

Reconstructing the Ecological Order: Towards a Biocentric Ethics

In this essay I will reflect on the human-nature relationship: Today, the dominating perspective on this “dualistic” bond is characterized by approaches to nature, based upon so-called human-centered assumptions. These approaches, which henceforth will be referred to as anthropocentric, account for a position in the ecological philosophy that considers humans either a morally superior being – or more radically – the *only* moral subject. However, this hegemonic position relies on an insufficient body of arguments. As Peter Singer, representing the patocentric position, writes: “If [an animal] suffers, there can be no moral justification for disregarding that suffering, or for refusing to count it equally with the like suffering of any other being”. Other, more radical, positions in the ecological philosophy question too the anthropocentrism and raise argument for a broader definition of moral value and rights.

As the topic is very comprehensive it must be broke down in smaller parts: First I will discuss the topic of animal rights, starting with Peter Singer’s patocentric views. Secondly, I will go a step even further and argue for the moral integrity of all life. Finally, using a dialectical attitude, I seek to combine the ecological positions into coherent principles of a bio-centered ethical approach to nature and the integrity of life in general.

The first question that I will address is: *Why do humans have moral worth, if animals do not?* As Peter Singer argues in his book *Animal Liberation*, there can not be any moral justification for refusing to count the suffering of a man to the suffering of another being. One of the first points on the subject raised in the anthropocentric tradition is that human beings are more intelligent, master the commands of languages and has a perception of moral, whereby they are morally superior. There are, nevertheless, many counterarguments to be articulated against this reasoning. The first is that we do not use intelligence as an “ethical” measure in our everyday life, nor our skills in language or our moral sense: For example we do not consider an intelligent man more morally valuable than a child, simply because he is more “intelligent”. In the same way our current principles of moral are independent of how many languages we speak or how “morally” we act. Another counterargument originates from the *is/ought problem*, also known as *Humes Law* or the *naturalist fallacy*. Basically David Hume asserts that man can only come to know how things *are*, applying descriptive scientifically methods, but not how things ought to be, because that is concerning moral which is a metaphysical phenomenon. For these reasons, the argument that humans are morally superior to animals because of their “talents” is invalid.

Another chain of reasoning, presented by several anthropocentric philosophers, has been addressing the so-called *humanitas*. The precise meaning of the word varies a lot: It has been claimed that we had a special biology. But the fact is that the human DNA is not that different from many other animal species and it seems difficult for either scientist or philosophers to

explain what specific “genes” that codes for moral worth. Secondly, if we accept Humes Law we can use it as a point of objection as well. Also Rene Decartes viewed animals as “merely mechanics” and explained thus the moral superiority of humans with his dualistic philosophy: Man has a physical body and a soul. But what is the soul? Is a metaphysical substance or is it another word for consciousness? If it is the last-mentioned then we must assume that animals – at some level – have a consciousness as well, seeing that they like us can see, hear, taste, communicate (more primitively though) and respond to stimuli, i.e. they can receive and treat impressions in some way like human beings.

This leads to the central argument of Singer’s thesis: If animals have a “consciousness” and the ability of experiencing “pleasure and pain”, then they should be regarded moral beings. Singer here extends the *principle of equality*, which only applies to humans within the anthropocentric position, and combines it with an utilitarian approach: If a being is able to suffer (or enjoy) then it must have an interest, which should be respected in ethical terms, no matter if that being is a human or another animal. Additionally he claims that if we do not accept this argument, we are “*speciesists*”, meaning that we only grant humans ethical right because we favour our own species in the same way that the white man defended the slavery of the black man by referring to racial difference.

To sum up: According to Peter Singer we must either acknowledge the moral value of feeling (patocentric) beings or acknowledge ourselves as speciesists.

Now I shall move on to my next inquiry, which is arguing that not only feeling animals should be entitled moral rights, but the entire biosphere as well. However, it is a fundamental supposition in the following chain of reasoning that *moral*, by definition, is a metaphysical subject, and therefore it cannot be “proven” empirically.

In the last part of Singer’s quotation, he states that “if a being is not capable of suffering, or of enjoyment, there is nothing to take into account.” As Singer uses a utilitarian approach in his argumentation it is an axiom that a being with no interest (unable to experience pain or pleasure) has no moral rights. This assumption, however, is problematic: What moral rights should be granted to a senile elderly, a disabled person or an embryo (not to say a new-born child)? The very dramatic consequence of Singer’s solely focus on the interest of the being, and not the matter of life itself, is that he must conclude, for instance, that we have a somewhat duty to kill (un)born disabled children if we estimate that their lives would contain more “pain” than “pleasure”. It is thus a consequence that the “quality of life” is at some point above the right to live: The value of a human life is accordingly relative to its (potential) “qualities”.

Another way to perceive the integrity of life is from an absolutistic perspective. The reason to do so is because it seems that we, emotionally and in discourse, consider human life to be *sacred*. For instance it says in the American Declaration of Independence “that we declare these truth to be self-evident...”, whereas a list of (human rights) follows. Nonetheless, if we accept that human life has an absolutistic, “self-evident”, intrinsic value, we will have difficulties arguing that all life forms do not. One argument is based upon *the awe-of-life*, which is an extension of the *integrity of human life* to cover all forms of life, seeing that the similarities between human and non-human life (animals, plants and bacteria) share significant similarities. This argument is, though, strongest in connection with Singer’s

patocentric position, since the similarities in life patterns between humans and animals grow rapidly larger in a like comparison between humans and plants. Therefore, a stronger argument for the moral rights of all life forms is still needed. Another approach is based on the teleological argument in which it is claimed that all life contains a so-called *telos* – that is a “final cause”. The term was originally invented by Aristotle, who said that the “the seed has the full-grown plant as its *telos*”. This argument is, in the same way as Singer’s patocentric argument, an extension of *the values of human purposes* as it is claimed that the intrinsic value of the purpose does not depend on the specific form of life, but lies within the purpose itself. All life forms have, according to the argument, thus an inherent value due to their final cause, which could be *growth, reproduction or diversity*.

Another more radical position in the ecological philosophy is the *Deep Ecology Movement* led by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and later also American George Sessions. In the deep ecology, the Earth is, ideally, considered a harmonic ecosystem with no distinction between human and nature. Every living being, also accounting the “life of an ecosystem and its single component” (here also inorganic materials: Rocks, mountains, rivers and valleys) have an inherent value. Naess and Sessions have articulated the following principles of the deep ecology, in which they sum up the basic metaphysical axioms of their philosophy:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of non-human life for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of all life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity, except to satisfy *vital* needs.

(Freely adapted from: *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, Sessions and Dewall).

Naess and Session thus construct a new perspective of nature, inspired by Eastern religion, Zen-Buddhism and Spinoza’s theory of one *substance* (being God), from which they can deduce the *holistic argument*. It asserts that humans can not be separated from nature, seeing that they are an inseparable part of nature as an ecological system. Moreover, the consequence is that our superior intellect does not release us from the bonds of nature, it actually rather impose us to secure (and restore) the balance or harmony of life in the ecosystem.

In this last section of the essay I attempt to combine the views of anthropocentrism and biocentrism using a dialectical approach. Here anthropocentrism is regarded the dominating thesis and the biocentrism (and the deep ecology movement) appears as an antithesis. The aim is to construct a synthesis or ethical approach to nature which can be proposed in some basic biocentric principles.

First, nonetheless, I will present my critique of Naess’ and Sessions’ deep ecological perspective and the holistic argument in defence of the anthropocentrism. It is assumed in the holistic argument as a consequence of the deep ecology world view that man is inseparable from nature. On the one hand, an objection could be that culture together with the invention

and advancing development of technology is a symbol or “proof” of man’s detachment from nature. On the other hand, it could be reasoned that the richness and diversity of culture, the exploration of science, and the development of new technology is a realization of human life and therefore also a value cf. the second principle of deep ecology.

In attempt to combine these two opposing perspectives into an approach we will thus have to take consideration of the absolute value of life, on the one side, and the value related to the realization of life, on the other side. Nevertheless, the value of life and the value of the telos related to every living being must be equally respected, and hence the right of realization for one life is limited by the equal right of another life. In keeping with that thought, I propose the following three *basic principles of biocentric ethics*:

1. All life has an inherent value, which can not be reduced by either human or technological power.

This first principle emphasizes that all life, in this approach defined as organisms build up by complex and functioning cell structures, have an inherent value as argued earlier. Moreover, this right or value is not relative to human interests or power, seeing the values are absolutistic and irreducible for consumptive (human) purposes.

2. Humans should seek an ecological balance or harmony where the value of all life forms are respected and their vital needs can be satisfied.

The principle proclaims that our “industrialized” relation to nature must end. Instead of viewing nature as a resource and the goal of every intercourse to gain economical profit on behalf of nature, we should seek to modify this relation so that our needs can be satisfied and the respect for life is still restored.

3. Human civilization relies on technology and therefore it must be considered an aid of human existence; however, man is to take the full responsibility of the consequences use of technology have for other forms of life.

Basically this principle is a compromise where the right for humans to realize their life through the development of technology is accepted on the condition that technology shall not reduce the inherent value or realization of other life forms, if not to fulfil vital needs.

In conclusion: I have argued for a reconstruction of the ecological order, focusing on the ethical integrity of all life, and proposed three basic principles for a biocentric ethics, which is adaptable with human culture and technology. It relies on the metaphysical axiom that all life has an inherent value in itself, no matter if it a human, an animal or a plant, which should at least be recognized as a moral worth.

As a last reflection on Singers thesis it could be argued that, from a biocentric perspective, his definition of “suffering” and “interest” is too narrow. If the assumption of a metaphysical value of life is recognized, it is reasonable to claim that all life has an *interest* (or *enjoyment*) of flourishing. Any obstruction of that interest would then be considered *suffering*, which can only be ethical, conditioned by the respect for life and the balance within nature.