

Ego & The Environment:

The Struggle Between Anthropocentrism & Environmental Stewardship

When referring to “the environment”, often it is easy for one to envision some entity beyond the self, separate and distinct. This is analogous to a “connect-the-dots” picture of environmental study – indistinct and incomplete. To paint a more accurate depiction of any environmental decision process, one must consider the complex system of considerations which are all part of “the environment”. How can one reconcile the intrinsically anthropocentric canvas of Western ethics upon which we base decision-making and the conclusively multifaceted nature of the environment, which is by no means limited to human concerns? Anthropocentrism is a force which, unless harnessed and directed in favour of environmental ethics, works against any form of sustainability. This assertion may be given credence by first analysing the anthropocentric nature of traditional normative ethical theories, expanding understanding by exploring the roots of this anthropocentric bias, and finally examining the hidden hope in anthropocentric egoism.

Conventional normative ethical theories are predominantly anthropocentric in nature. Anthropocentrism, a term bandied about quite liberally by this point in the present discourse, simply refers to any philosophical notion which is created with a human-centred bias. These ideas tend to emphasize rationalism and individualism, which are properties largely unique to humans (Tait, 2014).

As an example, one may examine the premises of utilitarianism. Jeremy Bentham’s basic Utilitarianism is based on three main assumptions. First, that sentience is what determines

which entities are to be considered by this moral framework. Second, utilitarianism demands that this sentience is determined by the entity's capacity to experience pleasure and pain. Finally, utilitarianism assumes that both pleasure and pain can be effectively measured and compared (Unknown, p. 10). These assumptions are relatively straightforward and sufficiently define utilitarianism from a human perspective, but if one attempts to broaden the application of utilitarianism to include additional stakeholders in environmental theory such as animals or trees, the concept of utilitarianism becomes substantially more ill-defined. Indeed, as Elliott Sober points out in his essay "Philosophical Problems for Environmentalism", even if one were to resolve some manner of incorporating animals into utilitarianism, which clearly demonstrate their capacity to feel something like pleasure and pain, one cannot generalize this animal consideration to non-biotic components of the environment, or even to a species on the whole (Sober, 1986). As such it is clear to see that the formation and basic execution of utilitarianism is based wholly on an anthropocentric worldview.

Such an in-depth breakdown may be completed for each major Western normative ethical theory; however for the sake of brevity one may isolate the key component to each of these theories which naturally begets anthropocentric tendencies: autonomy and sentience.

Deontology, for example, dictates that there is a categorical imperative to treat all autonomous agents "always as an end and never as a means only" (Korsgaard, 2012, pp. 40–41). This right, intrinsic to deontology, excludes all non-autonomous agents, which Kant would argue also excludes animals. Indeed, Kant explicitly states as much in saying

that “animals... are there merely as means to an end. That end is man.” (Kant & Beck, 1980).

If one is a proponent of Hobbes’ Social Contract, one encounters the same stumbling block. The social contract implies that all agents who enter into it and are ruled by it have done so autonomously (Unknown, n.d.). This once again provides ample entitlement to humans and human will, while eliminating any consideration which might be ethically paid to agents who by definition cannot enter into the social contract (i.e. trees, land, animals, etc.). Thus, Western ethical frameworks depend on autonomy and sentience to determine who is a stakeholder in ethical considerations, which is not transferable beyond humans in environmental issues.

In what direction then, ought environmental ethics to turn in order to more fully include these broader and non-human stakeholders in environmental decision-making? Some may advocate for moral extentionalism, such as Aldo Leopold in “The Land Ethic”. Leopold writes that “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community” (Leopold, 1981), which, with a little imagination, may be seen as an extension of Kant’s deontological rights (Tait, 2014). Andrew Brennan, however, believes that a “New Ethic” must be established if progress is to be made in environmental ethics. He asserts that “environmental ethics does not call for expanding the circle of beings recognized as having feelings... or capable of feeling pain”, instead advocating that environmental ethics ought to be formulated around new values which are not human centred in the first place, and that ethics in general then ought to be pluralistic, with this new, non-anthropocentric ethic as one facet of ethical consideration (Brennan, 1992).

Without passing judgement on either of Leopold or Brennan's proposed courses of action, however, one ought to entertain the notion that anthropocentrism itself can be a valuable tool in environmental ethics, even before any Leopoldian value extensions. Pinchot's conservationism, which advocates for the "greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time" (Pinchot, 1998, p. 382), is doubtlessly based in Bentham's utilitarianism – yet still entails some overarching, broad sense of care for biotic factors in its final clause which calls for a rough form of sustainability. Though admittedly unrefined, the conservation idea serves as a prototypical form of wielding the human self-value which presents itself through anthropocentric ethics as a tool for environmental justice.

The idea of human self-interest leading to collective good is by no means a new one, but is rarely applied to environmental ethics. When it comes to the environment, ethicists often seem to operate on the same false dichotomy presented in this paper's introduction: anything concerned with human-centred values is fundamentally incompatible with environmental care. In many cases this is true, such as the tragedy of the commons. In the tragedy of the commons, it is such anthropocentric ethical egoism which leads to individual gain (economic or otherwise) by exploiting resources which create distributed loss across all others (Hardin, 1968). However, given the correct situational framework within which to operate, the opposite may also be true. This is a phenomenon known as the "invisible hand" ("The Economic Times", 2014). Most often the invisible hand is applied in an economic sense, in order to describe the balance between cost, supply and demand and investment of assets in various industries as they gain or lose value in a free market, however it is worth noting Milton Friedman's description of the invisible hand as "the possibility of cooperation without coercion" (Read, 1999, p. 3). This generalization of the

notion of the invisible hand seems to imply that by the same principles of human-centred values and self-interest which lead to self-sustaining and growing economic systems, one may devise a system in which rational sovereign agents may make choices in their own self-interest which lead to other external positive benefits.

What may these systems look like? Real world examples of such models have been provided by such figures as Jeff Casello and Blair Feltmate. In Casello's presentation "Problems with Transportation Systems", he begins by outlining the tragedy of the commons inherent in modern North American transit – that is, driving is nearly always the best decision for an individual, while its negative effects (pollution, noise, traffic, etc.) are dispersed across the entire population. Most integral to Casello's lecture, however, is the shift to hopeful proposals of manners in which this human perspective may be shifted. The inclusion of externality costs and provision of easy alternatives are all that are required to shift the same self-serving anthropocentric action from environmentally destructive to preservative (Casello, 2014). Similarly, Blair Feltmate outlined an economic case for the "Triple Bottom Line" – an ideal which promises higher share prices for organizations which subscribe to a system of environmental, social and economic development (Feltmate, 2014). In this case too, one may clearly see illustrated a manner in which human self-interest (i.e. economic gain) can motivate "cooperation without coercion".

As such, it has been shown that though traditional Western ethical theories such as utilitarianism, deontology and the social contract are implicitly anthropocentric, they may still be used for positive environmental ethical effect. What matters is not the value which drives a particular normative theory, so much as the context and circumstances in which that theory is applied. In environmental ethics it is increasingly the role of the ethicist to

no longer propose amendments or alternatives to classical ethical theories, but rather to envision the engineered circumstances which are most likely to yield results which are compatible with environmentalist's goals, based on current descriptive ethical models. Examples such as Jeff Casello and Blair Feltmate of benefits to this approach already exist, with untold future applications yet to be seen. No longer should anthropocentrism be considered in contest with environmental ethic, but rather as an instrumental cog in its machinery.

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