

Relations

BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

11.1

JUNE 2023

*The Importance of Language in the Relationships
between Humans and Non-Humans*

Edited by Francesco Allegri

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Beyond Anthropocentrism?

Yes, but in What Direction?

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7358/rela-2023-01-allf>

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Criticism of anthropocentrism and discussion of alternative models and approaches are becoming widespread. These issues were addressed in a recent conference, entitled *Looks Beyond Anthropocentrism*, held in Florence on 30 and 31 May 2023. In addition to myself, the event, organized by the Italian Institute of Bioethics, was attended by scholars such as Vilma Baricalla, Luisella Battaglia, Hanz Gutierrez, Roberto Marchesini, Marco Massetti, Gaspare Polizzi, Mariagrazia Portera, Letizia Tomasone, who have tackled the subject matter from different points of view: philosophical, theological, ethological, historical, etc.

From an ethical-philosophical point of view the problem discussed is that of the extension of the moral community. Who are the *moral patients*, i.e. the entities that are worthwhile in themselves (also as ends and not only as means) and towards which we have direct moral obligations? The main alternatives for those who intend to move in a non-anthropocentric perspective are four: (1) *rationalism* (or *personalism*), according to which moral community is composed only by rational beings or persons (i.e., beings endowed with mental complexity); (2) *sentio-centrism* or *sentientism*, which includes all sentient beings in the moral community; (3) *bio-centrism*, according to which the status of moral patient is extended to every living organism, animal or vegetal, sentient or non-sentient, as a teleological center of life; (4) *ecocentrism*, for which, not only, or not so much, individual entities are deserving of direct moral protection, but (also) totalities: species, ecosystems, etc. and, beyond them, inanimate entities (Allegri 2019).

However, there is not only the problem of the extension of the moral community. There is also the problem of its internal structure. Is this structure egalitarian or hierarchical? Do the members of the moral community have the same moral rank or are they to be placed on different

levels of consideration? And so we can have, for instance, egalitarian and non-egalitarian forms of sentiocentrism or biocentrism.

Which of the previous options appears in reflective equilibrium with our considered beliefs? I would say that the rationalist-personalist perspective is not convincing as a criterion for inclusion in the moral community, because it is too restrictive (Allegri 2019, 8-9). Among the remaining options, both an egalitarian version of sentiocentrism and an egalitarian version of biocentrism leave more than one element of perplexity. In particular, they have great problems in managing conflicts. If already an egalitarian version of sentiocentrism has highly counterintuitive outcomes (Allegri 2021, 566), egalitarian biocentrism seems to me even more implausible. I find it difficult to understand how a being without states of conscience can have the same moral rank as a being who feels, has desires, intentions, a sense of the past and the future, etc. An excellent version of egalitarian biocentrism can be found in the texts of Paul Taylor, a Kantian deontologist who extends the value in itself and the idea of respect to all living beings, who, in his opinion, possess the same inherent value (Taylor 1986, 46, 155). Of course, as Taylor clearly shows, even an egalitarian biocentrist can have tools to regulate conflicts among living beings, all endowed with the same moral status. For example, a principle of self-defense may justify harm done to other living, even though they enjoy the same moral status as we do. Such a principle allows moral agents to protect themselves against harmful or dangerous organisms, even to the point of killing them. Taylor indicates five principles for resolving conflicts between living individuals, which, as such, are endowed with the same moral status. In addition to (a) self-defense, (b) proportionality, (c) minimum wrong, (d) distributive justice, and (e) restitutive justice (Taylor 1986, 263-307).

If with these five principles Taylor succeeds in avoiding blatant counterintuitive outcomes, it continues to remain difficult for his perspective to be in reflexive equilibrium with our considered beliefs in less usual situations, in thought-experiment cases, but not unreasonable or impossible to be realized. That is, the fact remains that a model such as Taylor's fails to decree plausible responses in evaluating situations in which interests of basic importance are at stake in all parties involved, for example the survival of individuals with very different characteristics. In situations of this kind Taylor resorts to the principle of distributive justice, which "requires that when the interests of the parties are all basic one and there exists a natural source of good that can be used for the benefit of any of the parties, each party must be allotted an equal share" (Taylor 1986, 292). But he admits that "Sometimes [...] the clash between basic human interests and

the equally basic interests of nonhuman cannot be avoided” (*ibid.*, 293). Taylor exemplifies such a case with the hypothetical situation in which, due to severe environmental conditions, humans are forced to use non-human animals as a source of food. And he concedes that

In such circumstances the principle entails that it is morally *permissible* for human to kill wild animals for food. This follows from the equality of worth holding between humans and animals. For if humans refrained from eating animals in those circumstances they would in effect be sacrificing their lives for the sake of animals, and no requirement to do that is imposed by respect for nature. Animals are not of *greater* worth, so there is no obligation to further their interests at the cost of the basic interests of humans. (*ibid.*, 293-294)

So “it is permissible to kill animals when this is necessary for our survival. [...] it is permissible to do this, since we have no duty to sacrifice ourselves to them” (*ibid.*, 295).

But such a principle only partially succeeds in reconciling Taylor’s theory with our reflective intuitions. For if I were in an extreme situation where it is not so much a question of saving *my* life against that of another animal or plant, but in which the alternative (*aut-aut, tertium non datur*) is between saving the life of a sentient being other than me or the life of a plant, Taylor’s principle of distributive justice do not seem to allow me to assert as obligatory the choice that appears not only intuitive, but considered: to save the sentient being. If the moral status of a plant is equal to that of a sentient being, and if the interest involved in that context is of fundamental importance to both (e.g., survival), from a moral point of view I have no reason to prefer (and thus save) the former over the latter. A highly counterintuitive result, that appears to contrast the perspective according to which, in order to be plausible, a theoretical model must be in reflexive equilibrium with its outcomes in concrete examples.

These problems lead us to look in the direction of non-anthropocentric and non-rationalist perspectives which distinguish different levels of membership in the moral community. An adequate perspective might be a non-egalitarian and gradualist version of sentiocentrism, whereby the value of sentient beings rises gradually, moving up the phylogenetic ladder, on the basis of their cognitive, emotional and social complexity. But a possible objection to such a conception is that the more mentally complex individuals, who are at the top of the ladder, have an absolute right of precedence over those who are placed on the lower rungs, i.e. any requirement of the former, even the least relevant, coming from a being placed at the top has priority over any need, even the most relevant, of the latter.

The problem can be overcome by introducing, alongside the characteristics of individuals (their mental complexity), another parameter of choice: the nature of the interests at stake (basic, important, less important etc.). And therefore in the case of conflict, I have to take into account not only the first parameter, but also the second. So if the alternative is between favoring a trivial interest of a more mentally complex being and a basic interest of a less complex being, I will have to favor the latter. And indeed, it could be argued that, not only do I have to take both parameters into account, but I have to assign greater weight to the second (the magnitude of the interests at stake matters more than the “mental complexity” factor), thus making the demands of those not at the top of the ladder prevail even more in the event of conflict. It is only when the interests at stake are on the same level that I am bound to give preference to individuals at the top rung of the ladder.

A gradualist model appears appropriate even if it proves convincing to further extend direct moral consideration, including, for example, all living beings. I have some hesitation in carrying out this further step, because it is doubtful that there can be any value in itself outside of entities possessing states of consciousness, but, even accepting it, one certainly cannot equate an ape and a flower. Gradualist versions of biocentrism can be found in the texts of Attfield and Varner (Attfield 1991, 154; Varner 1998, 95-96).

An interesting third way – perhaps a golden mean – between egalitarian and non-egalitarian sentiocentrism/biocentrism, refers to the principle of equal consideration of interests. The moral community can only have one level of membership, i.e. to attribute equal value to all sentient or living beings, but differentiate the weight of the interests at stake. In other words, individuals have the same moral status, but one thing is the value of individuals, one thing is the value of their lives. Interests must be weighed equally without any difference in rank between individuals, but *when they are equal*. According to this point of view (which for the sentiocentric option can be found in Singer and, albeit in dissimilar terms, also in Regan), in the face of death, the interests of sentient beings can be different. The idea is that a mentally complex entity (a person), such as a typical human, has the most to lose from an early induced death. In addition to future satisfactions, since she has a sense of the future, she is frustrated in her direct preference to survive, and in all future-oriented preferences that require being alive in order to be satisfied.

Is it necessary to go beyond sentiocentrism or biocentrism and welcome the demands of ecocentrists? It is difficult to say. Callicott himself, perhaps the most authoritative voice of this approach, expresses concern

about the problem of conflicts affecting biocentrism (Callicott 1993, 355). But in an ecocentric perspective this problem is further exacerbated, as the holistic dimension of value must also be taken into account. Moreover, the obstacle of attributing value per se outside states of consciousness remains. In any case, differentiations and rights of precedence seem appropriate here too. That is to say, an ecocentric model that would assign such pre-eminence to the holistic element as to crush the value of individuals does not appear convincing. The ecocentric approach in its early stages of development has repeatedly given the impression of moving in this perspective. I am thinking of certain expressions by Leopold or by his most important prosecutor, Callicott. Tom Regan, the great animal rights theorist, was very impressed by Leopold's thesis, according to which something is morally right when it promotes or tends to promote the preservation of the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community and wrong when it does not favor it (Leopold 1949, 217). And he interpreted it in an anti-individualist sense: "The implications of this view include the clear prospect that the individual may be sacrificed for the greater biotic good, in the name of 'the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community'" (Regan [1983] 2004, 361). If, as Leopold asserts, "man is only the member of a biotic team" (Leopold 1949, 209) and has the same moral status as any other member of the team, in the hypothetical situation where we were faced with the choice between destroying a rare wildflower or killing a human being, "if the wildflower, as a 'team member', would contribute more to 'the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community', than the human, then presumably we would not be doing wrong if we killed the human and saved the wildflower" (Regan [1983] 2004, 362). Hence the famous accusation of "environmental fascism" (*ibid.*) addressed by Regan to Leopold's ecocentric theses and his assertion of the incompatibility between this perspective and his animal rights theory. "Environmental fascism and the rights view are like oil and water: they don't mix" (*ibid.*).

Callicott too does not initially express himself in very different terms from Leopold, for example in one of his most famous essays (Callicott 1980). But then he becomes self-critical, admitting that he had "imprudently emphasized the holistic aspects of the land ethic at the expense of its provisions for the moral consideration of individuals" (Callicott 1993, 361). While instead "A secular environmental ethics that is as thoroughly informed by ecology as by evolution" has "a holistic dimension *as well as* an individualistic dimension". That is, it deems worthy of moral consideration "*both* the biotic community as such *and* (not, I emphasize, instead of) its individual members" (*ibid.*, 360). And, in addition to recognizing

the relevance of the individualistic dimension of value, the new Callicott is also willing to differentiate the value per se of entities and the corresponding obligations. Thus, “our obligations to family and friends – and to human rights and human welfare generally – come first; they are not challenged or undermined by an ecocentric environmental ethic” (*ibid.*, 375-376).

Proposed in these terms, even an ecocentric approach, if, in addition to untie the knot of the attribution of intrinsic value outside states of consciousness, it succeeds in resolving the problem of the conflict between individualistic and holistic requests, may be a plausible candidate to replace the now outdated anthropocentrism.

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How to cite this paper: Allegri, Francesco. 2023. “Beyond Anthropocentrism? Yes, but in What Direction?”. *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* 11 (1): 89-94. <https://doi.org/10.7358/rela-2023-01-allf>