

Unified Teleology: Paul Taylor's Biocentric Egalitarianism Through Aristotle

ABSTRACT: In this paper I examine the similarities between Paul Taylor’s and Aristotle’s teleological accounts as outlined in Taylor’s concept of biocentric egalitarianism from *Respect for Nature* and Aristotle’s concept of “for the sake of” from *Politics* I.8, and I show how Aristotle’s account can partially support Taylor’s. I discuss Aristotle’s virtue ethics and what they offer in terms of piecing together an environmental ethic, and I draw attention to an implied value—recipient value—that assigns significant worth to all living things “for the sake of” that is similar to Taylor’s biocentric egalitarianism. Lastly I address two problems that arise for Taylor’s egalitarianism and reevaluate the extent to which Aristotle’s teleological account may support Taylor’s.

Introduction

In his book *Respect for Nature* and essay “The Ethics of Respect for Nature,” Paul Taylor offers an individualistic ethic, biocentric egalitarianism, as a way with which to frame nature’s value. Biocentric egalitarianism puts forth the view that all living things have equal worth as “teleological centers of life;”¹ in other words, every living thing has its own biological interest and with that its own end—*telos*. All other capacities—such as sentience² or rationality³—are not counted as holders of relevant value. Nonliving things, including water, rocks, and other abiotic things that comprise the habitats in which living things dwell, are considered lacking in similar (intrinsic) value,⁴ and larger groups of animals, such as biotic communities and species, are

1. Paul W. Taylor, “The Ethics of Respect for Nature,” *Environmental Ethics* 3/3 (1981): 210.

2. *Ibid*, 200.

3. *Ibid*, 211.

considered subordinate in value.⁵ However, Taylor's egalitarianism comes under fire when he claims that it is less wrong to kill animals than plants for food and when humans' non-biological (extraneous) interests are granted more significance than biological interests of animals and plants; these problems will be addressed later on in the paper. In this paper I discuss the above problems for Taylor's egalitarianism and demonstrate the partial support Aristotle's teleology gives Taylor's nominal egalitarianism—and the full support it offers once the label thereof is stripped away.

Aristotle and Nature

Environmental ethics is a relatively modern discipline, and therefore no clear account defining the proper treatment of nature is given in Aristotle's works. This makes a comparison with Taylor's proposed ethics less straightforward. In order to do so, it is necessary to examine Aristotle's descriptions of nature and living things. It is also necessary to study his human ethics to find a model for the treatment of nonhuman things.⁶

While Aristotle's teleological account offers no disinterested motive for caring for things in nature, it is possible to draw from his human ethics to defend the treatment. In *Nicomachean*

4. Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 123. Nonliving things are said to lack well-being, and they are excluded from Taylor's life-centered egalitarianism as a result. The value of nonliving things lies solely in what they contribute to living things' ability to thrive.

5. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," 199. While community wholes and species are said to have goods of their own, these goods are determined by how well living individuals are able to live within these groups. Here priority is clearly placed on the well being of individuals. Therefore Taylor's view also falls under the label of biocentric individualism.

6. Susanne E. Foster, "Aristotle and the Environment," *Environmental Ethics* 24/4 (2002): 420. Here Foster turns to *Nicomachean Ethics* in showing how Aristotle's virtue ethics can be extended to nature and nonhumans. Alain Ducharme does so, as well, to argue against the claim that Aristotle supports the dominion thesis in "Aristotle and the Dominion of Nature," 8-9. I turn to a later section of *Nicomachean Ethics* to make a similar point.

Ethics he claimed that it is best to be a self-lover rather than to love others over himself, acting in self-interest in the sense that he wants to acquire as many virtuous deeds for himself as possible.⁷ This self-lover loves himself through others and their hardships, as he finds opportunity to help. If his aim is to acquire as much virtuous action for himself as he can, it makes sense for him to increase his pool of virtuous activity by looking outside of human interests. Thus, to be most virtuous, he should care for nature and desist from misusing it. Taylor would, of course, hold that any such actions for moral subjects should be done for the sake of moral subjects (nonhumans) not the acting moral agents (humans),⁸ but the outcomes of applying Taylor's biocentric egalitarianism and Aristotle's human virtue ethics from *Nicomachean Ethics* would likely be similar. Because environmental ethics is such a young field, many of its ethics are inspired by or taken from existing human-centered ethics.⁹ For this reason, applying the self-lover example from *Nicomachean Ethics* to nonhumans is hardly controversial.

Recipient Value

Under Taylor's view, all living things have equal intrinsic value¹⁰ as derived from their teleological nature. He describes a living thing's goal or end as "the full development of its biological powers." Thence the living thing has a biological interest to survive—to which Taylor refers as "a good of its own"—wherefrom stems the value inherent in the living thing, since

7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX.8, 1169a34-5 (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1999), 263.

8. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," 201.

9. Tom Regan. "The radical egalitarian case for animal rights." *Environmental Ethics*, 3rd edition. Oxford: Basil Blackwell (2001), 41. Regan applies Kant's Categorical Imperative to nonhumans.

10. Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 72-73. Here it should be noted that I use "intrinsic value" to denote Taylor's concept of "inherent worth." In *Respect for Nature*, "intrinsic value" refers to a different idea.

biological interest is morally relevant.¹¹ If this biological interest is hindered so the living thing cannot reach its end, the living thing finds itself harmed in its own right since its biological interest holds value: it is not something whose being affected affects only outside parties positively or negatively (in the way owners may be affected by the destruction of their [nonliving] property).

Aristotle's teleology may at first appear to contradict this concept of value in other living things due to the tricky language of "for the sake of" in *Politics* I.8, which is commonly interpreted as supporting human dominion.¹² Therein, Aristotle states: "After the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and... the other animals exist for the sake of man, the tame for use and the wild, if not at all, at least the greater part of them, for food, and for the provision of clothing and various instruments."¹³ Plants and animals sustain humans. Thus they exist "for the sake of" humans in the sense that they contribute to human survival.¹⁴ This isn't to say that their main ends or goods are to sustain us.¹⁵ Aristotle's teleology is not anthropocentric or dominion-related as commonly claimed; in the passage in the *Politics* Chapter 8 wherein he

11. Ibid, 199.

12. Alain Ducharme, "Aristotle and the Domination of Nature," 2-3. In *Practical Ethics*, Peter Singer claims that Aristotle's *Politics* I.8 (1256b16-22), specifically the vocabulary of other living things existing "for the sake of" humans, justifies human dominion. This has become a common reading of the passage.

13. Aristotle, *Politics*, I.8, 1256b17-20.

14. Ducharme, 5.

15. Aristotle, *On The Soul*, II.3, 415b1-3. Aristotle gives two different definitions of "for the sake of:" that end for which each living thing strives, or that for what or whom the living thing acts. Because he gives the goal of all living things as growing so "it may partake in the eternal and divine," it seems that when he states that plants and animals are "for the sake of" humans in *Politics* I.8, he means the latter definition—that for what or whom the living thing acts.

explains the art of acquisition: "...the amount of property which is needed for a good life is not unlimited," the wasting of resources seems to be discouraged.¹⁶

In *On the Soul*, Aristotle says the following: "...the most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine. That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible."¹⁷ Essentially, the goal or end of living things is to fulfill their biological interests to survive as an individual and as a species. This is found in Taylor's argument, as well, making his account of teleology and its role in nature value extremely similar to Aristotle's. As a matter of fact, Aristotle's "for the sake of" plays quite well into Taylor's biocentric egalitarianism. If Aristotle's account is applied, it becomes apparent that all living things exist as recipients of "for the sake of," in the sense that living things are sustained by other factors in nature.

Taylor maintains that all living things have equal value under biocentric egalitarianism. Therefore, Aristotle's "for the sake of" does not only cover contribution *of* living things to other living things or to the instrumental value of being able to contribute; it also covers contribution *to* living things and the value of benefiting from this contribution. These living things draw sustenance from a variety of sources, and these sources are a reason for their survival. In essence, they are living in part *because* of these sources. Living for another reason besides being "good for" something (indicative of instrumental value) gives it intrinsic value.

All living things can be considered recipients, that is, benefiting from other nature components "for the sake of" them. While this value differs from a living thing's teleological

16. Aristotle, *Politics*, I.8, 1256b30-31.

17. Aristotle, *On The Soul*, II.3, 415a28-415b1.

value (which arises from a living thing's goal-oriented quality rather than its recipient nature), it does denote an egalitarianism of the same variety that Taylor proposes, if all other qualities such as sentience or rationality are not counted as holders of relevant value. However, Aristotle does count rationality as relevant value, and his teleology does not support an egalitarian ethic such as the one Taylor proposes. This point will be further addressed later on.

This recipient value is relevant because it relates directly to the life quality and its significance, which is present in both Aristotle's and Taylor's teleological accounts: Taylor places the highest value on living things, and Aristotle claims that "the living, having soul, is thereby better than the lifeless which has none, and being is better than not being, living than not living."¹⁸ It assigns significant value to living things under "for the sake of," showing that they all have relevant worth and that humans are not the only beneficiaries of "for the sake of," when Aristotle's account is applied. This places all living things closer to humans in value because they have the same benefit: and although Aristotle's works support the general hierarchy (1. Humans 2. Animals 3. Plants), this application of his "for the sake of" concept brings his classification of living things' intrinsic value closer to Taylor's egalitarianism—and even closer once the objections challenging Taylor's egalitarianism are examined.

Value Objection

The first objection to biocentric egalitarianism to consider is that if all things have value, they are all equally valueless.¹⁹ This is a negative reading of the fact that no living thing holds

18. Aristotle, *On The Generation of Animals*, II.1, 731b28-30. Susanne E. Foster makes note of this passage to show Aristotle's bias toward the living in "Aristotle and the Environment," *Environmental Ethics* 24/4 (2002): 413. Additionally, Alain Ducharme shows the fundamental parallels between Aristotle and Taylor's teleological accounts in "Aristotle and the Dominion of Nature," 11n.

more intrinsic value than another in egalitarianism. This has negative implications for egalitarianism—one, of course, being that value should *not* be considered this way, and two being that egalitarianism rids everything of all significant value. (The latter is an implication taken from the negative reading: nothing is valuable in relation to each other.) If it is right that we believe these implications, Taylor, by assigning every living thing equal intrinsic value, has essentially stripped every living thing of *actual* intrinsic value.

This, of course, implies that nothing has value. This would seem to be because, generally, products in greater numbers are perceived to be less valuable than in fewer numbers. This principle seems to be coming into play here. However, it does not apply to life-sustaining qualities such as Taylor’s teleology: for example, one will not devalue his having a life simply based on the fact that everyone around him, also, has lives. (It could be that one could compare the *quality* of his life to another’s and thereupon become depressed. However, this is not the same type of consideration.) While self-ascriptions of value and actual intrinsic value are not interchangeable, perception of value can be an indicator of value²⁰—and life has obvious value under a biocentric ethic. Thus, the quality of being able to be harmed or helped retains its value even in great numbers. It is not diminished by universality (all living things possessing it), or by uniformity (all living things possessing it *equally*).

The cornerstone idea of Taylor’s “Respect for Nature” is that all living things will be respected. Even if biocentric egalitarianism (or any egalitarianism) entails that nothing is valuable by relation, this has no consequence on all the living things who are respected

19. Timothy Clark. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2011), 106.

20. I am not claiming that a living thing must be able to realize its value in order to have value—I merely state that, while perception of value is not the same as value itself, perception of value is not entirely irrelevant to actual value.

adequately under this ethic. By all living things being respected adequately, I mean that no living thing will be unjustly or offhandedly deprived of its right to survival, speciesism and other prejudices will not come into play, and the treatment to all living things will be completely fair and unbiased under the rules Taylor has laid out in *Respect for Nature*. Were his egalitarianism to be realized, the relative worthlessness of each living thing would not hinder it from flourishing. This objection is an empty appeal to hierarchy where none is necessary for all living things to have value and be treated as holders of value.

Death Objection

While Aristotle's ratiocentrism would indicate a hierarchy, he, like Taylor, places special value on the quality of life. Besides which, people may disagree with what an egalitarianism would require. Taylor supports an egalitarianism between the living things of nature (between humans and nonhumans) without advocating the view that nonhumans have rights, and he maintains that it is possible to support one without having to support the other.

By avoiding talk of the moral rights of animals and plants we do not lend aid to those who have no respect for them. On the contrary, by explaining the grounds on which we commit ourselves to the ethics of respect for nature, we give a solid basis for rejecting any human-centered viewpoint that would justify an exploitative attitude toward the Earth's wild creatures. Since we can in this way establish the four duties [Rule of Nonmaleficence, Rule of Noninterference, Rule of Fidelity, Rule of Restitutive Justice] that embody respect for all wild living things without using an extended conception of moral rights, it is best that the original idea of moral rights be accepted in its full, uncompromised meaning as applicable to humans alone.²¹

Here Taylor views moral rights at best as anthropogenic (coming from humans), since ethics were originally human-centered. By not pressing for the moral rights of nonhumans, he avoids applying human labels or values to nature—that which does not come from humans. For valuing nature on the basis of moral rights, which were originally all applied to humans—by humans and for humans—shows that people have not departed very far from human habits, and human habits

21. Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 226.

and assumptions about nature have encouraged the exploitation of nature and the justification of dominion. Having respect for nature on its own terms, rather than on the terms of humans, would allow people to hold a truer respect for nature.

By leaving this point open, Taylor sets up a point on which his and Aristotle's views merge: the varying amount of damage on harming different types of things in nature, which sets up for the following objection: that, under biocentric egalitarianism, killing a plant would be as bad as killing a human, if all things were to have equal value.

In *Respect for Nature*, Taylor discusses vegetarianism and fights what would appear to be the view necessitated by his ethic—that it would be equally as bad to kill an animal as it would to kill a plant, so an omnivorous diet would have as little consequence as an herbivorous diet would. However, because animals are sentient and plants are not, he maintains that killing an animal and causing it pain (or supporting industries in which animal cruelty is commonplace) is worse than killing a plant, a living thing that cannot feel pain, and so if killing sentient animals can at all be avoided, it should.²² This isn't because being hurt is worse than being harmed, or even that being hurt *and* harmed is worse than being harmed (when hurt applies to sentient beings and harmed applies to insentient beings), but because pain is an undesirable state for others and can be avoided. (Killing plants can't be avoided, since humans can't live healthily on an entirely animal-based diet.) Although Taylor appears to support an egalitarian ethic and Aristotle a hierarchy, both would maintain that it is worse to kill a certain type of living being than the other. Taylor would maintain that it is bad to kill a plant (or animal) other than for sustenance²³ (in the need to fulfill our own biological interest), the most basic type of living

22. Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 295.

23. *Ibid*, 183.

thing covered, because to do so would cut off its biological interest to survive. Given the section in *Politics* I.8 regarding the acquisition of goods, "...the amount of property which is needed for a good life is not unlimited," it seems that Aristotle's reasoning would support the wrongness in pointlessly killing a plant, as well.

Taylor does not argue for the rights of nonhumans as such. However, it seems that his ethics entails some rights—negative rights, or rights from harm, at the very least. His endorsement of vegetarianism could appear somewhat hierarchical. However, if it were hierarchical, then the needs of animals would *always* be considered over those of plants, since animals would be considered to have more value. This isn't the case.

This might be cleared up in the following passage: "It [the individual nonhuman organism] possesses whatever capacities it needs for successfully coping with its environment and so preserving its existence throughout the various stages of the normal life cycle of its species."²⁴ Capacities seem to play into biological interest and fall under biological interest. Therefore, because their value is covered by biological interest, which counts for equal value among all living organisms, they have no outstanding value. This stays in line with egalitarianism. It seems that, if forced to choose between killing two types of organisms in a case of conflicting interest, we may look to certain *relevant* qualities outside of biological interest but are essential to a living thing fulfilling its good—for instance, that of sentience, which wants for avoidance of suffering—based on some of these capacities.

Nonetheless, this is still somewhat problematic. A possible solution for his egalitarianism could involve living things having negative rights based on the qualities of different types of

24. Taylor, "Ethics of Respect for Nature," 199.

living things. (He actually does say that nonhumans have “rights” in this sense.²⁵) All living things have biological interests, some have sentience (animals, generally), and some have the ability to reason. Based on this and the rules of biocentric egalitarianism, plants have the right not to be harmed. Animals have the right not to be harmed or hurt. Humans have these same rights, but they also have a negative right corresponding to their ability to reason. This gives them the ability to think ahead and develop long-term goals.²⁶ For simplicity’s sake this will be called “the pursuit of happiness,” happiness being in a sense of having completed nonbasic interests.²⁷ All other living beings who can reason have this right, but for the sake of argument we will assume that this ability is unique to humans. Because humans do have this, they feel a loss without pursuit. They know happiness (in the above sense of accomplishment) and know when it is absent, and they feel their lives suffer without it. Thus, humans have the right not to be harmed, hurt, or deprived of their pursuits of happiness (as long as their rights don’t infringe upon the rights of others²⁸).

25. Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 253.

26. This begins to resemble Gary Varner’s concept of ground projects and categorical desires in “Biocentric Individualism” in *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works*, ed. David Schmidtz and Elizabeth Willot (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 96.

27. Here I borrow Taylor’s terms of basic and nonbasic interests (*Respect for Nature* 273), basic interests being those related to survival and nonbasic interests being all others unrelated to survival.

28. Taylor lists exceptions for this rule (*Respect for Nature*, 281-2) since many of humans’ major (nonbasic) pursuits harm other living things in nature in some way (for example, through the use of paper). If one chooses a life pursuit that harms nature in a minor way but contributes to human culture and sense of community, he is obligated to ensure that he harms as little as possible and to try to make up for the harm by performing some act of restitutive justice, or doing good for nature in a subsequent act. Presumably, this is in regard to humans’ ability to reason and look ahead; they would feel a sense of deprivation from not applying themselves toward long-term goals, given their abilities. This deprivation would be considered a wrong in the same way pain is considered a wrong, so human needs can be considered over those of nonhumans in these

Here, rights would not correspond directly to the value amount. (Otherwise Taylor would have been obligated to argue for the rights of animals and plants.) Rights are based on the differing capacities of living things. Having Right 1 (Biological Interest) and Right 2 (Sentience) would not give a nonhuman animal more value than a plant with Right 1 (Biological Interest). We might; a starving cheetah might have the right to use his speed to eat us.

Conclusion

Taylor's view does seem to enter the territory of a weak egalitarianism, one that admits of certain actions being more wrong than others even when all such actions affect beings of equal intrinsic value. Aristotle makes no argument for egalitarianism among all living things. However, his value of living things over nonliving things is apparent, providing for a similar principle to Taylor's if Taylor is to make this concession toward the varying immorality of harms. Although Taylor argues for egalitarianism in name and Aristotle does not, they both contend that some actions are intrinsically worse than others in consideration of a being's qualities other than that of living. Perhaps Aristotle's view is still not as strict as Taylor's in that it may permit a human's interest to be considered over a plant's even in a minor conflict of interest (such as plucking and pressing a flower). That Taylor only admits of this in certain instances is not relevant to the broader context. Though the accounts may entail slightly different actions as a result from varying levels of consideration *towards* living things, their accounts of nature, regarding the value that living things *contain* in the capacity of being living things and having biological interests, may be regarded as identical or nearly so.

cases, just as animal sentience gives animals greater consideration over plants on the subject of an omnivorous vs. herbivorous diet. Here it is important to note that basic nonhuman interests ordinarily have priority over nonbasic human interests, so this is not a case of species favoritism.

Aristotle's philosophy cannot offer a complete endorsement of biocentric egalitarianism, but it appears that this is also true of Taylor's own view. This allows for Taylor and Aristotle to meet in the middle, with Taylor's concession that it is worse to harm some types of living things than others in certain instances and with Aristotle's basic account of living things as holders of intrinsic value with ends. As a result, Aristotle can support Taylor's basic argument in theory, if not in name.

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