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**Extending Moral Consideration to our Greater Environment**

Our inherited attitudes towards our surrounding environment of living and non-living components are predominantly anthropocentric. In the west, these ideas emanated predominantly from the Greek, Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment philosophical traditions which produced morality based on divine command or the superiority of human reason.¹ Although these ideas may yield an environmental ethic, it seems clear that a more compelling and enlightened moral guide is needed in light of the vastly expanding impact the human species is having on our planet. In this pursuit, philosophers are roughly divided between those who believe we should take an *anthropocentric* approach, that is extend moral consideration to components of the non-human environment in service of human ends; and those who believe we ought to take a *biocentric* view, that is to value life intrinsically, or as an end in itself. This divide, Brian Norton suggests, has resulted because of a striving towards ‘monoism’, that is to use one single guiding principle to solve all moral decisions. He argues that this has led to a paralyzing dilemma which as a result is preventing the effective implementation of environmental policy.² I agree with Norton's analysis that this type of rigid discourse is unproductive. Both the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches have strengths

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and weaknesses which I will discuss. I believe the biocentric view offers useful insights however in the end I believe an anthropocentric viewpoint will best compel moral action.

The biocentric viewpoint assigns intrinsic value to the environment and life, and proposes that we ought not to see them as tools for human ends. Within this viewpoint there are several differing focuses of moral consideration. Kenneth Goodpaster’s standard is thus: “Nothing short of being alive seems to me to be a plausible and non-arbitrary criterion.” The Deep Ecology movement also proposes that life ought to be the criterion of moral consideration and in addition suggests that we ought to strive for “self-realization”, or reevaluate our place in nature. Paul Taylor proposes that “Every organism, species population and community of life has a good of its own which moral agents can intentionally further or damage by their actions.” The key phrase here is ‘good of its own’, that is intrinsically. Thus, these philosophers suggest that the valuing of life intrinsically and repositioning of humanity within the greater life community will require us to give all life moral consideration. I believe there may be some value in these two ideas for several reasons. Firstly because it removes the human species out of the spotlight and forces us to revalue our importance objectively in respect to the greater environment. We can arrive at this from an evolutionary perspective as our importance is put in perspective if we consider ourselves as but one expression of the evolutionary process. Secondly, biocentrism forces us to revalue our ideals of equality. For example, why do we value human life more than that of other animals?

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If we value human life solely because it is ‘human’, this begs the question: Is being human an acceptable premise for moral consideration? It may be sufficient although can we argue that it is the only criteria for moral consideration?

However despite the valuable challenges that the biocentric viewpoint presents, interpreting such a viewpoint has practical problems and ambiguities which confound clear guidance for moral action. The most serious of these problems is the management of conflicts of interest between human beings and the living and non-living environment that will most certainly arise. Clearly in these situations there must be some sort of differentiation between the values of respective living entities. If we take Goodpaster’s criterion for moral consideration of “being alive” then we will certainly be left with some moral dilemmas. For example, if we were to imagine ourselves in a hypothetical situation where one is leaving a sinking vessel on a lifeboat and there is only enough room to bring one’s child or one’s dog but not both, we arrive at, if we take the biocentric viewpoint, a serious conflict of interest. Intuition it seems would make this decision easy. Most of us would likely choose our child. This problem seems to require that we have some sort of objective standard for determining ‘how much’ consideration we owe to other living entities, a concept which is ambiguous in biocentric viewpoints. The second problem I see with a biocentric viewpoint is that it requires the assumption that humans are capable in a consistent fashion to act with extraordinary altruism towards entities with which they have no relationship or who may stand in the way of the realization of their basic existential interests. This does not seem realistic in light of what psychology tells us about the motivations of the human species, that is that at best we are
capable of limited altruism or enlightened egoism.  

A solution to these problems I believe can be best remedied through an anthropocentric, utilitarian approach for the reason that ideologically, it accepts the validity of anthropocentric motivations which I believe better facilitates conflict resolution and environmental protection which is at the end of the day the goal of any environmental ethic. So how does the utilitarian approach lead us towards this goal? If we define utilitarianism as maximizing net benefits over net harms we must clearly define who is to be benefited, what constitutes harm and or who/what has interests. A popular definition of this is proposed by Jeremy Bentham: “Each to count as one, and none for more than one.” Or as Peter Singer interprets it, “… the interests of every being that has interests are to be taken into account and treated equally with the like interest of any other being.” From this interpretation Bentham and Singer propose that this leads us to take into account interests regardless of the recipient. Thus the utilitarian approach I propose will consider the interests of sentient entities to not unreasonably suffer and beyond suffering I would also propose that we consider the greater living and non-living realms in terms of human self-interest through scientific observations.

Suffering and pain is undeniably an experience avoided by the majority of humans. Singer justifies this criterion of suffering by comparing the inferences of pain in other humans with that of other animals and suggests that if we accept that we can infer pain from external reactions within our own species we should accept that similar reactions infer pain in other

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animals. For example, touching an iron to the skin of a human would likely result in a cry and a withdrawal of the inflicted region, from which we infer pain. Likewise it does not require a great leap of faith to infer that the same application to the skin of an animal would produce the same experience. The strength of the criterion of suffering is that it leads towards a solid starting point for moral responsibility. In this interpretation our moral community would then include all sentient beings in the same lot. The most challenging problem I believe this presents is that I think it is unrealistic that humans can completely overcome their bias towards the suffering or the lives of our own kind with that of another species. We can certainly acknowledge that both human and non-human animals suffer however we are intuitively inclined to say that no, the human being matters more. This is I accept an acceptable intuition; however I don’t believe that it creates an insurmountable barrier to extending moral consideration beyond humans. Donald VanDeVeer points out this problem in Singer's argument but offer a useful solution to overcome this barrier. He first questions Singer's suggestion that there is a 'genuine' conflict of interest between the interests of rats and children living in a slum. From this VanDeVeer extracts Singer's premise that “the interests of all sentient creatures be given equal consideration.” He questions what is meant by giving 'equal' consideration to all sentient creatures. I agree with VanDeVeer's objection and suggestion that there certainly must be made room for contextual considerations. VanDeVeer's arrives at a reasonable resolution process taking into account these considerations whereby he suggests differentiating between basic and peripheral interests. He

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defines basic interests as an interest in not suffering or dieing; and peripheral interests those that are not essential to support basic interests.\textsuperscript{11} His solution is that basic human interests should always trump in conflict with animal basic interests however animal basic interests will trump human peripheral interests.\textsuperscript{12} This solution while not universally conclusive does seem to provide a useful solution of the interest conflict found in Singer's premise.

Thus if we have duties to minimize the suffering, within reason, towards other animals then what about the vast majority of living things that, as far as we know, are not sentient. Clearly if we want to foster a complete environmental ethic then these forms of life need a standard for moral consideration. From this point I believe the focus shifts from protecting the interests of sentient individuals towards the health of the community or a shifting of value from the tree to the forest. I also believe that a utilitarian viewpoint offers compelling reasons to respect the existence and health of the forest in terms of human self-interest.

The current utilitarian paradigm has valued the environment in terms of economically valuable services however this does not appear to be a sufficient criteria. For example, from our accumulated and vastly expanding field of ecological knowledge we know that we are much more dependent on the life cycles of insects and plants than we once thought. Wilson effectively argues along these lines. He points out that humanity is a small slice of the entire diversity of life and that if we measure importance based on the quantity and quality of ecological services provided by a species, i.e. nutrient cycling, humans contribute little if none; life on earth would expand in diversity if humans were to disappear, however if

\textsuperscript{11} VanDeVeer Donald, \textit{Interspecific Justice}, The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book 3\textsuperscript{rd} Ed., VanDeVeer Donald, Peirce, Christine, Wadsworth, 2003, pp. 151, 158

\textsuperscript{12} VanDeVeer Donald, \textit{Interspecific Justice}, The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book 3\textsuperscript{rd} Ed., VanDeVeer Donald, Peirce, Christine, Wadsworth, 2003, pp. 157-158
invertebrates were to disappear our remaining existence would be quite certainly brief.\(^\text{13}\) He also gives us other anthropocentric reasons to value these creatures such as, “scientific exploration and naturalistic wonder”.\(^\text{14}\) These points he argues should lead us to a much more enthusiastic conservation effort in light of the fact that invertebrates are often ignored and often detested. I agree with Wilson’s reasons because they attempt to strongly compel the protection of life with no immediate economic value in terms long term human survival. This I believe accomplishes environmental protection by exploiting human self-interest. A biocentric viewpoint would certainly object that we should not value life solely as a service to humanity, although as I have mentioned earlier this objection is unrealistic. For example it seems very unlikely that valuing ants because they are alive is a sufficiently compelling reason to consider their existence when for example considering how to apply pesticides. But rather, it seems more compelling if we value ants for the reason that we know that we are highly dependent on their services, and thus have a high degree of self-interest in their preservation.

Valuing life in terms of the real and potential welfare of humans is also extendable to the wider realm of species and ecosystems. Aldo Leopold’s suggests this is a natural and necessary progression. He argues that ethics are “a kind of community instinct in-the-making”\(^\text{15}\) and that a land ethic is an extension of this instinct towards our greater environment to increase our survival chances. He emphasizes that our current ethic is limited to immediate self-interests and short term economic gains, which is in his analysis greatly


insufficient to adequately protect the natural environment.\textsuperscript{16} I agree with his analysis that economic terms should not be the only standard for assigning value to the environment, for the reason that this is often simply not in our long-term interest. Along this line of thought Leopold sees a divide between conservationists. From his experience in forestry he sees one group as very narrowly focused on short term production; and an opposing group who see the multiple benefits of the forest, for example wilderness for wildlife habitat and future human enjoyment.\textsuperscript{17} This part of his argument falls within an enlightened, anthropocentric basis for protecting the environment, or as he calls it “the stirrings of an ecological conscience”.\textsuperscript{18} Leopold does seem to lapse between biocentric and anthropocentric, which seems to be expected considering his considerable personal first hand experience in the places he wishes to protect. However he does admit valuing our environment for human ends in ways discovered through ecological knowledge. This I agree is the most objective and compelling reason for moral consideration. In a similar vein Elliot Norse makes a strong case for conservation of our oceans in light of ecological knowledge. To him ignorance is the worst threat to protecting the environment. He provides a paramount quote from Senegalese ecologist Baba Dioum who accurately summarizes this thesis: “In the end we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught.”\textsuperscript{19}

Thus, knowledge it seems forces us to reconsider our actions. It challenges us to

\textsuperscript{16} Leopold Aldo, \textit{The Land Ethic}, The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book 3\textsuperscript{rd} Ed., VanDeVeer Donald, Peirce, Christine, Wadsworth, 2003, p. 218
\textsuperscript{17} Leopold Aldo, \textit{The Land Ethic}, The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book 3\textsuperscript{rd} Ed., VanDeVeer Donald, Peirce, Christine, Wadsworth, 2003, p. 222
\textsuperscript{18} Leopold Aldo, \textit{The Land Ethic}, The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book 3\textsuperscript{rd} Ed., VanDeVeer Donald, Peirce, Christine, Wadsworth, 2003, p. 222
\textsuperscript{19} Norse Elliot, \textit{Marine Environmental Ethics}, The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book 3\textsuperscript{rd} Ed., VanDeVeer Donald, Peirce, Christine, Wadsworth, 2003, p. 240
consider suffering beyond the human species and also to carefully consider present actions and their future consequences. The benefits of preserving all forms of life and their habitat is certainly compelling and should lead us towards an environmental ethic that will certainly benefit the long term interests of the human species and should by extension promote the thriving of our greater environment.
Bibliography
