



Review Article

Language and Critical Thinking as Vehicles of Environmental Ethics and Metaphysics

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Abstract: Language, metaphysics and environmental ethics are specific and universal aspects of culture. Language and critical thinking are phenomenal means of communicating and rationalising environmental and metaphysical issues, among other existential concerns in general. This study argues that language and critical thinking are vehicles of metaphysics and environmental ethics. It also argues that the kind of metaphysics and environmental ethics inherent to a people determine their attitude towards the environment. As some scholars affirm in the literature, this is where continental philosophy comes into environmentalism, because no philosophy is independent of culture and a larger number of environmental issues are peculiar to a place, while a few others obtain across places as universals. Thus, environmentalists look at environmental issues and metaphysical concerns from both specific and general contexts. It is realised that upon giving the issues at stake critical reflections, ethical principles are made or advanced using language constructively to express, disseminate and sustain them across ages. The study concludes that despite being neglected in metaphysical and environmental discourses, language plays a critical role in them, as (mis)representation of the two depends on how language is used to express and disseminate (un)critically constructed thoughts on environment and metaphysics.

Keywords: Environmental ethics, Metaphysics, Language, Critical thinking, Vehicles

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Introduction: Language either makes or mars in human activities depending on how it is used in society by individuals and groups. This is what obtains in environmental ethics and metaphysical concerns. The misuse of language, which amounts to linguistic misdeeds, constitutes a challenge to environmental ethics and metaphysics as well as philosophy as a whole, among other human endeavours. As Robert notes, philosophical problems are largely linguistic problems, as in the mystification of philosophy using language flamboyantly, impressionistically, and technically¹. Besides, linguistic problems are of concern to philosophy¹. It would be recalled that philosophy rose from linguistics (called philology). The paper argues here that since oral and written literature are integral parts of the whole thrust of linguistics, philosophy is birthed by linguistics because it gave *life* to philosophy through its raw materials that the latter took up and began to preoccupy itself with. Myth (mythology), poetry, folktale, and legendary, which philosophers across all periods agreed to be the mother of philosophy^{2, 3, 4}, are the elements, aspects or thrust of oral literature that involve and rely on language vis-à-vis linguistics in all regards.

It would also be recalled that linguistics, philosophy, science, and other intellectual disciplines began in Egypt, Africa before being hijacked by Western philosophers, linguists, scientists, and other professionals^{2,3,4,6,7,8}. James⁷ simply describes the reckless and pompous hijack of African philosophy as well as other disciplines and societal systems by the West as 'a stolen legacy'. Ideally, what ought to be is a harmonious complementarity^{9, 10} between all of Africa, all of the West and all of the other parts of the globe, and not the dabbling, attrition, negligence and/or erosion of any other's cultures, knowledge, disciplines, systems, institutions, etc.¹. The essence of the foregoing historical reflection is to historically situate the nexus between language, metaphysics and environmental ethics vis-à-vis philosophy and philology (linguistics).

Different cultures have different philosophies, within which their varied metaphysics and environmental ethics along with the other fields of philosophy. These endeavours, among all

other human endeavours, are only possible with language use^{11,12,13,14,15,16}. As Zimmerman¹⁷ rightly points out, issues of environmental ethics are borne out of the differences in the experiences, perspectives and approaches of philosophers. He also notes that 'continental philosophy shapes environmental philosophy and accounts for the variances in the conception of environmental issues, the treatment of the environment and the scholastic approaches to environmentalism'¹⁷. The expressed views of Zimmerman¹⁷ clearly lend credence to the central arguments of this paper. Under several sub-headings, the study shall thereby go on with explaining the place of language and critical thinking in environmental ethics and metaphysics among cultures. Thereafter, the paper shall make a logical conclusion from the whole analysis made to substantiate its thesis.

Concepts of Language, Critical Thinking, Metaphysics, and Environmental Ethics:

Language refers to the generality of all communication means among all living creatures including humans and animals^{18,15}. A language, a natural phenomenon, refers to as reflected and imbedded in their culture, tradition, existence, cosmology and endeavours in totality. The concepts of culture, tradition, existence, and cosmology capture metaphysics, while culture and tradition capture environmental ethics. Again, the plurality of language, whereby the speech forms of two or more peoples are involved, refers to languages^{1,15}. The scientific study of language is known as linguistics. Linguistics involves the scientific study of language, e.g. the scientific methods of data collection, observation, test, experimentation, hypothesis, generation or formulation of linguistic principles or laws (theories), and valid results (facts)^{1,18}.

Critical thinking, also regarded as 'reflective thinking,' is defined by Besong¹⁹ as 'an act of careful, logical, in-depth, reason-based and result-oriented thinking, directed at achieving a given goal.' Its usage in the academic or educational circle is attributed to John Dewey, who had used it interchangeably with 'reflective thinking' in 1910¹⁹. For Dewey²⁰, critical thinking refers to 'active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed

form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends.' It also involves constructive thinking that rests on one's own observations and experiments, and other factors^{21,22,23}, with the central goal of appraising the products of such thinking¹⁹. On their part, Robert, Besong, and Danjuma²⁴ define critical thinking as the act and art of engaging in decisive, logical and sustained deep(er) mental reflections on various ideas, aspects, matters and things of life about cosmos, self, others, the Supreme Being, beings, humans and non-humans, and the universe, with a view to making tangible observations for cogent and valued results in form of answers to questions of and about life and existence. Besides, the definition looks at critical thinking as a concept, an act and an art²⁴.

Metaphysics is a concept that is etymologically traced to Andronicus Rhodes (c.70 BC), the first to use it while compiling and editing Aristotle's works beyond the physical or ordinary^{1,25,26}. As a branch of philosophy, it concerns itself with critical and rational questions about and answers to reality, its nature and knowledge, the ultimate of the universe, and what reality or the ultimate of this or that entails, being and the Supreme Being^{27,28,29,30}. In the words of Alvira³⁰, 'metaphysics is the study of the ultimate cause and the first and most universal principles of realities.' This definition focuses on Western metaphysics. However, Okolo²⁶ and Chimakonam³¹ state that to the African, the ultimate reality is spirit, God (Being) or consciousness not matter in Western metaphysics. Both physical and spirit worlds are real to the African²⁵.

Environmental ethics is the field of philosophy concerned with looking at values, norms, principles, morality, and laws regarding human activities, actions, and inactions in relating or interacting with and exploiting the environment. Akpulu³² defines environmental ethics as the critical philosophic interrogation of human interaction with and use of the environment, based on morality, ethics and law, whereby the wrongs meted out on the environment by humans warrant punishment for violating moral codes, ethical principles and

laws that apply. Animals, plants, mountains, rivers, valleys, and other creatures inhabiting the ecosystem collectively refer to the environment. Næss^{33,34} identifies seven 'platform principles' that ought to be followed in human versus non-human relations in the ecosystem. These are intrinsic value and biocentric equality; non-violence and non-interference; deep questioning and self-realisation; ecocentrism and rejection of anthropocentrism; diversity and decentralisation; spontaneous experience and ecological perception; and environmental activism and policy^{33,34,35}. These principles are characterised by metaphysics to a reasonable extent. They are borne out of critical thinking. Thoughts, ethical and moral considerations and laws on environmental relations between humans and non-humans are generally borne out of critical thinking and expressed using language.

Environmental ethics follows the inherent environmental concerns of every given place, because our encounters occur in the place where we dwell in^{36,37,38,39,40,41,42}. Since place grounds and shapes experience³⁸, the experience one has of a given place informs and shapes one's ontological conception of the environment. According to Heidegger⁴⁰, dwelling is of existential significance, as 'the basic character of Being'. For Heidegger⁴⁰, place symbolically reveals the world. This undoubtedly concerns metaphysics in different geographical locations. Individuals are shaped by our daily experiences in a place and the stories told about the experiences are part and parcel of them^{38,43,44}. Some scholars strongly argue that place is the fitting ground for environmental ethics^{42,45,46,47}. Casey⁴⁴ holds that place is marginalised in Western thought. It should be noted that the place is not marginalised in African thought.

Language and Critical Thinking in Environmental Ethics: According to Malpas⁴⁸, 'memory, narrative and place are all co-constitutive of identity.' Memory has to do with recalling the past, which involves the narrative and place where the narrated event had occurred. Remembrance rouses deserving attention to what is at stake, such as environmental issues⁴⁸. Malpas³⁸ argues that it is an indisputable fact that 'human identity is tied to location across cultures and ages.'

Stories make our identity, as in auto/biographic, tribal, migratory, folkloric, legendary and heroic stories. Holland and O'Neill⁴⁶ are of the opinion that stories of land and other components of the environment have to be told so as to engender ethical commitment to building on what has been in place.

Zimmerman¹⁷ emphasises that English-speaking eco-philosophers, approach is influenced by continental thought, differ from Anglo-American analytic eco-philosophers, whose taken approach aims at justifying the move for extending moral consideration to non-human organisms (e.g. animals, plants, ecosystems, mountains, rivers). 'Such moral extensionism,' Zimmerman¹⁷ notes, 'draws upon the three major ethical traditions of the modern English-speaking world: natural rights, utilitarianism and deontology.' The foregoing observation made by Zimmerman¹⁷ highlights the significance of language and place in environmentalism. In the first place, natural rights, utilitarianism, and deontology are to metaphysics. They extend to environmentalism vis-à-vis environmental ethics in the second place. Clearly, Zimmerman¹⁷ agrees that language has a significant place in environmental ethics in that he reiterates language-based differences that manifest in eco-philosophy among scholars of English, French, and German backgrounds, among others. It follows that their geo-linguistic backgrounds substantiate, influence and determine the variation in approach, conception, exploration, and analysis of themes of environmentalism vis-à-vis environmental ethics.

Also, Zimmerman¹⁷ agrees that tradition, cosmology, language, economy, and geography come to a place in matters and politics of and scholastic brainstorming on the environment, to which context-specific and universal ethics are applied. In addition, Zimmerman's explanation has influenced the thoughts of different philosophers as well as other persons on environmentalism¹⁷. He rightly observes that 'the experience and the conception of nature, shared by descendants of colonists, differ from the experience and the conception of nature shared by European contemporaries'¹⁷. He emphasises that the

noted 'factors make the differences in the views and approaches of American, Australian, New Zealand and French environmental philosophers'¹⁷. As such, it is quite clear that humans' linguistic, cognitive and practical capacities make distinctions between and among humans, animals, other non-humans of the ecosystem, and all other existential phenomena.

However, 'decisive', 'logical', 'observations', 'results', 'cogent', 'sustained', and 'mental reflections' attributes to prove critical thinking to be a tasking exercise that crosses the province of arts and humanities to sciences. It allows its performers or actors (i.e. critical thinkers) to make choices and exploits of what become(s) shared cogent and valued results of individual's deep mental reflections. The results are most often than not sustainably beneficial to the individual critical thinker and others concurrently²⁴.

Critical thinking makes it possible to realise the truism or falseness of environmental and metaphysical matters. All that is worthily communicated about the environment, existence with its substances, and ultimate reality is first of all borne out of critical thinking and revealed afterward through language use in oral or written form or both forms. Although the otherwise is also borne out of thinking and expressed using language, the thinking is not critical and the language use is unworthy, wrong, or negative.

Language is used to influence people into thinking critically and creatively about the environment. Upon doing so, they realise the need to uphold ethics in relating with and exploiting the environment. Environmental issues and their measures, ethical and moral considerations, and laws on environment all involve language use.

Ekpenyong and Ikegbu⁴⁹ admonish thus: 'Languages, linguistics and communications must be added to the list of the allied challenges of humanity, where there is a high increase in knowledge upon which philosophical thought is increasingly needed to deal with them. Ekpenyong and Ikegbu's view reflects that of Asouzu⁵⁰ who observes that 'philosophy has much to do with the

resourcefulness with which we handle the changes [challenges] we encounter in life.' It suffices to say that language misuse, the endangerment and attrition of indigenous languages, the misdeeds to the environment with its non-human species, and the violation of environmental ethics, among others, are 'the allied challenges of humanity' that require language and critical thinking to deal with, among other viable measures. The centrality of language in all endeavours is expressed by Uche⁵¹ thus: *'Without language, science cannot strive; this shows that effective communication in science involves [the] ability to use and understand the technical terms as well as interpret information encoded in symbolic form into another non-symbolic form of language'*.

However, Næss' formed three central ideas on environmentalism are grounded in critical thinking about and ontological conception of environment along with all that affects it. One of the three is ecological self-realisation and the self-identity of nature. The next one is non-violence and the intrinsic value of all beings. His third major idea is the importance of diversity and decentralisation³⁵.

Language and Metaphysics: The place of language in metaphysics in general cannot be over-emphasised. All that is said and known about metaphysics is done using language. It implies that there can be no metaphysics without language. Metaphysics as well as philosophy in its entirety relies wholly on language and linguistics for encoding, expression, dissemination and decoding of whatever knowledge that embodies it in totality. African metaphysics is expressed through the different African languages and speech varieties, including those of Nigeria. That is, the macrocosmic Nigerian metaphysics is expressed using Nigerian languages. The microcosmic Nigerian metaphysics, which entails the respective inherent metaphysics of every Nigerian people, is also expressed or made using the different Nigerian indigenous languages.

That is, African metaphysics doubles as Nigerian indigenous metaphysics that is embedded and shown in their indigenous proverbs, customs, traditions, norms, values,

etc. The expression of a people's metaphysics through their indigenous languages and dialects does not apply to African metaphysics alone. It obtains across all global cultures, un/popular and in/formal alike. European, American, Chinese, Japanese and Australian metaphysics, among others, is likewise respectively. The wide knowledge of Western philosophy cum metaphysics is a product of the wide use and sustenance of English Language and other like today's Western languages, their means of communication. The description of African metaphysics follows the general description of metaphysics as the quest to know about reality in totality, including the ultimate cause and first principles of realities in the universe and beyond (the metaphysical world of form)¹.

It concerns the African peculiar conception of reality, its nature, knowledge, ultimate cause and principles, and embodiments in entirety, including Africans' cosmology and belief in/about the Supreme Being, spirits, self, personhood and the 'unquestionable received' knowledge and phenomena that go beyond reason, science, skepticism and human's comprehension¹. The explanation offered by Ukwamedua²⁵ on what describes and constitutes African metaphysics reflects the foregoing definition attempted by this study. According to him,

*African metaphysics in general can be considered as the African way of perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of reality. In its bid to comprehend an all embracing and totalistic view of reality as well as the unique place of individual beings in the holism of reality, African metaphysics considers among other things, the fundamental institutional embodiments of the African traditional thoughts*²⁵.

However, Dibia and Robert⁵² argue that the fact that philosophical problems stemmed from linguistic problems, generated by the medieval philosophers, all human problems stem from linguistic problems that arise from language misuse, under-use and linguistic ignorance, negligence, issues and trends. Wittgenstein blames the medieval philosophers for causing

language-based problems and mystifying philosophy by using language esoterically and flamboyantly for impressionistic sake. For Wittgenstein, the problems of philosophy sprawled from philosophers' wrong, flamboyant, and ambiguous use of language, basically for impression. Drawing an inference from Wittgenstein's view, Dibia and Robert⁵² submit that all human problems can best be solved or avoided linguistically since they basically arise from the wrong use of language.

Also, Nwala¹⁸ maintains that the numerous problems bedevilling our societies could have been addressed if the linguists were up and doing. Consequently, 'most of our problems, both language-based and general ones, are left unaddressed or have been half-haphazardly addressed'⁵³. On their part, Negedu and Ukwamedua²⁷ warn against the tendency of trying to wipe out metaphysics vis-à-vis philosophy in its entirety through Pyrrhonism and skepticism.

However, according to Ijiomah¹⁰ avers, 'every material thing has a spiritual dimension and every spiritual thing has a material dimension', which implies that there is an existential connectivity between the physical and the spiritual, between the being and the humans, between humans and the non-humans, and between and among humans, cultures, groups and phenomena¹⁰. In addition, as Ijiomah¹⁰ posits, reality in African context is composed of material phenomenon and spiritual phenomenon, and the relationship that exists between elements or entities is the force that dovetails realities into each other. Africans conceive this cyclical nature of reality. Therefore, the geographical and status differences between Western and African phenomena and aspects of culture like languages and philosophy [metaphysics and ethics herein] do not presuppose contradictions, regardless of their (seeming) oppositeness. Thus, resolving environmental issues and metaphysical debates significantly requires harmonisation of existential realities and opposites about these issues at stake, which are currently polarised and bifurcated. Interestingly, resolving the issues begins with

thinking critically. Then, the constructive and right use of language follows suit.

Asouzu's Ibuanyidanda philosophy, an ontological model, emphasises the dire need for mutual complementarity between and among persons, people(s), groups and phenomena for the realisation of the greatest possible thriving and gaining the collective good of all⁵⁴. That is, there is a mutual dependence of all missing links in the unifying interrelatedness of things and all living creatures in generality. Thus, language, critical thinking, metaphysics and environmental ethics are interrelated. Harmonisation of realities and existential opposites would undoubtedly contribute to resolving environmental issues, among other societal problems, particularly those arising from 'polarisation and bifurcation of reality'⁵⁰.

Since the metaphysics of a people is the peculiar system of a people, its original expression is best possible through the use of indigenous languages, knowledge, worldview and values, oral tradition and literature, which are indigenous means and ways of life. For example, Nigerian peoples' metaphysics is made manifest in their worldviews, beliefs, myths, tales, notions of personhood, existence, human versus non-humans, brotherhood, life and death, etc., all in African perspective. The cosmology of each of the Nigerian peoples is also made manifest and expressed in their oral tradition and literature, and indigenous knowledge and ethos, such as myth, folklores, legendary, customs, arts, artefacts, crafts, norms and values, etc.¹ Therefore, it is quite clear that the attrition/erosion of any indigenous languages spells doom on the metaphysics of the people(s) concerned and their inherent environmental concerns, as their environmental ethics gets eroded or put to perpetual attrition too.

Conclusion

So far, this paper has demonstrated that language and critical thinking are vehicles of metaphysics and environmental ethics. A people's metaphysics and ethics are made manifest in their relations with the environment. The thoughts about the

environment and the ethics evolved, conventionalised, institutionalised, transmitted, and sustained across generations among cultures are manufactured and processed through critical thinking. Upon completing the mental processes involved, such thoughts and ethics are emitted using language. The right use of language portrays the metaphysics of a people in good light, while the otherwise misrepresents it. The metaphysics of a people is an integral part of their culture, just as language is.

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