

The Relevance of the Anthropocentric-Ecocentric Debate

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Professor Li raises a number of important issues concerning the ecological/environmental ethical debate and its significance for the articulation of a philosophy of environmental and/or ecological education. She has identified the central issue defining the boundaries of current ecophilosophical debate: anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism. I would like to concentrate my remarks on what I understand to be Li's central argument: on the one hand, Li argues for the expansion of the moral community to include all living beings, human as well as nonhuman, and on the other hand, she argues for the rejection of nonanthropocentric, ecocentric attempts to justify such an expansion, thereby founding her own plea for expansion on anthropocentric moral grounds. Implicit in Li's argument is the belief in the expansion of moral community which extends moral consideration beyond intra-human affairs to include the natural world. She is clear in her sentiments for the moral relevancy and importance of taking into serious consideration the natural environment in our ethical ideals and practices.

I agree that inclusion of the natural world in the moral community is necessary for its moral consideration; for what distinguishes, by definition, a "moral" from a "bare" community is the existence of such consideration for all members of the community. What follows from this premise is the proposition that the construction of an environmentally sensitive ethic must be founded upon the establishment of criteria for the extension of moral consideration to nonhuman beings. Anthropocentric theory defines the value of nonhumans instrumentally as being valuable only insofar as they have value to human beings. Ecocentric theory defines the value of nonhumans intrinsically as possessing value independently of human judgment. Li proposes to justify the expansion of moral community to include all living beings on anthropocentric grounds. She maintains that (1) a nonanthropocentric perspective is impossible, (2) that the proposition of intrinsic value leads to a strict egalitarianism that does not offer guidelines for the adjudication of conflict in values between humans and nonhumans, and (3) that it is also impossible to determine the intrinsic values inherent in nature. I will argue (a) that as arguments for the rejection of an ecocentric, intrinsic value theory (1), (2), and (3) are fundamentally flawed and (b) that the expansion of the moral community to include nonhumans in principle cannot be achieved on anthropocentric grounds.

(1) Li maintains that any value possessed by nature is inevitably based upon human perception and judgment. She argues that "the values of natural objects and processes cannot be independent from human moral reasoning." To this effect she quotes J.B. Callicott: "there can be no value apart from an evaluator...all value is as it were in the eye of the beholder. The value that is attributed to the ecosystem, therefore, is humanly dependent or at least dependent upon some variety of morally and aesthetically sensitive consciousness." She concludes that given this contingent

nature of value, any environmentally sensitive ethic must be in principle anthropocentric. In essence, this argument maintains that it is impossible to avoid anthropocentrism since all of our judgments are necessarily *human* judgments.

This argument commits what Warwick Fox refers to as “*the anthropocentric fallacy*,” a version of the *fallacy of equivocation*. A fallacy of this kind conflates the trivial and substantive senses of a concept. In this case, what is conflated is the inescapable and trivial fact that environmental ethics is derived from a human perspective with the substantive content of the ethic. In the trivial sense, all varieties of environmental ethics are equally anthropocentric because they are inescapably conceived by human beings. However, in the substantive sense the wide variety of human conceptions of responsibility pertaining to the environment are extremely divergent, some anthropocentric others ecocentric. To say that intrinsic value theory is anthropocentric because it is inescapably conceived by a human being is equivalent to saying that the advocacy by a white male of affirmative action and equal opportunity for African-American women is sexist and racist because it is advocated by such a male. This is a trivial argument in the same sense that it conflates what is obvious with what is substantive. It is the substance of the argument made by ecophilosophers for an nonanthropocentric, ecocentric ethic that is the issue, not the trivial fact that ecophilosophers are human beings. Appeal to the trivial sense of the argument is insufficient grounds for refuting its substance. It is unfounded to assert that human beings are incapable of adopting an ecocentric perspective simply because they are human.¹

(2) Li offers a second argument in her attempt to refute the possibility of ecocentrism: She argues that the implicit egalitarianism of intrinsic value theory offers no guidelines for the adjudication of value conflicts between humans and nonhumans. If all beings are equal, on what grounds do we adjudicate the inevitable conflict between their interests? The moral egalitarian position of most moral philosophies, including ecophilosophy, maintains that all individuals are entitled to equal respect. It is this egalitarianism that in fact defines a moral community. However, moral equality does not imply that justifiable discriminations cannot be made nor does it imply equal treatment per se (as opposed to being treated as an equal). In this regard Naess articulates two principles for the adjudication of conflict between biological entities: vitalness and nearness. He writes:

My intuition is that the right to live is one and the same for all individuals, whatever the species, but the vital interests of our nearest, nevertheless, have priority. There are rules which manifest two important factors which operate when interests conflict: vitalness and nearness. The greater vital interest has priority over the less vital. And the nearer has priority over the more remote — in space, time, culture, and species... The terms used in these rules are of course vague and ambiguous. But even so, the rules point toward ways of thinking and acting which do not leave us helpless in the many inevitable conflicts between norms.²

Whether these principles are the most compelling is open to debate; their assertion, however, suggests that moral equality does not negate the possibility of articulating principles for justifiable discrimination, and therefore, the grounds for the adjudication of conflict. I would submit, however, that the subjectivism and hence moral relativism implicit in Li's criticism, exemplified by the proposition that “value is in the eye of beholder,” provides a far less adequate foundation for the

adjudication of conflict than the assertion of ecocentric moral equality. Inherent in subjectivism is the kind of egalitarianism that does in fact negate the possibility of adjudication. For example, one may value a tree for itself, another may value it for its instrumental value, and still another may not value it at all. If one takes the position that value is in the eye of the beholder, then each one of these positions is equally valid, and therefore, there is no ground upon which to resolve the potential for conflict implicit between them.

(3) Li also conflates the distinction between possessing intrinsic value and possessing particular kinds of intrinsic value. From an ecocentric perspective, it is invalid to prescribe the kinds of value that another biological entity may or may not possess. However, this invalid attribution is fundamentally different than the assertion of intrinsic value. To assert that all living beings have intrinsic value is distinct from maintaining that a living being possesses certain valuable characteristics, in the sense that the former recognizes the other as requiring equal respect, while the latter attempts to specify the worth of the other. The former is ecocentric, the latter is anthropocentric. Ecophilosophers attempt to make the case for intrinsic value, not the specification of particular intrinsic values.

(4) It can be argued that an expansion of the moral community to include the natural world cannot be achieved on anthropocentric grounds. An anthropocentric position concerning the value of the natural world must by definition be instrumental, since it necessarily entails a rejection of the possibility of nature possessing intrinsic value. From this perspective, nature can only have instrumental value, not intrinsic value. However, moral community by definition is based upon the recognition of the intrinsic value of each of its members. If an individual is deemed not to have intrinsic value, then that individual cannot in principle be a member of the moral community. The individual may possess value, but it is contingent upon its utility to the members of the moral community. Thus, if the expansion of moral community to include nature is based upon the recognition of its intrinsic value, and if anthropocentric theory rejects the proposition of intrinsic value, then the expansion of moral community, and therefore the moral consideration of nature, cannot be achieved anthropocentrically.

One could argue that moral consideration of nature does not have to be based upon the expansion of the moral community, that it could rest solely on instrumental value. For example, one could argue that we should treat the natural environment with care and respect because our own survival is contingent upon its well-being. This statement proposes an anthropocentric, instrumental foundation for the moral consideration of nature. To adopt such a position would be a step in the right direction relative to the current plunder of the earth. However, in the long term I believe it offers a weaker foundation for a ecologically sustainable ethic than an ecocentric approach does. The strongest argument for the establishment of moral consideration is intrinsic value, for it establishes the inviolability of moral consideration rather than resting it on the contingent grounds of instrumental value. In fact, implicit in the notion of instrumental value is the inherent tendency toward the domination of nature.³

In conclusion, I submit that the distinction between anthropocentric and ecocentric value theory, and thus the distinction between environmentalism and ecology, is relevant. They constitute two fundamentally different philosophical perspectives with distinctly different educational and social consequences. There is a profound difference between educating for the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature as opposed to educating for a recognition of nature as morally considerable on instrumental grounds. The anthropocentric and ecocentric debate is at the core of our choice between environmental and ecological education, and therefore constitutes a relevant and important consideration.

1. Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1990), 20-22.

2. Arne Naess, "Equality, Sameness, and Rights," in: *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995), 222.

3. See William Leiss, "The Domination of Nature," in: *Ecology*, ed. Carolyn Merchant (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 58-59.