

ANTHROPOCENTRISM VS. BIOCENTRISM: A STUDY ON HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The human-nature relationship has been a focus of research for the environment has seen a dramatic increase. To subdue nature, to bend its forces to our will, has been the acknowledged purpose of mankind since human life began, but the time has come for a revision of our conception of the benefits and responsibilities of holding domination over all other created things. A new spirit is abroad as scientists and layman realize that man and the rest of nature are united and indivisible. The study of anthropocentrism and biocentrism as approach to study the human-nature relationship has not yet received enough attention. Although both express environmental concerns and have an interest in protecting nature and also have recognize that we have a responsibility to the environment, but they have different motives. This paper is an attempt to expound and clarify these two concepts and try to give answer to the question “Does it matter which of these two views we adopt?”

KEY-WORDS: *human-nature relationship, anthropocentrism and biocentrism, responsibility to the environment.*

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INTRODUCTION

The past century has witnessed unprecedented economic growth and prosperity along with unprecedented depredations upon nature. The field of environmental ethics concerns human beings' ethical relationship with the natural environment. One takes a human-centered, or anthropocentric, view of our relationship to nature to emphasize the value of securing the resources needed for further development. The other takes an environment-centered or biocentric, view of conserving her integrity and beauty. This paper explores tensions underling these two views with special reference to Passmore & Baxter's anthropocentrism and biocentrism of Taylor & Leopold; and finds that neither adequately reconciles us to nature.

METHOD/TECHNIQUE

In the present study, we wish to follow a method, which is comparative and critical normative. We want to compare and contrast the anthropocentric outlook (Passmore & Baxter) and biocentric attitude (Taylor & Leopold) regarding their positions on human-nature relationships. Here our method is critical, because we wish to propose a critical attitude towards these two views of environmental ethics.

For the sake of clarity, we have divided this work into the following three sections.

Section – I

Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism-literally meaning “human centered”-is the view that all environmental responsibility is derived from human interests alone. The traditional view of morality is that only human beings can be the focus of moral consideration-not rocks, rivers, plants, or even animals. Only humans are moral persons, have moral rights, and have a direct moral standing. We have a unique status among things on this planet, and morality only applies to us. Anthropocentrism assumes this traditional view that only human beings have a direct moral standing, and we therefore do not have any responsibility to the environment for its own sake.

The value that we place in anything, such as a house, a car, a pair of glasses, is based on the importance that these things have in our lives; there is nothing special about any of these things apart from the value we give them. We value works of art such as the Mona Lisa for the joy that they give humans, and not for what they are independently of us. So too with the environment: it is important for our happiness and our very survival, and because of that we have an obligation towards it. But the obligation is indirect (derived from human interests only) and not direct (derived from the value of the environment itself).

Our indirect obligation would include keeping the environment hospitable for supporting human life and preserving its beauty and resources so that we can continue to enjoy it.

John Passmore is the best known present-day anthropocentric environmentalist philosopher. In his book *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (1974), Passmore argued that *there is urgent need to change our attitude to the environment, and that humans cannot continue unconstrained exploitation of the biosphere*. However, he rejected the view that we need to abandon the Western tradition of scientific rationalism, and was unsympathetic towards attempts to articulate environmental concern through radical revisions of our ethical framework. Passmore was very skeptical about attempts to attribute intrinsic value to nature, and his preferred position was of valuing nature in terms of what it contributes to the flourishing of sentient creatures including humans.

Defending the anthropocentric position, law professor William Baxter argues that the source of all environmental obligations is human benefit:

I reject the proposition that we ought to respect the "balance of nature" or to "preserve the environment" unless the reason for doing so, express or implied is the benefit of man. I reject the idea that there is a "right" or "morally correct" state of nature to which we should return. The word "nature" has no normative connotation. [People or Penguins (1974)]

According to Baxter, it is irrelevant to discuss issues of environmental damage without linking them to human considerations:

My [environmental] criteria are oriented to people, not penguins. Damage to penguins, or sugar pines, or geological marvels is, without more, simply irrelevant. One must go further, by my criteria, and say: Penguins are important because people enjoy seeing them walk about rocks; and furthermore, the well-being of people would be less impaired by halting use of DDT than by giving up penguins. In short, my observations about environmental problems will be people-oriented, as are my criteria. I have no interest in preserving penguins for their own sake. [Ibid]

Thus, nothing in the environment is valuable for its own sake, but only for the benefit that it brings to humans.

Section – II

Biocentrism

By contrast, biocentrism is the view that we have direct moral obligations to things in the environment for their own sake, irrespective of their impact on human interests. There are two ways that the biocentric position can be understood.

First is *biocentric individualism*: individual living things within the environment have moral worth in and of itself. According to Paul Taylor in his book *Respect for Nature* (1986), every organism has moral worth because each has a built in goal that directs its growth and activities towards its survival and well-being. Whether it's a plant, human or animal, it has, as he calls it, a “*teleological center of life.*” This does not mean that every living thing has rights in the way that humans do, but it does mean that we have moral responsibilities towards them. That responsibility also increases as we move up the food chain, from plants, to unconscious animals to conscious ones.

Second, there is *biocentric holism*, sometimes called eco-centrism, which is the view that we have direct responsibilities to environmental collections, such as animal species and rain forests, but not necessarily to the individual organisms within those collections. What is important is that ecosystems and species thrive. Even if there is no negative human consequence of destroying a species or ecosystem, we still have a moral responsibility towards those collections in and of themselves.

Biocentric holism was first articulated by American ecologist Aldo Leopold in his essay "The Land Ethic" (1949). He describes how notions of morality have evolved over the millennia. The earliest moral conceptions regulated conduct between individuals, as reflected in the Ten Commandments. Later ones regulated conduct between an individual and society, as reflected in the Golden Rule. But now, according to Leopold, we are on the brink of a new advance in morality that regulates conduct between humans and the environment. He calls this final phase the land ethic, and states that "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." This involves a radical shift in how humans perceive themselves in relation to the environment. Originally we saw ourselves as conquerors of the land. Now we need to see ourselves as members of a community that also includes the land. Thus, he writes, the guiding moral principle of the land ethic is that “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

Biocentric holism is often associated with other environmental theories that make even more radical claims. The theory of deep ecology holds that humans are only part of a larger ecosphere, and we should seek to understand how the environmental system operates as a whole. To gain that understanding, we need to go through a life-transforming experience called “re-earthlings” by which we gradually identify more closely with the earth. Another related theory is the Gaia hypothesis, which is the view that the entire earth is a single ecosystem or organism that regulates itself through feedback mechanisms to maintain a state of equilibrium that is conducive to life on this planet. For example, when the heat from the sun increases or decreases, the planet's self-regulating ecosystem compensates by adjusting the amount of greenhouse gas that it emits; as a result, the temperature on earth has remained relatively constant for the past billion years. Defenders of the Gaia hypothesis argue that recent human intrusion into the ecosystem threatens to disrupt its self-regulating process. Deep ecology and the Gaia hypothesis share the central intuition of biocentric holism that we must value the earth's larger ecological system apart from our isolated human interests.

Section – III

Does it matter which of these two views we adopt?

Both the anthropocentrist and biocentrist views recognize that we have a responsibility to the environment. Does it matter which of these two views we adopt? The answer is yes, particularly since the two sides disagree about whether human interests or environmental interests should get priority. On the one side, anthropocentrists like Baxter criticize biocentrists for giving too much consideration to the environment at the expense of human interests. On the other side, biocentrists like Leopold criticize anthropocentrists for making environmental decisions based on what is cost-effective, and thus selling out the environment.

To illustrate the differences, suppose that a chemical company was found responsible for polluting a river, and two corrective options were open to them. First, they could invest fifty million dollars in pollution control systems at their factory, but this would likely force them out of business. Or, second, they could pay the community one million dollars in compensation for living with the polluted stream, thus costing them much less money. This second solution might very well address the human concerns of the affected community, and thus be a viable option for the anthropocentrism. However, the biocentrism would completely dismiss the second alternative and be satisfied only with the first one that seeks to repair the damage to the environment itself.

The rift between anthropocentrism and biocentrism often plays out in public debates over wilderness land management issues. It concludes with a discussion of the implications of both these views for environmental policy and practice.

Concluding remarks

Over the past decades, environmental problems have attracted enormous attention and public concern. An evolving understanding of the complexity, magnitude, and inter-relatedness of environmental problems leads us to conclude that a new balance of research programs may be helpful. Environmental ethics will of course be informed by our scientific understanding of the environment as well as its relation with human beings.

How long have you been disconnected from nature? It's impossible to think without nature for a single moment. Our attitudes towards nature are currently being transformed through the recognition of nature's agency and its ability to resist the anthropogenic. The central discussion of this paper was to explore the interrelationships between the human-nature relationships. Finally, a developing conceptual model of human and nature is inclusive of the human-centered perspective is proposed. Our responsibility to the environment should follow in such a manner where our motto is to live 'eco-friendly'.

Both theories agree that if nothing is done as regards the relation human-nature, if man continues to destroy biosphere as he has been doing for the last centuries, human species may face the possibility of total extinction. And it should be stressed that Passmore's environmental problem of preservation generally overlaps with Taylor's views concerning wildlife. Unlike Taylor, the Australian thinker Passmore notices that a "new ethic" is not required, meaning, most obviously, a new environmental ethic.

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