a person to develop a character which would be desensitized to cruelty towards humans.

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- Kant believes that one should treat human beings as an end. But nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man and that the value of non-human things in nature is merely instrumental.
- According to Heidegger the biosphere will be saved from danger by saying: “let human beings and non-human be”, it means allowing nature to be do not tamper with it.
- For Heidegger, we should protect our environment and the best solution is “prevention is better than cure”.
- For him, both human beings and non-human are related to Being. It means we are only care takers one day all of us will give an account of our stewardship.
- For Heidegger, human beings have gone to the moon and other planets and also advance in science and technology; but we have no peace in the world. There is need for human beings to return back to Being. For us now it means “God” so that one can live above all ills in the society and in our environment.

Evaluation

We give credit to Kant for his ideas concerning the application of environmental ethics to only beings that have reason and indirectly to non-humans. However, on a critical note, Kant cannot be forgotten in his involvement on environmental ethics. This is because our environment speaks volumes about us. Martin Heidegger cannot be forgotten in environmental ethics for his contributions especially “let human beings be and non-human be! Heidegger is not against the development by science and technology. He is against the destruction of nature and wrongful application of science and technology. This explains what he means by “let humans and non-humans be”. It means we must relate to nature with dignity. We must understand the natural environment and its component as existential “being” tending towards the higher “Being”. This means one should not destroy the essences of natural environment. We are only caretakers of ourselves and the things in this world because one day we shall give account. Today, the better understanding of Heidegger is not his own “Being” that is spacio-temporal but the “Actus Purus (“Pure Being) that is eternal being who is beyond space and time which all things terminate in Him. (Terminus Adquem).

CONCLUSION

We have come to the close of “Kant and Heidegger on Environmental Ethics”. Kant’s contribution is that environmental ethics should be applied

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only to beings that have reason but indirectly to non-human, while Heidegger believes that nature should not be tampered with, “let human beings be and non-humans be”. Indeed, both Kant and Heidegger believe that human beings are the cause of environmental hazards. For Heidegger, to cope with the hazards prevention is better than cure. Also one should be a care taker of his environment since one day we shall give account.

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