

BIOCENTRISM, MORAL STANDING AND MORAL SIGNIFICANCE

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INTRODUCTION

One of the four questions which *Philosophica* has asked contributors to address runs as follows: "Can biocentrism be justified without accepting *a priori* that all living beings deserve moral consideration?" Now on one understanding, biocentrism consists precisely in the claim that all living beings are morally considerable; indeed Richard Sylvan has criticized George Sessions and Bill Devall for adhering to biocentrism in this very sense.¹ There again, the theorist who uses 'biocentrism' of his own position, Paul W. Taylor, certainly includes the belief that all living beings have moral standing as an element in that position,² and, unless I mistake him, as an *a priori* belief at that. On the other hand Taylor's biocentrism, as will be seen, has other (less acceptable) implications.

It is as an implication of the first of Taylor's four components of the biocentric outlook on nature that the claim that all living creatures have moral standing comes in. According to this tenet, "humans are thought of as members of the Earth's community of life, holding that membership on the same terms as apply to all the nonhuman members". What these terms are is partly spelt out in the section entitled 'Humans as members of the Earth's community of life' (pp. 207-209); but it is also partly supplied earlier in the article, where at p. 201 the principle of moral consideration is presented. (Certainly the biocentric outlook on nature is supposed to supply the underpinning of the attitude of respect for nature which is being expounded in this earlier passage; but the attitude is expounded by principles which dove-tail so tightly into the components of the belief-system that both principles and components are probably to be taken as elements of the same system.) This principle is presented in two forms. (1) "According to the principle of moral consideration, wild living things are deserving of the concern and consideration of all moral agents simply in virtue of their being members of the Earth's community

of life." (The context makes it clear that all living creatures are included, and not only wild ones.)² "But the principle of moral consideration prescribes that, with respect to each being an entity (should this read "being or entity"?) having its own good, every individual is deserving of consideration."

Thus, to Taylor, the terms on which humans and nonhumans alike are members of the Earth's community of life include every one of them being morally considerable. So, as long as we forget for present purposes about the possibility of life on other planets, the tenet that all living creatures deserve moral consideration is fundamental to Taylor's biocentrism.

There is also reason to conclude that Taylor adopts his belief-system on an *a priori* basis; for he holds that such a system of belief cannot be "proven to be true", nor wholly expressed either in empirically verifiable propositions or in analytic truths; yet it constitutes a "coherent, unified, and rationally acceptable "picture" or "map" of a total world" (p. 205). The components can be expounded, but nothing more can be done to justify them besides exhibiting their mutual coherence and their freedom from unanswerable objections. Granted further that the moral considerability of living creatures is neither an empirical nor an analytic proposition, it can be concluded that it is accepted *a priori*.

One of the questions, therefore, which need to be asked is whether this particular tenet of biocentrism can be justified or defended in any other way, and this question I shall be addressing shortly. But the further issue also arises from the question put by *Philosophica* of whether biocentrism as a whole can be defended at all. And it will be defensible as a whole only if Taylor's belief in biotic egalitarianism³ can itself be upheld, a belief which is implicit in Taylor's denial of the superiority of human beings over members of other species (component 4 of the biocentric outlook, p. 207), and in his defence of this denial (pp. 211-218). The issue, then, of whether all living creatures have like moral significance is the other issue which I shall address.

DEFENCES OF BIOCENTRISM

It is sometimes suggested that practical principles of a biocentric kind could be derived from a much less generous account of moral considerability, combined with an enlightened view of human self-interest⁴; and it might be thought that an alternative defence of biocentrism could be arrived at in this way. But this would be a mistake. For there must be possible cases where a difference to the action of moral agents would be made by whether or not non-human living creatures have moral standing, and thus matter in

their own right. Where no human interests arise, or where they are evenly balanced, the moral considerability of nonhumans, and what I, with Taylor, take to be the related fact of the intrinsic value of their good, constitute reasons for action which would not exist if nonhumans lacked such standing, and were only of instrumental value; and these reasons will often dictate different action (or forbearance from action) from the actions which would otherwise have been right or obligatory. (The moral standing of nonhumans can also, of course, make a difference in cases where human interests are at stake and are not evenly balanced; but the types of cases just cited present a readier test of the proposed defence of biocentrism.) As different actions are indicated if nonhumans have moral standing from those indicated if they lack it, the practical principles of biocentrism cannot be defended in the manner proposed.

Yet the belief that all living beings have moral standing may still be capable of justification or defence. One possible form of defence is an analogical argument from the moral standing of human beings. For it is usually granted that all human beings have moral standing; and it may be argued that, if this is really true of all and not only of some of them, then moral standing attaches equally to all other living creatures. This would be because of the substantial similarities between living creatures in general and human beings, including those human beings who lack the capacities which have often been thought to make humans distinctive, such as rationality, self-consciousness and the capacity for moral agency.

For unless it is to be held that human beings have moral standing just because of their species-membership, it must be allowed that this standing arises because of either characteristics which they have or relations in which they stand. But as some humans stand in no relation to any other person, but would not normally be supposed to lack moral standing for all that, the fact that they deserve moral consideration must be due to their qualities or capacities. Thus it is often allowed that the capacity to experience pleasure and pain is enough to ensure moral standing; and, if this is so, then all sentient nonhumans must have moral standing also.

But some human beings lack this capacity, whether through brain-damage or as a result of having fallen into an irreversible coma. Now admittedly there is room for dispute about whether such humans still have moral standing; yet the strong inclination of most people would be to give an affirmative answer to this question. These people, after all, remain living beings, with all the capacities which are necessary for the maintenance of human life; and they still plausibly have interests of their own, even if, as

may be true of some of them, it would be better for them if their life were to end. But if humans of this kind have moral standing, then whatever other creatures have interests of their own and the capacity of sustain a continuing life would seem to have moral standing also. This would apply not only to creatures capable of conscious experiences and of self-motion, but also to other living creatures in general, with their capacities of growth, ingestion, excretion, reproduction and self-maintenance.

This argument, however, may seem to suggest that the only reason why nonhumans count in morality is their similarity to abnormal or to severely malformed or retarded humans. And it may also seem to degrade both the nonhumans and the humans which fall within its scope; for the nonhumans are presented as comparable with defective humans, as if they had no powers of their own, and the humans are presented as altogether on a par with vegetables. Indeed if there were no more to be said, these implications might easily seem to follow. In fact, however, there is importantly more to be said, and what remains to be said significantly supplements the argument in a way which shows that these apparent implications do not stand. Thus the argument remains a cogent one, though, being analogical, it lacks the coercive force of a demonstration.

The key point which remains to be made is that living creatures each in different ways have the capacity to lead the form of life proper to their own kind. This is why they are not to be considered merely as organisms which fail to be nondefective humans; and this is what makes them curiously alien to ourselves, and at the same time an unending source of fascination and wonder. Now this point could be taken as a source of dissimilarity between humans and the various nonhuman kinds; but actually the capacity to lead a life proper to one's kind is something *common* to humans and other living creatures. Indeed this capacity explains the respect which is accorded to human beings; and its waning helps to explain why there are doubts about the moral standing of the severely brain-damaged and the irreversibly comatose. Yet the capacity of these people to sustain human life indicates that they have moral standing still.

In any case, the capacity to lead a life proper to one's kind is a sufficient condition of having interests and a good of one's own; and it may reasonably be held that it is in virtue of resembling humans in respect of having interests and a good of their own that nonhuman living creatures merit moral consideration. This, then, would be the basic analogical argument in support of the moral standing of all living creatures; the above version of the so-called argument from marginal cases, while remaining cogent, is not after all the central argument, or required to bear

the full weight of the conclusion.

Thus the moral standing of all living creatures is a belief which can be supported by analogical reasoning from a presupposition of most of those who reflect on morality, namely that all human beings have moral standing. But, as with analogical reasoning in general, the conclusion will be no stronger than the analogy, and its reliability may be questioned by those who stress the relevant disanalogies between humans and (some or all) non-human living beings, except where the dissimilarities can be shown to be irrelevant. So far, then, the proposed defence amounts to there being important similarities between creatures of admitted moral standing (human beings) and all other living beings; but, as similarities and dissimilarities are infinite, there will be no point at which the assessment of the argument could be complete, and it would always remain possible that dissimilarities might be found which would outweigh the similarities and thus overthrow the cogency of the conclusion.

Nevertheless I want now to show that the moral standing of all living creatures may be a necessary truth. This is compatible with the conclusion just arrived at that, as far as analogical arguments are concerned, the moral standing of all living creatures could never be conclusively established. Even if this belief could not be established in any way at all, its logical status could still be one of necessity. I shall now indicate why this might be so.

The conclusion that all living beings have moral standing can be validly deduced from two other propositions, the propositions (A) that all living beings have a good of their own and (B) that whatever has a good of its own has moral standing. Now (A) is plausibly true; indeed the case for its being true is well set out in Taylor's essay and his replies to criticisms.⁵ Further, it is difficult to see how anything could be a living being and fail to have a good of its own; for any living being would have the capacities required for sustaining the life of its own kind, and the possibility of their development or realization would show it to have a good of its own. Artefacts, on the other hand, only at most have a derivative good, i.e. the performance of the function for which they were contrived. The problem certainly arises about living beings which are, if regarded in one way, human artefacts, having been bred for various purposes. Yet the breeding can only operate as far as inheritable potentials allow; and anything with inheritable potentials for growth and self-maintenance must have a good of its own for that very reason. Proposition (A), then, seems to be a necessary truth.

The case for proposition (B) has been well presented by Kenneth

Goodpaster (6). Anything which can be benefited or harmed must be regarded as having moral standing, granted the centrality of beneficence within morality; and everything with a good of its own can be benefited or harmed. I do not wish to add directly to this case here, but would rather point out that the same reasoning applies to any possible world. There might be thought to be a problem about worlds containing no moral agents, as harm might be thought to be there impossible, even to creatures with a good of their own; but in fact they could still be harmed by themselves, or by fellow-members of their species, even if none of them were moral agents. Thus if (B) is true at all, it is necessarily true. Some people would probably question whether it can be known to be true; but in any case its necessity is as defensible as its truth.

Thus the moral standing of all living beings is validly deducible from two propositions which are, plausibly, both necessarily true. This clearly amounts to a strong justification of that belief itself. For with regard to this argument, no disanalogies between human and nonliving beings are relevant, and the conclusion is just as reliable as the premises are. I should not claim that the argument establishes its conclusion, as I cannot demonstrate the truth of proposition (B), or therefore its necessary truth either; yet the argument does give good grounds for the conclusion to be adopted.

It may, of course, be suggested that this argument adds little, as it amounts to reasoning from a *a priori* premises to a conclusion which otherwise has to be accepted (or rejected) *a priori*. Indeed if '*a priori*', as applied to propositions, is taken to mean 'necessary', then this is true, but it would also be misleading, as necessary premises are premises of the strongest possible kind, and no source of complaint. If, however, '*a priori*' is taken to mean 'without logical support other than self-evidence', then the suggestion is false; for proposition (A) is plausibly analytic and grounded in concepts, and proposition (B) can be defended by a combination of Goodpaster's defence and the supplementary points given above. Someone who had not previously found the belief that all living beings have moral standing credible might come to adopt it through being persuaded of the separate merits of these two propositions. Thus this particular component of biocentrism can be justified in a manner which is not, in this second sense, a *priori*, and gains in credibility accordingly.

CAN BIOCENTRISM BE JUSTIFIED ?

On Taylor's account, however, biocentrism includes biotic egalitarianism, the claim that the realization of the good of any living creature is of like intrinsic value with the realization of that of any other. For when Taylor argues against belief in the superiority of humans over other living creatures, he is not only denying that all humans should be accorded priority over all non-humans, but is also denying that the realization of the good of any human should ever, as such, be regarded as intrinsically more valuable than the realization of that of any nonhuman, and indeed that the realization of the good of any type of living creature should ever be regarded as intrinsically more valuable than the realization of that of any living creature of a different type. Now the first of these denials might easily be accepted; as I have pointed out elsewhere⁷ "Donald VanDeVeer is surely right to deny that we should save the life of an infant human with Tay-Sachs disease by means of a kidney transplant from a healthy chimpanzee of greater capacities"⁸, (e.g. of greater skills and intelligence). But the main denial is harder to accept. Taylor argues for it on the count that there is no rational basis for recognizing "greater inherent worth" in humans than in nonhumans as such; but even if this argument were successful it might only show that the realization of the good of some (but not all) nonhumans is at least as valuable as the realization of that of some (but not all) humans, and not that all are of like worth or value.

When, however, Louis G. Lombardi argued that types of creature with a wider range of capacities are of greater inherent worth than types with a narrower range⁹, Taylor accepted the coherence of the suggestion that one creature might have greater inherent worth than another, but claimed that Lombardi had not shown that there are any actual such differences of inherent worth. Creatures have inherent worth, he retorts, not because of their capacities taken by themselves, but because their capacities are "interrelated functionally so that the organism as a whole can be said to have a good of its own which it is seeking to realize... Insofar as all living things are ascribed some inherent worth, it is the simple truth that each one has a good of its own which counts as the sufficient ground for such worth. This is what their having intrinsic worth means ...".¹⁰

Now this passage is an elaboration of Taylor's account of inherent worth in his original paper.¹¹ But without examining the earlier account and its relation to the elaboration, it can easily be seen that if the elaboration is accepted, and what is there said is what it means to have intrinsic worth, then nothing which

has intrinsic (or inherent) worth could conceivably have greater intrinsic (or inherent) worth than anything else. For the various different organisms which have a good of their own will each have intrinsic (or inherent) worth, and will have it equally; and nothing could make them have it more or less. But, this being so, the discovery that everything which is morally considerable, and the realization of the good of which is of intrinsic value, is (in Taylor's sense of the terms) of equal intrinsic (or inherent) worth does not begin to answer the question whether the good of some things counts in morality more than the good of others. It remains an open possibility that the moral significance of organisms varies, even though they are alike both in moral considerability and in intrinsic (or inherent) worth.

The moral so far is that the question of degrees of moral significance can best be discussed without reference to the all-or-nothing notion of inherent worth in Taylor's sense. The issue, to use terms which Taylor could accept, becomes that of whether the realization of the good of any one creature is of equal intrinsic value to that of the realization of the good of any other creature; and it certainly makes sense, as Taylor would agree, for there to be degrees of intrinsic value.

Now as soon as the thesis of biotic egalitarianism is examined, it turns out to have unacceptable implications. Thus it implies that, when water is scarce, and the small quantity available can be given either to a human or to a plant, and other considerations are equal, there is no stronger obligation to give it to one rather than to give it to the other, and it is thus indifferent to which of the two recipients the water is given. But any proposed ethical principle which implies this must be abandoned, on the count of having sundered its links with any system recognizable as an operative and defensible morality. It is no good for Taylor to introduce at this point his belief in human rights, and claim that the human recipient's right against the human agent distributing the water gives her priority; for he also holds that the obligations to nonhuman living creatures are just as strong as the obligations which correspond to human rights, and thus that human rights make a decisive difference (if anywhere) only in dealings between humans which have no effect on other living creatures.

There again, biotic egalitarianism implies that, other things being equal, wherever a greater number of creatures could occupy a microhabitat currently occupied by a lesser number, and the greater number could not exist or continue to exist elsewhere, it would be better for the greater number to move in, and therefore for any moral agent who could bring this about to proceed to do so, even at the cost of the loss of the lives of the lesser

number, and even if the lesser number were humans or other characteristically self-conscious creatures, and the greater number were not. For if the realization of the good of each creature is of equal intrinsic value, (i.e. each life is of equal moral significance), then the realization of the good of more must take priority over the realization of the good of less; and accordingly there would, if other things are equal, be an overriding obligation on any moral agent able to control which creatures occupy the microhabitat to introduce to it the greater number of creatures, even if this resulted in the death of the lesser number.

Worse still, it is unclear whether, in most cases, a human who kills another does not act just as this overriding obligation would direct. For though the death of a human may involve the deaths of the numerous organisms to which each human plays unwitting host, it also facilitates the lives of numerous other organisms which are agents of decomposition and decay; and if the latter would outnumber the former, and other things are equal, there would be an overriding obligation to bring all this about. Once again, a moral theory with such counterintuitive implications should be rejected.

I should not wish, however, to be taken to be supporting the position of Lombardi, who seems to hold that their greater range of capacities gives humans *as humans* a greater moral significance than nonhumans. For some nonhumans, like the chimpanzee of VanDeVeer's example, have capacities which compare favourably with those of some humans; and, even if there are utilitarian reasons for treating those humans which lack the characteristic capacities of humans like other humans, there are also strong moral reasons for according like consideration to intelligent and self-conscious nonhumans, where their interests are at stake.

Nevertheless, I do consider Lombardi to have the right approach when he attaches different degrees of intrinsic value to the realization of different capacities. (This approach need not involve discrimination between humans of, say, different degrees of intelligence, as it could be that there are thresholds below which differences of capacity are of no significance.) Lombardi is surely fundamentally right to accord significance to the capacities for consciousness and sentience. Thus, other things being equal, where the small quantity of water which is available can be given either to a creature which can undergo frustration and the pangs of thirst or to one which cannot, the former should be preferred; and where it can be given either to a self-conscious creature, able to anticipate future frustration and pangs as well as to undergo them in the present, or to one which can experience but not anticipate them, then preference should be given to the one

with foresight. Like Lombardi, I should also contend that even capacities which do not involve consciousness or self-consciousness can also make a crucial difference.

It will not, however, be simply the possession of *extra* capacities (or of extra capacities of a different type) which entitles the possessor to priority, as Lombardi seems to suggest; for the number of capacities possessed is relative to the number of descriptions which we may care to use, and, there again, many capacities plausibly add nothing of moral significance (e.g. the capacity for inertia). Nor should priority go to just any member of a species the characteristic capacities of which are more notable; for the individual concerned may lack the characteristic capacities, or, without being lacking, the capacities may be entirely irrelevant to the treatment which the individual stands to receive on this occasion. (A human's capacity for theoretical reasoning does not make the pain of an experimental pin-prick worse than it would be for a guinea-pig lacking this capacity.)

This is not the place to develop a positive account of the relative intrinsic value of the realization of different capacities, or of the relative significance of different creatures; this is in any case something which I have attempted to do elsewhere.¹² But if Taylor's biotic egalitarianism is unacceptable, and Lombardi is on the right lines in recognizing different intrinsic value in the realization of different capacities, then there is an important moral to draw. For Taylor denies that there is any point of view from which any capacities are superior to any others, which is not already the point of view of one creature or other. Human capacities will be important from the point of view of humans, but so will flight be from that of birds and photosynthesis from that of trees; and, beyond this, nothing supposedly can be said about the value of the realization of capacities as such. But, since the needs of different creatures do not all count alike, and the possession of capacities such as self-consciousness does sometimes endow the possessor with greater moral significance, there must be a point of view beyond those of the several creatures each striving to attain its own good. I hesitate to call this point of view an 'interpersonal' one, since it takes into account intrinsic goods which may befall living nonpersons as well as living persons; but perhaps this point of view may, without too much distortion, be called an 'intersubjective' one. When Taylor allows that if some state of a creature has intrinsic value there is a reason for any moral agent to respect or promote it, and contends that the intrinsic value of the realization of the good of each organism is equal, he seems himself to be adopting this point of view. What I am adding is the claim that, where there are

intersubjective reasons for action, some can be intrinsically stronger than others, and that, where the good of different creatures is in question, all operative and defensible moral systems presuppose that the realization of certain capacities of itself supplies reasons which take a high priority relative to other capacities.

My other conclusion concerns the question posed by *Philosophica*. For, as biocentrism includes belief in biotic egalitarianism, the justifiability of this belief is a necessary condition of the justification of biocentrism. Since, as has been seen, biotic egalitarianism cannot be justified at all, the answer to any question beginning "Can biocentrism be justified...?" must unequivocally be "No".¹³

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NOTES

1. Richard Sylvan, "A Critique of Deep Ecology (Part 1)", *Radical Philosophy* 40 (1985), pp. 2-12, p. 8.
2. Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature", *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981), pp. 197-218, esp. 206 f. See also the title of his paper "In Defense of Biocentrism", *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983), pp. 237-243.
3. Taylor uses this phrase of his own position in note 9 of "Are Humans Superior to Animals and Plants?" *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984), pp. 149-160, p. 156.
4. Thus e.g. Gene Spitzer, "Justifying a Respect for Nature", *Environmental Ethics* 4 (1982), pp. 255-260.
5. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature", pp. 207, 210 f.; "In Defense of Biocentrism", pp. 237 ff.
6. Kenneth E. Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable", *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978), pp. 308-325, and, more specifically "On Stopping at Everything: A Reply to W.M. Hunt", *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980), pp. 281-284.
7. Robin Attfield, *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell and New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, p. 179.
8. Donald VanDeVeer, "Interspecific Justice", *Inquiry* 22 (1979), pp. 55-79, p. 65 and p. 77, note 15.
9. Louis G. Lombardi, "Inherent Worth, Respect and Rights", *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983), pp. 257-270, esp. pp. 263 f.
10. Taylor, "Are Humans Superior to Animals and Plants?" pp.154 f.

11. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature", p. 201.
12. Attfield. *op.cit.*, pp. 168-184 (i.e. Chapter 9: "Inter-species Morality: Principles and Priorities").
13. I am grateful to Geoffrey Hunt for comments and suggestions on this paper from a very different philosophical point of view.