

AFRICAN *COSMOTHEOANDRIC* WORLD-VIEW: BASIS IN A QUEST
FOR AN AFRICAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS
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Abstract

Every ethical rationality presupposes a foundational ontology i.e. the conception of reality on which such an ethical rationality is anchored. Likewise, an environmental ethics presupposes an ontological conception of the reality of the environment. There is increasingly an urgent call from the world political and religious entities, as well as global non-governmental organisations, for measures to mitigate the global environmental crisis. The summon to take urgent responsibility to conserve and care for the environment has placed environment ethics into focus. The largest segment of environmental ethics enshrines ethical reasoning for the care of the environment, argued from value of the environment to human existence. Such value of the environment is an attributed instrumental value i.e. in terms of the usefulness of the environment to humans. It is an ascription to the environment in which, the environment is viewed as natural resource to be exploited by humans for their existence, and hence humans ought to take care of it on that account. This kind of conception has led to manipulation and exploitation of the poor global south by the massively industrial and capitalist global north, that paradoxically is on the lead in the global campaign for mitigation of environmental crisis. There is another understanding of the value of the environment in intrinsic sense. It refers to the value of the environment in itself independent of any human ascription, but in reference to the good of the environment in itself, such that, the degradation of the environment by human activities implies the loss of or disrespect for the good of the environment in itself. An environmental ethics that is anchored on the intrinsic value of the environment requires an ontology that enshrines such conception of the value of the environment. This study presents the African ‘cosmotheoandric’ world view, as an ontology that implies intrinsic value of the environment. The main argument of the study is that, from the African worldview, we can have an African extraction of environment ethics, as a viable alternative for the care of the planet as the common home of humanity.

Keywords: Worldview, *Cosmotheoandric*, Vital force, Reality, Environmental ethics.

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Introduction

This study is presented in three major parts. In the first part is presented the African world view. The concept of worldview is used here to approximately mean, how a given community of people with the same culture and tradition of rationality do understand reality. Hence, when we talk of the African worldview, we simply refer to how Africans understand reality. We could as well refer to it approximately as African ontology. The term Africa needs to be clarified here as well. In this study, Africa is not used to refer to all the people and cultures found in the contemporary geo-political division of the continental land mass called Africa. Otherwise, the contemporary geo-political entity called Africa has many non-homogenous cultures and rationalities such that, we cannot talk of a single African worldview, but rather a plurality of African worldviews. Instead, in this study the term Africa is used to refer to the indigenous African population that is constituted of majorly three ethnical communities, namely, the Bantu, the Nilotic and the partly the Cushite people, which has a more or less homogenous culture and tradition of rationality. It has been referred to by many scholars as Africa proper, located in the portion of the African geographical land mass that is south of Sahara Desert and north of river Limpopo.

The African worldview as discussed in the first part of this study, is explained by the fundamental constituent of reality, which is a kind of dynamism and energy like entity called the vital force. It explains that every reality is constituted by the vital force such that, the three major entities that constitute the subject matter of inquiry in the history of philosophy, namely, God, humans and the cosmos, are netted into one complex whole. It is noted that, in the African worldview, the relationship between God, humans being and the physical nature have is explained by the vital force. They form a tri-dimensional unitary complex, thanks the vital force that nits them together. Hence, the African world view is *cosmotheoandric*. This term is coined from the three Greek words, namely, *cosmos*, *theos*, and *anthropos*, which mean; the physical universe, God and the human being respectively. The study finds out that human beings are at the centre of the universe, not as masters but as a constituent party in the vital union. The second part presents the African attitude towards the natural environment as a consequence of the relationship between God, humans and the physical environment based on the vital force, and the place of humans in the *cosmotheoandric* unitary complex whole. Since the physical universe has mystical powers in itself, thanks the vital force, the African people relate with it with a reverential fear and adoration.

The study finds out that, the manner in which Africans relate with the natural environment is not purely utilitarian, but also more religious. The African attitude towards the natural environment is eco-centric, i.e. an attitude that intrinsically values the different entities in the physical environment, but not purely in reference to their utility to humans. The third part of the study presents and proposes an extract of African environmental ethics. The main argument presented as the conclusion of this study is that, an environmental ethics based on the African worldview or something similar to it, offers one of the best viable alternatives in the quest for rationalities to mitigate the global environmental crisis being experienced today.

I. African Worldview

Like any culture and a people in a given context, the African mind struggles to get answers to the question; what is the world made of? World as used here is synonymous to reality. The answer to this question constitutes the African conception of reality i.e. the African ontology. It is the conception of what reality is, that shapes the overall view of the world around the African, that we here in refer to as the African worldview. To understand the African worldview, let us begin by searching for the answer to the question; what constitutes a thing, that which is i.e. being? Classical western metaphysics posits substance as the constitutive unit of being. The other principles of being are only explained from the profound and extensive analysis of substance as the constitutive unit of being. On the contrary, Placide Tempels¹ asserts that, in the African metaphysics, the principle and constitutive unit of reality is the vital force. The vital force is the invisible principle that underlines the reality of everything that exists in the African universe². The interpretation of all the interaction in the universe is based on the vital force. All beings in the universe including the inanimate things, possess the vital force.

For Tempels to attribute the vital force to inanimate reality demonstrates that he doesn't use the adjective vital in its Latin derivative,

¹ Placide Tempels was a Belgian Franciscan Missionary in Belgian Congo. In his great effort to understand the African cultural heritage in order to be able to better announce to the African people the Christian message, he embarked on profound articulation of the African thinking about reality. He produced a deep analysis of the fundamental elements of African thought and religion in his classical seminal work *La Philosophie Bantoue*, published in 1945 (see, Bénédet Bujo, *African Theology in its social context*, 56).

² D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Indiana University Press, Indiana 1994, p. 48.

from the noun *vita*, which in English can be translated as biological life. He instead uses the concept of vital force to denote a certain dynamism and energy like property that underlines everything that exists, as the essence of being³. Whereas, the substance is the very essence of being in classical western philosophy, the vital force is essence of reality in African ontology. The vital force can be described loosely as an integration of force and matter. Therefore, the Bantu metaphysics makes no distinction between force and matter, but integrates them into a unity that subordinates matter under the dynamism of force⁴. As already stated, the vital force is not a static but a dynamic concept that constitutes the essence of e.g. a mouse, a tree, a cow, stone, a human being, soil and indeed all that exists in the universe, including the spiritual realities. The vital force as essence of everything that exists, does not only define the things but also interconnects them in such a way that, the universe is a webbed whole, which Ijomah describes as harmonious monism⁵. In the African ontology, essence is an energy-oriented-conception-of-vitality. The conception of essence as vitality makes African ontology holistic-communitarian, in which reality is a closed system.

Consequently, the African view of the universe is holistic and not mechanistic as in the western modern scientific paradigm. In the African universe, all that exist are interconnected, and all natural forces depend on each other, such that humans live in harmony not only in, but also with the whole of nature⁶. The African universe therefore indicates a closed system that is in equilibrium of interdependence and coexistence between the earth, the spiritual world, humans, and non-humans both animate and inanimate. It is a universe in which the spiritual, human and physical worlds overlap in such a way that there is no differentiation and labelling of; the animate and inanimate, the physical and metaphysical, the sacred and secular, and the natural and supernatural⁷. In the African worldview, the natural and supernatural are not distinct but rather form a complex contiguous. In other words, the natural and supernatural have no difference in kind. The African universe is a system of almost unbreakable interrelations between God, the ancestors (the living dead), the living humans and nature. However, the living humans occupy central place in the system. In their worldview, the Africans

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ E. Etieyibo, *Ubuntu and the Environment in The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, Adeshina Afoloyan and Toyin Falola eds, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2017, p. 636.

⁶ Ivi, p. 639.

⁷ A. D. Kwesi, *Theology in Africa*, Orbis Book, New York 1984, p. 49.

live in a relationship of mutual moral obligation with physical nature. Nature or the environment therefore has more than just the ordinary meaning to the Africans. Since the environment is within the complex network of vital force that it shares with the spiritual realm and humans, it can be tapped to increase the vital force in humans and can also be manipulated to reduce it. This is the rationality behind African magic and witchcraft.

Unitary Tri-dimensional African Universe

Charles Nyamiti describes the African universe “as a sort of organic whole composed of supra-sensible or mystical correlations or participations”⁸. The African conceives the universe as an organic whole entity, with the same source of vital force as the principle that animates it. Every entity in the universe is connected with each other in such a manner that, each one influences the others positively or negatively⁹. The universe can therefore be viewed as spider web-like complex network of the interactions of vital force, in which no single thread (which represents the relationship between one entity and another) can vibrate without shaking the whole network¹⁰. What Nyamiti terms as interactions and participations in the network of African worldview refers to the relations of vital force between; God and humankind, God and both non-human animate and inanimate nature, humankind and humankind, and humankind and both non-human animate and inanimate nature. Since every single entity in the African universe is in active relationship with the rest of the entities, reality in African worldview is understood as a closed system in such a way that everything hangs together and is affected by any change in the system¹¹.

The African interconnected complex universe, is conceived as a three-tier creation of God (whom the Africans refer to with different names in the plurality of African indigenous Bantu, Nilotic and Cushite languages). The three entities include; First, the spiritual world, consisting of the heavens, empirically seen as the skies in which is found God, and the underworld where the ancestors dwell in spirit. The second entity is the human world that is located at the centre of the universe. The third entity is the cosmic world

⁸ C. Nyamiti, *The Scope of African Theology*, Gaba Publications, Kampala 1973, p. 20.

⁹ L. Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 1997, p. 50.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J Roux eds, *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2nd ed., Routledge, London 2003, p. 196.

here understood as the world composed of both animate non-human and inanimate beings. God is conceived and revered as the source of the vital force and the creator of all that exists, but He is not outside the world like a cosmic architect. God is the creator of the whole universe because He is the source of the vital force. He is the apex of the hierarchy of concatenation of the vital force. Since God is the source of the vital force, he is regarded as supreme and the strongest in the universe¹². God is a totality in himself and possesses the final force in its fullness. The vital force then flows to other beings in decreasing order of quantity, namely, to humans, nonhuman animate beings, and finally to inanimate beings. We can therefore establish a hierarchy of beings in the African universe based on the 'quantity' of vital force, similar to the hierarchy of beings in classical western philosophy.

The cosmos understood as the nonhuman animate and inanimate beings, constitutes what we refer to as nature or the physical environment. The trees, mountains, water bodies (rivers, lakes and seas), animals, birds, insects etc. in the African universe are 'material, religious and sacred'¹³. The natural environment serves as the dwelling place for both the living humans and the living-dead. So, the many physical entities around village clusters such as woods, bushes, forests, rivers, mountains are held in high esteem, reverence and even with fear for religious motives. Such entities are the dwelling places not only for the living but also for living-dead and other spiritual beings, and therefore are held to have mystical powers. For that reason, they are held with high reverence. Yet, the same entities can also be the dwelling places of spirits of the dead that cannot rest in the communion of the ancestors for not having lived morally up-right lives. Such spirits are cast out from the peace and tranquillity of the company of ancestors into rivers, mountains, dark caves, forests, lakes etc. as wondering spirits that can harm the living¹⁴. In such cases, the living humans hold the places with fear of harm. For example, among many African tribes, it is forbidden to go to rivers, lakes, forests, caves and similar place in the late hours of day and nights, lest one suffers harm by wondering spirits.

Since the physical natural environment is permeated by the vital force, it provides to the humans both spiritual and material nourishment. The spiritual nourishment is seen in many plants that have curative powers. They are used as medicine to cure wide range of sicknesses. Sickness is understood

¹² F. Ochieng' Odhiambo, *Trends and Issues in African Philosophy*, Petersburg, New York 2010, p. 29.

¹³ E. Michael Onyebuchi, *Humanitatis-Eco (Eco-Humanism)*, p. 626.

¹⁴ J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, Heinemann, London 1975, p. 32.

as diminution of vital force in a person, and its cure is understood as restoration of the lost vital force. Thus, the curing of the plants with medicinal power takes place at the metaphysical confluence between nature, human beings and the spiritual world of the ancestors and God¹⁵. Meanwhile, some plants are used as a medium of intercession between the living and the living-dead in religious ceremonies, thanks again to the vital force in them. The vital force also interconnects humans to the inanimate entities. Even where there is no biological life, the Africans attribute mystical life to an object such that there is a direct relationship between humans and the inanimate objects around them¹⁶. We can conclude the discussion about the physical environment as the second tier of the order of universe. The humans interact with the physical environment at the two level. First, at the physical or material level in which the physical environment provides humans with habitation and material and nourishment. Second, at the spiritual or metaphysical level, providing spiritual nourishment the living and abode for the spiritual world. Therefore, there is a unitary relationship between the humans and the physical environment, thanks the vital force that nets humans and the natural environment into the same web. The third tier in the complex order of the universe is the world of human beings, which stand at the centre between God and the cosmos. In the following section, is discussed the centrality of the human being in the complex order of the universe.

The Centrality of the Human being in the Universe

At the centre of the African complex vital force permeated and hierarchical universe, is the human being. Due do the centrality of their position in the order of the universe constituted by the network of vital forces, Africans have a relational conception of the human being. The human being is understood as always in a simultaneous tri-dimensional relationship, namely, with God and the spiritual realm, with fellow humans and with physical environment. Thus, at any given moment, the human being is a constituent member of the vital union. Each of these three dimensions of relationship is significant to the relationship between humans and the environment. The human being is in constant relationship with the spiritual world (the world of the divine and ancestors. If the humans are in constant relationship with the ancestors, then it means that the vital union is intergenerational. It is extended to the

¹⁵ M. Onyebuchi, *Humanitatis-Eco (Eco-Humanism)*, p. 626.

¹⁶ J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, Heinemann, London 1975, p. 39.

generations in the past and potentially to the generation that is yet to be born. The past, the present and future generations form one human community that is incorporated through the vital force into a large union of vital force with other animate and inanimate physical environment. So, humans in their being that is relational in nature, are just but a part of an enviroing wholeness, in the sense of an encompassing physical and metaphysical universe¹⁷. From his relatedness to all other entities in the complex vital union, the human being is understood merely as the centre of the universe but not as its master. In his position as the centre, the human being is a friend, beneficiary and user of the universe, but not its master and exploiter at will. Humans therefore have an imperative to live in harmony with the universe and to guard against any mentality of domineering and exploitation that goes against the equilibrium of the vital force in the universe.

II. African attitude towards the environment

A quick comparison between African and the western conceptions of the universe reveals a complete contrariety. While the African conception of the universe is unitary and explained by teleological view of causality, the western view of the universe influenced by and based on modern techno-scientific rationality is atomistic and explained by mechanistic view of causality. Even if the day-to-day activities and life of the Africans is based on facts that are empirically verifiable, when it comes to the explanation of the deep existential realities, the African rationality stands at complete variance with modern science. What the Africans understand of the universe is much deeper than what their human senses perceive and what science explains. The two views of the universe invoke different attitudes towards the environment. The western techno-scientific view of the universe takes nature as something that should be controlled and exploited to serve humans. For that reason, the western attitude is that of scientifically probing, analysing and manipulating the universe to serve humans¹⁸. In such an attitude, the western mind understands human survival as depended on the human capacity to control and subdue the natural environment.

The western view then understands the environment as having an instrumental value for serving human ends. The environment is understood purely as a resource to be exploited and for value addition to serve human

¹⁷ M. Onyebuchi, *Humanitatis-Eco (Eco-Humanism)*, p. 625.

¹⁸ A. D. Kwesi, *Theology in Africa*, Orbis Books, New York 1984, p. 47-48.

purpose. In the western understanding of the universe, what humans ought to do is continuously improve technology for the exploitation and manipulation of the environment to serve human desires and ends. In such a mentality, the natural environment is understood an independent entity, whose existence is not ontologically related to human existence. Its relationship to humans can solely be explained by its usefulness as a resource to humans.¹⁹ Furthermore, the western conception of the universe sets humans literally as the masters over the environment, who exploit the environment as directed by their wills and interests. This attitude is largely behind the environmental crisis that we are experiencing. The western capitalist society has manipulated its way up to the top of the global power structure to sit and exploit the environment of poor nations especially in the global south. Here we can mention the exploitation of minerals, fauna and flora in the Congo basin in Africa and the forest resource in the Amazon region by the western capitalist powers.

The African attitude towards the environment is at variance with the western attitude. The environment has a special and deeper meaning to the Africans than empirical perception and what natural science can explain. The African “loves the environment, fears it, and senses something mysterious about it”.²⁰ The environment is mysterious, religious and sacred because it is not only the abode of the living but also the living-dead and other spiritual beings. For that reason, the environment has mystical powers. John Mbiti sights that in many African cultures, spirits are believed to dwell in woods, bushes, forests, exceptionally big trees, rivers, mountains or just around the villages.²¹ Consequently, such entities are held to be sacred and are highly esteemed, and often preserved. For example, even if a forest has ripe trees for timber, no one in the community would engage in lumbering for economic gains. More so, such entities bore communal implications in terms of ownership and the right to disposal due to their mysterious and sacred status. The African view of the universe unites humans with natural environment. The Africans understand themselves as always in relation to the environment in their day-to-day life. Through the vital force, there is interconnectedness in the universe between everything that exists both living and non-living things. “Even where there is no biological life in an object, the African people attribute (mystical) life to it, to establish more direct relationship with the

¹⁹ J. Keulartz, *The Struggle for Nature: A Critique of Radical Ecology*, Routledge, London 1995, p. 5.

²⁰ K. A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, Orbis Books, New York 1984, p. 48.

²¹ J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, Heinemann, London 1975, p. 32.

world around”²².

The Africans understand that, the flourishing of human and non-human life and the ‘wellbeing’ of inanimate nature have intrinsic value in themselves and are mutual inclusive, thanks the vital force. This does not mean that the Africans cannot utilise the natural environment for their human benefit. It instead means that, they can do so with reverence and such appropriation of the physical environment for human use implies the circulation of the vital force in the same tri-dimensional complex unity. The main argument being underlined here is that, the Africans do not value the natural environment from its usefulness to human flourishing, but rather intrinsically in itself. The main African conception is that the diversity and richness of the different life forms of both fauna and flora have intrinsic values, which all contribute the flourishing of human and nonhuman life²³. This is understood as the nourishment of the equilibrium of the vital force in the unitary complex whole, which humans are a part of. If the equilibrium is offset by the destruction of the natural environment for human selfishly utilitarian motives, the flourishing of not only nonhuman lives but also of humans themselves is compromised.

At the root of the difference between the African and Western attitudes towards the physical environment, is the difference between the ontological rationalities on the which the two conceptions of reality are based. We have already presented the African ontology in a fairly exhaustive manner in the preceding parts. For a comparative purpose, we can briefly look at classical western ontology. Whereas the western ontology depicts the human natural environment as something that is passive, based on the theory of substance as that which constitutes being, the African ontology of vital force depicts the natural environment as something that has mystical (vitality) energy. The Western ontology also views the natural environment as distinct and separate from human existence, and as having a lower value than human existence if any. Thus, whereas the western conception ontologically dissociates human existence from the physical environment, the African conception unites and integrates the two. Consequently, the western understanding of the environment is anthropocentric, according to which, all that which constitutes the physical environment is passive and ontologically distinct from human existence such that, the value of physical nature that surrounds humans can only be measured by its usefulness to human

²² Ivi, p. 39.

²³ P. Curry, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*, Polity Press, cambridge 2011, p. 1.

wellbeing.

The dichotomy between human existence and the existence of the natural environment has its roots in western modern and postmodern ontological rationality, which to a great extent is rooted in Platonism. Platonism separated human rational dimension from the bodily dimension. It exclusively attributes the essence and fullness of human existence to the rational dimension, while bracketing the bodily dimension to all the material reality that surrounds human life, as something of a lower value. This reasoning robustly influenced many later Western philosophers. For example, in the Cartesian thought the human being as the *subjectum* is set apart from their physical environment. The Cartesian thought denies the intrinsic value of the natural material surrounding of human beings, implying that, its value is only ascribed by humans as the thinking subject and reference point²⁴. In a similar way, Emmanuel Kant sets the human subject above non-rational and inanimate entities. According to him, anything apart from human beings has but just a relative value as a means to serve human beings. Otherwise, it is only human beings that are an end in themselves²⁵. The implication of this argument in the relationship between human beings and the natural environment is that, the later does not have an intrinsic value but only an instrumental one, ascribed to them by humans who are set above as a masters of all the non-rational entities that exist around them. The Kantian reasoning results into anthropocentric environmental ethics. Furthermore, in his analysis of *Dasein*, Martin Heidegger, asserts human beings as the fullness of being and radically sets them beyond all nature as they dialectically remain envired by the same nature²⁶. In Heidegger, the human being is that which ‘forms the world’ whereas non-human entities have an impoverished world or no world at all. He asserts that “the human being is ‘world forming’ (*welthildent*), the stone is altogether ‘without world’ (*weltlos*), and the animal is ‘poor in the world’ (*weltarm*)²⁷. What cuts across the ontological articulation of the representative western philosophers chosen here, is the implication of their thoughts in environmental moral enquiry. They all put the

²⁴ D. Bergandi, *The Structural Links between Ecology, Evolution and Ethics: The Virtuous Epistemic Circle*, Springer, New York 2013, p. 20.

²⁵ J. Broughton and J. Carriero eds., *A Companion to Descartes*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden 2008, p. 179-80.

²⁶ J. Kocklelmans J., *Heidegger's Being and Time: Analytics of Dasein as Fundamental Ontology*, University of America Press, Washington DC 1989, p. 94.

²⁷ A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Humans Beings Need the Virtues*, Duckworth, London 1999, p. 42.

human beings separate and above their natural environment. The humans are not part of a shared ontologically continuous ecosystem with the natural environment. The western understanding of the natural environment adduces an attitude towards the environment different from the African attitude. From the African ontological understanding of reality based on the vital force and the consequent African attitude towards nature, we can extract an African environmental ethics.

III. Towards an African Environmental Ethics

The analysis of the African world view that has been given in the preceding part enables us to extract an African theology and spirituality of the environment. But more significantly, it enables us to extract an African ethics of the environment. From the analysis we can immediately deduce that, African theology and spirituality of the environment is earth (universe) oriented, and points to practical ethical implications, expressed through restraints and prohibition to destructive mentality and practises against the environment. An over-view of African religion shows that its main ethical presuppositions are derived from the relationships in the African universe between humans and the spiritual world, and between humans and the physical environment. The underlining implication is that, there is an imperative for respect for the spiritual-mystical nature of the environment in the African universe²⁸. The central position of the human being in the order of the universe does not imply that humanity has a licence to carry any activity towards the universe at will. It instead implies a great responsibility on humanity to treat the non-visible, in the visible sphere of the universe with reverence and respect, which translates to the care of the visible sphere of the universe. In fact, the reverential care for the totality of the universe is an essential part of the moral order of the universe, which determines the moral quality of everything in human action towards the natural environment²⁹.

As it has already been pointed, human beings are at the centre of the universe and therefore, has a moral imperative to live and maintain the harmony in the universe through their actions. There is imposition on them to obey the laws decreed by the natural, moral and the mystical order in the universe, which if they disobey leads to disturbance of the equilibrium of the whole universe. The consequence is suffering, which the human species bears

²⁸ L. Magesa, *African Religion*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 1997, p. 22.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 72.

the most. Therefore, human beings ought to be in harmony with the natural environment, namely, fauna, flora, and the inanimate order, since they all incarnate the vital force that orients them towards linkage with the entire system of the universe. The African integral ontology has a very direct moral implication i.e. it prescribes how humans ought to relate with the natural environment. It prescribes to humans a kind of relationship of reverence with nature around them. Africans therefore relate with nature, ascribing to it both intrinsic and instrumental value. The former is the value of an entity owing to the vital force in it, while the latter is the value of an entity in so far as it is for use in promoting human life within the ecosystem of the vital union.

In the African integral ontology, the meaning of a thing is derived from both its mystical and material dimensions. For example, many plants and animals serve as medicine and for ritual performances. They have some mystical powers for which they are used for performing religious rituals. Western modern science would see such plants for what they are, namely, just as plants even if they had some chemical composition that can be used in the manufacturing of medicine. Whereas the Africans see beyond the materiality of the plants to their mystical powers. For this reason, in the various African communities many species of plants and animals are held with a certain special dignity because of the mystical powers that they have. They are totems and they determine how humans ought to act towards them, hence an ethical implication on humans. Another ethical imperative that can be drawn from how Africans understand themselves in relation to the physical universe is that, humans cannot arrogate to themselves an infinite right to interpret and reduce the diversity of life forms and inanimate forms only to the satisfaction of mere human needs, often driven by greed. From the African conception, we ought to protect the natural environment because it has an inherent worth that surpasses its mere utility to human flourishing³⁰.

We can therefore, raise ethical questions that embrace how humans should relate with the natural environment from an African perspective of the understanding of the natural environment. Such questions provoke the establishment of norms of how to relate with the natural environment from an African understanding. This gives birth to an African environmental ethics that strives to establish what constitutes the ethical right human conducts, appropriations and use of the natural environment to serve human needs, given that the natural environment forms an interconnected ecosystem of the

³⁰ A. Kernohan, *Environmental Ethics: An Interactive Introduction*, Broadview Press, New York 2012, p. 179.

vital force with human beings. In this way, an African environmental ethics establishes a moral relationship between humans and the natural environment, and criteria to evaluate such a relationship. In its ultimate goal, an African environmental ethics should strive to attain a balance between appropriation and use of the physical environment for human good and the preservation of the same because of its intrinsic value and integrity independent of its usefulness to human beings. Therefore, an African environmental ethics prescribes the manner of living and acting, which as much as possible promotes both human and non-human flourishing, for equilibrium in, and wellbeing of the whole complex ecosystem of the vital force in the universe.

Conclusion

The worsening global environmental crisis calls for a change of attitude towards the environment, from a capitalist-consumerist attitude of maximising the exploitation of the natural environment, to an eco-friendly attitude that treats the natural environment with reverence and care. In the human relationship with the natural environment, the first attitude places its premium on capital expansion, while the second on a healthy relationship with natural environment for a holistic wellbeing of the universe from which is drawn the individual wellbeing of all the entities in universe, including human life. In the first attitude, healthy human relationship with natural environment is sacrificed for capital expansion and increasing consumerist satisfaction, whereas in the second attitude capital and any appropriate human desires ought to be used to promote a healthy and reverential human relationship with the natural environment. To stimulate the required change of attitude, we need an ontological conception of reality on which such attitude can be anchored. After a lengthy discussion, this study recommends the African ontology of the vital force as a viable option, and proposes an African environmental ethics derived from the African ontology, to be adapted albeit in different contexts, for environmental moral rationality in the fight against environmental crisis. It argues that, an African environmental ethics can help to mitigate the current global environmental crisis by prescribing the appropriate human conducts and attitudes for an integral formation of healthy human relationship and behaviour towards the natural environment.