Using the African Teleological View of Existence to Interpret Environmental Ethics

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Introduction

In this article, I intend to critically explore what I see as the African teleological understanding of existence and to examine its significance for environmental ethical thinking.[1] As I focus on this critical issue in African philosophy, I admit and accept the contention that Africa ". . . does not have a single culture that is to be understood since it is a large and diverse continent with a diverse of cultures" (UA, 2002: IX). Notwithstanding the need to avoid the *unanimist*[2] fallacy about African philosophy, I seek to critically examine the nature, character, and philosophical significance of environmental ethics that is salient in the African view of existence. This is a relatively novel and underexplored area of African metaphysics that has not received much attention in most recent works on African environmental ethics.

The central argument developed is that the teleological understanding of existence in African philosophy informs a reasonable African ontology-based environmental ethics. I intend to offer an attractive African ontology-based and teleologically-oriented view of environmental ethics that stems from the understanding of *being*.[3] I contend that if this kind of ontology-based and teleologically environmental ethics is clearly understood in African philosophy, there will be no need to look towards Western environmental ethics for the resources for unpacking and understanding environmental ethics in Africa.

As I advance this teleological view of environmentalism, my approach differs from the views of Ramose (AP, 1999: 154–59), Murove (AC, 2004: 195–215), Bujo (EC, 1997: 208–25), Tangwa (SA, 2004: 387–95), Kelbessa (RI, 2005: 22), Lenka Bula (BA, 2008: 375–94), and Behrens (AP, 2011); (AR, 2014: 63–83) concerning the significance of African philosophy for environmental ethics. All of these thinkers emphasize the need to appreciate African indigenous approaches to environmentalism, but most want the understandings of *ubuntu* philosophy, *ukama* (relationships), and communitarian views to be used in order to understand environmental ethics. In contrast, mine is an ontology-based approach to environmentalism, which attempts to explore further a view about *being* and purpose that remains to be critically explored in the current discourse on African environmental ethics.

This is, the view that is centered on the assumption that human beings and the environment at large have independent teleological and normative purposes.

This article is theoretically informed by the link between the aspects of *being* and *telos* in the African hierarchy of existence. Since the question of *being* is central to my discussion, I first attempt to examine the hierarchy of *being* in African philosophy. In the article's second section, I attempt to address the question of *telos* in African ontology. It is in this section where I grapple with the problem of whether existence in African ontology ought to be understood from a teleological perspective. I address this question in the affirmative, and I then proceed in the last section to address the teleological appeals for moral status in African ontology.

The Hierarchy of Being in African Ontology

I consider the beings in African thought as largely hierarchically placed. By this I mean that existence is in the form of a hierarchy, a chain or some linear order. In this way, existence in African ontology manifests itself at different levels. For example, existence can be realized at the highest level of existence through the God, which is a purely non-physical form of existence. Besides the Supreme Being, ancestors are also thought to exist as non-physical forms of *being*.[4] The existence of the non-physical beings in the form of God and ancestors confirms the ontological speculative picture of these invisible forces. Although such a picture of the world and existence is difficult to justify, it remains a fundamental point in the metaphysical understanding of existence in African ontology and philosophy.

Another form of existence is conceptualized at the level at which human beings exist as physical, sensible, and empirically verifiable beings or individuals, before it cascades to the non-human level (non-human beings), plants, and the physical environment or the non-animate beings. All these beings form part of the African ontological and teleological order of existence as well. The existence of these beings could be taken to explain and confirm the teleological dimension of existence in African ontology which I have in mind.

The hierarchy of existence of these various beings or forces in African ontology is also confirmed by Teffo and Roux, who also see the interconnectedness of the various forms of beings (MT, 1998: 138).

African metaphysics is holistic in nature. Reality is seen as a closed system so that everything hangs together and is affected by any change in the system . . . African metaphysics is organised around a number of principles and laws which control the so called vital forces. There is a principle concerning the interaction of forces, that is between God and humankind, and material things. These forces are hierarchically placed; they form *a chain of beings*. In this hierarchy, God, the creator and source of all vital forces, is at the apex. Then follow the ancestors, then humankind, and the lower forces, animals, plants, and matter (MT, 1998: 138).

Here, this hierarchy is arranged along the level of potency within the various forces. In this way, beings are therefore hierarchically placed according to their power and influence within the order of existence, despite all of them having ultimate purposes for existing. Chimuka confirms this understanding of hierarchical existence as he argues that "these modes of being found in the universe relate to one another but ultimately, spiritual beings are more powerful than the other modes of being" (ES, 2001: 29). Notwithstanding the

varying degrees of potency in these various levels of existence in African ontology, all being or existence is ultimately oriented towards some of the fundamental purposes for existence. These purposes for being are contained in the various appeals to environmental ethics, such as the appeal to life, vitality, sentience, and well-being. I examine these appeals to environmental ethics after addressing the question of *telos* in the following section.

The Question of *Telos* in African Ontology

The aspect of *telos* has been fairly examined by quite a number of thinkers within the history of philosophy. While this aspect is historically traced to Aristotelian thinking, I also trace it to, and situate it within the African philosophical discourse. I do not intend to venture into the discussion of whether the former tradition borrows from the latter. However, I notice that the Aristotelian conception of *telos*, as well as the sub-Saharan African view share a common standpoint, as they all associate *being* or existence with purpose and the *good life*. To confirm this view, Aristotle contends that ". . . every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim" (NE, Book 1: 935). Similarly, I contend that within the African context, *being* or existence in general must also be tailored towards some purposive existence. Teffo and Roux also agree that such existence ". . . is driven by aims such that there are no blind happenings but only planned action" (MT, 1998: 161). Having noted this similarity in the two traditions, I therefore focus on how the idea of *telos* is understood in the African context and the way in which it informs environmental ethics.

In African philosophy, there have been some attempts to understand and appreciate the question of being or existence as a metaphysical problem and a teleologically-oriented concept as well. (See also Tempels: BP, 1959.) However, such views have not been seriously considered, and no attempts have been made to understand this teleological concept in the context of environmental ethics. African thinking and its conception of *being* is not just metaphysical; it has other normative and teleological implications that would help us to meaningfully understand African environmental ethics. It is metaphysical insofar as attempts are largely aimed at explaining reality beyond what is physical, as implicit in mechanical conceptions of reality in African ontology. Reality is, within the African context, mostly explained in terms of whether, how, and why certain things are what they are and why they happen the way they do. This is why Teffo and Roux argue that "such thinking about reality, that is, such attempts to fathom what is real and what is not and what the ultimate nature of reality is, is metaphysical thinking" (MT, 1998: 134). In this regard, to understand the question of existence as also having a teleological orientation is also part of these metaphysical attempts that I aim to undertake here.

In most cases, the attempts to explain and understand why a certain phenomenon happens the way it does go to show that African people have a teleological or purposive conception of being. To understand the idea of how existence is teleologically oriented in African thinking, Teffo and Roux invite us to appreciate the reasons why most African people raise eyebrows when, for example, lightning kills people, when others are rich while others are poor, and why also people become ill and eventually die (MT, 1998: 134). They come to the conclusion that "people who ask the above questions have a teleological con-

ception of reality, that is, reality hangs together because of aims" (MT, 1998: 134). The reason why this view is a teleological one is because people think that illness, poverty, and death are not purposes for existing. Rather, illness, poverty, and death go against some of the teleological *ends* for existing such as happiness, well-being, and life.

Existence in general is essentially something that has a purpose (*telos*). Focusing on environmental ethics and how it relates to the value of life in general, Izibili confirms this idea that existence or life itself has a purpose for which it must serve. According to Izibili, ". . . the principle of the value of life requires that one respects life, that one does not unthinkingly destroy or alter forms of life. Living beings are [not] to be regarded as having instrumental life only, [but inherent value]. [Hence] this is value that is supposed to inhere, or belong directly to living beings" (EE, 2005: 386).

The African teleological understanding of being also has to be considered in terms of how being *qua being*, or existence proper, is transcendental. Once the transcendental orientation of being is clearly understood, then it would be easier to comprehend its teleological orientation. By considering being as transcendental, I mean that the notion of existence itself goes beyond merely denoting human existence. Ultimately, I assume that human existence takes into consideration other important aspects that are associated with existence, such as the promotion of the good life, survival, and human and non-human well-being. In this way, it is important to realize that all beings must be tailored towards a certain purpose for which they exist. Mbiti discusses this teleological orientation of being, although he is more focused on the *telos*, or purpose, of human life alone. As he sees it:

> Human life has another rhythm of nature which nothing can destroy. On the level of the individual, this rhythm includes birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, death, entry into the community of the departed and finally entry into the company of spirits. It is an ontological rhythm, and these are the key moments in the life of the individual (AR, 1969: 24).

Notwithstanding its anthropocentric slant, as Mbiti notes, this in itself is a positive conception of the individual which confirms the teleological understanding of being, which I take to be characteristic of African ontology. In this regard, it is meaningful to conclude that existence of the human person in African ontology has a deep-seated teleological dimension to which the end of a human being is to aim at the good life. In light of what Mbiti observes here, it would be prudent to argue that all the stages of human life, from birth to death, have various purposes that form part of what Mbiti calls the ontological rhythm of life that helps the life-force to grow and achieve its purpose (AR, 1969: 24). This view is in line with Aristotle's thinking that "every art and every inquiry and similar every action as well as choice is held to aim at some good. Hence people have nobly declared that the good is that at which all things aim" (Aristotle: NE, Book 1: 1094a).

Also, the other dimension of the teleological view in African ontology is that human existence among African communities has some obligations that are closely associated with it. These obligations are varied and could either be cultural or communitarian. Focusing on the communitarian obligations of existence, although he later settles for some moderate form of communitarian existence, Gyekye notes, as follows:

> The fact that a person is born into an existing community suggest a conception of the person as a communitarian being by nature, even though some people insist on the individuality of the person. The communitarian conception of the person has some implications . . . [for]. . . social relationships in which he/she necessarily finds him/herself (PC, 1992: 104).

Here, the teleological obligation that the human being has is that of realizing and accepting that existence is incomplete without coexistence with other beings that include the human and non-human community. Otherwise, existence in general ought to be understood in African philosophy as having a teleological orientation. In this way, it is important to realize that one of the ultimate purposes of human life and existence is the pursuit of the good life and the ability by human persons to do the right action. (*See also* Aristotle, NE, Book 1: 1094a.) In light of the teleological view of being in African ontology, I now proceed to examine some teleological appeals to moral status which could be plausibly taken as the basis for African teleological environmental ethics.

The Teleological Appeals for Moral Status of Nature

In order to appreciate how the idea of *telos* could be understood in order to interpret environmentalism, I see the need to first address the question of whether there ought to be any teleological connection/s between human beings and the natural environment. I therefore address this question as I make a transition from *telos* to moral status. I seek to validate my argument that teleological conceptions of existence in African ontology could credibly support the recognition of the inherent value and moral status of the natural world as a whole. (See also EP, 1994: 117.) Overall, I argue that there is a strong teleological connection between the human community and nature. This teleological interconnection is useful here because my understanding is that the moral status of nature must be largely informed and shaped by the teleological relationship between the human community and the natural environment. This natural environment consists of both living and non-living beings.

First, it is important to realize that the teleological framework of being must be closely linked to a conception of the moral status of the environment. There must be some fundamental teleological connections between human beings and nature, such that nature must have purpose and, eventually, moral status. In order to establish this teleological connection and argue that nature has both purpose and moral status, I also take a pluralist approach to the grounding of moral status in African ontology. This pluralist approach is based on a variety of other additional appeals to moral status, such as appeal to African biocentrism or vitalism, sentience, and beingness. Notwithstanding that these views may not necessarily cohere well together and their different implications on *telos* and moral status, I argue that they all contribute in various ways to a plausibly acceptable view of teleological environmental ethics in African ontology.

Although it may not be so explicit, the way environmental ethics is broadly understood as concerned with the relations between human beings and various aspects of nature must be a strong reason to believe that there must be teleological connections between human beings and the environment. This view is based on the purposive *ends* for being that I see to

be shared between the human community and the natural environment. Also, this teleological connection partly comes from the fact that human beings exist *in* human communities and *in* the natural environment as well. Although this view may sound to be fairly anthropocentric, which is a view that I do not intend to legitimize in African environmental ethics, it is shaped by the understanding that the teleological and ethical bases for respecting nature are attributable to where human beings find their habitat and also to the belief that nature itself ought to live and flourish and achieve its purpose for existing and well-being. Interpreted teleologically, this view could be taken to imply that one ultimate purpose of nature is to live or exist well. Generally, "life" or living is at the core of any being that is a "subject of a life." It is such that, given an option, all conscious beings that are a "subject of a life," such as human beings and other animals, would opt for life and continued living as opposed to death. This could be one reason why life should be taken as one ultimate purpose for being.

Also, in African ontology, it is generally acceptable that all life, whether human or non-human, is a sacred creation. By looking at life as a sacred creation, it means that all beings or objects of life ought to be treated in a dignified way, such that they could fulfill the purposive goals for existence which entail living a good and meaningful life. For that reason, life could be taken as the ultimate good or *end* for existence, such that it deserves respect and reverence. Accordingly, I argue that certain aspects of the environment that have the capacity to possess life and live life ought to be treated with due care and respect because they must have been created in such a way that they exist and live their independent lives to the fullest. This explains why not only human beings are scared of harm and death, but other non-human animals are, too.

In addition to living well, nature itself must have an additional purpose of supporting the well-being and survival of both human beings and non-human living creatures. At the same time, another purpose of conscious human beings could be taken to be the need to safeguard the well-being and purpose of nature. In this case, the nature of the environment as a being is such that it exists for the good of not only the human beings that live in it, but also for the good of particular non-human animals and non-animate beings that constitute it. So, in order for individual human beings and the environment to achieve their respective individual goals and purposes for existence in life as I have just alluded to, human beings ought to have obligations to do so in a manner that takes into consideration the purposes and goals of other human communities, non-human communities, and the natural environment.

Apart from well-being as one useful value for understanding *telos* in African philosophy, there is also the appeal to life. This view is commonly expressed as the vitalist dimension to existence. In African ontology, the human being must be teleologically understood as a purposive being that ought to achieve its *ends* or purposes in life, but without necessarily disadvantaging other beings that also have independent lives and goals to those of human beings. This view is also informed partly by what I see as the direct moral duties that human persons must have towards other human beings, non-human living beings, and the natural environment by virtue of being teleologically connected to nature as a whole. First, it is important to realize that human communities depend on various aspects of nature for their livelihood. Accordingly, although it could be one anthropocentric basis for treating the environment well, it must follow that nature must have a purpose of furthering the life or vitality of human beings. This could be taken as one anthropocentric reason why nature has

a purpose of furthering life in general, while at the same time human beings have a purpose to safeguard the well-being of nature. This is because human beings and nature can be positively or negatively affected by individual human actions. However, it must be reasonable to appreciate that not everything that human beings do will always affect the environment negatively. For example, it is acceptable that an action like taking a single dog and taming it and keeping it isolated at home in a fenced yard for the rest of its life does not necessarily affect nature negatively. However, following the African bio-centric view of environmental ethics, as commonly expressed in the vitalist view of existence, such an action remains suspect in the light of the fact that a dog is an animate being that has a vital force and its own *telos* for being such that it ought to be treated in a dignified way. This is because such a dog also ought to achieve its teleological goals for life, such as survival, harmonious living, and well-being, all of which are independent of those of human beings.

In the African teleologically-oriented environmental ethics, the teleological understanding of existence, which is the basis for moral status, is not shaped by the idea that the environment belongs to the human community as implicit in some radical anthropocentric views. It is based on the understanding that human beings and the natural environment are teleological counterparts. They are teleological counterparts insofar as they all ought to attain some meaning and purpose for existing. Accordingly, the nature of existence of the human being and nature must be understood as being based on possession of life, co-existence, and realization of their independent purposes for existing. This is why I take as useful Bujo's contention that in African environmental philosophy, "total realisation of the self is impossible as long as one does not peacefully co-exist with minerals, plants and animals" (EC, 1997: 208). The reason why this view is acceptable is because human beings coexist with these beings. Such beings in some way possess life and vital forces in their own right such that they have independent purposes to those of human beings.

This view above is equally a bio-centric, vitalist, and teleological view, which I suspect is compatible with my understanding of African ontology-based and teleologically-oriented environmental ethics. Ojomo espouses almost a similar view of teleological environmental ethics, although hers is limited to a fairly bio-centric view of existence. For her, "all life forms are *moral patients*—entities to which we should accord moral standing . . . it is its *telos* (purpose) that gives each individual organism inherent worth and all living organism possess this worth *equally*[5] because all individual living beings have telos" (AU, 2010: 53). While I accept Ojomo's argument for moral status that is based on *telos*, my teleological view of moral status goes beyond her focus on living beings alone, as I include even non-living beings such as rocks, soil, and the air as also capable of having purpose for existing. I do so on the basis that these beings must have their purpose for *being*, although it may be different to that of human beings.

Following this view therefore, I argue that the ethical obligations that human beings have towards the environment should be informed, ideally by relating well with aspects of the natural environment such as non-human animals, plants, the air, the soil, rocks, and water bodies. These components are not only "moral counterparts" to the human community, they also have their teleological ends which can either be enhanced or negatively affected. In this case, as I borrow from the Aristotelian view of *telos*, I depart from his functional understanding of the purpose of *being*. I find the Aristotelian view to be strongly anthropocentric, as it puts emphasis on the function of a being in order to achieve its pur-

pose. (See also Aristotle: NE, Book 1: 1059a.) Such a view is therefore incompatible with my understanding of African teleologically-oriented environmental ethics, where components such as rocks, the soil, and the air are considered as also having their respective purposes for *being*. The basis upon which these beings must have purpose is centered on some of the following reasons: First, the fact that we do not know the exact purpose/s of non-living beings such as rocks does not necessarily mean that they do not have such purpose/s. Also, some of the living beings that are naturally taken as having purpose for *being*, such as human beings, non-human animals, and *functional*[6] things like knives, cannot sometimes achieve their respective purposes without some of these non-living beings. In the case of rocks, for example, they can even be used to sharpen a knife so that it achieves its purpose of cutting well, while human beings could also use them to build shelters and live meaningful and purposive lives. For these reasons, I therefore argue for the need to take all beings as having some purpose for *being*, although such purpose for *being* in this case could be looked at as being extrinsic and fairly serving anthropocentric reasons.

Also implicit in the bio-centric, vitalist, and teleological views which are mainly characteristic of African environmental ethics is the appeal to sentience. Generally understood, sentience could be taken to refer to the ability of any being to feel and experience pleasure, pain, or consciousness. (See also SM, 2001: 192.) The aspect of sentience is important because it is capable of determining whether a given being will achieve its purpose for existing or not. Because of its emphasis on pleasure, pain, and consciousness, all of which can determine whether a life or being can be better or worse, sentience must be closely linked to teleology. Although he does not focus on African environmentalism in particular, Taylor also gives us a generally acceptable understanding of what sentience-based environmental ethics entail, which I suspect could be reasonably taken as useful in determining the teleological *end* of any being in African ontology-based environmental ethics. For him, "quite independently of the duties we owe to our fellow humans, we are morally required to do or refrain from doing certain acts insofar as those acts bring benefit or harm to wild living things in the natural world" (RN, 1986: 10).

As I interpret this view from an African philosophical and teleological standpoint, I argue that this is a very useful teleological criterion for determining moral status. Although sentience, vitality, and beingness could be understood in the context of the African hierarchy of existence as some criterion for determining moral status in some beings, *telos* is what ultimately confers moral status. Such *telos* is realized differently in different beings. So, even if we think thatall beings may not have equal moral status or equal moral consideration on the basis of, say, sentience or vitality or beingness, they do have moral status on the basis of *telos*.[7]

Closely related but different from the sentience-based view of environmental ethics is the idea of *beingness*, or simply ontological status, which I also take as the other view informing the teleological understanding of African environmental ethics. This view is compatible with the consideration of non-human beings, especially non-animate beings in African environmental ethics. By "ontological status," I mean the *beingness* of a thing or its general existence as a being. Since my discussion is not limited to the ontological and teleological status of living things alone, as implicit in the sentience-based view above, according to this view, there are other non-living beings or non-animate beings, such as the soil, air, and rocks, whose *beingness* must be safeguarded by human beings because their *being-*

ness or existence is independent to them. Although I take a pluralist view to *telos* in African ontology, I go beyond these bio-centric and sentience-based views as I envisage an African ontology-based communitarian environmental ethics that is based on *beingness*. This view takes into consideration even non-sentient beings, phenomenon, and objects like rocks, water, air, and soil as having purpose, like I have argued here. The basis for sustaining such a view is what I discuss as the need to take into consideration the *beingness* and purpose for *being* of which I suspect is teleologically-oriented towards environmental ethical thinking.

Most attempts in the general discourse of environmental ethics limit human environmental ethical obligations to living things in the natural environment. However, my conception of environmental ethics, despite its pluralist approach to moral status, extends beyond this bio-centric view of environmental ethics because of its primary focus and emphasis on *telos* as the cardinal point in determining moral status. It considers both living beings and non-living beings as all having purpose for existence, such that they could also be understood to have moral status. This is because some of the actions that human persons may do to the natural environment could affect its biological, vitalist dimension, its sentience, its well-being, its *beingness*, and, eventually, its *telos*. In view of this, Tangwa argues that "as human beings, we carry the whole weight of moral responsibility and obligations for the world on our shoulders" (SA, 2004: 388). This understanding of the ethical role of human persons towards the natural environment could be justified by the view that, despite the varying degrees of vital force and purpose as argued here, nature must have moral status. This view of moral status stems from the teleological connections between human beings and the environment, as I have argued here.

Conclusion

What I have attempted here is to critically examine the teleological dimension of existence in African ontology, but within the context of environmental ethics. As I catalogue some of the purposes for *being* in African ontology, I have attempted to relate these purposes for *being* and to examine the extent to which they could inform environmental ethics. I note a very strong relationship between *being*, purpose, and environmentalism in African ontology. I therefore put forth the conclusion that the teleological view of existence ought to be taken as being useful towards the interpretation of African environmental ethics. Whether such a view could also be used to interpret any other environmental ethical thinking that is outside the African context is not part of this discussion and could be pursued separately.

Notes

2. According to Paulin Hountondji, the *unanimist* fallacy is based on ". . . the illusion that all men and women [in African communities] speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues" (AP, 1996: XVIII).
3. The word "being" could be used to either denote the idea of existence in general or to refer to objects of existence. Where I italicize this word in this work, I use it to refer to the former.
4. I thank the anonymous reviewers for helping me to clarify this point on the existence of the ancestors in African metaphysical thought.
5. I have italicized Ojomo's use of the word "equally" in this context because, while I agree with her argument for according moral status on the basis of purpose, my point of departure is on her attempt to grant equal moral status to all living beings.
6. I italicize the word "functional" in order to highlight Aristotle's emphasis on the functional understanding of purpose.
7. Initially, there were some contradictions and tensions in my pluralist view of teleological environmentalism. However, for helping me to clarify and solve some of these tensions and contradictions, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, as well as Dr. Edwin Etieyibo for pressing upon me the need to infuse such suggestions.

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