

African Environmental Philosophy With(out) Eco-phenomenology?

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Abstract

There has been relatively little reflection from African environmental philosophers on the specific contributions that eco-phenomenology, insofar as it constitutes a distinctive philosophical approach, might make to their field. In this article, I critically evaluate key approaches in African environmental philosophy and argue that the implicit aim of early African environmental philosophers appears limited to employing analytic and hermeneutic methods to rethink anthropocentric attitudes—those largely responsible for upsetting the balance of the natural environment—without any explicit engagement with eco-phenomenological principles or methods. I discuss possible reasons for this neglect and show how African environmental philosophy could benefit from adopting an eco-phenomenological perspective, particularly in revealing the problematic assumptions embedded in the ontological ideal of the interdependence of all things in nature. I conclude that eco-phenomenology has the potential to advance environmental thinking in Africa, provided its methodological insights are adequately taken up.

Keywords: African environmental ethics, eco-phenomenology, environmental philosophy, environment, nature, normativity, interdependence, African philosophy method.

1. Introduction

African environmental philosophy is a growing field that seeks to articulate unique perspectives on the relationship between humans and the environment, drawing on the continent's rich tapestry of cultural traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and philosophical insights. This branch of African philosophy has considerably developed beyond articulating cultural ontologies as the basis for environmental ethics (Kelbessa 1997; Chemhuru and Masaka 2010) to addressing critical issues affecting human–environmental relations like moral status (Metz 2012, 2022; Chemhuru 2019), sustainability (Kelbessa 2018; Samuel and Fayemi 2019; Tosam 2019) and animal rights (Horsthemke 2019).

However, the issue of method has not garnered much interest among African environmental philosophers.¹A close examination of popular literature on African environmental philosophy shows that two major approaches have been employed by African environmental philosophers: analytic

(Metz 2012, 2017; Chemhuru 2019; Samuel 2023) and hermeneutic (Ekwealo 2012; Fayemi 2016; Roothaan 2017).² On the one hand, the analytic method for addressing environmental issues is characterized by its rigorous focus on clarity, precision, and logical argumentation in the examination and clarification of concepts and propositions. On the other hand, the hermeneutic method of philosophy, rooted in the tradition of interpretation and understanding, focuses on the interpretation of texts, meanings, and human experiences. There is, however, the neglect of eco-phenomenology as a framework for addressing environmental issues among African scholars, although it may not be a deliberate act on their part. Even when some of them address themes related to eco-phenomenological concerns (see Chimakonam 2017), there is a lack of recognition of the specific contributions that eco-phenomenology might make to African environmental thought.

Eco-phenomenology as an evolving branch of environmental philosophy was influenced by the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Brown and Toadvine 2003; Meyer 2024). This philosophical approach to ecological issues emphasizes the embodied and experiential dimensions of human–environmental interactions. David Wood, one of the foremost eco-phenomenologists, posits that “eco-phenomenology can be thought of as a hybridization of phenomenological ecology and ecological phenomenology and that the task of eco-phenomenology is to rearticulate our experience of dwelling on earth in ways that can mitigate the environmental crisis in the world” (Wood 2019: 14). Eco-phenomenology is the pursuit of the relationalities of worldly engagement, both human and those of other creatures (Wood 2003: 213) and this approach has even been applied to understand recent phenomena like the pandemic crisis (see Verducci and Küle 2022).

Thus, one of the objectives of eco-phenomenology is to scrutinize the relational ontology underlying much environmental theory in a bid to reimagine new meanings of both environment and the human.

The objective of this article is to explore the value that an eco-phenomenological approach could bring to African environmental philosophy, especially in revealing the complexity of environmental experiences that are entrenched in the ontological idea of interdependence of all things in nature, which underpins many African environmental theories. A recurring theme in African environmental philosophy is the emphasis on the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of living harmoniously with nature (Behrens 2017: 469–471; Murove 2004; Tangwa 2004). However, this ontological idea is often mentioned without a clear appreciation of its conceptual commitments and practical implications. Kevin Behrens, a South African based environmental philosopher, notes the limitations of this idea, stating that “it is not easy to give an account of quite how the acknowledgement of interdependence entails a normative requirement to foster a certain kind of relationship” (Behrens 2010: 472). His argument is that the “correlation” between interdependence and harmonious living with nature is assumed in many African accounts of environmental ethics (Behrens 2010: 472). In this regard, there is the awkward blend of ontology, epistemology and ethics that calls for critical scrutiny. To do this, I turn to the insights from eco-phenomenology, a growing discipline in environmental philosophy. I argue that African environmental philosophy built upon the ontology of interrelatedness of all things in nature exaggerates our openness to more-than-human-alterity and the motivation to care for and respect the environment. Also, I contend that there are complex environmental experiences within the African tradition that should, at least, be recognized and even explored through an eco-phenomenological approach since this approach gives more attention to the lifeworld where environmental experience, in their everydayness, becomes the raw data of environmental analysis.

The article is divided into six sections. In section two, I evaluate African environmental philosophy as a distinct branch of African philosophy and argue that the analytic and hermeneutic methods are popular in African environmental thought. I demonstrate that these approaches, although quite

engaging, have not opened some significant environmental attitudes and experiences, even when they regard the ontological precepts of interrelatedness/interrelatedness of all things in nature as the basis of their environmental theories. I argue that the use of these methodologies by African environmental philosophers does not reveal what is fully available in terms of experiencing nature and the more-than-human-world in Africa, thereby leading to a deficiency in their environmental theories. In section three, I will provide a rough understanding of eco-phenomenology, detailing the evolving nature of this sub-discipline, its proponents, principles as well as its aims and objectives in rearticulating environmental thought. The account of eco-phenomenology that I offer is an extremely general one and is hardly exhaustive. In section four, I provide some reasons why eco-phenomenological approaches might have been unpopular in African environmental thought, even when African phenomenology has recently evolved on other topics (Olivier *et al.* 2023). In section five, I analyse what is on offer from eco-phenomenology and how African environmental philosophy can broaden the idea of interdependence with nature by applying an eco-phenomenological analysis to the representations of ordinary life, within the natural environment, that are too easily secured and fail to grapple with the ambivalence and ambiguities that are part of the experience of nature. In the final section, I conclude that African environmental philosophers should pause before endorsing African environmental philosophy as systematised and complete. Equally, though, they should not be quick to discount the possibility that eco-phenomenology can pose an intriguing challenge to develop an African environmental philosophy that prioritizes revealing the assumptions that are concealed in complex experiences of nature over theorizing a reductive ontology that emancipates us from the ordinary as the basis of African environmental ethics. An eco-phenomenological approach, as I argue, will offer a critical dimension to the dominant relational ontology at the background of African environmental philosophy and also insist that African environmental philosophers pay more attention to the value of experience in Africa's lifeworld. This approach will consequently provide a better motivation to reflect deeply on the rich but varied experience of the natural environment in Africa.

2. African Environmental Philosophy, Relational Ontology and the Limit of Methods

In this section, I aim to show that the two prevalent methodologies for addressing African environmental issues have obscured, perhaps unintentionally, the potential for discovering values from their relational ontology which is a core aspect of eco-phenomenology. Although African environmental philosophy has recently evolved, one would expect that this branch of African philosophy would have gained more prominence by exploring critical methods for developing its environmental thought and analysis, rather than merely describing the varieties of "African philosophical methodologies" used in addressing environmental problems (see Ibanga 2018).

What is now known as environmental philosophy in Africa began as a mesh of cultural ontologies and ethical reflections, which are largely responses to the criticism from Western philosophers.³ What I mean is that at its inception African environmental philosophy was spurred by critiques from Western thinkers. In particular, the remarks from John Baird Callicott that "Africa looms as a big blank spot on the world map of indigenous environmental ethics [...] [and that] African thought orbits, seemingly, around human interest" (Callicott 1994: 158) motivated some African environmental philosophers to counter the accusations of anthropocentrism in Africa's worldview (see Ojomo 2011). Kelbessa explores the evolution of environmental thought on the continent, elucidating the ideas and theories that have shaped African environmental philosophy (see Kelbessa 2018).

Although the question of which methodology is best suited for addressing environmental concerns in the African tradition has not been a focal point in African environmental philosophy, it is possible to identify at least two methodological approaches in existing works on African environmental philosophy. They are the analytic and hermeneutic methods. The analytic method of philosophy, often

associated with the tradition that began in the early twentieth century, represents a distinctive approach to philosophical inquiry that emphasizes clarity, precision, and logical rigor. This method has significantly shaped contemporary philosophical discourse and research, particularly in the Anglo-American tradition. At the heart of the analytic method is a commitment to achieving clarity and precision in philosophical arguments. This involves careful analysis of language and concepts to avoid ambiguities and confusion. Analytic philosophers often seek to clarify the meaning of terms and propositions to ensure that arguments are logically coherent and that philosophical problems are well-defined. In Africa environmental philosophy, the analytic method has been used to clarify and evaluate normative theories, ethical principles including moral reasoning. Philosophers such as Behrens (2017) and Metz (2012, 2022) have applied logical and conceptual analysis to develop and defend environmental ethical theories from the African tradition. For instance, Kevin Behrens, responds to Callicott's charge of anthropocentrism in Africa's worldview. He employs an analytical approach to develop the theory of "African relational environmentalism," which is grounded in the ontological concept of the "interrelatedness" or "interconnectedness" of all elements within nature (Behrens 2010: 469–471). He argues that this ontological position can ground environmental ethics in Africa.

Behrens is not alone in using an analytic approach to theorize African environmental concerns, Thaddeus Metz also uses an analytic approach to address moral issues related to the environment in his works. Metz employs analytical philosophy to clarify and address ethical questions concerning moral status and animal rights (see Metz 2017, 2022). Metz's analytic approach involves critically evaluating existing ethical frameworks and engaging in philosophical dialogue to develop ethical theories that are applicable to environmental issues. This includes addressing criticisms and counterarguments to his proposal thereby showing plausibility of his ethical theories for environmental philosophy (see Metz 2023).

The other popular method for addressing environmental issues in Africa is the hermeneutic method. The hermeneutic method of philosophy, rooted in the interpretation of texts and understanding of meaning, represents a distinctive approach to philosophical inquiry that emphasizes the historical and contextual dimensions of human experience. This method has profoundly influenced various fields of philosophy, including ethics. The hermeneutic method encourages reflective interpretation of ethical concepts and practices. This involves critically examining how moral values and principles are interpreted and applied in various contexts. The demonstration of hermeneutics in African environmental philosophy is an acknowledgement that moral understanding is historically and culturally contingent. Ademola Fayemi (2016) uses the hermeneutic approach to analyze environmental thinking in the African tradition. In his hermeneutico-reconstructive theory of African environmental management, he highlights the limitations of current eco-activism in Nigeria and proposes a more culturally and contextually grounded approach to environmental ethics. By integrating African environmental ethics through a hermeneutico-reconstructionist framework, Fayemi advocates for a more effective and culturally resonant approach to addressing Nigeria's environmental challenges (Fayemi 2016). However, his approach does not give a robust analysis of how environmental attitudes are inspired by people's complex experiences of nature.

In a similar but more interpretative manner, Angela Roothaan, a European based philosopher dedicated to African philosophy, explores the significance of trees in West African cultures through a hermeneutic framework. She examines how trees are interpreted and understood in some African contexts, highlighting their cultural, spiritual, and ecological importance. By applying a hermeneutic approach, Roothaan uncovers the intricate meanings and signification associated with trees, and suggests that these insights should be integrated into our understanding of the environment

(Roothaan 2017). Although the hermeneutic approach allows for a more flexible analysis of environmental issues because it recognizes that moral values and practices evolve over time and are shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts, yet, it has not been applied with rigor by subsequent African environmental philosophers especially to the ontological norms that engender environmental actions.

Workineh Kelbessa has also developed some African-inspired environmental theories (Kelbessa, 2014, 2018). Kelbessa's African environmental theories stem from a blend of analytic and hermeneutic approaches. In one of his works, he uses the hermeneutic approach to explain the environmental attitudes of indigenous people of Oromo community (Kelbessa 1997) but adopts the analytic framework to tease out the environmental values peculiar to Africans and how these values can contribute to rearticulating global environmental ethics and policy (see Kelbessa 2014). In another article, Kelbessa succinctly analyzes the African worldview when he writes,

[...] African worldviews regard human beings and the non-human world as extensions of each other [...]. In African worldviews, human beings are in nature and part of nature in balance with the whole. When human beings see themselves as outside of nature, it is purely for the purpose of conceptual need. The purpose here is to engage in conceptual analysis. Even here humans are still in nature. (Kelbessa 2018: 321)

Kelbessa's analysis above captures Africa's relational ontology of interconnectedness/interdependence of all things in nature. He explains that the belief in harmony and interdependence of all entities in nature is a requirement for human flourishing in the environment.

The ontological ideal of interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all things is relatively popular in African environmental philosophy. However, environmental analysis within the African tradition has allowed this ontological concept of interconnectedness of all things in nature to be narrowly interpreted. I will discuss three important themes, among several themes, where African environmental philosophers have adapted this relational ontology in a limited way. First, some African environmental ethicists attempt to propound an African theory of moral status that can address the anthropocentric perception of nature and non-human animals in Africa. In this regard, Thaddeus Metz uses an analytic approach to propound an African relational theory of moral status. He demonstrates that the source of moral status resides not in an entity but in the capacity of the entity to relate with other entities (Metz 2012: 389–393). He calls the revised view of this account the “modal relational account.” In this revised account, he suggests that “moral considerability” applies only to beings that can be objects and subjects of communion (Metz 2022). While this analytic framework has been useful, it still does not open up the full possibilities in the relational ontology at the background of people's environmental attitude and behaviour that is responsible for reinforcing or diminishing the capacity to relate with other entities. Similarly, Munamoto Chemhuru offers another account of moral status in African environmental philosophy. Although Chemhuru considers the moral status of nature from an African perspective using an analytic approach, his conclusions align with the hermeneutic approach. He specifically argues, “The fact that human beings are interconnected with other natural beings such as the air, water and the soil could give them strong reasons to treat them in a respectable way because they have a moral status to some extent” (Chemhuru 2019: 44). The obscurity in this claim is that the mere fact of acknowledging interconnectedness of all things in nature does not translate into action of respect for the natural environment. There seem to be in-betweens that specific encounters with nature have revealed to some people in Africa that are not captured by this relational ontology. I will provide some concrete examples of these environmental experiences later.

The second theme common in African environmental discourse is the application of ubuntu, an African philosophical worldview that is popular among sub-Saharan Africans, to environmental thinking. The contribution of ubuntu to addressing environmental problems has gained more patronage since the works of Ramose (2015), Horsthemke (2015, 2019) and Etieyibo (2017). The interpretation of ubuntu and its usefulness for deriving a transformative environmental philosophy is building up even though some African philosophers have criticized some interpretations of ubuntu because they echo anthropocentrism (Horsthemke, 2015) and also that there exists a “closed conception” of ubuntu environmental theories because they fail to encourage diversity in environmental ethical analysis (Gwaravanda 2019: 86). Although these critics of ubuntu need to be taken seriously, given that there are many unfair interpretations of it, what I think should be taken away from the critics of ubuntu is that they seem to suggest that ubuntu should be viewed as a complex experience and that there are varieties and layers of ubuntu expression that are embedded in the ubuntu worldview which must be recognized in their own terms rather than imposed. The point here is that the many layers of ubuntu experience must be given fair, if not equal, visibility in environmental analysis and discourse. If one sees ubuntu as a doctrine that dictates a particular way of life rather than a codified complex experience of people that offers myriad ways of relating with the environment, there will be a limitation on what ought to be available for exploration. Analysing the variety of environmental experiences of the natural environment responsible for both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric

attitudes in places where ubuntu worldview exists should also be a task for African environmental scholars. As Etieyibo argues, the non-anthropocentric component of ubuntu can be made available if the focus is on the metaphysical rather than the ethical aspect (Etieyibo 2017: 636–637). I regard Etieyibo’s point here as a challenge to unearth the complexity of ubuntu metaphysics, one that should not only merely retort the idea of interdependence of all things in nature but also open the vagaries of our inherence in nature as humans, as well as the quasi-intentionality of non-humans in such arrangement of interdependence. On this requirement, Gwaravanda recommends that “ubuntu ethics should open up for multiple and diverse thinking” because it offers the possibility of exploring the horizons of ubuntu manifestations in African societies especially the complex relationalities that exist in it (Gwaravanda 2019: 86). The analytic and the hermeneutic approaches, as deployed by African philosophers, have not been decisive in meeting this requirement.

The third theme focuses on sustainable development. Some African scholars have used the analytic approach to show that African environmental ethics can contribute to the discourse on sustainability and sustainable development (see Kelbessa 2018; Samuel and Fayemi 2019; Tosam 2019; Etieyibo 2023: 127–128; Samuel 2023). Most of these accounts lean on the ontological idea that everything in nature is interconnected, inferring that the motivation to live sustainably and avoid overexploitation of the environment stems from this ontological position. However, these African theories of environmental sustainability, based on the ontology of interconnectedness of all things in nature, have often overstate the scale of environmental consciousness and people’s moral agency in Africa. I think a persuasive theory of sustainability should be discovered from, and amenable to the lived experience of specific people instead of just being a consequence of the relational ontology that exists in a worldview. Eco-phenomenology, as I will later discuss, emphasizes the importance of local, contextual engagement with nature. This aligns well with sustainable practices that are grounded in specific ecosystems, cultures, and traditions, rather than imposing one-size-fits-all idea of sustainability. By understanding the unique characteristics of each ecosystem through direct practical engagement, African communities can develop sustainability theories and practices that are more effective and respectful of local environments.

From the above analysis, environmental theories from the first generation of African philosophers to contemporary African thinkers, as far as I understand, have at least two intentions. First, to show that there are beliefs and attitudes within African societies that suggest the need to respect nature. Second, to demonstrate that such theories of nature-relatedness are worthy of consideration, not just for addressing misconceptions about African environmental philosophy but also for revealing moral intuitions that can help resolve critical environmental problems (Kelbessa 2005: 21). However, the quest to defend non-anthropocentric interests in African environmental philosophy through the analytic and hermeneutic approaches has somehow obscure some complex but concrete experiences of people's relationships with the environment in Africa. This neglect has been facilitated by the simplistic acceptance and interpretation of the relational ontology in this tradition. When Callicott speaks of the need for "the construction of environmental ethics from the raw materials of indigenous, traditional, and contemporary cognitive cultures," it seems to me that he is referring to the concrete experiences of indigenous people, rather than just their beliefs regarding the natural environment in Africa's lifeworld (Callicott 1994: 5). The African lifeworld is undeniably rich in experiences that reflect different attitudes to environmental conservation. This suggests that the actions, attitudes, and motivations toward environmental conservation are more complex than what many African environmental philosophies have described.

What I have tried to establish in this section is that the use of analytic and hermeneutic approaches to exploring the African ontological idea of interrelatedness or interconnectedness of all things in nature might have "laid the foundation for a morality that value harmonious relationships within the community of all natural things," as Behrens and many other African environmental philosophers have argued (Behrens 2014: 82). However, to build on that foundation, we need a methodology that can explore African ontological theory of environmental relations in ways that do not bypass concrete experiences and the different modes of being within Africa's environmental lifeworld. While eco-phenomenology is open to scrutinizing relational ontologies (as I will demonstrate in section 5), I think African environmental philosophers have not sufficiently explored the usefulness of this approach, perhaps due to its methodological obscurity. In the next section, I will discuss eco-phenomenology as a distinct branch of environmental philosophy.

3. Understanding Eco-phenomenology

The aim of this section is to offer a rough sketch of eco-phenomenology by outlining some of its key proponents, principles, and objectives, particularly in its effort to rearticulate the crisis of environmental thought and behaviour. I admit that the account I provide is intentionally broad and by no means exhaustive. It is offered in the spirit of presenting eco-phenomenology as an evolving, yet valuable, philosophical project.

To begin, one cannot understand eco-phenomenology without first considering what phenomenology itself is about, since eco-phenomenology emerged as a form of critical—or perhaps applied—phenomenology. As a discipline, phenomenology arose in response to the growing threat of scientific naturalism. This naturalism was primarily concerned with abstract, objective accounts of reality, often neglecting the phenomena themselves. The classical phenomenologists, beginning with Edmund Husserl, sought a richer articulation of reality—one grounded in how phenomena are given in experience (Brown and Toadvine 2003: iv). Their insistence on returning to the phenomena opened a space for attending to the complexity of what appears in experience. Such openness also entails allowing aspects of reality to show themselves intelligibly—to become accessible through sustained experiential engagement.

Although individual phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have offered distinct accounts of what experience is and its meaning, one can safely assert that phenomenology begins within the everyday experience of the world and seeks to understand the structure of that experience (Banon 2016: viii). At its most fundamental level, phenomenology is a philosophical method that begins with an examination of experience. But this kind of examination is not an empirical conception of experience that attempts to reduce experience to its simplest terms in order to understand it. Rather, phenomenology seeks to understand experience in its complexity. In other words, phenomenology eschews idealized and abstract models of experience in favour of engaging the world as we actually experience it. Phenomenology equally avoids the limitation of scientific causality by taking perceptual realities as one that is more structured and perhaps complicated than what the theory of causality has captured. Phenomenology, according to David Wood, intends for a different kind of causality, one that is higher than that which is demonstrated in scientific naturalism. Such causality, he says, is one that is presupposed by the operative causality of everyday phenomena (Wood 2003: 213).

Eco-phenomenology began as the intersection of phenomenology with ecological thinking and this phenomenological approach emerged when some continental philosophers attempted a role in addressing the current environmental crisis, relying on the ideas of classical phenomenologists like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger, with the belief that these thinkers laid the foundation of a new environmental philosophy (Foltz and Frodeman 2004). This attempt led to the sub-discipline of environmental philosophy called eco-phenomenology. Eco-phenomenology emerged from the need to understand human beings and even nature better than that which has been represented by natural science, especially when entities within nature have been constantly manipulated by human beings giving reasons to agree with the characterisation of this age as Anthropocene.

Nature is now a controversial concept in this era of environmental crisis. Some scholars argue that that a beguiled understanding of nature stands right at the heart of environmental problems (Wapner 2014). While the subject matter of nature for the environmentalist is seen as important, the eco-phenomenologist distinguishes their intervention in environmental philosophy as a desire to rearticulate the two facets of nature. That is, the nature outside (natural world) and the one within (human nature) (Toadvine 2009: 4–5). Eco-phenomenology sees the experience of these facets of nature as important and should be taken seriously in addressing environmental crisis since man's experience of nature has resulted into undesirable situations, one that has manifested through varying crisis ranging from pollution, desertification, climate change and biodiversity loss.

The objective of eco-phenomenology is therefore not to offer practical actions that will help address environmental crisis. Rather, as Toadvine argues, eco-phenomenology aims at articulating "our inherence in nature" that has caused undesirable effects on the natural environment (Toadvine 2009: 5). That is perhaps why Toadvine prefers the name of the discipline to be known as 'philosophy of nature' instead of environmental philosophy. He argues that *philosophy of nature* better captures a discipline that focuses on a richer, multi-faceted, and philosophical investigation of nature (Toadvine 2009: 6). This discipline, he supposes, will unravel the assumptions that has led to misuse and abuse of nature, a task that natural science is not suited.

Eco-phenomenology in the form of philosophy of nature, according to Toadvine, must address two important questions. One, what does it mean to understand human beings as part of nature and two, how does our situation as immanent to nature compromise or give access to the being of nature? (Toadvine 2009: 7–8). These questions suggest two crucial elements of eco-phenomenology. One, it seeks to understand the relational capacities and possibilities of human beings as part of nature and two, it seeks to unravel distinct features of nature to better represent it as a phenomena worthy of

care and respect in the world. Moreover, it is important to point out that addressing these questions as conceived by Toadvine may not directly suggest what is wrong about the environmental crisis we face; however, it will reveal an essential part of the problem which is the limitations of our relational ontologies and of our epistemic access to nature and why this is possible. Hence, eco-phenomenology is more attuned to unravelling the hidden assumptions in our understanding and conception of nature that has engendered attitudes of exploitation and disrespect for nature.

Furthermore, eco-phenomenology focuses on correcting misconceptions that have influenced how we relate with the natural world. Robert Booth argues against the idea that understanding the natural world as it truly is, requires us to think of it as separate from our minds, devoid of our conceptual interpretations or active structuring (Booth 2021: 12). The need to understand the relationship between human beings and the natural environment led to phenomenological inquiry about the various relationalities that entail our worldly engagement. As David Wood posits, eco-phenomenology is “the pursuit of the relationalities of worldly engagement, both human and those of other creatures” (Wood 2003: 213). Interestingly, there are many relationships in and within nature that an eco-phenomenological approach can bring to light. This relationship is not limited to that of human beings with nature but also of non-humans with human beings, making it a comprehensive theory for analysing environmental relations.

Eco-phenomenologists seek to provide a robust description of our experience of nature. In doing this, they examine the ways in which our experience of nature differs from other phenomena and what is uniquely wrong about the assumptions behind these experiences. This examination is not upon the concrete actions that is manifested in our experience of nature per se, rather, the focus is on our conceptions of nature that has informed our evolving relationship with the natural world. David Wood makes this point when he posits that “in principle, an ecologically oriented phenomenology would experientially counteract the toxic effects of hubristic conceptualizations through which we often connect with the natural world” (Wood 2019: 4). In essence, Wood is advocating for a shift in how we experience and conceptualize our relationship with nature, moving away from detachment and control and toward immersion, respect, and care. This shift, he argues, can help address the ecological crises stemming from humanity’s hubristic attitudes toward the natural world.

The phenomenologists’ (particularly Husserl) call, for a return back to “things themselves” has a bearing on eco-phenomenology. The connection there is that the aim of eco-phenomenology is to bring us back first to our primordial selves and later to a natural world that is worthy of appreciation and care. Taylor Eggan makes this point when he suggests that, “the problem of eco-phenomenology is not simply that industrial modernity has driven the planet to the brink of collapse, but that it has driven us out of ourselves, clearing mind from body and thought from the flesh of the world” (Eggan 2022: 28). As such, eco-phenomenology advises radical measures meant variously to return us to the natural world and restore us to our “embodied sensorium” (Eggan 2022: 30). This point aligns with the claim of Brown and Toadvine when they submit that eco-phenomenology is “potentially revolutionary” because it enables the “rediscovery of a natural world that is inherently and primordially meaningful and worthy of respect” (Brown and Toadvine 2003: xx).

The basic tasks of eco-phenomenology can be summarised to at least two. One, to examine the the assumptions and attitudes that are complicit in the environmental crisis that the world is faced and two, it aims to emphasize the importance of lived body and perhaps lived experience in addressing this environmental crisis. For eco-phenomenologists, the proper human relation with nature is close contact and bodily participation in a world of experience and these experiences engender values (Booth 2021: 13). Merleau-Ponty already makes this claim when he argues that reality is “expressed

ambiguously between body-subject and world,” and so the more-than-human world can express its own, rich, meanings with, or through, human body-subjects (cf. Toadvine 2009: 36).

To address the current environmental crisis, eco-phenomenologists embrace the need for self-criticism and an openness to relationalities not common to human beings. Robert Booth argues that eco-phenomenology finds space for two important endeavours. They include robust critical “self-reflexivity” and “radical openness” to the more-than-human world on its own, rich, terms (Booth 2021: 13). Since satisfying both demands appear essential for a positive and rigorous reconfiguring of the entities that environmental philosophers address, it should be clear why eco-phenomenology provides a useful toolkit for our present task. Eco-phenomenology holds a deep-seated belief that Life, Earth, the Cosmos, and human existence merit profound admiration and reverence. This perspective transcends the notion that these entities are mere resources for material gain, advocating instead for an approach that acknowledges their intrinsic worth beyond their utility to humankind (Küle 2022: 7). Hence, eco-phenomenology, drawing from the phenomenological tradition, is a distinct philosophical approach that offers a unique perspective on the interdependence of humans and nature, emphasizing the embodied nature of human existence in the experience of nature. Eco-phenomenology offers a distinctive approach to the study of nature, highlighting the ways in which humans are embedded within and interconnected with the natural world, even though the structure of this interconnectedness is yet to be fully explored.

4. Sidelining Eco-phenomenology in African Environmental Philosophy

In this section, it is worth asking why eco-phenomenology approaches have been scanty in African environmental philosophy. African environmental philosophy is quite flourishing and there is a new wave of African phenomenology (see Olivier *et al.* 2023) that suggests that African environmental philosophy can be influenced by ideas from the phenomenological tradition. However, one can detect, until recently, a hint of dismissal or lack of eco-phenomenological considerations in African environmental philosophy.⁴ That is, theories of African environmental relations have not considered the principles and frameworks of phenomenology in their analysis, sometimes to the detriment of their theories because they limit what is available to understand about the environmental crisis that we face.

Within eco-philosophy, there has been a notable shift towards prioritizing the concrete experience of nature. This emphasis has been underscored by certain continental philosophers who have sought to demonstrate the alignment of phenomenology with ecological concerns and the “possibility of a phenomenological ethics of nature” (see Prášek 2023: 342–366). One must at least consider the value in this approach and discuss why other traditions of environmental philosophy like African environmental philosophy do not consider this approach. I will provide at least four reasons why I think it is not commonplace in African environmental discourse to adopt eco-phenomenology as the framework for addressing environmental crisis. However, I need to quickly say that it is not the case that lived experiences of Africans have not been the basis of philosophical analysis, my poser is that eco-phenomenology has been less explored as a plausible methodology and the use of phenomenological methods and principles that focus on inter subjective experience have not been tapped into as the basis for African environmental analysis.

First, the nuanced nature of phenomenology and how it applies to environmental thinking is yet to be understood among environmental philosophers and African environmental philosophers in particular. Admittedly, phenomenological ideas are sometimes difficult to understand because of the lack of fluidity and sometimes the inaccessibility of the language of its earliest proponents. Classical phenomenological theories are full of neologisms that obscure a great deal of knowledge such that

those unversed in the language of phenomenology are unlikely to consider its plausibility for ecological theorizations (Hale 2005: 2). Sometimes, scholars frequently conflate the different perspectives that make up the heterogeneous category of “phenomenology” into a unitary perspective, thereby misrecognizing what phenomenology is and is not, and how its various insights have been incorporated into theoretical and methodological debates (Stanier 2022: 412). To help simplify the complexity in understanding the branches of phenomenology, Besnik Pula explains the three different strands of the phenomenological tradition. These three strands include: “phenomenology as existentialism,” “phenomenology as ontology” and “phenomenology as hermeneutics of Being” (see Pula 2022: 411–431).⁵ While these three phenomenological traditions are important for addressing environmental issues, it is essential to first understand them fully before determining how to apply their principles to tackling the environmental crisis.

The second reason is that the burden of subjectivity in the phenomenological method has been its alibi in social theory. This second critique of phenomenology is quite important because the charge against phenomenology here is that there are impediments to any social analysis from the prism of a disengaged autonomous subject. Hence, the phenomenological method has been criticized by opponents and sometimes proponents for its “methodological limitations, occlusions, and foreclosures” (Stanier 2022: 226). Over time, the subjectivity of phenomenology seeks to construct reality from the perspective of a sole, independent, and autonomous subject but with dire ethical consequences that must not be overlooked. Also, critics have raised important questions about the applicability of an approach that defends individualistic experience to the African context. They argue that the Eurocentric origins of phenomenology may limit its relevance to African philosophical traditions, which often emphasize communal values and holistic worldviews (Ikuenobe 2006: 11).

Third, the legacy of continental philosophers in Africa has engendered squabbles of racialization and superiorization (Freter 2020). The ideas of continental thinkers like Kant, Hegel, Hume and even Heidegger carry within them seeds of racialization and otherness. African environmental ethicists have been reticent to borrow from thinkers whose dubious political history is exacerbated by an ambiguous stance on ethical matters. Recently, Abraham Olivier, a South African based philosopher, and some other colleagues showcased African phenomenology as a distinct tradition of phenomenology that focuses on the formative effects of the crisis of lived conditions on human existence in Africa (Olivier *et al.* 2023). In another article, Olivier provides four strands of African approaches to phenomenology that take critical attitudes to phenomenologizing in the African tradition (see Olivier 2023b).⁶ These approaches, although influenced by ideas from early phenomenologists, counter the phenomenology of the continental tradition that eschewed the structures of colonialism and its attenuations. The development of African phenomenology is an outcome of the growing field of critical phenomenology, which legitimately insists on the necessity to focus on the world and the conditions for plurality rather than on the transcendental subject, which would need to be deconstructed and divested from its illusory homogenizing and unifying powers (see Weiss *et al.* 2019; Boubilil 2022: 472). New phenomenologists in Africa and elsewhere are not just willing to follow through the same end as classical phenomenologists, even though they did not abandon classical phenomenological theories. Unlike Husserl and Heidegger who do not make normative claims or perhaps, it is very difficult to see (if any) prescriptive analysis in their works, new phenomenologists like Aaron Simmons and Bruce Benson have taken up the task of making normative claims from phenomenological ideas. They perform this normative duty on the premise that such normative claims are invitation to epistemic and ethical humility regarding our own view of reality rather than action guides (Simmons and Benson 2013: 63).

Fourth, it seems to me that some African environmental ethicists have objectives that are tilted towards technical fix and policy change much more than theoretically reframing the problem of environmental crisis. Their research objectives seem to be topically aligned with that of scientists and politicians. Although policy change is very critical to environmental ethics, addressing environmental problems through policy engineering leaves out a fundamental problem which is the perception at the root of environmental problems, which is a critical demand for eco-phenomenology. The penchant to address environmental crisis from the angle of policy engineering does not require so much reflection on Africa's relational ontology and how such ontology hinders addressing the problem of environmental degradation in contemporary society.

5. Eco-phenomenology and the Ontology of Interdependence in African Environmental Philosophy

Eco-phenomenology, as I have discussed (in section 3), rearticulates our relationship with the environment. Here, I will explore how an eco-phenomenological approach can be adopted to scrutinize the African relational ontology of interdependence which is at the foundation of African environmental philosophy. This ontology proposes that Africans believe that all things are interrelated and interdependent in nature. Consequently, African environmental philosophers who have been influenced by this ontological precept, argue that human beings from this tradition would generally act towards caring and preserving nature. I apply an eco-phenomenological thinking to scrutinize the dire assumptions in this relational ontology.

Charles S. Brown's and Ted Toadvine's *Eco-phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself* offers useful guideposts for developing a phenomenologically rooted environmental analysis. Many contributions in this work reflect deeply on our relationship within nature, illustrating that eco-phenomenology is not a rigid analytical framework and does not aim to capture every environmental experience. Rather, eco-phenomenology signals that lived existence challenges purely ontological and normative claims, interrupting the assumption of neutrality that exists in classical phenomenological description. This perspective, when applied to the ontology of interrelatedness in African environmental philosophy, can illuminate a broader understanding of interdependence and interconnectedness within nature, particularly in the relational ethics proposed from this ontology.

Interestingly, both African environmental philosophy and eco-phenomenology emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings in nature and challenge traditional Western dualisms between humans and nature, subject and object, and mind and body. Both approaches offer a holistic view of the world, emphasizing humanity's intrinsic relationship with the natural world. However, while both frameworks contribute to our understanding of our relationship with nature, they approach interrelatedness from distinct philosophical perspectives. Eco-phenomenologists, for instance, tend to focus on the individual's embodied experience within nature as the source for examining our modes of engagement with interdependent nature. Philosophers like Merleau-Ponty contend that we cannot assign value from a detached, neutral perspective in the hope that it will justify nature's worth. Instead, the value of interdependence lies in exploring our lived experiences of embeddedness in a world of values, which demands more than merely prescribing an ontological precept of interdependence (see Toadvine 2009: 43). Since the idea of interconnectedness and interdependence with nature can appear to us in manifold ways, it is important that the ontological idea of interdependence of all things incorporates hermeneutic interventions suited to eco-phenomenology. Doing this would require that this ontological idea is discoverable in human experience and not just a given. Without this, African environmental theories built upon this ontological framework risks becoming detached from immediate lived experience, a challenge Foltz and Frodeman identified in the approach of environmental sciences that has influenced western and perhaps other traditions of environmental ethics (Foltz and Frodeman 2004: 7).

It is therefore crucial to critically examine the assumptions in African relational ontology, especially because there is a relational ethics that is inferred from this ontology. The notion that Africans extend reverence to nature based on the ontology of interdependence of all things in nature is sometimes overstated. For instance, Ikuenobe argues that African ontology supports a harmonious arrangement of all things, where every element in reality possesses vital force or energy, and their harmonious interactions strengthen reality (Ikuenobe 2014: 2). He posits that,

The African view of reality is manifested in different aspects of people's actions and ways of life, especially in terms their religious practices. Their religious practices seek to maintain the harmony and balance that exist in nature, reality, and the natural community of things. For instance, in various religious practices, people consider natural objects as divine and as things in which gods, deities, spirits, and ancestors are made manifest. Traditional Africans see mountains, trees, rivers, and different animals as representations or embodiment of deities or spirits, and as such, they are divine, sacred, and are given due reverence. (Ikuenobe 2014: 2)

From this assertion, Ikuenobe suggests that this ontology supposes that there are values in nature perceived by Africans and that "people's actions and ways of life reflected the efforts to exist in harmony with nature" as a result of this ontological understanding (Ikuenobe 2014: 2). Although Ikuenobe's position reinforces the view that humans are embedded within a network of reciprocal relations, challenging anthropocentric perspectives that view nature as a separate, exploitable entity, his conclusion that such ontological position is responsible for actions of preserving nature overlooks actions that contradicts preservation of nature by the same people who live with respect for the relational ontology of interconnectedness. There are certain traditional African practices, such as human and animal sacrifices, that contradict this perceived harmony of all things in nature. These actions show that the people who embody this relational ontology are also responsible for actions that are variance with nature conservation and preservation. The suggestion that African relational ontology is responsible for helping people to see the intrinsic worth in nature therefore glosses over the complexities of relational imbalances or the ethical implications of asymmetrical dependencies discovered in their actions.

The ontological premise of Africa's belief in interconnectedness does not always translate to respect for nature in everyday life even in traditional Africa. To put it modestly, the idea of interconnectedness of everything in nature is not consistently reflected in the conservation actions observed in practice among Africans. Sometimes, when people demonstrate coexistence with nature in parts of Africa, it may imply that they have acted because of the belief in the ontological premise of interconnectedness of all things. However, at other times, they engage in behaviours that appear to support conservation but are not necessarily driven by this understanding. For instance, in Yoruba traditional society, dogs are used as hunting aids, but this does not imply that they are cherished as companions or regarded as non-human animals to be cared for. Rather, these actions show that dogs are viewed as means to certain anthropocentric ends. Another example is the killing of dogs for ritualistic purpose, a practice common among traditional worshippers of Ogun in Yoruba society. What becomes evident from these examples is that there are, at least, two contrasting relational attitudes towards dogs in Yoruba traditional society that need to be explored in order to show the complications in the ontology of interdependence of all things in the African tradition. Approaches in environmental philosophy that do not explore the complexity of ontological propositions will be insufficient in providing a robust understanding of environmental attitudes and experiences. As Mateusz Tokarski points out, there are other experience of nature such as "ecological discomfort" which may stem from a worldview that posits interdependence and interrelatedness of everything in nature but has been overlooked in environmental ethical analysis (Tokarski 2019: 23). According to Tokarski, ecological discomfort refers to situations where contact with nature might evoke emotional states like fear, anxiety, and disgust,

rather than admiration, wonder, or appreciation. Yet, this dimension of environmental experience is overlooked in environmental ethics (Tokarski 2019: 23). Ideally, each act and experience of nature should be treated on its own terms, rather than assuming that all actions stem from a sense of interconnectedness. While I agree that the ontological notion of interrelatedness of all things in nature underpins a moral obligation to treat nature with respect, there is much hidden in the background of this ontological position that needs to be brought to light but it seems that the methods that have been adopted by African environmental philosophers are not adequate for this task

Although Behrens suggestion that “the African notion of the interdependence of nature holds much promise for environmental ethics” (Behrens 2017: 199), I think popular approaches to African environmental issues have interpreted this ontology in ways that limit the range of experiences characterizing environmental relations, as they often overlook the exploration of embodied subjectivities of environmental relations within the African tradition. By embodied subjectivity, I mean encounters by specific beings within the natural environment that shows that they are subjectively aware of the world while also being objectively part of it, whether as humans, animals, or other entities (Jensen and Moran 2013; Durt 2020: 69). African environmental philosophers have overlooked the internal dynamics inherent in the ontological notion of the interdependence of all things in nature. This oversight has obscured significant aspects of environmental consciousness and behaviours within Africa’s lifeworld, which holds relevance for philosophical inquiry.

The question of what to value and how value emanate is critical to environmental discourse but how value emanates in nature has been oversimplified in African environmental philosophy. Contemporary eco-phenomenologists, such as Christophe Gilliand, critique the notion of relational value in environmental philosophy, pointing out a “theoretical vagueness” that leaves it open to pragmatic interpretation rather than reflecting the deeper meanings and values that people ascribe to their interactions with the environment. Gilliand warns that “this pragmatic approach can be manipulated to justify non-intrinsic, non-economic values” in nature (Gilliand 2021: 717). One could argue that African environmental philosophers, by invoking the ontological notion of interdependence, risk oversimplifying how value in nature emanates and the different possible perceptions towards nature. For instance, Ekwealo, a Nigerian environmental philosopher, explains that, according to the Igbo ontology, plants like Iroko trees are treated as sacred because they are “the home of spirits”. He later suggests that this ontological belief is the justification for respecting and preserving nature within the Igbo tradition (Ekwealo 2012: 271). The challenge with this notion is that it tacitly suggests that the Igbo people perceive Iroko trees as entities worthy to be preserved because they are “homes of spirits.” However, this view limits the possible range of experiences some people might have had with Iroko trees that has shaped their perception of trees and other entities in nature. One could ask the following questions: In this same tradition, do people’s experience of Iroko trees elicit emotions like fear and anxiety because they are regarded as the abode of spirits? Do interactions with these Iroko trees also inspire empathy and care? These are possibilities that we must explore. In fact, what does it mean to treat something as sacred? Does it mean that they should not be touched? These critical questions reveal complexities within African relational ontology that should not be overlooked. This is where an eco-phenomenological approach becomes invaluable.

Ontology is crucial to addressing the current environmental crisis. In this regard, some scholars argue that we need to rethink our very concepts of nature self, and human nature relation (Deka 2018: 116). However, it is important to note that we do not understand ontology in abstraction since it involves every part of our being. This is why corporeality is central to eco-phenomenology (Meyer 2024: 8–9). The exploitation of nature manifests in our corporeal existence. By corporeal existence, I mean that as humans, we do not merely perceive and analyse the environment as an uninvolved outsider.

Rather, we are connected with and directly affected by it (Meyer 2024: 9). Given that, as human beings, our corporeal and existential grounding in the world precedes intellectual attempts to capture it, experiences in Africa's lifeworld requires phenomenological insights into how individuals who apply the relational ontology of interdependence of all things in nature manifests corporeality. Rita Felski describes the lifeworld as both a phenomenological and social reality, made up of mental habits and pre-existing schemas that shape our relation to the world (Felski 2012: 7).

African environmental theories oftentimes focus on the ontology of interrelatedness but lack the evocative richness of the eco-phenomenological tradition in which lived experience of the environment is integral. Robert Booth argues that to address the current environmental crisis, "questioning our basic assumptions and onto-epistemological apparatuses is required" since the crisis partly stems from the imposition of specific ontological schemas onto the more-than-human world (Booth 2021: 9). Beneath the environmental crisis lie some questionable assumptions about our relationship with nature but if scholars continue to view human and non-human entities as deeply intertwined based on Africa's ontology of interrelatedness, it might be a struggle to account for the deficiency in our understanding of what it means to embody and practice such ontology.

The analysis of African environmental crisis must therefore focus on concrete attitudes toward the environment in their everydayness. Gazing down on African society and positing an ontology of interrelatedness without describing the specific relational features at play overlooks the vitality and unpredictability on the ground. Environmental issues, though oftentimes scientifically explicable, are situated within the lifeworld—the human realm of values and significance. Focusing on Africa's lifeworld when theorizing on the current environmental crisis demands that we link up and immerse ourselves in the ordinary experience of the environment in contrast to the notion that normative analysis will emancipate us from the ordinary. The focus on lifeworld by phenomenologists highlights something essential; that everydayness is not just an object of thought but a condition of thought. Engaging with Africa's environmental lifeworld is an indication that we see the richness, warmth, and solidarity of eco-communal life in contrast to the faceless anonymity and ice-cold rationality of modern society. While mountains and rivers in Africa have been seen as economic zones of survival and sustenance by some people who presume to live by the relational ontology of interconnectedness of all things in nature, these natural bodies are also infused with affective meanings that beckon our environmental theorizations. However, any approach to elucidating relational ontologies in environmental philosophy that obscures the varied meanings of natural entities, because it refuses to focus on the diverse encounters in nature, will be too narrow and contrary to the ecophenomenologists agenda.

African environmental philosophers should therefore make effort to describe how people in Africa experience important aspects of their environment, such as water, trees, and non-human animals in a manner that reveals the intentionalities at play. This will be a response to what Banon describe as "inhuman phenomenologies," a term that suggests that it is possible for us to understand how meaning and value emerge from relationships among non-human beings (Banon 2016: 61). Contrasting experiences of entities within the environment—such as the varied cultural significances of water bodies and animals in Yoruba societies—demonstrate the need for African environmental philosophers to account for these diverse experiences.

Eco-phenomenology as an approach to addressing environmental crisis demands a critical approach to the relational ontology at the background of African environmental philosophy. This demand is similar to Elvis Imafidon's call to critically examine Afro-communalism. Imafidon argues that the rigid conception of community in Afro-communalism's leads to the exclusion of others (Imafidon 2023: 39). This same rigidity affects African environmental philosophy's account of the solution to the

environmental crisis, often resulting in an overly generalized view of the relational ontology of interdependence of all things in nature. Instead of being fixated upon the idea that Africans have a care ethic that demands that nature be preserved based on the ontology of interrelatedness of all things within nature, eco-phenomenologists would rather ask what it means to experience a particular environment or place within the African tradition. This question has a spatio-temporal dimension because experiencing a place would always depend on the specific people that inhabit a place and the events that have occurred in the period under consideration. This approach does not only allow for depth in the understanding of meaning and values in nature, it also positions environmental philosophy as a discipline that requires a methodical approach that is sensitive to the evolving experience of nature. As David Wood argues, the potency of eco-phenomenology lies in its principal focus on environmental experience, within “plenitude of space and the plexity of time,” thereby making environmental analysis subjected to the veracity of experience in a particular milieu (Wood 2003: 213). In this era of environmental crisis, facilitated by economic growth, mountains, rivers and other elements of nature within Africa have meanings and values that have evolved and we must strive to understand the evolutionary trends in describing entities in nature within the African tradition.

African spaces and places of nature must be engaged to understand how values are discovered in the environment instead of admitting that the African relational ontology of interdependence of all things within nature already suggest that we should value nature. For the eco-phenomenologists, the discovery of value in nature depends neither strictly on the subject, making the evaluation or the object being evaluated. It is the space of encounter that matters. According to Gilliland, environmental ethicists that aim to be more than pragmatist must describe the act of valuing nature “by focusing on the encounter of the subject and object in a region of reality where they are still entangled and have not been strictly divided by the actions of language and thought” (Gilliland 2021: 772). Gilliland further argues that the pursuit to understand relational values in nature “is an invitation to accomplish a paradigm shift within environmental ethics as usual and turn our attention to a different set of cardinal questions that can open us to the faulty assumptions in our relationship with nature” (Gilliland 2021: 722). Rather than discussing why and how we ought to attribute value to “other than humans” from a disembodied neutral perspective in the hope that the answer can provide a solid justification for nature protection, we need to start from our visceral intuition that nature has value and ask ourselves what that value means (Gilliland 2021: 722). This shift opens a space for reflecting on the implicit assumptions that govern our relationship with nature.

African environmental philosophy, for all its gains, might become hollow if it does not adopt an eco-phenomenological approach that deals with human affect and emotions, bodily experience, practical knowledge as well as the wealth of intersubjective experiences of people within the African environment. The environmental crisis that we face in Africa, whether climate change, pollution or biodiversity loss, can be traced back to the soullessness of modern existence and the atrophy of experience. However, if African scholars mire environmental philosophy in cognitive endeavours, stupefied in only policy interventions without scrutinizing the assumptions in their relational ontology, it will be as if African environmental philosophers are sleepwalking through the environmental crisis on ground.

Despite its rich ontological worldview, African environmental philosophy remains narrow in scope by expressing a relational ontology that enforces interrelatedness of all things in nature without addressing its experiential complexities. Eco-phenomenology invites us to engage with nature and the more-than-human world on their own terms and recognize the complexity of the embodied experiences of nature in different traditions. Eco-phenomenology, therefore, holds the potential to

rescue African environmental philosophy from its present abstractness and overly broad generalizations.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that eco-phenomenology offers a distinct approach to environmental philosophy, one that foregrounds experience as the foundation for discerning environmental values—a perspective yet to be fully explored in African environmental philosophy. Adopting an eco-phenomenological approach, I contend, holds the potential to address gaps in African relational ontology, particularly with respect to the ontological idea of interdependence of all things in nature which is a central tenet in African environmental thought. An eco-phenomenological approach, as I have argued, encourages a deeper examination of concrete relational experiences, offering African environmental philosophy a robust framework for more nuanced reflections on environmental issues.

I propose that incorporating eco-phenomenology into African environmental philosophy would enhance its theoretical richness, particularly the interpretation of its relational ontology. This perspective will encourage African philosophers to reconsider the assumptions and the reductionist tendencies in African relational ontology of interrelatedness, acknowledging that the tradition will benefit from the development of the implications of this relational ontology for addressing environmental problems. However, this is not to suggest that eco-phenomenology is without limitations, nor that it will single-handedly resolve the African environmental crises at hand. Practical environmental issues like climate change and deforestation will obviously require a complementary ethico-political analysis because the descriptions of people's complex experience of the environment alone cannot enforce practical actions. What I have shown, rather, is that adopting eco-phenomenology reveals significant complexities of engaging with the more-than-human world. African environmental theorists should therefore remain open to the idea that an eco-phenomenological approach to environmental issues will challenge existing frameworks and reveal limitations in the ontological models prevalent in African environmental theory.

The call here to integrate eco-phenomenological approaches into African environmental philosophy is a response to Kelbessa's (2018: 323) appeal "to explore the useful elements in the African worldview for a strong African environmental philosophy" that contributes to addressing present environmental challenges. An eco-phenomenological engagement with African relational ontology of interrelatedness of all things in nature underscores the importance of everyday environmental experience, providing African environmental philosophy with a versatile and valuable framework for ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical inquiry into the environmental crisis. This article therefore reinforces Kira Meyer's assertion that "environmental ethics (in any tradition) would profit from including eco-phenomenology, both methodologically and philosophically, into its research program" (Meyer 2024: 288).

Acknowledgements: I appreciate the Centre for Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Studies, College of Fellows, Tübingen University for providing funds to organize the first workshop on the theme: *Eco-phenomenology in and from Africa*. I first conceived some of the ideas in this article while preparing for the workshop. I also appreciate Prof. Thaddeus Metz for providing critical comments on the initial draft. I thank panel members at the 1st Annual South African Society for Environmental Philosophy (SASEP) for their feedback after I presented the article. I equally appreciate the two anonymous Reviewers for their constructive feedback.

Notes

¹ Except for discussion of some concepts, principles and methodologies of African environmental ethics by Diana-Abasi Ibanga, I am not aware of any other article on the subject of methodology in African environmental philosophy. Ibanga (2018: 123–141) was able to tease out ten methodologies for theorizing issues in African environmental philosophy but in fairness, most of them lack visibility in comparative environmental ethics, making one question their robustness for addressing African environmental problems.

² As it stands, Oyekunle (2023) suggests the view that an epistemic approach can also be a viable approach to African environmental philosophy.

³ Kelbessa (2018: 314) makes the important point that initially, African environmental scholars have used the term “environmental ethics” to describe their work, even when it encompasses the broader scope of environmental philosophy.

⁴ There are few exceptions. For example, Louise du Toit (2019) and Samantha Vice (2017). These authors used phenomenological approaches for analysing issues closely related to human–environmental relations.

⁵ For the application of phenomenological hermeneutics to human–animal relations in the wake of rewilding, see Tokarski (2019).

⁶ According to Olivier (2023b: 15–36), these four strands of Africa approaches to phenomenology include transcendental phenomenology, existential phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology and post-phenomenological approach.

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