

Open Peer Commentaries

## Ecocentrism as anthropocentrism

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‘Is it true that God is everywhere?’ a little girl asked her mother; ‘I find that indecent!’—a hint to philosophers! One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties. (Nietzsche, 1887, preface 4)

In his interesting analysis of the debate about species egalitarianism, David Schmidtz (this issue, pp. 127–138) rightfully criticizes Taylor’s defense of it. Taylor’s argument starts with four beliefs about the relation of humans and other species that together form the core of his ‘biocentric outlook on life’ (Taylor 1986, see also Taylor 1981). The first is that humans are members of the biotic community in basically the same sense as all other living things are. The second core belief is that all species—humans included—are integral parts of a system of interdependence. Thirdly, Taylor considers all organisms as teleological centers of life, that is all living beings are oriented towards their own telos; they pursue their own good; they seek to flourish and do well. Fourth and most crucial is the belief that humans are not inherently superior to other living beings: we do not have good reasons to believe that humans are better than other beings. According to Taylor, as soon as we accept these core beliefs as our starting point and decide to reject the notion of human superiority, we will be inclined to accept the ‘doctrine of species impartiality’. And although he admits that his biocentric outlook on life does not present a logically valid argument for adopting species egalitarianism, he does believe that it gives as convincing a reason to do so. In his paper, Schmidtz clearly shows that Taylor’s argument is not without problems.

Here I want to focus on Schmidtz’ remarks regarding Taylor’s last statement—that humans are not inherently superior. Schmidtz points out that Taylor’s argument has met two different replies that both accept that we should respect nature but reject species egalitarianism. One common reply denies that the question whether humans are superior or not is actually that important. If—as Taylor claims—all living beings are intimately tied together and interdependent, then the telos of other beings has to matter to humans irrespective of the question whether or not humans are inherently superior.

In this paper, I want to focus on the other common reply, that grants that our reasons to believe that humans are superior to other living beings may have to be rejected, but then goes on to say that it does not follow that humans and nonhumans are equal. However, I believe that Schmidtz’ account of the reply fails to adequately address one fundamental problem. According to Schmidtz, the question whether humans are superior or not is a matter that cannot be decided because the different forms of life are incomparable.

The question how we compare to nonhumans has a simple answer: we don’t. We are not equal. We are not superior. We are not inferior. We are simply different. (Schmidtz, this issue, p. 128)

I feel that Schmidtz’ account of this counterargument, although technically not wrong, is somehow missing a more fundamental point at stake here. Rather than merely saying that humans and other life forms are incomparable and that the issue about human superiority is undecidable, we should recognize that the argument itself is nonsensical. More importantly, as I will argue below, it is built on an assumption that belongs to the very type of anthropocentric reasoning that ecocentric egalitarianism sets out to criticize.

According to Taylor, the idea that humans are superior to other living beings is both unfounded and wrong, because it is humanly biased. There are no impartial, objective reasons for such a belief. In other words, underneath Taylor's argument is the assumption that, in principle, it makes sense to think about the superiority of humans over non-humans from an objective point of view—from without the human position, as it were. However, this very idea takes us beyond the scope of proper moral reasoning altogether. According to the Belgian philosopher Arnold Burms, philosophers like Taylor tend to forget the basic truth that each valuation will inevitably be an expression of specifically human attitudes towards the world:

Our value statements can never be anything other than an expression of what we consider to be valuable. Whenever we try to articulate our appreciation of the non-human, we will inevitably be guided by our feelings of admiration, reverence, sympathy, i.e. by our typically human feelings. It makes no sense to search for an objective, impartial measure of value independent of the human perspective. Outside the human perspective, concepts such as 'value' and 'appreciation' have no meaning. Suppose that someone would want to know if what people consider to be beautiful actually is beautiful from an objective, impartial perspective. We would have to say that the very question itself originates from conceptual confusion. The very notion 'beauty' does not have any meaning outside the context of specific human—aesthetic—responses to the world. (Burms, 1991, p. 141)

However, Burms points out that there is another, more important problem with Taylor's line of argument, and that is that it implicitly repeats and even radicalizes just the kind of anthropocentric reasoning that he sets out to criticize. According to Burms, the morally most troubling aspect of anthropocentrism is not so much its assumption that humans are superior to non-humans, but that what matters to human beings is true in an absolute sense. And it is this way of reasoning that is central to Taylor's argument:

Ecocentrism presents itself as the opposite of anthropocentrism, but on closer examination it appears to be an extreme form of anthropocentrism itself. The ecocentric way of thinking is based on the human tendency to ascribe a significance that is absolute, i.e. independent of specific human reactions or interests, to specific human categories (such as the opposition superior–inferior). The spokespersons of ecocentrism play with the idea that an objective, unbiased observer could determine how the value of human dignity would compare with other living beings. But why assume that the typical human tendency to judge things in terms of superior and inferior would have any meaning whatsoever when seen from the standpoint of an impartial observer? It is clear that the question whether or not man is superior to all other living beings loses its meaning in an objective, scientific perspective. (Burms, 1991, p.141. Originally in Dutch, authors translation)

It does not make sense to use normative expressions such as 'superior' and 'inferior' objectively, outside the particular context of a human ethical outlook. To suggest that ethical outlooks can be informed and founded from without, is to ascribe absolute validity to concepts and ideas that are intrinsically bound to the finite human perspective on the world, and therefore entails a radical form of anthropocentrism.

Burms believes that anthropocentrism is unavoidable for those who want to articulate an ethical perspective on the world. He notes, however, that not all forms of anthropocentrism are equally problematic. Apart from the current 'humanistic anthropocentrism', which starts from the conviction that non-human entities can have value if and only if they are valuable (useful or pleasant) for humans, other (traditional or post-scientific) forms of anthropocentrism exist ('metaphysical anthropocentrism') that start from the idea that humans are not in the center of the world:

Metaphysical anthropocentrism, which is typical of any traditional, post scientific vision of reality, exists in the belief that an understanding of the most essential structures or properties of the objective reality always also entails an insight into the meaning of human existence. Within this perspective, nature is seen as a meaningful context to which a person should attune

his or her life. [ . . . ] In this view, at the center are not humans, but the divine that manifests itself through nature to humans. [N]ature is understood as a meaningful context that speaks to humans rather than as an impersonal play of natural forces that is described by science. (Burms, 1991, p. 142)

Burms does not do much to clarify his idea that an adequate critique of humanistic anthropocentrism should start with metaphysical anthropocentrism. Yet I believe that his reflection does provide a basis to critically reassess species egalitarianism and its metaphysical assumptions. It may very well be that the normative core of species egalitarianism is not the belief that all beings are equally valuable but, rather, the humbling insight that we are part of a larger context that does not revolve around us. When we conceive of nature as a network of interdependent living beings of which we are part, this provides us with a context out of which we can understand ourselves and articulate a vision of what our life is about. Yet, ultimately, we are bound to the human perspective.

## References

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