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## Anthropocentrism and Nature

### An Attempt at Reconciliation

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#### 1. *Introduction*

Nature is whatever is, all in sum, and in that universal sense the word is quite unmanageable. Even the sense of the physical universe going back to the Greek *physis* is both too broad and too simple. We reach the meaning we need (which also recalls the sense of *physis*) if we refer to our complex earthen ecosphere – a biosphere resting on physical planetary circulations. Nature is most broadly whatever obeys natural laws, and that also includes astronomical nature. Used in this way the word has a contrast only in the supernatural realm, if such there is. But nevertheless we restrict the word to a global, not a cosmic sense, as our typical use of the word *nature* still retains the notion, coming from the Latin root *natus* and also present in *physis*, of a system giving birth to life (Rolston 1979: 9).

Over the past few millennia, human populations have dispersed so widely and grown to such an extent that they have subsequently come to exert tremendous selection pressures on almost every form of life on the planet. The technological prowess of human societies has enabled them to rapidly extract and exchange vast amounts of natural resources with one another in a feverish, never-ending stream. While this seems to have worked out well for our species in the short-term, we may be irreparably degrading ecosystem services that would be vital to humanity’s long-term prospects. From an ecological perspective, *Homo sapiens* is always part of its environment – i.e., its evolutionary success is fundamentally dependent on factors such as climate, resource availability, and so on. However, when humans and their commensals encroach upon the niches, habitats, and ecosystems that were *wild* and *natural* prior to human invasion, environmental conditions tend to be radically altered. Environmen-

talists warn that carbon-heavy patterns of resource depletion will ultimately result in ecological dystopias for many future humans, particularly the economically disadvantaged. Andrew Fiala notes an interesting paradox behind such apocalyptic visions, the problem of Nero's Fiddle. Unless the severity of the ecological predicament is adequately communicated to the public, it is unlikely that people will be motivated to alter their lifestyles. However, when environmentalists realistically assess the complexity of the crisis, it appears that only prolonged, global cooperation will solve it. Furthermore, there is little reason to believe that nations will cooperate in this manner. After considering the situation thoroughly, the danger is that one may conclude that the rational thing to do is to fiddle while Rome burns, to adopt just the kind of selfish disregard for the environment and future humans that would reinforce the predicament and make it worse:

In other words, cooperation diminishes as the threat increases and hope decreases. If we work together and share our resources, we may be able to row our metaphorical "lifeboat" to safety. But there comes a time when it is rational to assume that the lifeboat will not be rescued. Those who continue to cooperate might be praised as Good Samaritans. But if the crisis is truly severe, the egoist may in fact triumph over the altruist in the struggle for survival in the short term; and for the sort of egoist I am describing here, the short term is what matters most. The more certain we are that the crisis is unsolvable and that the lifeboat is about to sink, the more rational egoism becomes for those who are already primarily committed to egoism (Fiala 2010: 56-57).

Egoism thus appears the best strategy for promoting the interests of individuals but the worst strategy for promoting the interests of the species.

When environmental philosophy emerged, its founders assumed that the West's anthropocentric axiologies and ontologies underlie humanity's ecological predicament. Animal philosophers have likewise historically denigrated human-centered worldviews. Although their aims differ significantly, animal thinkers and environmentalists have generally been united in condemning anthropocentrism and its variants – speciesism, human chauvinism, and so on. The immediate appeal of their assumptions is understandable, given that traditional worldviews in the West set up a bifurcation between humanity and nature. Immanuel Kant's philosophy, for example, can be accused of reinforcing questionable assumptions that go back at least to the ancient Greeks. Predominant worldviews since ancient times have held that humans have a kind of incomparably

*absolute* value that justifies humanity's exploitation of the natural world<sup>1</sup>:

As the sole being on earth who has reason, and thus a capacity to set voluntary ends for himself, [man] is certainly the titular lord of nature, and, if nature is regarded as a teleological system, then it is his vocation to be the ultimate end of nature (Kant 2000: 298).

Because our species' most extensive ecological degradations since the industrial revolution have been inordinately influenced by consumers in societies whose intellectual founders took humans to be the measure or measurers of all things, many environmentalists have taken it for granted that ecological degradation is an inevitable side effect of anthropocentrism. However, if an anthropocentric axiology genuinely values humanity as such (and not merely the individual human), why would societies under its sway ever permit policies and legislations that are foreseeably detrimental to the long-term satisfaction of basic and vital human interests? If anthropocentrism were impartially concerned with the good of current as well as future humans, it could not condone behaviors such as the widespread, frivolous overexploitation and commodification of toxic and limited resources. Besides, those who directly benefit from ecological irresponsibility and degradation represent a very small portion of humanity. Unless anthropocentrism is necessarily equated with an attitude that condones policies favoring the short-term interests of the few over the long-term interests of the many, it is not exactly obvious why being human-centered is so toxic to the environment. As Tim Hayward points out:

A cursory glance around the world would confirm that humans show a lamentable lack of interest in the wellbeing of other humans. Moreover, even when it is not other humans whose interests are being harmed, but other species or the environment, it would generally be implausible to suggest that those doing the harm are being "human-centred". To see this, one only has to consider some typical practices which are appropriately criticised. [...] In the case of hunting a species to extinction, this is not helpfully or appropriately seen as "anthropocentrism"

<sup>1</sup> According to the Aristotelian paradigm, every species has a built-in telos, with humans situated atop life's hierarchy. The capacity for rationality was taken as proof of humanity's objectively *higher* status. This worldview was seemingly supplanted with the advent of post-Darwinian science's supposition that no life form is *objectively* higher than any other since evolution has no ultimate purpose. It is now recognized that there is evolutionary continuity among Earth's dizzying flood of life forms. The extent of that continuity, however, has long been delimited by a Cartesian-like skepticism regarding mental experiences in nonhumans, bolstered by the lingering effects of behaviorism.

since it typically involves one group of humans who are actually condemned by (probably a majority of) other humans who see the practice not as serving human interests in general, but the interests of one quite narrowly-defined group, such as poachers or whalers. A similar point can be made regarding the destruction of the forest – for those who derive economic benefit from the destruction oppose not only the human interests of indigenous peoples whose environment is thereby destroyed, but also the interests of all humans who depend on the oxygen such forests produce (Hayward 1997: 57-58).

The anthropocentrism that has been vilified by various thinkers must therefore represent a variety of human-centeredness that fails to value humanity as such or that fails to acknowledge humanity's dependence and influence upon nature. Accordingly, those who consider themselves nonanthropocentrists should revise their critiques if they are to accurately identify worldviews that can be coherently blamed for humanity's inimical impact on our planet's biosphere.

## 2. *Naturalizing Value*

Environmental and animal philosophers who consider their views to be nonanthropocentric typically assert that anthropocentrism is most blameworthy for hierarchically valuing humanity above nonhumanity<sup>2</sup>. Favoritism extended by humans toward humans is rejected as a form of prejudice along the lines of racism or sexism. According to common critiques, anthropocentric axiologies are hazardous to the environment because they *intrinsically* value humanity but only *instrumentally* value nonhumanity. Intrinsic value is generally considered necessary for full moral status or membership in a moral community. To deem a thing intrinsically valuable is to consider it necessarily valuable *in itself* or *for itself*, whereas to deem it instrumentally valuable is to consider it contingently valuable *for some other thing* that has intrinsic value. When it comes to anthropocentric policies, intrinsic value presumably affords humanity existential rights, privileges, and protections that are denied to Earth's less fortunate nonhumanity. Nonanthropocentrists conclude that humans living in societies under the influence of anthropocentrism will remain indifferent to the

<sup>2</sup> I use the term *nonhumanity* throughout to refer to all components of Earth, biotic as well as abiotic, that are *not human*. This includes nonhuman organisms as well as the environment. I use the term *nonhumans* to refer to nonhuman organisms.

harms incurred by nonhumanity as a result of anthropogenic mass extinction, invasional meltdown, global warming, and so on. They further presume that *Homo sapiens* would not be facing its current ecological predicament if humans also intrinsically valued the rest of nature. However, such criticisms are misplaced if directed at genuine, or ecological, forms of anthropocentrism.

Although any form of anthropocentrism preferentially values humanity, ecological anthropocentrism does so at the species level. This entails simultaneously valuing the ecosystems and nonhumans that enable human societies to persist. Even if ecosystems and nonhumans are thereby only instrumentally valued according to whether or not they promote long-term human interests, such valuation certainly should not entail policies that lead to ecological degradation. Rather, it should entail policies favoring the perpetual preservation or conservation of ecosystems, biodiversity, and so on, which are of obvious benefit to humanity. Furthermore, both intrinsic and instrumental value can be expressed along a continuum, and those things considered only instrumentally valuable are sometimes afforded greater rights, privileges, and protections than things that are purportedly intrinsically valuable. It should be noted that if individuals in carbon-heavy societies such as the United States intrinsically valued all humans and merely valued nonhumans instrumentally, it is not likely that they would expend more resources on sustaining the lives of their pets rather than on sustaining the lives of fellow humans who happen to be strangers. However, as research by Sena De Silva and Giovanni Turchini suggests, consumers in the West expend a tremendous amount of resources on their pets that would instead be spent on fellow humans if human-centeredness truly accounted for their behavior:

The market for pet food and pet care products has been reported to be growing at an annual average rate of 4% in value terms and reached US\$49 billion in 2003, with pet food representing about 80% of the global pet industry market (Combelles 2004a). Recent market research also reported that the pet food market has been experiencing a trend towards premium and super-premium products (Combelles 2004b). It has been hypothesized that pet owners are treating their companions progressively more as a family member, and consequently, expenditure on pet food is growing. Premium and super-premium cat food often include high content of chopped or whole forage fish such as pilchard and sardines, and in some instances even tuna (De Silva and Turchini 2008: 460-461).

The central issue is not an advocacy of pets versus aquaculture or other agricultural/animal husbandry activities, but the need for a more objective and a

pragmatic approach to the use of a limited and a decreasing biological resource, for human benefit (De Silva and Turchini 2008: 465).

The nonanthropocentrist's critique is problematic for another reason. Those who appeal to humanity's intrinsic value are apt to disagree about whether the ultimate locus of such value is genetic humanity or personhood. As utilized by philosophers such as Mary Anne Warren (1997), the term *personhood* refers to a cluster concept of ideal human traits: sentience, self-awareness, abstract linguistic communication, autonomy, moral agency, and so on. The more of these traits a being possesses, the more likely it can be considered a person. Some who invoke the intrinsic value of personhood assume that (at least on Earth) only beings that are genetically human can attain it, whereas others assume that personhood is possible for nonhumans as well. If the locus of intrinsic value is genetic humanity, then fetuses and humans declared brain dead are just as intrinsically valuable as any fully functioning human. However, if the locus is personhood, then there are plenty of genetically human beings who lack intrinsic value altogether, there are some who have more intrinsic value than others (by virtue of having more traits characteristic of personhood), and perhaps there are also some nonhumans that have intrinsic value comparable to or even surpassing that of humans. Chimpanzees and dolphins, for example, are often cited as strong contenders for personhood. At any rate, the nonanthropocentrist's critique is only applicable if the presumed intrinsic value of humans or persons grants them the right to degrade Earth's ecosystems and biota without concern for the ecological repercussions. This may be applicable to ethical egoists and those who construe human nature to be ultimately *supernatural*, but it certainly does not apply to genuine anthropocentrists. Many pre-Darwinian conceptions of human nature could be labeled supernatural. Examples include those of Aristotle, René Descartes, and Immanuel Kant that view differences between humans and nonhumans to be *in kind* rather than *in degree* – particularly when it comes to psychology. According to their views, only humans are deemed capable of exhibiting virtue, mind, good will, and so on. Supernatural forms of anthropocentrism also typically assume that human psychology permits a kind of immortality, or experiential access to the infinite manifold of being, that is categorically denied to Earth's nonhumans. Although most thinkers now recognize biological continuity among humans and nonhumans, the longstanding paradigm of psychological discontinuity has mostly gone unchallenged until recently. Even nonanthropocentrists tend to prereflectively dismiss the possibility of *authentically* meaningful

phenomenal experiences in *simple* organisms like plants and microbes since these thinkers remain under the spell of the dominant paradigm's assumption that the only truly meaningful valuations are the *higher-order* variety.

One of the founders of environmental philosophy, J. Baird Callicott, argued a few decades ago that the chief task of environmental ethics should be the creation of a nonanthropocentric value theory, one that does not limit intrinsic value to humanity. However, Callicott's formulation of an ecocentric axiology was, by his own admission, *humanistic*. Although ecological communities of life are accorded intrinsic value in Callicott's value theory, were it not for the appearance of humans on Earth, such intrinsic value would have gone unrecognized:

The Darwin-Leopold environmental ethic, grounded in the axiology of Hume, is genuinely and straightforwardly non-anthropocentric, since it provides for the intrinsic value of non-human natural entities. It is also, nonetheless, humanistic since intrinsic value ultimately depends upon human valuers (Callicott 1984: 305)<sup>3</sup>.

I interpret Callicott's admission of humanism to be evidence that his axiology is fundamentally human-centered, albeit in an ecological manner. Holmes Rolston responded to Callicott by arguing that the fundamental unit of intrinsic value should be the Earth itself. To say that the Earth is *valuable* in Rolston's terms is not to say that it is *able to be valued* by humans but that it is *able to generate values* recognized by humans. Long after humans have ceased to exist, the Earth will continue to generate values by providing the environmental conditions that bring forth intrinsically valuable organisms, species, ecosystems, and so on. Thus, Rolston argues, Callicott's value scheme does not appear so much a challenge to pre-Darwinian, anthropocentric paradigms (as Callicott intended) but a reinforcement of long-held assumptions regarding humanity's privileged status:

A simpler, less anthropically based, more biocentric theory holds that some values are objectively there, discovered rather than generated by the subjectivist valuer. [...] Value appreciates (increases) with humans. But such an ethic does not insist on a human translator for value to be present throughout 99 percent of the creation. That commits a fallacy of the misplaced location of values. It has not yet naturalized value (Rolston 2002: 118).

<sup>3</sup> When fellow nonanthropocentrists pressed Callicott to elaborate, he responded that *value* may also be «vertebragenic, since nonhuman animals, all vertebrates at the very least, are conscious and therefore may be said, in the widest sense of the term, to value things» (Callicott 1992: 138). In my conversations with Callicott, he seemed to agree with my suggestion that all organisms that perceive the world may be said to value it.

Humans are not so much lighting up value in a merely potentially valuable world, as they are psychologically joining ongoing planetary natural history in which there is value wherever there is positive creativity. While such creativity can be present in subjects with their interests and preferences, it can also be present objectively in living organisms with their lives defended, and in species that defend an identity over time, and in systems that are self-organizing and that project storied achievements. The valuing human subject in an otherwise valueless world is an insufficient premise for the experienced conclusions of those who value natural history (Rolston 2001: 85).

As researchers set aside pre-Darwinian paradigms concerning the mental and moral capacities of nonhuman life forms and critically engage the observations of ethologists and others who study nonhumans, purely mechanistic stimulus-response accounts are increasingly less credible. Naturalizing value in the wake of Copernicus and Darwin means overcoming the ontological error of assuming that only humans have existential access to value as such. Values – intrinsic, instrumental, moral, and so on – hierarchically differ from one another by degrees, according to the context of the perceiver that enacts them. Such hierarchies of value are subjective rather than objective. What has overwhelmingly positive value in one context may have overwhelmingly negative value in another. One must appeal to the supernatural in order to claim that some values are objectively *higher* than others. The longstanding notion that only humans are capable of moral agency appears to rely on just such an appeal. Drawing on several decades of empirical observations by ethologists, Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce have recently argued that members of several animal species are not only worthy of moral consideration but are also capable of *behaving* morally. While Bekoff and Pierce conservatively ascribe the capacity for authentic moral agency to only a handful of mammalian species, they conclude that ongoing research will necessitate constantly revising the list to include ever *simpler* life forms:

Can we draw a line that separates species in which morality has evolved from those in which it hasn't? Given the rapidly accumulating data on the social behavior of numerous and diverse species, drawing such a line is surely an exercise in futility, and the best we can offer is that if you choose to draw a line, use a pencil. For the line will certainly shift “downwards” to include species to which we would never have dreamed of attributing such complex behaviors, such as rats and mice (Bekoff and Pierce 2009: 8)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> In response to Bekoff and Pierce, Mark Rowlands (2012) argues that a limited number of nonhuman animal species may have members capable of being moral subjects, but not moral



If value itself is naturalized, humanity's enactment of it is no more *authentic* or *intrinsic* than that of nonhumanity. Accordingly, it is arrogant and presumptuous to assume that linguistic propositions, such as those which give expression to human valuations, are required in order for an organism's experience to be granted authenticity or intrinsicity. Neither organisms nor inorganic components of the biosphere take on value – intrinsic, instrumental, moral, or otherwise – simply because humans generously grant it to them. According to the naturalistic, enactive value theory that I propose to ground ecological anthropocentrism, *to perceive is to value*, and *to be perceived is to be valued*. A thing is *valuable* if it is *able to value* or if it is *able to be valued*. So, all organisms that are capable of perceptually interacting with their environments can be deemed intrinsically valuable, regardless of what value, or capacity for value, humans ascribe to them. Value is an inherent aspect of their being that is independent of any human acknowledgement. Likewise, all components of the environment that can be perceived by a perceiver can be deemed intrinsically valuable. Perceivers enact values, but they do not grant them authenticity that is lacking prior to the act of perception. The distinction nonanthropocentrists have emphasized between intrinsic and instrumental value is thus irrelevant to a critique of anthropocentrism since, in its genuine form, it does not require such a distinction. Ecological anthropocentrists preferentially value *Homo sapiens* over other species, but they do not assume that their valuation is accompanied by any objective validation.

### 3. *Mistaken Identities*

Anthropocentrism, as an ideology that preferentially values humanity over nonhumanity, can be thought of in at least two other fundamentally distinct ways. These depend on whether anthropocentrism's human-centeredness focuses on the individual human or on humanity as such. The first form, ethical egoism, is rightly criticized by environmental philosophers (albeit under the wrong name, *anthropocentrism*) since it condones selfish behavior that would be beneficial to individuals in the short-term but disastrous to humanity's long-term viability. Environmentalists should

agents. Rowlands' denial of moral agency to nonhumanity is based on his adherence to an Aristotelian axiology. According to the Aristotelian paradigm, nonhuman animals lack the psychological capacities necessary for exhibiting moral virtue.

consider the second form, *genuine* anthropocentrism, ideal since it values *Homo sapiens*, including current as well as future humans, and condones unselfish behavior that would be beneficial to humanity's short-term and long-term viability. What critics have pejoratively referred to as anthropocentrism, what Bryan Norton (1984) calls *strong anthropocentrism*, should more properly be construed as a sophisticated form of widespread, institutionalized ethical egoism in that it limits the scope of those whose interests it upholds to particular, identifiable humans, not humans as such, regardless of whether these interests are selfishly frivolous or foreseeably detrimental to the interests of humanity broadly construed. According to anthropocentrism's self-absorbed reduction to ethical egoism, the locus of all value is the individual human. It is normatively mandated for individuals to consistently promote their own interests or preferences, regardless of the effects this might have on others. However, egoists will likely *appear* to exhibit altruism toward others within their nested hierarchy of social contracts (à la kin or group selection) since such beings form part of their extended self-identity and because such beings can most directly affect whether the egoists' interests and preferences are satisfied.

On the other hand, any rationally defensible form of anthropocentrism as an ideology that champions the interests of humanity as such must expand its concerns to encompass not only the interests of specifically identifiable humans – i.e., those individuals currently or imminently existing – but also the interests of the species on a geologic scale of space and time. I refer to this form, what Norton (1984) calls *weak anthropocentrism*, as *genuine* or *ecological* anthropocentrism since it condones the satisfaction of only certain preferences, namely, those of individuals or societies that, if satisfied, would not be detrimental to the long-term viability of *Homo sapiens*. Universally shared interests among the individuals that make up our species – e.g., to have unpolluted air, soil, and water; adequate food and shelter from the elements; leisure time for activities such as contemplation, rest, play, etc. – can be understood as the legitimate, minimal interests of the species<sup>5</sup>. According to the geologic spatiotemporal scale of genuine anthropocentrism, the interests of humanity's possible and probable future members must be counted along with those of its current members as representing the interests of the species. As such, it may be further stat-

<sup>5</sup> The interests listed here are not meant to be exhaustive. I merely suggest that they be considered among the most basic because of their importance to physical and psychological wellbeing.

ed that is in humanity's interests for its governing bodies to more stringently regulate the avoidable, frivolous consumption of toxic and limited resources at unsustainable levels, particularly when it is readily foreseeable that such consumption will have drastically negative consequences for many future humans.

#### 4. *Alternatives to Anthropocentrism?*

Founders of the emerging branches of environmental and animal philosophy have been largely united in defining their positions as a condemnation of, and an attempt to offer alternatives to, the human-centered worldviews that have historically dominated philosophical narratives. According to paradigmatic assumptions going back at least to Aristotle, humans are ontologically and axiologically privileged among Earth's life forms for having *authentic* existential access to *being* and *reason*. However, in the wake of Copernican and Darwinian revolutions in science, it seems bad faith to continue upholding the supernatural assumption that humans are the measure or measurers of all things. As stated by Paul Taylor:

Now if the groundlessness of the claim that humans are inherently superior to other species were brought clearly before our minds, we would not remain intellectually neutral toward that claim but would reject it as being fundamentally at variance with our total world outlook. In the absence of any good reasons for holding it, the assertion of human superiority would then appear simply as the expression of an irrational and self-serving prejudice that favors one particular species over several million others (Taylor 1981: 217).

Even though environmental and animal philosophers have been highly critical of anthropocentrism, their critiques have nevertheless been based on human points of view and human systems of value. Ultimately, in spite of their condemnations of human-centered worldviews, they have typically found ways to introduce humanism through the back door without considering themselves human-centered for doing so. Perhaps this suggests that not only is something ineliminable about anthropocentrism but that anthropocentrism itself is not really the problem discussed by these thinkers. If so-called nonanthropocentric worldviews such as biocentrism and ecocentrism are nevertheless coherently held by their proponents, it is never at the expense of a humanistic foundation. Peter Singer (1975), for example, has famously denounced speciesism as one of humanity's greatest moral fail-

ures. Since animals can suffer, we who believe that suffering is generally bad have the same duty to ameliorate or prevent suffering in animals and to promote their pleasant well-being that we have in the case of fellow humans. Roger Fjellstrom (2003) argues, however, that since Singer's writings in general focus on our obligations to help fellow humans (as in his influential *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*), Singer is himself guilty of human-favoring speciesism. Singer is also guilty of human-centeredness by limiting membership to the moral community to those species that scientists recognize as capable of experiencing pain or pleasure – traits deemed important by humans like Singer. Singer displays not only human-centered speciesism for favoring some species over others – based solely on traits they share with humans – but also human-centered *classism* for preferentially favoring members of humanity's class, *Mammalia*, over all others.

Some thinkers have questioned the overall coherence of a nonanthropocentric worldview. If humans and what humans care about are not accorded preferential valuation, then on what basis can human individuals or human societies adjudicate in favor of one organism, species, etc. over another? As Tim Hayward argues, there is a sense in which it is logically impossible for a human to formulate a *genuinely* nonanthropocentric axiology:

As long as the valuer is a human, the very selection of criteria of value will be limited by this fact. It is this fact which precludes the possibility of a *radically* nonanthropocentric value scheme, if by that is meant the adoption of a set of values which are supposed to be completely unrelated to any existing human values. Any attempt to construct a radically non-anthropocentric value scheme is liable not only to be arbitrary – because founded on no certain knowledge – but also to be more insidiously anthropocentric in projecting certain values, which as a matter of fact are selected by a human, onto nonhuman beings without certain warrant for doing so (Hayward 1997: 56).

Values are always the values *of* the valuer: so as long as the class of valuers includes human beings, human values are ineliminable (Hayward 1997: 57).

Mary Anne Warren states the problem thusly:

In making judgements about the moral status of living things, we are not (or should not be) seeking to estimate their value from the viewpoint of the gods, or that of the universe. We are not gods but human beings, reasoning about how *we* ought to think and act. Our moral theories can only be based upon what we know and what we care about, or ought to care about. If this makes our theories anthropocentric, then this much anthropocentrism is inevitable in any moral theory that is relevant to human actions (Warren 1997: 43).

A genuinely nonanthropocentric axiology cannot be *humanistic*. According to its most basic premise, no being is more valuable or more deserving of existence than any other. Many environmental philosophers who consider themselves nonanthropocentrists nevertheless hierarchically value *wild* species and *undisturbed* ecosystems above those influenced by humans. The freer of human influence, the higher an entity is valued. This corresponds to a worldview that separates humanity from what is considered *natural* and can be taken to suggest that humanity is in a hopelessly unnatural situation. Humans are the sorts of beings that naturally behave unnaturally or supernaturally. If, however, humans were to act *against their nature* and treat *all* living things equally, they could not engage in simple, everyday activities such as eating, bathing or brushing their teeth. This would present no small challenge for anyone who wanted to use nonanthropocentrism as a basis for directing *human* behavior. Victoria Davion argues that genuine biocentrism, which exhibits no bias in humanity's favor, is utterly impracticable for this reason. Davion suggests that proponents of such a worldview may inadvertently distract thinkers from reaching a solution to ecological problems that have been wrongly blamed on anthropocentrism:

The idea that we can meaningfully “revere all life” can make us feel good, but such empty slogans may do no more than comfort those who say them, and alienate those who think they are meaningless platitudes. This idea may cause needless rifts between people who should be working together (Davion 2006: 125).

According to Bryan Norton's convergence hypothesis, «if reasonably interpreted and translated into appropriate policies, a nonanthropocentric ethic will advocate the same policies as a suitably broad and long-sighted anthropocentrism» (Norton 2004: 11). In spite of Norton's claim, however, it could be argued that if one were to succeed at adopting an egalitarian biocentric axiology, one might be morally obligated to assist in expunging humanity from the Earth. Perhaps what ultimately prevents Paul Taylor from advocating such misanthropy is that his nominally nonanthropocentric axiology limits *moral* rights to members of rational species such as ours. If it did not, Taylor could not be referred to as a Kantian. Taylor nevertheless clearly expresses what many environmentalists hint at – that Earth's biotic communities would be better off if humans weren't around to mess things up for them:

If, then, the total, final, absolute extermination of our species (by our own hands?) should take place and if we should not carry all the others with us into

oblivion, not only would the Earth's community of life continue to exist, but in all probability its well-being would be enhanced. Our presence, in short, is not needed. If we were to take the standpoint of the community and give voice to its true interest, the ending of our six-inch epoch would most likely be greeted with a hearty "Good riddance!" (Taylor 1981: 209).

Of course, since Taylor and nonanthropocentrists in general avoid adopting the misanthropy implied by a *genuinely* nonanthropocentric position, their value theories should more properly be considered attempts at ecological anthropocentrism.

Environmental philosophers are quick to point out that humanity is itself inextricably part of, rather than apart from, nature and cannot therefore transcend it, as those with supernatural conceptions of humanity suggest. Ironically, however, it follows that any so-called degradations to nature engendered by humanity are themselves likewise utterly natural. This has led many in the field to charge that appeals to what is *natural* are ultimately dead ends. Steven Vogel has proposed that environmental philosophers abandon their problematic nonanthropocentric ideals regarding *nature*. Humans will never have authentic access to a nonanthropocentric perspective, thus the appearance of humans on Earth is the onset of what Vogel deems our planet's *postnatural* condition:

*This is why dualism is wrong; humans cannot be separated from the world any more than the world can be separated from them. [...] The world we are in, the world we are always already transforming, might more appropriately be called "the environment" (and not "nature"), precisely because of the (literally) anthropocentric connotations of the former term: it refers to the world that surrounds us, the world in which and on which we engage in transformative practices. This world, I am suggesting, is the only one we know (Vogel 2002: 32).*

Vogel is certainly correct that humans are inextricable from an environment that embodies or otherwise delimits their phenomenal and existential being. The same is true for all living things – their existence is their nature. I take it that the term *nature* refers to all that is actual and to all that is actually possible. The existential and phenomenal being of any organism is ultimately natural in that it is an expression of actuality. All organisms have limitations regarding the manner of their particular access to being. However, even a *simple* microbe, such as a member of *E. coli*, can exhibit some measure of autonomy concerning the actualization of its possibilities. In this regard, it differs from a human by only a matter of degrees. Problems can arise when nature is contrasted with humanity or

when nature is defined as inherently good. Nevertheless, the concept of what is *natural* can still be useful in the context of ecological and biological discourse. To understand that humans are part of nature is to appreciate natural limits regarding what permits humans and the life forms they care about to remain viable. While it would be perfectly natural for humans to extirpate most species on Earth, including themselves, it would not be anthropocentrically wise for them to do so. If human societies are to make wise decisions, it is important for them to understand how natural conditions will unfold as a result of human-environment interactions. What is wise, from an anthropocentric perspective, is to bring about or preserve environmental conditions that will permit the long-term viability of our species.

### 5. *Anthropocentrism as Species Contract*

Genuine anthropocentrism can be viewed as implying a kind of social contract that encompasses all members of our species. Although it does not require the reciprocity generally considered essential to traditionally construed contractarianism, it does place the burden of ethical responsibility on currently existing human societies to consistently consider the interests of fellow and future humans. This necessarily entails an impartial consideration of the interests of fundamentally unknowable humans separated from those currently identifiable by incomprehensibly vast stretches of space and time. Regarding the geologic spatiotemporal scale needed to view humanity at the level of *Homo sapiens*, Paul Martin wrote:

Geologists travel into “deep time,” which envelops a fossil record of hundreds of millions of years of organic evolution, including five mass extinctions. The rest of us may regard events of 13,000 years ago (the time since the American megafauna disappeared) as decidedly ancient. After all, a life span of one century is beyond the reach of all but a very few of us. Who can comprehend 130 centuries, over 10 times the age of Methuselah? In a sense we are like fruit flies, which live but a few weeks and cannot experience most seasonal changes, much less a year. We cannot know from experience the history of planet Earth. Most of it is destined to be as abstract to a layperson as the dimensions of the universe (Martin 2005: 54).

Derek Parfit is among those who have pointed out the paradoxes involved in dealing with merely possible beings of the future. Human-centered policies that are person-affecting or otherwise emphasize the rights

of identifiable individuals are only coherent on brief scales of time. Although exercising our current rights to frivolously and unsustainably consume toxic or limited resources may foreseeably decrease the quality of life possible for many humans who will likely be born a few centuries from now, alternative policies that would restrict such rights could turn out much worse for them. After all, any significant alterations to our current lifestyles will also alter the conditions that will determine whatever future beings exist. Parfit explains:

Suppose that we are choosing between two social or economic policies. And suppose that, on one of the two policies, the standard of living would be slightly higher over the next century. This effect implies another. It is not true that, whichever policy we choose, the same particular people will exist in the further future. Given the effects of two such policies on the details of our lives, it would increasingly over time be true that, on the different policies, people married different people. And, even in the same marriages, the children would increasingly over time be conceived at different times. As I have argued, children conceived more than a month earlier or later would in fact be different children. Since the choice between our two policies would affect the timing of later conceptions, some of the people who are later born would owe their existence to our choice of one of the two policies. If we had chosen the other policy, these particular people would never have existed. And the proportion of those later born who owe their existence to our choice would, like ripples in a pool, steadily grow. We can plausibly assume that, after three centuries, there would be no one living in our community who would have been born whichever policy we chose. (It may help to think about this question: how many of us could truly claim, “Even if railways and motor cars had never been invented, I would still have been born?”) (Parfit 1984: 361).

In spite of our judgments that further ecological degradations would make the Earth an unfit home for future humans, Parfit goes on to argue that many who could exist in such a future would deem their lives worth living and would thus prefer existence over nonexistence. If policies are based on the interests of future humans such as these, almost any policy can be justified. Responding to Parfit’s paradox, Robin Attfield writes:

Our obligations cannot simply consist in advantaging them or in not harming them, since their very existence would depend on present choices, and they would not exist otherwise. So we cannot ask whether one policy or another would harm or benefit them, as there is no possible alternative impact of our actions on them with which to compare the quality of life that they are likely to have if we choose policies that bring them into being. To harm someone has usually been regarded as implicitly making him or her worse off than he or she would have been other-



wise; but such a person is someone who would not have existed otherwise, that is, in the absence of these policies. But if this is the case, then most of such people cannot be harmed (Attfield 2007: 365).

Nevertheless, as both Parfit and Attfield conclude, it would be wise to care about our impacts on the quality of life of future humans even if such beings have no discernible identity and cannot be harmed by what we do. Such a concern exemplifies anthropocentrism at the species level. At the level of the individual, anthropocentrism devolves into egoism and is thus reduced to spatiotemporal scales that are only relevant to individuals – typically, no more than a handful of generations.

One problem that faces anthropocentrism as a *species contract* is that it is impractical to expect individuals to voluntarily adopt the sorts of behaviors that would be required if environmental solutions were solely dependent on their individual initiative. Most individuals are also not well informed about the long-term ecological impacts of their actions. Ecological anthropocentrism requires its proponent to adopt an attitude of radical impartiality toward fundamentally unknowable humans extended across geologic spatiotemporal scales. Thus, such an anthropocentrism will find its most practical application, not necessarily in guiding the voluntary behavior of individuals, but in informing the policy decisions that regulate human-environment interactions. As Fiala suggests, such policies may need to appeal to the short-term interests of egoists if they are to be adopted:

Individuals want to be free to consume; and democratic governments must have very good reasons for restricting this liberty. Indeed, democratically elected politicians must pander to short-term self-interest in order to maintain popular support – a problem with democracy that has been noted since the time of Plato (Fiala 2010: 54).

Cooperation among environmentalists and policymakers will perhaps make it possible for the frivolous to fiddle without burning Rome to its foundations. I suggest that such cooperation can begin by reconciling anthropocentrism with nature<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Ted Schatzki for providing valuable feedback on this paper.

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## Abstract

*Due to the manifold ecological problems associated with exponentially growing human populations and their collective interactions with Earth's various ecosystems, many environmentalists have lamented that nature is being destroyed by humanity. The theoretical framework which presumably accounts for our species' destructiveness is pejoratively referred to as anthropocentrism, the view that humans are the sole bearers of intrinsic value on our planet, whereas all nonhuman aspects of the biosphere, whether biotic or abiotic, are of merely instrumental value to the satisfaction of human interests. I argue, however, that environmental thinkers' critiques of anthropocentrism are ultimately misplaced. Humanity's ecological predicament is not the result of overvaluing humanity as such but of permitting institutionalized forms of ethical egoism to underlie policies that narrowly focus on the short-term, frivolous interests of current individuals at the expense of the vital interests of future generations.*

