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# A Philosophical Reflection on the Debate Concerning the State and the Future of the Natural Environment

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**Abstract**

This essay examines the crises of opinion regarding the nature and character of environmental problems in the world today. The essay examines two philosophical positions in the debate on environmental degradation - the position of persons commonly referred to as ecological pessimists and that of persons commonly regarded as ecological optimists, thereafter, the study proceeds to adopt the position of ecological optimists, who trust in human and technological ingenuity in resolving any environmental problem. Next, study attempts a philosophical gaze at the debate arguing in consequence that due to the glaring, deplorable state of the environment, it is wiser

and safer to align with ecological optimists in order not to avoid trading cheap on both human and environmental destiny. It argues that just as inductive trends of events can proves dubious at times; nature, despite its consistent pattern overtime can equally prove dubious, by manifesting signs, contrary to its observable consistent pattern and contrary to human expectations. The study holds that environmental problems and threats are real; and unless we act now, the anticipated and unexpected feedbacks from nature can either wring human neck or human impact may wring the neck of nature. Alternatively, both could occur, resulting in mutual catastrophe. It argues that given the spate of the human impacts on nature, and the threatening consequences therefrom, although we do not have assurance for ultimate victory over these problems, it is better to constantly make efforts toward resolving environmental problems than to do otherwise.

**Key Words:** Ecological degradation, Environmental threats, Environmental pessimism, global collapse, Environmental optimism, Myth of ecological collapse, Nature preservation, Environmental ethics

## Introduction

This study is about the debate concerning the safety and the future of the natural environment. It reflects on the existent pull of opinion concerning the state of the environment and the nature of environmental problems. As a result of the desire to satisfy human needs, people interact with nature through agriculture, lumbering, fishing, concretization, river dredging, hunting, urbanization, genetic engineering, science and technology. Some negative impacts result from such interactions, which now threaten the continuous, harmonious existence of the natural environment. Such negative impacts include the problems of pollution, energy consumption, greenhouse effects, global warming, stratospheric ozone depletion, acid precipitation, overpopulation, cropland scarcity, tropical deforestation, desertification, extinction of species, species invasion, pollution, migration, scarcity of freshwater, decline of fish stocks, loss of biodiversity, extinction of species,climate change, erosion, garbage

threat, land degradation, resources depletion, war, poverty, and so on.[1] Without doubt, the natural environment has been greatly tampered with, and distorted out of its original state and shape. Nevertheless, different scholars, professionals, and sometimes individuals, are divided about the degree of these distortions, what they portend for mankind, the future and the environment itself, and what we can do about them. Hence, there are existent crises of opinions by concerned environmentalists, scientists, philosophers, economists, geologists, geographers, ecologists, historians, and many other professionals. While some are optimistic and, thus, make forecast of hope, some others are pessimistic, and, thus, make forecast of doom, and of a gloomy future. Yet, some others, including the ecological agnostics, hold other views or suspend judgement by making no categorical assertion. These kind of hypothetical views dangle between the two positions that are diametrically opposed. But we shall devote attention to the two major opposing views, while subsuming others under them where necessary.

The ecological pessimists are those thinkers who have gloomy view of the environment due to the negative consequences from human impacts. They argue that unless urgent attention in taken, and unless there is urgent change in human attitude concerning present state of interaction with the environment, environmental collapse is inevitable, imminent and doom pending. On the other hand, the ecological optimists do not foresee any danger; they argue instead

[1] For detailed exposition and analyses of environmental problems, see T.F. Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 52-72, J. Zeaman, *Overpopulation.* (New York: Franklin Watts, 2002), pp. 70-92, H.H. Titus and M. Keeton, *Ethics for Today.* (New York: D. Van Nostrand company, 1973), pp. 484-485, E. Barcalow, *Moral Philosophy: Theory and Issues*, (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 358-362. D.K. Asthana and Meera Asthana, *Environment: Problems and Solutions*, (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company PVT Ltd., 2012), pp. J.D. Cox, *Climate Crash: Abrupt Climate Change and what it Means for Our Future*, (Washington, D.C: Joseph Henry Press, 2005). D. Jamieson, *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 8-13, J. Speth and P. Haas, *Global Environmental Governance*, (London: Island Press, 2006), pp. 12-51.

that we are not anywhere near killing the planet; they trust in human and technological ingenuity in resolving any problem. They regard the forecast of doom by their opponents as a myth. Dale Jamieson captures this controversy this way:

> Many biologists believe that the sixth major wave of extinction since life began is now occurring, and that this one, unlike the other five, is being caused by human action. Atmospheric scientists tell us that we have set in motion events that will take more than a century to play out, and that the result is almost certain to be a climate that is warmer than humans have ever experienced. Many other examples could be given. Some doubt the seriousness of this crisis because they are skeptical about the science. They think that scientists exaggerate their results in order to obtain more research funding (Jamieson 2008: 6).

This debate, which we shall soon turn, is also represented roughly but in brief in twofold by Daniel Botkin and Edward Keller. In their view, "[e]nvironmentalists believed that the world will be destroyed if people do not change their approach to the environment". According to them, "economic and social development mean the destruction of the environment and therefore ultimately, the end of civilization, the extinction of many species and potentially, the extinction of human beings" (Botkin and Keller 1998: 4). The anti-environmentalists, on the other hand argue that social and economic health and progress are necessary for the prosperity of people and civilization. According to them, environmentalists represent a dangerous extreme view because they focus on the environment to the detriment of people. The anti-environmentalists therefore infer that this environmentalists' view would destroy the very basis of civilization and lead to the ruin of our modern way of life (Botkin and Keller 1998: 4). Arising from such controversy, some concerns, which will attract our responses and, which we shall be inquiring into, are: are there environment problems and attendant crises? If there are, then are the perceived environmental problems and their inseparable crises real? If yes, are

they threatening? Is the environment at risk? And are humans also at risk? If yes, to what extent? The involvement in this debate is necessary because the accurate understanding of these issues is germane to informing human attitudes toward natural environment and their challenges, with a view to resolving them.

**Ecological pessimism**

Despite the many advantages, which result from human interaction with nature, such as improved standard of living, better health conditions, enhanced knowledge and leisure, among others, there are some negative effects of environmental degradation, which result from this same interaction and which are threats to the survival of the globe. For example, G. Tyler Miller, Jr. and Scott Spoolman note that

> …forests are shrinking, deserts are expanding, soils are eroding, and rangelands are deteriorating. In addition, the lower atmosphere is warming, glaciers are melting, seas are rising, and storms are becoming more destructive. And in many areas, water tables are falling, rivers are running dry, fisheries are collapsing, coral reefs are disappearing, various forms of life are becoming extinct, environmental refugees are increasing, and output of some pollutants and wastes are rising. (Miller and Spoolman 2008: 15)

Thinkers are divided with respect to what these consequences hold for the environment, mankind and the future. This means that people "disagree about how serious our environmental problems are and what we should do about them" (Miller 2005: 323). Nevertheless, many people have come to realize that natural resources are subject to diminishment, destruction and loss through careless exploitation, pollution and general encroachment of civilization (Thiroux 1995:

438). The Ecological pessimists have gloomy views of the environment; they make forecasts of ecological doom, drawing inferences from human impacts on the natural environment and the consequent feedback resulting from ecological dilapidation.

Rachel Carson draws attention to the immediate and remote impact of chemical pollutions, known and unknown, which singularly alter the course of history. Carson (1994: 1-3) argues that the harmony which once existed in nature, and which made it serve a variety of purposes for all lives in it, has been strangely intercepted by man. This leads to disturbing negative consequences, which is driving some species into extinction and making life dull and moribund for others in different parts of the world. This is why she says: "A grim spectre has crept upon us almost unnoticed… and tragedy may easily become a reality" (Carson 1994: 3). According to Carson, in the history of the interaction between living things and their surroundings, it is in the 20th century that man acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world.

> [T]his power has not only increased to one of disturbing magnitude but it has changed in character. The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissue is for the most part irreversible. In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little recognized partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world – the very nature of its life (Carson 1994: 5-6).

Many of these chemicals are used in man's war against nature (for example, in killing insects, weeds, rodents and other organisms, which

human beings have regarded as pests in the modern time) in farms, gardens, forests and homes, and they have the power to kill both good and bad insects, birds, fish in the streams. These chemicals also have the power to coat the leaves with a deadly film, and to linger on in the soil. It is possible for such a barrage of poisons (originally directed at some rodents, insects, and other pests) laid down on the surface of the earth to make it unfit for all life (Carson 1994: 6-7). For this reason, Carson suggests that they should not be called insecticides but biocides. In argumentation exploit, Carson continues:

> Along with the possibility of the extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has therefore become the contamination of man's total environment with such substances of incredible potential for harm – substances that accumulate in the tissues of plants and animals and even penetrate the germ cells to shatter or alter the very material of heredity upon which the shape of the future depends (Carson 1994: 8).

Carson argues that the road we have long been travelling, and with which we progress with great speed, is deceptively easy; at its end lies disaster. The other road – the one "less travelled by" – offers our last and only chance which assures the preservation of our earth. According to Carson, the chemical barrage, which has been hurled against the fabric of life, is capable of striking back in unexpected ways (Carson 1994: 277, 297). Carson writes that "the control of nature" is a phrase conceived in arrogance; in turning chemical weapons against the insects, we have also turned them against the earth.

According to Carson, in the near past, mankind lived in fear of the scourges of infectious diseases that once swept nations before them. Now the major concern is no longer with the disease organisms that

once were omnipresent. Advancement in knowledge, enlightenment, wealth, and medical breakthrough, provides a high degree of control over them. "Today we are concerned with a different kind of hazard that lurks in our environment – a hazard we ourselves have introduced into our world as our modern way of life has evolved" (Carson 1994: 187). The introductions of the never-ending stream of chemicals, which are now pervading the world in which we live, and acting upon us directly and indirectly, create new, multiple environmental health problems, separately and collectively. Their presence casts an ominous shadow that is formless, obscure and frightening because it is simply impossible to predict the effects of a lifetime exposure to chemicals and physical agents that are not part of the biological experience of man. She quotes David Price to substantiate her position thus: "We all live under the haunting fear that something may corrupt the environment to the point where man joins the dinosaurs as an obsolete form of life. And what makes these thoughts all the more disturbing is the knowledge that our fate could perhaps be sealed twenty or more years before the development of symptoms" (Carson 1994: 188. See Price 1959: 693-699). The crux of Carson's argument here is that as more modern ways of life are evolved, more hazardous, complicated health and environmental challenges that are doom pending are evolved as inseparable consequences.

In consolidation of Carson's view, Patricia Hynes states that "[s]ince… 1985 there have been at least three publicized 'Silent Springs,' in Bhopal, Chernobyl, and the Rhine River, two of which involved pesticides." According to her, many ecological disasters of the past two decades (from her time of writing this book in 1989) "have occurred in the manufacture, storage and use, and disposal of pesticides or chemical compounds with deadly biocidal components" (Hynes 1989: 3. VanDeveer and Pierce 1998: 591).

Garrett Hardin notes some causes of environmental degradation and their aftermath consequences in his *The Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin 1968: 1243-1248. Goldfarb 2000: vi, 39-47). In this article, Hardin argues with the analogy of the herdsmen using a common

pasture that the greedy and careless uses of common resources by some persons deplete such resources beyond regenerative capacity. This gradually leads to a complete ruin of the resources to the tragedy of all. The work raises social and ethical issues about the world of limited resources and an increasing number of people. In this article, Hardin emphasizes the human tendencies to outsmart others in maximizing opportunities which ultimately are not to anyone's advantage but to everyone's ruin.

Environmental problems are inextricably (and morally too) linked with famine, poverty, and social policy. Hardin's metaphor of "lifeboat ethics" is a harsh attempt to cushion the global problem of limited resources due to depletion and an attempt to negatively influence the American policy about helping poor nations. Given that there are limited global resources, (Hardin 1974. Holdstein 2005: 44-55), have argues that any attempt for rich nations to assist poor ones will place them in the same unfavourable condition which the poor are already faced with. This will mean a global disaster – the tragedy of all. The basis for Hardin's position is that charity to needy nations would reduce the quantity of the resources available to wealthy nations and, thus, the quality and standard of their living. It would also mean gambling with the quality of life of their progeny. This would endanger their secured, privileged position. Then, they would face a common ruin with the underprivileged nations of the world. For Hardin, any compelling reason to helping the poor will certainly involve the depletion of resources that will lead to global tragedy. It will be a matter of complete justice, complete catastrophe.

Hardin, therefore, submits that the refusal of the affluent nations to share their wealth with the poor is the only moral position that can guarantee the preservation of only a segment of the globe. What are Hardin's reasons? Barry Commoner writes that very recently, Hardin carried out this course of reasoning to a logical conclusion in an editorial in *Science* that since it is unlikely that civilization will survive everywhere, it is better that it survives in few places than none. And so, they, the fortunate minorities, must act as the trustees of a civilization that is threatened by uninformed good intentions. Barry

Commoner retorts that "[i]n our unwitting march toward ecological suicide we have run out of options." According to him, "[n]either within Hardin's tiny enclaves of 'civilization', nor in the larger world around them, would anything that we seek to preserve – the dignity and the humaneness of man, the grace of civilization – survive" (Commoner 2000: 31). Commoner seems to be correct because, life and all of its activities, whether within the boat or outside of it, implies impartation on, and depletion of, available resources. The illustrative history of the inhabitants of the Easter Island, supports this claim that it is possible to die, or for a civilization with a *hitherto* secure enclave to collapse due to resource depletion. As Jared Diamond (2004: 10-14, 24) noted, Easter Island which was isolated in the Pacific Ocean can be seen as a metaphor for Planet Earth isolated in the universe. And like the inhabitants of Easter Island, if we ruin our resources, there is no place we can go, and nobody will come to help us. This argument also clearly shows that Hardin's tiny enclave is neither a viable option nor solution to the problem of resource depletion facing mankind. Nevertheless, Hardin's demonstrative logic shows how the scarcity of resources can seriously undermine human sensitivity to the well-being of some other human beings. It also shows that Hardin believes in a gloomy future globally due to limited resources arising from the depletion of nature.

Randall Hayes poetically puts it that rainforests, which scientists call the lungs of the planet "are everywhere under attack by an aggressive strain of cancer: namely human greed. The earth is sick and the patient's days are few. There is little time left to save the rainforest ecosystem and the people who live in it" (Hayes 1999: 137). Hayes' submission is supported by Joseph Desjardins' more recent position that at the beginning of the 21st century,

> Human beings face environmental challenges unprecedented in the history of this planet. Largely through human activity, life on Earth faces the greatest mass extinctions since the end of the dinosaur age sixty-five million years ago.

> Some estimates suggest that more than one hundred species a day are becoming extinct and that this rate could double or triple in the next few decades. The natural resources that sustain life on this planet – air, water, and soil – are being polluted or depleted at alarming rates. Human population growth is increasing exponentially…. The prospects for continued degradation and depletion of natural resources multiply with this population growth. Toxic wastes that will plague future generations continue to accumulate worldwide. The world's wilderness areas – its forests, wetlands, mountains, and grasslands – are being developed, paved, drained, burned, and overgrazed out of existence. With destruction of the ozone layers and the potential for a greenhouse effect, human activities threatened the atmosphere and climate of the planet itself (Desjardins 2006: 5-6).

These environmental threats, which result from human activities, are either underestimated, disregarded, or labelled as pseudo threats. Desjardins, therefore, notes that it seems that while theorists continue to debate the relative merits of various environmental philosophies, the issue that motivates us all – environmental destruction – marches on. Meadows thus write that "[t]he vast majority of policymakers seem to be actively pursuing goals that are incompatible with these results" (Meadows 2002: 52). This portends a gloomy future.

> Faced with such a potentially catastrophic future, we are challenged with momentous decisions. But how do we

> start making the right decisions? ... [M]any of our present problems are the result of the decisions made in good faith by previous generations. In fact, many of those decisions had many beneficial consequences to both prior and present generations. But they have devastating consequences as well. How can we be sure that the decision we likewise make in good faith will not have equally ambiguous consequences? (Desjardins 2006: 6).

The problem is more than that. Given the present state of moral apathy, can we really make a collective decision, in good faith, about the environment? Even if we can, for now, we do not have any guarantee that the decision we would make today in good faith, will not have ambivalent consequences both on the present and, especially, the future generations. As a result of the various ways human beings impact on the environment, Gordon Taylor, (1970: 14-15) notes that human inventiveness makes the planet uninhabitable. He argues that the human species is destroying the environment on which it depends, and like a culture of rapidly growing bacteria, is beginning to be poisoned by its own waste products. Taylor notes again that the balance of nature could be so radically altered as to make life impossible for man in anything like his present number, due to the fact that the whole network of relationships of the feeding cycle, and the cycle that regulates the air which ought to be maintained, are at risk. Following this same pattern of argument, Robert Pierson argues that "[f]or the first time since man's creation his technology has made it possible to destroy himself and the whole world" (Pierson 1976: 3-4). According to him, the development of atomic strength and social vices leaves the civilized world in a state of shock and revulsion. Population explosion threatens the ability of the planet earth to provide the needs of people who inhabit it. This becomes more critical with the passage of time. We rely on environmental resources as an inexhaustible reservoir to supply

human needs. But we take no thought when our impacts on the environment pollute it. Robert Goodland extends this view.

Goodland argues that the limit to growth has already been reached or is near. He contends that further input growth will take the planet further away from sustainability, and we are rapidly foreclosing options for the future possibly by overshooting limits. According to him, the world is being run unsustainably now since we have already fouled our nests. Human wastes (toxic chemicals) are obvious and increasing all over, poisoning the air we breathe in and the marine ecosystem (Goodland 1998: 601-606). Goodland uses the various glaring environmental feedbacks as evidence to show that either we have reached the limit, or the limit (of exhaustion of resources, of environment's ability to adapt to pollution, and so on) is near. He, therefore, attempts to convince people of the urgent need to maintain a sustainable economy.

The technological sceptics believe that there are limits to growth as well as finding the substitute to exhausted resources.

> They contend that the environment is humanity's essential life-support system and that technology can never adequately reproduce or substitute for it. They do not believe that people can, in any realistic time frame, learn to control the weather, or replace animals that have become extinct, or build underground cities, or find an adequate artificial substitute for the world's rainforests or coral reefs (Zeaman 2002: 57).

These are the reasons the sceptics do not believe that "humanity should gamble that these as-yet-underdeveloped technologies will bail them out of the problems that they are creating today. The technological sceptics take an attitude of 'better safe than sorry'" (Zeaman 2002: 57). We may say that they would prefer that we err on

the side of caution. The view of the technological optimists dissents from the view of the technological sceptics. This will attract some attentions later in this study.

On his part, Al Gore is convinced that the engines of human civilization brings us to the brink of catastrophe. Gore (1993) argues that only a radical rethinking of our relationship with nature can save the earth's ecology for the future generation. His work points to a global environmental crisis which threatens to overwhelm future generations. It is an urgent call to actions to save our entire living space. In consolidation of this line of thought, Raziel Abelson and Maurice-Louise Friquegnon write that

> [s]ince World War II, humanity has become increasingly aware of itself as an interdependent and fragile global community, in grave danger of extermination as a result of the… greedy depletion and pollution of its environment. The… spread of radioactive wastes, the rapid exhaustion of fossil fuels, the gradual wearing away of the protective ozone layer of the upper atmosphere by fluorocarbon emissions and … the levelling of rain forests… *are* threats to human survival…. The environment problems of depletion and pollution continue to plague us with escalating intensity.[78] (Abelson and Friquegnon 1991: 243).

Scientists and non-scientists alike are, therefore, "alarmed at the accelerating changes towards widespread environmental degradation which are threatening the health and the very survival of the biosphere and human life as we know them" (Polunin 1972: xi). Almost all regions of the world have become object of one threat or the other by various environmental feedbacks, which result from

human interruption of the ecosystem. The consequences of human assaults on the environment are already being felt and have all pointed fingers to the unsafe nature of our environment. These threats are expected to continue as time goes on and as these depletion, degradation, and destruction continue. According to a biodiversity expert, Edward O. Wilson, "[t]he natural world is everywhere disappearing before our eyes – cut to pieces, mowed down, ploughed under, gobbled up, replaced by human artefacts." As such, most species have gone extinct prematurely or carelessly. "The current rate of species extinctions is at least 100 times the rate that existed before modern humans arrived on earth, and is expected to increase to between 1,000 and 10,000 times the earlier rate during this (*21st – emphasis mine*) century (Miller and Spoolman 2008: 150, 177.)

Passell and Ross, then, in a review cite the ecologists as saying that "[t]he useful and uplifting items around which industrial man has built his life… turn out to choke his lakes, clog his lungs, and overflow his vacant lots. The harsh lesson is that ecological sanity may require an end to economic growth...." (Titus and Keeton 1973: 471. Passell and Ross 1971: 6-7). Anatoly Rakitov had similarly argued that "[m]an's effect on his environment has become so destructive in recent decades through the great increase in the power of modern equipment and the building of huge cites, roads, industrial enterprises, and export systems, that people have begun to talk about the death of nature and the crisis of the environment" (Rakitov 1989: 197, 230). According to Rakitov, this contradictory and extremely dangerous situation comes about in the modern world as a result of the disturbance of the ecological balance. Mark Hertsgaard, thus, forces us to see the whole earth as the ground-level reality of a decimated, contaminated, and critically ill habitat (Hertsgaard 1998). In his evaluation of nature based on human impact, Frederick Engels warns us of the impending doom. According to him, nature, oppressed by man, begins to hurt him. He argues that no matter the seeming victory humans think they have over nature, nature will certainly hit back. Therefore, he admonishes that we should not flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victory over

nature. For each such activity, nature takes its revenge on us. In the first place, it brings about the results we expected, but thereafter, it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first (Engels 1975: 13. Engels 1974: 180). Rakitov thus argue correctly that "[m]an's attitude to nature is contradictory…. In setting themselves concrete aims and working to achieve them, people alter nature so that the final end result of their activity often proves the opposite of their original aims and intentions" (Rakitov 1989: 203). These are some of the reasons why some thinkers argue that mankind will clog his own lungs (Titus and Keeton 1973: 471) and be poisoned by his own toxins (Taylor 1970: 1). From this rendering, the absolute trust in human ingenuity, science and technology, to tackle any feedback, (Krupp and Horn 2008. Juniper 2007. Lerner 1998: xi-xii) and the blatant rejection of glaring gloomy future (Ronald Bailey 1993) can be conceived as nothing but a myth of progress (Anon, 2009).

**Ecological optimism**

Contrary to the preceding positions, some thinkers hold that this gloomy picture of the world, and by extension, the forecast of ecological apocalypse, is a myth. Ronald Bailey offers a spirited critique capable of forcing some thinkers, who are already convinced that eco-disaster is imminent, to re-examine their beliefs. Bailey disagrees with those he calls doomsayers who flood our time with dreadful prophesies that the future of the environment is bleak, and that we are driving our planet out of existence. He argues that the earth is actually in a far better shape than we have been made to believe. He attempts to defuse as myths of global disaster, all the assumed threats ranging from nuclear winter, pollution, and famine, to the depletion of non-renewable resources. He writes that we are nowhere near killing the planet. "There are no permanent resource shortages – future food supplies are ample, world population will level off before overcrowding becomes a problem, and pollution can be controlled at modest cost" (Bailey 1993: 78, xii). Bailey believed in the reality of human progress and he attempts to restore hope in the

future to prevent future generations from growing up to feel that their future is dismal and blighted.

In this optimistic rendering, Glenn Seaborg admits as truism the negative effects of interaction with nature, but he argues that these effects are not signs of doom but of a better, blissful future. He urges us to look at the present and future with new eyes. He asserts that "[w]hat we are seeing today in all our social upheavals, in all our alarm and anguish over an environmental feedback and, in general, the apparent pilling of crisis upon crisis to almost intolerable degree, is not a forecast of doom. It is the birth pang of new world.It is a period of struggle in which we are making the physical transition from men to mankind.." (Miller 1975: 366). With such belief, any negative portrayal of the present and future of mankind and the environment would make no sense to Seaborg. In this regard, E. Fedorov concludes his work by quoting Vernadsky about future optimism as follows: "Man is growing into a mighty geological force. He, his thought, and labour, are confronted with the task of restructuring the biosphere for the benefit of an integrated, free thinking, mankind.… Therefore, we can look to the future with confidence. For the future is in our hands and we shall not let it go" (Fedorov 1980: 173). It is evident here that both Vernadsky and Fedorov are optimistic about the human final victory over seeming environmental problems.

Along this optimistic pattern of thought, Bjørn Lomborg argues that future generations will be richer than the present generation, and so, we do not need to worry about them. In his opinion, the whole idea of conserving resources is absurd because if every generation saves resources for future generations, and every future generation does the same, then resources will never be used (White 2009: 362, 372-377. Lomborg 2001). In this same optimistic attitude, the neoclassical economists, such as Robert Samuelson and Milton Friedman, view natural resources as important but not indispensable because of our ability to find resource substitutes. They also claim that continuing economic growth is necessary, desirable, and essentially unlimited. The economic optimists (Miller and Spoolman 2008: 403. Homer-Dixon 1999: 29-35), which include neoclassical economists, economic

historians and agricultural economists, hold that if there is any limit to population and prosperity at all, they are very few. They are optimistic that properly functioning economic institutions, especially markets, provide incentives to encourage conservation, resource substitution, development of new sources of scarce resources, and technological innovation.

John Zeaman (2002: 56) copiously captures the positions of some economists and the technological optimists. He writes that, although the idea that resources are finite and should be carefully conserved seems like common sense, not all economists, such as Julian Simon, would agree to this. Simon argues that people should not be worried about conserving specific resources. The premiss of his argument is that when people exhaust one resource, they either find a substitute for it or they change their technology to make use of a substitute. He argues further that shortages are actually good in the long run because they force people to innovate. This confident belief that technology and human know-how can solve such a problem is sometimes called technological optimism. The opposing view is labelled 'technological scepticism' (already attended to). But the questions for the technological optimists are: will there be substitutes forever, and for all used resources?

Zeaman argues that history has plenty of examples to support the optimists' position. For example, for thousands of years, "firewood was humanity's chief fuel…. But in 1976, just as England was beginning to run out of timber, James Watt invented the steam engine, which suddenly made it much more worthwhile to mine coal. By the time it was being put to commercial use twenty years later, the steam engine had made coal a valuable resource and people were mining it in huge quantities" (Zeaman, 2002: 56). Zeaman captures the belief of the technological optimists this way:

> The technological optimists believe that population and economies can continue to grow forever. They do not worry about environmental damage because they

> believe that technology can substitute or make up for any lost environmental services. If greenhouse gases build up in the atmosphere and cause the climate to warm, technological optimists believe that science will find a way to fix the composition of the atmosphere or will come up with various solutions so that people can continue to prosper in the new climate. If the world runs out of enough fertile farmlands to grow food, technological optimists believe that science will find new ways to create food. In short, the technological optimist believes that science will always triumph and that people will continue to become more and more independent of nature (Zeaman, 2002: 56-57).

Tony Juniper may not be as optimistic as the technological optimists. Juniper honestly acknowledges that the planet is in danger due to the extent of damage done by humans to the environment. He explains that "the human race is changing (destroying) the planet by endangering species throughout the world, contributing to climatic change, and plundering natural resources." More importantly, he offers practical advice and solutions to help reverse these dangerous trends. He calls for an urgent wake to stop the harmful activities and undo, as much as possible, the damage already done before it is too late. He puts it optimistically that the earth can be restored. According to Juniper, (2007: blurb, 72) conservation is simply no longer a question of avoiding damage, or conserving the high-quality natural areas that remain; it is now putting back what has been lost. Fred Krupp and Miriam Horn have the absolute trust in human ingenuity, science and technology to tackle any feedback. They direct attention to the kind of inventors who will stabilize our climate, generate enormous economic growth, and save the planet if they are given chance for fair competition, or else they will fail to avert the crises in

time (Krupp and Horn 2008: 3). They also focus on anti-global warming and alternative energy through policy technological innovators and investors who are reinventing energy and the way we use it.

**Some Philosophical Reflections**

This section is a philosophical rethinking about the state and future of the natural environment. Although the optimists offer some reasons why people should not worry about the state of the environment, nevertheless, we should not ignore the warnings of the alarmists who hold a contrary view because what happened to some other species who were co-inhabitants of the earth – extinction and boredom – can happen to humans as well. It is arguable that if some species have gone extinct, we do not have any absolute assurance (deductive or inductive) that humans and other surviving species will not go extinct someday. If some parts of the globe have been destroyed or lost its capacity to sustain life, we do not have any ultimate assurance as well (deductive or inductive) that the whole globe, or at least, some other parts of it will not be destroyed or lose its capacity to sustain life someday. But if we presume that we have, then it may be our overconfidence – a fatal optimism – which will partly make us die in our slumber sooner than expected.

Ironically too, the very various attempts to thwart this impending doom may facilitate it. The reason is that history has taught us that decisions made in good faith can lead to unforeseen negative consequences. For example,

> [i]ndustrial progress was meant to make our lives easier. In some ways it has. However, it is this very 'progress' that aggravates the earth's environmental problems. We appreciate the inventions and advancements that industry has presented to us, but the very production of these and our use of them have often

> resulted in ruining parts of our world (Awake!—2003: 4-8).

Therefore, there is no guarantee that we will succeed in our combat with environmental problems or in our complete restoration of the environment to its original state. There is no guarantee that the environment will not finally wring our neck. This implies that it is not certain that we will survive or overcome all environmental problems and challenges. Our desire for success may be frustrated.

The preceding view can be substantiated with Inductive Paradox. The environmental optimists, while having inductive faith about a bastion future environment, ignore the possibility and applicability of the paradox of the chicken in environmental situation. Since the environment in the contention of the optimists have not been exhausted or collapse, they expect that *ad infinitum,* it can neither be exhausted nor collapse. Just as the chicken least expected that its neck will be wrung someday and therefore expect a life of endless care from its master, the optimists presume that nature is boundless and since most problems have been fixed in the past, therefore all problems, now and later, can be fixed as well, and substitute can always be found for any exhausted resources. Besides, they believe and argue that technologies can always device alternative means in the future. While they expect endless provision from nature, they ignore the fact that nature cannot be predicted for certain, like the unpredictable owner of the chicken. And like the unpredictable owner of the chicken, nature may one day wring human neck. Alternatively, the unobservable human impacts can as well wring the neck of nature. Still worse, the feedbacks can wring simultaneously, both human neck and the neck of nature. Most humans are as careless, unprecautionary and optimistic as the chicken even when reality or experience decides or has decided or is deciding otherwise. The master may have been mangling the neck of other chickens before the optimistic one just as parts of nature have been manacled and mangled before our eyes.[2] Mind you, the moment the neck of the

[2] For details, see J. Diamond, *Lessons from Environmental Collapses of Past Societies*, Fourth Annual John H. Chafee Memorial Lecture on Science and the Environment, (Washington, DC: National Council for Science and the Environment, 2004), A. Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth: The*

chicken is mangled, it becomes impossible to undo it. Hence it is wiser to heed to the pessimists to forestall mangling humans and nature out of existence before the situation becomes irremediable. These impel us not to be thinking only of the merits of induction and the consistent pattern of nature in our daily guidance but also of the negative and unanticipated consequences that can ensue and which they can produce contrary to expectation. Since induction can be dubious at times, it would be risky to have absolute trust in its procedure and expectations, just as nature is sometimes unpredictable. Therefore, we need to take with a sense of urgency, the warnings of the pessimists to avert unforeseen, irreparable and irreversible contingencies. From this presentation so far, it is glaring that the trust in modernity, industrial revolution, radical development of technology and science, and reason based social organization in bringing about tremendous improvements in human life that would result in perpetual material prosperity and the spiritual enlightenment of mankind, (Anon. 2009: 2) is, as well, but a myth of progress.

Although we may not have any assurance of ultimately overcoming all environmental challenges, but following Miguel de Unamuno and Albert Camus, we should strive against environmental problems. This philosophical thought is derivable from Unamuno's idea of uncertainty in his tragic conception of life and Camus' absurdity of human existence, which they analogized concerning the condition of human existence. The uncertainty of ultimate victory over environmental challenges points to the extent of the intensity of environmental problems, and the dangers which they portend. Nevertheless we must continue to fight against environmental odds even without any guarantee of ultimate victory with concrete actions, informed by good intention or goodwill. We must revolt (devote our energy), but with cautions against these militating problems of environment as if we are going to succeed. As Unamuno would

*Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and what We can do about It*, (Emmaus: Rodale, 2006), J. Zeaman, *Overpopulation*. (New York: Franklin Watts, 2002), pp. 70-92, D.K. Asthana and Meera Asthana, *Environment: Problems and Solutions*, (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company PVT Ltd., 2012), pp,23-34, John D Cox, Climate Crash: Abrupt Climate Change and what it Means for Our Future, (Washington, D.C: Joseph Henry Press, 2005), Eleanor Horwitz, Ed. *Ways of Wildlife*, (New York: citation Press, 1977), pp. 67, 101, 104-106.

encourage, we must fight against destiny even without any ultimate assurance of victory and even if it means perishing while resisting (Unamuno 1954: 363. Omoregbe 1991, 66-67). For Unamuno the uncertainty about our future and ultimate destiny is a good foundation of ethics. And for Camus, despite the absurdity of human existence and the futility of the endless labour to which man is condemned like the Camus' Myth of Sisyphus (Camus, 1955), it is better to die while resisting than to fold our arms.

The engagement in this study is essential because our clear understanding of the nature, kind and degree of environmental problem is germane to informing our consciousness, attitude and collective resolve to relate with the environment in a moral and more careful way with the aim to averting further deterioration and addressing existing problems. If there is no danger posed by anthropogenic impacts on the environment, and if there are no negative impacts at all on the environment, then there would be no need engaging ourselves on how to resolve environmental problems; and if they would not arise, there would be no need engaging on how to prevent their occurrence. But if there are existent ones and if some would still occur, and we hold that they are not and would not occur, then, that would be an outright, colossal, doom pending deception or ignorance, as well as a fatal optimism. The various attempts at national and global conferences and summits to resolve environmental issues and problems or prevent their occurrences through policy-making proliferate in scholarly literatures of variegated disciplines, and they are attestations to the existence of threatening environmental problems demanding urgent attentions. At the theoretical level there are also various scholarly theories of environmental ethics, geared toward the prevention and resolution of environmental problems. They are also attestations to the existence of threatening environmental problems demanding urgent attentions. It is only urgent response to such exigencies that can save humans and the whole earth from the looming threats and the impending catastrophe arising therefrom.

But sadly, the thinkers who foretell or draw attentions to gloomy future of the environment are labelled either environmental pessimists, sceptics, alarmists, extremists, doomsayers or prophets of doom by the environmental optimists; and the problems they draw attentions to are labelled pseudo problems and then consigned to myth by some scholars who hold contrary view.

## Conclusion

This study examined philosophically the divergent opinions concerning the state of the natural environment and the nature of environmental problems. The existence of environmental problems is unarguably real and irrefutable. Today, it is clear that human beings are faced with myriads of environmental problems, such as desertification, deforestations, population explosion, and food shortage and many more, which result especially from human desire to make the resources of nature available for his use. These environmental problems are interwoven. The attempt to resolve any particular problem or some of them, most often, generate new problems or aggravate already existent ones.

The unmitigated consciousnesses of the reality of environmental feedbacks and the dangers that loom from them have drawn significant attention from scholars of various disciplines. In this regard, different approaches have been developed for understanding and protecting the natural environment. Such approaches among others include eco policy and various theories of environment, including environment ethics to assuage or resolve environmental problems; that is: to right the wrong, maintain a balance and restore ecological sanity.

With the present stage of awareness, it is philosophically safer and wiser to take into consideration the position of the ecological alarmists, (who are actually ecologically realistic, since they are realistic about the state of our environment, and since they present the actual position of environmental situation) and listen to them than the optimists who may teleguide or swindle us optimistically,

consciously or unconsciously, into a chaotic point of no return. The suffusing breadth of vision of the environmental realists needs to trigger, encourage or compel us into adopting and maintaining a careful relation with nature and into a careful management of earth's resources.

In altruistic term, Dale Jamieson argues that, "[e]ven if there were no environmental problems, there would still be a place for reflecting on ethics and the environment. However, what has given our subject its urgency and focus is the widespread belief that we are in the early stages of an environmental crisis that is of our own making" (Jamieson 2008: 6). Although Jamieson is correct in arguing that there would still be need for environmental ethics even if there were no environmental problems, but many would not agree with him that we are in the early stages of environmental crises. As this study reveals, it seems we are in advance stage.

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