

The Environmental Crises: Why We Need Anthropocentrism

ABSTRACT: In the face of an ensuing environmental crisis, this paper suggests that currently accepted modes of environmentalist thought have not been effective enough in enacting positive change. Anthropocentrism provides something that environmental philosophy needs – wide acceptance and public appeal. This paper argues that an environmental ethic that is weakly anthropocentric, in that it finds value in the environment via human values, can be both internally consistent and highly pragmatic. It goes on to examine some pitfalls of Deep Ecological environmental philosophy, which could be avoided if a weakly anthropocentric environmental ethic were adopted now.



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For a system of ethics to be successful, it must be both internally consistent and widely acceptable. There is danger in getting so caught up in the first requirement that we find ourselves defending views that most human beings would be unwilling to accept – such positions are doomed to be ignored by most outside the philosophical community. Environmental ethics, which seek to explain the ethical relationship between humans and the environment, are no exception. The main point of contention among environmental ethicists revolves around the question of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the

evaluation of reality exclusively in terms of human interests and values. As a way of viewing the world, anthropocentrism has a profound impact on our decision-making calculus. I believe that an anthropocentric environmental ethic can be both internally consistent, and widely accepted, by confirming the intuitions of environmentalists who seek to challenge human destruction of the natural world. In that way, our environmental ethic can effect more change in the way humans treat the environment, and be defensible to a critical audience. The decision to adopt an anthropocentric environmental ethic is one that is both pragmatic and ethical. Its practical appeal



stems from its attraction to a wide audience, while its ethical appeal is generated by its concern for those animals, humans, and ecosystems suffering from the environmental crises.

The description of an environmental ethic as "anthropocentric" needs clarification. The ethic I will extol is not *strongly* anthropocentric, but weakly so. The distinction here, and much of its explanation, is taken from Bryan G. Norton's definitive article on the subject, entitled "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism." To fully understand the distinction between strong and weak anthropocentrism, we must recognize two types of human desires: felt and considered preferences. According to Norton, a felt preference is one that can be satisfied by some specific experience. For example, my wish to eat a chocolate cupcake is a felt preference because it reflects a desire of mine that can be satisfied by a specific, immediate experience – namely, me eating that cupcake. A considered preference is one that an individual would have after "careful deliberation" that determines the preference to be consistent with a "rationally adopted worldview."¹ By rational worldview, he means a conception of the world in accordance with reason or logic, which informs our decisions about value. My desire to recycle is not a felt preference, because the act of putting the aluminum can in the recycle bin doesn't satisfy any specific desire of mine. It is a considered preference because I only want to recycle in light of my rational worldview about environmental responsibility. An ethic is strongly anthropocentric, according to Norton, if the things it values can all be reduced to felt preferences of human individuals. A weakly anthropocentric ethic, in contrast, finds value

in both felt and considered preferences. Strong anthropocentrism could provide no check against felt preferences that endanger the natural world, since felt preferences are always the basis of value under this view. Weak anthropocentrism determines felt preferences to be rational or irrational based on their consistency with our rational worldview. As a decision-making calculus, weak anthropocentrism explicates its goals by determining what the agent wants (felt preferences), and then how those desires fit in with the agent's rational worldview (constraining felt preferences). Our worldview also generates its own desires – ones that we wouldn't have without careful consideration (considered preferences). Both the weak and strong views are anthropocentric because in both human interests are the source of value, and our worldview is the only one that guides our actions.

Before we begin a discussion of the advantages of a weakly anthropocentric ethic, one further clarification will be helpful. Its application to future generations is at this point unclear. Parfit's paradox, as discussed in the Norton article, explains why we cannot take into account the felt or considered preferences of future individuals, since the choices we make today will determine which future individuals will exist, and they could not reasonably complain about those policies given that they would not have existed without them. Norton again comes to our aid in applying the ethic to future generations. He believes, and I agree, that an environmental ethic should not be individualistic in that it only considers the preference of existing individuals. Our ethic can also find value in the existence of the human race, rooted in the belief that the universe is

better with human consciousness than without it. Accepting this value into our rational worldview will inform considered preferences that aid in protecting the resource base for future generations. Fortunately, the belief that human consciousness is valuable is already a part of many people's humanistic worldview – consider the Judeo-Christian tradition, which believes homicide and suicide are sins because each human life is intrinsically valuable.²

With a working explanation of our weakly anthropocentric, non-individualistic, environmental ethic we can now outline how it speaks to issues in a way most environmentalists would appreciate. In other words, this ethic tells us to do things that environmentalists already think we should do- reduce, reuse, recycle, develop alternative energy, protect species, eliminate pollution, and reduce greenhouse emissions, etc. As such, it could satisfy many environmentalists as a way to justify their goals to themselves and a wider audience. Considered preferences of a weakly anthropocentric ethic can include all of these objectives, based on a rational worldview that values ecological diversity, harmony with nature, and human existence. The first two are easily justified, and the third is a firm conviction widely held, as discussed above. Ecological diversity is valuable to humans for myriad reasons, such as medicine, scenic views, education and tasty foods. Many believe that harmony with nature is important to our spiritual development, or the formation of human values. It is not difficult to imagine a rational worldview that respects these values, and many already exist and are followed today (e.g., Hinduism, Jainism). Even the major

religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition can inform considered preferences such as these, which will be a major advantage to our view.

The weakly anthropocentric view avoids the difficulties of justifying an environmental ethic from either end of the spectrum. On one hand, it avoids controversy over the existence of intrinsic value in non-human organisms, objects, and ecological systems. This is one important characteristic of a nonanthropocentric ethic like Deep Ecology– finding intrinsic value in all living things.³ By intrinsic value, I mean value that exists independent of any observer to give it value. For example, a nonanthropocentric ethicist would see value in an animal that no human could ever benefit from or even know about, simply because of what it is. While possibly justifiable, an ethic that treats all living things and possibly even ecological systems as intrinsically valuable may seem very radical to a large portion of the public. It seems that even the philosophical community remains divided on the issue. On the other hand, our ethic avoids making felt human desire the loci of all value by showing how considered human values can explain the value in our environment. In other words, what humans value, either directly or indirectly, generates value in the environment. In this way, we avoid unchecked felt preferences that would not be able to explain why excessive human consumption is wrong. Avoiding these controversial stances will contribute substantially to the first advantage of a weakly anthropocentric environmental ethic: public appeal.

The importance of public appeal to an environmental ethic cannot be overstated. We are running out of time to slow or reverse the

1. Bryan G. Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism", *Environmental Ethics* 6:2 (1984): 134

2. Richard M. Gula, "Dying Well: A Challenge to Christian Compassion", *The Christian Century* (1999): 501-505

3. "Deep Ecology Movement," *Foundation for Deep Ecology*, 26 August 2008, <http://www.deepecology.org/movement.htm> (22 February 2009)



effects of past environmental degradation, and we will need the support of society to combat them effectively. Hence, the most important advantage of a weakly anthropocentric ethic over a nonanthropocentric one is public appeal because many people feel that nonanthropocentrism is just too radical and contrary to common sense. For many, all value does come from humans, since they believe we are the only species capable of rational thought. Opinions about the environment are certainly changing, but anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that most reasons given for increasing environmental protection all reduce to anthropocentrism. For example, the 2004 book *The Meat You Eat*, by Ken Midkiff, explains why factory farming should be rejected, with a focus on its detrimental effects to human health. The vegan and vegetarian movements have increasingly focused on this angle of the factory farming debate, perhaps because of the broader appeal of human-focused motivations. As Midkiff says, "It is simply impossible to raise animals in concentrated operations and to slaughter these animals by the thousands... without severe health consequences among humans. By treating these animals as units of production, the industrial methods, ultimately and inevitably, produce meats that are unfit to eat."⁴ Even if this justification for ending factory farming is not one defended by deep ecologists, isn't actual change more important? Common justifications for species protection include parents wanting their children to know

what an elephant, or a leopard, or a panda look like, how the beauty of animals increases human satisfaction in much the same way that an art gallery would, or the genetic information they can provide which might cure human diseases. In fact, almost every justification printed or aired in major news media reflects a anthropocentric bias. For example, an April 2008 article from the BBC, entitled "Species Loss Bad for Our Health", surveys "a wide range of threatened species whose biology could hold secrets to possible treatments for a growing variety of ailments."⁵ President-elect Barack Obama has consistently spoken about global warming in terms of its impact on future human generations. In a 2007 speech at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, he stressed the urgency of the issue by saying that "the polar ice caps are now melting faster than science had ever predicted... this is not the future I want for my daughters."⁶ As for the last premise, most people agree that human consciousness is intrinsically valuable. That is the reason why this value needs little explanation. Even if this justification isn't perfect, I believe that the ecological ends justify the philosophical means.

It will be helpful to explore an example of how a weakly anthropocentric environmental ethic can justify environmentally-friendly actions to a non-philosopher, and contrast this with a nonanthropocentric justification. Weak anthropocentrism would advise that we protect a lowly invertebrate because its genetic diversity could yield a cure for some human ailment,

or because it holds some key place in the food chain that sustains an animal that yields benefits to humans. A nonanthropocentrist would have to justify protection of the lowly invertebrate by appealing to its intrinsic value. However, why a worm or sea sponge is valuable in itself is difficult for many to justify.

Another advantage of weak anthropocentrism is its ease as a decision-making calculus. Weighing the intrinsic value of non-human organisms, objects, or systems is significantly more difficult than weighing human values, possibly because of our proximity to and experience with them. If a gorilla has the same intrinsic value as an earthworm, would that justify our killing the gorilla to save two earthworms? If the gorilla does have more intrinsic value, how much more? Why is one ecosystem more valuable than another? If it is not, then why are human-created ecosystems less valuable? All these questions must be answered to act on a nonanthropocentric ethic. Critics may claim that even weak anthropocentrism falls prey to the same problem, but at least the problem is easier to resolve. A gorilla is probably more valuable to human interests than an earthworm, especially since there are fewer gorillas than earthworms. A natural ecosystem is more beneficial to our harmony with nature than a human-made ecosystem. If human consensus about benefit is unclear, we have the guidance of our own conscious. Whether or not I think a gorilla or an earthworm is more valuable is always a relevant question when following a weakly anthropocentric ethic. Admittedly, our ethic may fall prey to the same issue in determinations of the value of one human vs. another, but at least the problem is not as widespread, and we have more experience with human value so that controversy

will be easier to answer. Because this is a problem for all ethical systems, and is not unique to an anthropocentric environmental ethic, we will not address it here. This observation about practicality helps explain why more than just being a benefit, a human-centered view is the only type of environmental ethic we can practically utilize.

As humans, it is probably impossible to escape a human-centered ethic to guide our decision-making. Our subjectivity means we can only experience the world from one perspective, and this perspective colors everything we do. Our self-preservation instincts lead us to value ourselves above the rest of the world. What person would reasonably kill themselves, or their children, friends, and neighbors, to save an ecosystem? Or two ecosystems? Though some radical environmentalists have chained themselves to trees and bulldozers, this is generally a statement to express the direness of the environmental situation, instead of an actual bodily sacrifice. Would the same environmentalist give their life to save two gorillas, or two earthworms? We are all responsible for the world, but we are first and foremost responsible for ourselves. More than that, our subjectivity means that one deep ecologist will observe value in the world differently than the next. Even those who subscribe to the idea that objective deliberations are possible, admit that we can rarely access them.⁷ Believing we can have knowledge of intrinsic value that we cannot access in any meaningful way would require the adoption of moral realism, the idea that we can have knowledge of objective moral facts. The problem with this view is the lack of a perceptual capacity that would enable us to know moral facts the way we can see colors and hear music.

4. Ken Midkiff, *The Meat You Eat: How Corporate Farming has Endangered America's Food Supply*, (City: Macmillan 2005): 42.

5. "Species loss 'bad for our health'", BBC News, 23 April 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7361539.stm>> (18 December 2008)

6. "The Obama-Biden Environmental Plan," *Obama for America*, 8 October 2007, <<http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/issues/Environment-FactSheet.pdf>> (18 December 2008).

7. Russ Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 136.



Moral realism has been debated for thousands of years, and endangered species, degrading environments, and the human species do not have time to wait for philosophers to settle this esoteric question. Even if it could be settled, broad appeal is another matter.

Deep ecologists and other nonanthropocentric ethicists often claim that weak anthropocentrism is impossible, that any anthropocentrism taints the whole ethic because it always devolves into appeals to existing human desires. Norton believes, and I agree, that this is not the case as long as we can adequately defend the distinction between felt and considered preferences. Maintaining this distinction will place a constraint on felt preferences, deeming them irrational if they are not consistent with a rational worldview. The key here is finding a worldview that values things like ecological diversity and human consciousness.

Another possible criticism arises from the status of our advocacy as genuine or not. Those who would support a weakly anthropocentric ethic because of its usefulness, and not their genuine belief in it, might undermine effectiveness. This point is made by one of the founders of the deep ecology movement, Arne Naess, in his article "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects." "It is indecent for a teacher to proclaim an ethic for tactical reasons only," he asserts.⁸ Naess does not include warrants for his claim of indecency (he believes it will be obvious), or of undermined effectiveness. Regardless, I believe that many proponents of our ethic will genuinely believe in it, as do the Hindus and Jains. That means that they genuinely accept a worldview that

values things like environmental diversity and a sustainable resource base. Those who would lean towards deep ecology intuitively may also espouse our ethic in an attempt to spread environmentally responsible behavior. Even if this approach would decrease overall effectiveness in the long run, the direness of our current environmental situation fully justifies this sacrifice. Deep ecology, while possibly a better plan for our relationship with the natural world, has failed at wide adoption, and thus done relatively little in actually changing our relationship with the environment. Even Naess seems to endorse the combination of a weakly anthropocentric view with deep ecology as an educational tool later in the article, when he claims that "environmental education campaigns can fortunately combine human-centered arguments with a practical environmental ethic based on either a deeper and more fundamental philosophic or religious perspective, and on a set of norms resting on intrinsic value."⁹ Other than the last part about norms resting on intrinsic value, this claim seems to endorse our more practical ethic. Why does the fundamental philosophic or religious perspective have to rest on a set of norms which themselves rest on intrinsic values?⁹ The answer is unclear.

The best criticism of weak anthropocentrism takes the form of "last human" hypothetical situations, where no action performed by the last human can possibly affect any other human, because the rest are all dead. "If no human use is known, or seems likely to be found, it does not matter if they are destroyed", Naess explains.¹⁰ The same problem would occur if an entire generation of the human population

chose voluntary sterilization, and no future generations were possible. The easiest response to this accusation is the last-human situations are purely hypothetical, and highly unlikely to ever be anything else. This, of course, is to side step the issue, although some will find it a satisfactory response because we are seeking an ethic that will work in the current situation, not one that will work in every unlikely counter-example. Still, we can respond to the voluntary human sterilization example by showing that the sterilization itself would be wrong because there is inherent value in the continuation of the human race. What about after the sterilization occurs? One possible response could be found in the benefit of ecological diversity and natural harmony to human spirituality. This point applies most clearly to the remaining, sterile generation, as many will find a source of spiritual development in the natural world. But what if the last human being is a spiritually bankrupt materialist? In other words, they only find value in consumption of natural resources. In this instance, it isn't so clear how a weakly anthropocentric ethic could constrain the last human's actions to degrade or destroy the environment. Perhaps the possibility of future human existence could be a solution. Parfit's paradox would not apply, because if we destroyed the Earth no humans could exist as a

result, and thus our obligation to the existence of future human consciousness could only advise us to maintain a viable life support system on the Earth and the ecological diversity that would benefit future human lives.

Despite its pragmatic issues, deep ecologists need not abandon their philosophical view completely. A weak anthropocentric ethic may, in addition to reversing environmental degradation, serve as a segue to a more fundamental shift in our relationship with nature. Radical shifts in human relationships are rare – see for instance the anti-racism and anti-sexism movements. While weak anthropocentrism may not go as far as deep ecologists would like, it is certainly a step in the right direction.¹¹

Even if deep ecologists can identify internal inconsistencies or possible abuses of a weakly anthropocentric, non-individualistic, environmental ethic, I think accepting it anyway is well worth the possible risks. Most deep ecologists would agree that the Earth is fast approaching a point-of-no-return for environmental well-being, if it hasn't already. The ecological world desperately needs the destructive human population to adopt an ethic that will slow or reverse environmental degradation. If we do not, the last human scenario might not be so hypothetical, and the last of many species will have already come to pass. ♦

8. Arne Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects," in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003)

9. Ibid 264

10. Ibid 267

11. Charles T. Rubin, *The Green Crusade: Rethinking the Roots of Environmentalism*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 1994): 209.

