

Brian M. O'Leary, 2004/22, HPA17009, Ass 1

90%

This is an excellent piece of work that presents
remarks that are of publishable quality.
The texts discussed are very well-researched
and arguments are presented clearly
throughout and is a way that displays
a perceptive understanding of the
wider philosophical dimensions of the
topic. There's strong evidence of in-depth
research, with no irrelevances. Overall, you
have provided a sophisticated analysis
of issues with individuality, indicating an
understanding of the subtleties of the topics.

There are few weaknesses - see body of
text for minor annotations.

This has been awarded an outstanding
mark, but such marks are exceptional
so should not be expected for the second
assignment.

A well argued, well structured piece of
work, indeed.

Assignment 1

Brian M. O'Leary, Student No. 2004122

Annotated Bibliography

1. Barnabas Dickson, 'The Ethicist Conception of Environmental Problems' *Environmental Values*, 9 (2000)127-152
(available online from UWTSD Library)

Dickson challenges 'the ethicist conception of environmental problems'. Asserting that much environmental philosophical thinking revolves around human obligation to the natural environment and whether that derives from obligation to humans, he finds that the causes of environmental problems, and their potential solutions, are typically located in the theoretical framework of moral obligations, which underpins two important assumptions. First, that the general attitudes of individuals are a major factor in the causation of environmental problems and, secondly, that changing the ethical orientation of individuals, towards the environment, will achieve substantial resolution of those problems. These assumptions are identified as ethicist in character, with one or both said to be shared by a wide range of academics and others engaged in environmental philosophy. Dickson believes that these assumptions underpin two of the central debates in this field - the prolonged disputation about whether a new ethic is needed to address the environmental crisis and a second, more recent discussion about whether environmental philosophy is contributing to 'the solution of ecological problems'. In his opinion, the debates have produced empirical claims about the causes and solutions of environmental problems that 'pay insufficient attention to the socio-economic context', and which pose questions concerning the value of environmental philosophy itself. Constructing ethical theories from everyday realities while ignoring that context is problematic, and he questions the rationale of the argument that philosophers can contribute to the 'requisite change of attitudes.'

An extensive analysis of the contentions of some of renowned philosophers follows, ranging from the initial quest for a new ethic by Leopold and White to the refutations by Passmore and Attfield, who - for different reasons - suggest that a suitable ethic already exists; and to the later work of Callicott, Gunn, and Hargrove, who, although differing, too, in their emphases, share the assumption that persuading people to adopt 'a more ethical orientation towards the natural environment' will be an important part of resolving environmental problems. Dickson explores the nature of the ethicist claims, investigating, for example, how legitimating attitudes affect the environment, whether it is only influential persons whose attitudes are significant, and querying the imprecise use of the term 'important' in the comparison of the ideas with more 'material' factors.

Dickson stresses that there is a considerable distance between (most) individuals in modern societies and the environmental resources that they consume, a gap that is mediated via producers and suppliers of goods such as food, fuel, and clothing. Notwithstanding that mediation is a barrier between individuals and their attitudes to the environment, their 'consumptive actions' contribute to environmental harm, however unintentional: 'our ordinary sense of responsibility fails to encompass the full

significance of our acts and omissions'. He explores the gap between consumptive acts and environmental consequences, pinpointing five features - production methods, mass marketing, multi-sourced materials, and ignorance of the impact of modern manufacturing processes. Those five may not be present in all cases of actions contributing to environmental harm but, usually, several are implicated. Dickson judges that, because of the mediating relationship between actions and consequences, legitimated attitudes (beliefs which derive from past and/or present influences) play little part in causing those actions, thus casting doubt on the first ethicists' claim that general attitudes to the environment are a major casual factor in environmental harms.

Addressing the second claim, that problems can be solved if large numbers of people are persuaded to adopt environmental values, he offers similar reasoning: due to the mediated relationship, between consumer and the goods or services consumed, insufficient numbers would change their actions. He questions whether resolution could be obtained by persuading 'key environmental agents' (planners, engineers *et al*) to adopt new values, when overriding economic pressures may defeat those values. In liberal democracies, enforced, regulatory frameworks may appear to offer a greater prospect of resolving environmental problems. Dickson, though, thinks that the potential threat to profitability of private enterprise, and any accompanying risk of unemployment, are empirical barriers to persuading electorates to support state-sponsored environmental intervention. Only a more detailed examination would reveal whether opportunities 'to profit from environmental protection' would enable those barriers to be surmounted. If, he says, ethicists are to defend their claims, they need to engage with empirical questions about the nature of societies, and the pressures that militate against environmental solutions, including the 'underlying dynamics of the socio-economic systems' that produce those pressures.

Dickson concludes that, although environmental ethics may be of some value, 'the solution of environmental problems may not rest on ethical change'.

II.

Twenty-one years after this article was published, readers may feel the arguments were prescient because ethicists' concerns about harm to the environment do not appear to have occasioned major change in public attitudes when measured by consumptive actions. While there may now be greater public awareness of environmental problems, particularly in more developed nations, Dickson's central tenet, that the mediated relationship between consumer and resources reduces or prevents individual acceptance of responsibility for environmental harm, a result of prevailing socio-economic circumstances, purportedly remains valid.¹ The increase in public awareness has been largely driven by activists' campaigns (individual and organizational, local, national and international) and, particularly in the last decade, by a combination of mounting scientific evidence of climate change and of weather-related events and processes that

¹ Dickson's claim is strongly contested by Robin Attfield, who argues that 'Even indirect consequences remain consequences, and when they are foreseeable...we may even be morally responsible for them'.

He quotes Parfitt, who proposes that small or even imperceptible actions may have jointly, serious, foreseeable outcomes, with shared responsibility for all concerned. Attfield, though, questions whether mediated relations between action and consequences affects responsibility itself '...rather than perceptions of responsibility'. R. Attfield, *Environmental Ethics: An Overview for the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd edition (Cambridge; Polity Press, 2014) pp. 80-83.

result from global warming. Other evidence, of pollution, soil erosion, deforestation, deteriorated air quality and contaminated water, as well as major declines in wildlife (the Sixth Extinction) is penetrating consciousness, especially now that documentaries are beginning to provide a more accurate picture of 'the natural world'.² Nevertheless, judged by consumptive actions, greater awareness has not produced a *major* change in public attitudes to the environment. Recycling, less use of plastic bags, increases in vegetarianism and veganism, expansion of organic farming, experiments in rewilding, conservation efforts, and the development of wind and solar power are outweighed, in terms of environmental harms, by the seemingly insatiable growth in consumption of air and car travel, meat and dairy produce, fashionable clothing, and digital goods such as computers and 'phones'.³

Dickson's conclusion that environmental philosophy has failed to achieve significant change in attitudes to the environment, that the solution to those problems may not depend upon an ethical shift, has been challenged.⁴ Whether that criticism is upheld may depend upon the reader's views of Attfield's consequentialist position and his own claim to have fully considered 'systematic and structural factors'.⁵ However, Dickson's arguments are weakened by significant omissions - he neither examines the public role of the philosopher - how ethicist reasoning is communicated to consumptive agents - nor does he define key terms.⁶ Is it the task of philosophers to seek change in attitudes? Or is it to consider, reflect and offer clarity of thinking?⁷ How are such reflections conveyed beyond academia? There is no doubt that ethical thinking occurs in the same socio-economic contexts as consumer activity, but the interstice between refined, rational, moral reflection and consumptive acts cannot easily be bridged by philosophers themselves.

² The term 'natural world' is used here solely as convenient shorthand. The precise meaning and interpretation require a separate discussion.

³ The advent of the coronavirus pandemic has obviously had an impact on current consumption, but the underlying trend does not appear to have changed. The disposal of Covid safety equipment has created a large-scale environmental problem, with considerable quantities of new plastic waste being added to the enormous volumes already accumulating in landfill and oceans. However, a report by Surfers Against Sewage, on litter collected from beaches in a recent 'clean-up' by volunteers, found that some 65% of the branded items originated from twelve companies and Covid safety equipment formed only 2.5% of the total: 'Coco-Cola most common littered brand on UK beaches says study', Helena Horton, *The Guardian*, 11 August 2021.

⁴ Attfield disputes whether any philosopher (except, perhaps, Callicott) has suggested that '...environmentally benign attitudes are a sufficient condition of realizing solutions...', albeit that they may be a necessary condition. In his view, Dickson has failed to demonstrate that environmental ethics has made no difference to environmental solutions. Attfield, *Environmental Ethics*, pp.83-86.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.85, n.50.

⁶ Natural environment, environment, nature, ecological problems, environmental problems are used interchangeably, without definition. Benson emphasizes that environment is a relative term, and environmental ethics is a concept open to interpretation: J. Benson, 'Environments and Environmental Ethics' in: John Benson, *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction with Readings* (London; Routledge, 2000) pp. 9-29.

⁷ "...philosophy is the attempt to make sense of things, to achieve understanding and perspective, in relation to those many areas of life and thought where doubt, difficulty, obscurity and ignorance prevail - which is to say: on the frontiers of all our endeavours". A.C. Grayling, *The History of Philosophy* (London: Viking, 2019) p.xix.

Market forces, in liberal democracies and one-party states, have acted as a supremely powerful counterweight against modest political attempts to restrain consumptive actions in the interests of the environment. State-led action to resolve environmental problems seems only to occur when resolution becomes imperative.⁸ Dickson suggests that ethicists must 'engage more closely' with the empirical questions posed by the complexity and dynamics of socio-economic systems. However, knowledge - of the cause of a problem, and the consequences of inaction - is the crucial factor and it is debatable whether changes in ethical orientation occur among political leaders and other influential figures without preceding, empirical, paradigm shifts recognized by the general population, even if not always fully accepted.⁹ Nevertheless, despite his reservations, Dickson's article encourages further exploration of how environmental ethics may inform quotidian realities - an increasingly urgent task. One option, arising from the cumulative effects upon the environment of vast numbers of relatively insignificant, individual consumptive actions (inconsequentialism) may be the investigation of the importance of virtue ethics in offering a potential transformation of public attitudes.¹⁰

1332 words

⁸ For example, public health interventions in 19th and 20th century Britain to tackle problems such as sewage disposal, water supplies, and air quality.

⁹ An exception may arise when a religious movement captures belief systems, as happened with the Christian religion during the later period of the (Western) Roman empire, in the 4th- 6th centuries CE.

¹⁰ Sandler has provided a sympathetic, theoretical analysis: R. Sandler, 'Ethical Theory and the Problem of Inconsequentialism: Why Environmental Ethicists Should be Virtue-Oriented Ethicists', *Journal of Agriculture & Environmental Ethics* 23 (2010) 167-183.

2. Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self*
(Abingdon; Routledge Classics 2021; first published 1991)
(recently published in paperback version).

I.

In her revised introduction to this classic text, Mathews states that the work is first and foremost a metaphysical attempt to explain the world in which we live, which provides an 'ultimate framework for ethics'. She draws heavily upon the work of Baruch Spinoza - specifically, his treatise, *Ethics* (1677) which argues that reality is a single substance, a total unity: the things around us - people, trees, buildings, stars, landscapes, animals - are not separate entities but modes of the underlying unity. Mathews posits that modern, Western civilization is based upon the materialism of classical, 17th century Newtonian science, with its key concepts of atomism and mechanism that have produced a dysfunctional individualism in which human beings stand apart from the natural environment, regarding it as a resource at their disposal. Her quest is to seek an alternative, holistic explanation in cosmological physics, in geometrodynamics, an extension of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity.¹¹ Mathews finds explication in the concept of 'a self-realizing system', that is, the universe creating and maintaining its own structure through time, in which local environments are patterns within the larger geometrodynamical field. The system is driven by Spinoza's *conatus*, or conativity, whence '...everything endeavours to persist in its own being'.¹² Spinoza attributes *conatus* to all 'things', Mathews only to self-realizing systems or selves. Thus her explanation implies phenomenology as much as physics, that the driving force or effort has 'an inner dimension of experience'; that entails a panpsychist approach because psychics alone cannot explain 'existential logic'.¹³ However, we should look beyond mathematics to an 'epistemology of communicative engagement with our selves and Self' (i.e. the universe of which we are part) and Mathews discovers possible examples in traditional, basically forager societies that 'join forces' with the land in a 'blend of awareness and deep engagement'.

The book has four chapters. The first examines how Western thought has been dominated, since classical times, by the concept of atomism, in which the world consists of 'discrete individual substances'; individual, independent objects, connected by 'a web of causal ties'. Described as 'substance pluralism' by Mathews, the concept is culturally contingent and a metaphysical archetype of the world's basic structure. An

¹¹ 'In theoretical physics, geometrodynamics is an attempt to describe spacetime and associated phenomena completely in terms of geometry.' In simple terms, it is seen as a synonym for general relativity. *Wikipedia* (consulted 22.07.2021).

¹² According to Curley, *conatus* is often left untranslated in secondary literature since any translation is potentially contentious. Endeavour (effort, exertion, struggle, attempt) is but one classical meaning, although he prefers 'striving' on stylistic grounds. E. Curley, (ed. & trsl.) *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. 1 (New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 1985) p.657.

¹³ Mathews notes that 'panpsychism' is 'the term traditionally adopted in the history of ideas to denote metaphysical outlooks that attribute mind or mind-likeness as a fundamental property to all matter'. (p.xiv). However, in the period between the first appearance of her book and its reprinting, she has elaborated the concept to embrace not only living systems but the universe at large - in her words, 'living cosmos panpsychism'. (pp.xii-xx).

This is very helpful

opposing archetype represents the world as a single universal substance - 'substance monism'. Her objective is to show how substance pluralism was validated by Newtonian science. She distinguishes between the concrete world of cosmology and the multi-layered domain of metaphysics, which ranges over actual, abstract, possible and even spiritual realms, and notes that, until recently, cosmologies have been regarded as outmoded and beyond verification but are now undergoing a scientific renaissance. However, while relativity and quantum science are disproving atomism, the concept remains embedded culturally. Mathews focuses on how the work of Kepler, Galileo, and Descartes influenced Newton's thinking which, in turn was used to legitimize 'a new, emerging, socio-economic order'. The ideological consequence was the individuation of human beings, with self-interest becoming 'the driving force of social life' and 'Nature' a resource to be conquered and exploited, in a universe regarded as inert, insensate, devoid of meaning and value. Her hope is that science will deliver a new cosmology, superseding Newtonian physics, in which the universe is alive, sentient and evolving.

Chapter 2 examines the prospect of achieving 'cosmological rehabilitation' through a scientifically credible shift to an alternative metaphysical archetype, substance monism. Quantum mechanics, with its principles of non-locality and intrinsic dynamism, is underpinning a 'paradigm shift' in physics - that matter must be understood in terms of relationships, which suggest a holistic, indivisible reality. The theory explaining a 'new monistic worldview' is geometrodynamics. Although Mathews admits that the theory has not been experimentally successful to date, she is convinced that this vision of a conceptual blueprint for 'an ultimate physical theory' provides a metaphysical archetype of substance monism.

The third chapter discusses how our apparent individuality interlocks with substance monism: 'are individuals really real?' The new science suggests that substance is 'a fluid continuum' that is indivisible. Her complex exposition of systems theories and the self-regulation of living organisms produces the concept of 'the self-realizing being... which actively determines and preserves its own perimeters'. While the self-realizing being is to be distinguished from inanimate material, it functions as 'an organism-in-its-environment', an environment that is part of a self-realizing system, of a greater whole - 'intrinsic interconnectedness'. A critique of Spinoza's version of the concept of *conatus* identifies his failure to develop a 'dynamic theory of substance' and Mathews proposes, instead, that:

the universal substance is a self, a being endowed with *conatus*, possessed of an impulse for self-preservation and self-realization

In the final chapter, Mathews proposes a normative stance towards 'Nature' that is essentially ecocentric. She detects three levels of value; the intrinsic value attaching to the cosmos; the value embodied in individual selves or self-maintaining systems; and, deriving from the second, a third, relative framework of value that varies from viewpoint to viewpoint across 'an indirect, ecological interdependency'. Mathews finds support for her conceptualization in the Deep Ecology of Naess, and in the Gaia theory of Lovelock, concluding that 'the global biosphere to a certain extent qualifies as a self'. To be viable, human culture needs to acknowledge that it is an instrument of 'Nature' - that humans are interconnected with the global biosphere. Her overall position is summarized in the statement that 'the right cosmology will dispose us towards a benign pattern of interaction with the environment'. By adopting a bio- or

ecocentric ethic, in accepting our holistic relation with the cosmos, we may obtain insight into the meaning of life.

II.

Seen as a profound attempt to reconcile philosophy and modern science, the book is a demanding, often perplexing challenge to anyone lacking formal education in the specialist fields of Relativity theory and quantum physics.¹⁴ Nevertheless, leaving aside the debates about the nature of atoms and subatomic particles, space-time, and quantum indeterminacy, there are familiar questions concerning our universe and our place within it - questions seemingly first raised in Ionia over two thousand years ago, although Mathews does not dwell upon that link. The main inspiration of her thinking is not the Infinite of Anaximander, nor the One of Xenophanes and Parmenides, but the single substance, God, or Nature, of Spinoza, and she relies heavily on his concept of *conatus*, even though she restricts it to selves with 'an inner dimension of experience'.¹⁵

well said. Is Mathews successful in the enterprise to reconcile science and philosophy? The short answer is no. She moves beyond scientific knowledge into the realms of speculation, constructing a psychodynamic metaphysics arising from increasing anxiety about the treatment of the planet and its life forms, by humans, in the industrial and post-industrial societies that have predominated during the last three centuries. While she is right to challenge the ethics that have permitted, even encouraged, the plundering of the planet's resources - animal, vegetable, mineral - she does not explain how we may reconstruct 'the blend of awareness and deep engagement' with our environments, local and universal, that she attributes to traditional forager societies. Those ways of life, evolving over millennia, have been destroyed by modern technology and consumptive actions, and cannot be recreated at societal level. Mathew's central message - that we are simply a mode of the Self that is the universe - may appeal to those desperate to halt the downward slide into ecological disaster but offers no practical solution and would not be comprehensible to most (although, quantum mechanics aside, the philosophy would be familiar to many ancient *phusikoi*.) She has developed the Self-realization of Arne Naess, his 'fundamental norm', but seems to have overlooked his conviction that 'Deep Ecology' is not a philosophy in the proper, academic sense, but a

¹⁴ Lacking that specialist knowledge, I find that much of Mathews' explanation of modern science must be accepted at face value.

¹⁵ From the evidence in fragments, Schofield infers that Anaximander saw the world as '...a systematic unity sustained by dynamic transformations...': Malcolm Schofield, 'The Ionians' in: C.C.C.W. Taylor (ed.) *From the Beginning to Plato: Routledge History of Philosophy* Vol. 1 (Routledge; London, 2003: first published 1997) pp.47-87 (57). Schofield is less certain about the link between the monotheism of Xenophanes and cosmology, which seems to have been a construct of later writers, *ibid.*, pp.72-74. Hussey has no doubt that Parmenides (a pupil of Xenophanes) was a monist for whom reality was 'undivided, coherent, one': Edward Hussey, 'Pythagoreans and Eleatics' in: Taylor, *op.cit.*, pp.130-151 (139-144). The difficulties of interpreting the extant fragments of Anaximander, Xenophanes, and Parmenides, and the doxography, are examined in detail in: G.S. Kirk *et al*, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* 2nd edition (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1983) pp.100-142, 163-180, 239-262.

vehicle for direct action and campaigns.¹⁶ However, Mathews has remained true to the philosophical endeavour, raising important questions about modern cosmology, the place of human beings within the environments that they inhabit, and the paramount need to 'tread lightly' upon the planet. The conclusions of the book could be construed as mystical but the quest for an environmental ethic informed by scientific evidence is edifying.

1355 words.

¹⁶ Naess is emphatic that Deep Ecology is a movement for action for supporters of the platform of eight points. However, he develops a philosophical ecology - 'Ecosophy T': A. Naess, 'The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects', *Philosophical Inquiry*, 8, 1-2 (1986) 9-31. Naess detects elements of Deep Ecology in Eastern religious and philosophical thought and some forms of Christianity: conversely Mathews emphasizes the secular aspects of Spinoza's thinking: it is through the love of 'Nature' that one is united with the ecocosm - one's greater Self.

3. Robin Attfield, 'Beyond Anthropocentrism' in:
Philosophy and the Environment
Royal Institute of Philosophy, Supplement 69 (Oct.2011) 29-46
(available online - see module reading list))

I.

Attfield identifies two, distinct periods in the writing of environmental philosophy: a first wave, in the early 1970s, mostly critical of anthropocentrism, followed by a new trend that sought to 'revive or vindicate anthropocentric stances'. Later writers detected 'tacit anthropocentrism', even in 'Deep Ecology'. Perspectival anthropocentrism was regarded as the 'inevitable methodology' because environmental ethics were devised by human beings. Attfield's article is devoted to a refutation of these later, 'revisionary approaches' on the grounds that denying non-human good restricts environmental concerns and the preservation of ecological systems. He asserts that:

we need to be free to preserve possibilities for life beyond human life, and not only forms of life meaningful to humans.

Normative anthropocentrism is defined as 'the belief that nothing but human beings has moral standing or should be taken into account in ethical deliberations'. Although not endorsing their specific ethical interpretations, Attfield shares the views of philosophers that he assigns to the first wave - Holmes Rolston, Richard Routley and Arne Naess, viz. anthropocentrism was misdirection and that it was arrogant not to look beyond human interests. He finds that the approach of later philosophers was (often) more humanistic and the positions of Bryan Norton, Janna Thompson, Kenneth Goodpaster, and other thinkers of the so-called second wave are summarized, with nuances of their reasoning highlighted. Arguing for a distinction between the normative and the meta-ethical, Attfield contests the claim of perspectival anthropocentrism - that only human judgement can generate value - preferring the use of the term anthropogenic. Even if someone believes that claim, it does not justify the anthropocentric standpoint that only humans have moral standing and interests.

Attfield reviews Norton's appeal for 'broader understanding of human interests' and the various responses, with particular attention to John O'Neill's focus upon the Aristotelian concept of a flourishing human life that includes disinterested care and love; while anthropocentric, human flourishing may provide motivation for caring and protection for nature. Although welcoming O'Neill's 'general account of human good', and its potential extension to natural goods, he thinks that it provides insufficient motivation for everyone to care about nature, which is a requisite for enlightened anthropocentrism; some humans may lead flourishing lives without interest in natural

goods. The theory that care for natural goods is 'constitutive' (of flourishing human life) is open to criticism. And while awareness of 'nature's otherness' may be a precondition of human well-being, explicit sensibility is, again, not constitutive. Many non-human species are unknown to humans and others may appear to have little relevance to our existence - therefore they cannot be said to be constitutive of the flourishing of human beings; nor are they likely to inspire protective care. Attfield uses a similar argument to show that anthropocentrism is unlikely to ensure the post-human survival and flourishing of other creatures. And he emphasizes that because animal suffering matters in itself, irrespective of effects on human agents, it undermines any claim of anthropocentrism that human flourishing is 'the sole criterion of ethics'.

The 'weak' anthropocentrism, espoused by Norton and others, propounds that human well-being provides a foundation for many kinds of environmental concern but, says Attfield, not a comprehensive one: instead,

a non-anthropocentric and non-sentientist normative ethic is needed to accommodate the full range of reasons by which human beings are capable of being motivated.

Examining other philosophical approaches, he repeats his earlier dismissal of perspectival anthropocentrism on the grounds that human valuers are able to consider non-human interests 'despite reasoning within a human perspective'.¹⁷ He concurs with the view that Deep Ecology's identification of the human self with nature, understood as 'my greater Self', is ethical egoism, a form of anthropocentrism. Protection of a natural environment, such as the Brazilian rainforest, where there is a conflict of interest between human, economic development, and the interests of non-human inhabitants, confirms the need for a non-anthropocentric ethic to ensure that non-human interests are respected. Prosaic human values, in many societies, have recognized the standing and value of non-humans: non-anthropocentrism reflects the full range of 'the human scale of values'.

Finally, Attfield considers the work of two other philosophers, Bernard Williams, and David Wiggins. He detects a substantial assumption in Williams' claims that environmental values need not be restricted to human interests but must reflect human values, namely that humans cannot 'understand themselves as pursuing or respecting the interest of most non-human creatures', and finds that to be an exaggeration, close to anthropocentrism. Conversely, Wiggins asserts that the human scale of values extends sufficiently to include disinterested concern for non-human creatures and 'the great framework for a life on earth'. However, although expressing respect for Wiggins' 'green' stance, Attfield is critical of a viewpoint confined to one framework that does not conceive of other contexts in which humans may not exist. Life on our planet may outlive humanity - we must therefore respect its independent value despite the possibility of no human interest in that future. Restricting our duties to possibilities for humans is anthropocentric. Nevertheless, Attfield concludes, he is not advocating that 'ethical priority' be given to remote species or distant planets but, instead, stressing

¹⁷ Attfield specifically criticizes Ferré's position. However, Ferré is surely attempting to develop a more holistic perspective: '...a continuum of values, pervading the universe, can undergird a unified ethics in which human persons are recognized as especially valuable without rupturing the continuities that bind humanity to the rest of the living (and nonliving) environment.' Frederick Ferré, 'Persons in Nature: Towards an Applicable and Unified Environmental Ethics', *Ethics in the Environment*, 1,1 (Spring 1996) 15-25 (p.15).

that our failure to respect the interests of living nonhuman beings may distort our own humanity.

II.

Attfield, the renowned author of many books and papers, excels at dissecting and summarizing the many contrasting views of other, environmental philosophers. Here, though, he does not present a convincing explanation of *how* it may be possible to move beyond anthropocentrism. At the outset Attfield states that, after the first wave in environmental philosophy writing, critical of anthropocentrism, the new trend sought 'to revive or vindicate anthropocentric stances'. That implies that anthropocentric stances may have commonly existed before the first wave, but these philosophers are not identified. He also omits to cite the pioneering work of Leopold, which influenced many later writers.¹⁸ Another omission concerns the work of numerous activists, mainly outside academia, who were already pursuing environmental goals by the early 1970s, and who, collectively, formed a crucible in which protean ethical questions were debated, and in which anthropomorphic positions were often challenged.¹⁹ The interplay, between public ethical considerations and academic philosophy, is not considered here.²⁰

Proposing the need for a non-anthropocentric ethic, in order to protect the interests of non-human living entities, however desirable, does not amount to an explanation of such an ethic.²¹ Attfield consistently separates human beings from 'nature' and, as noted above, declares that non-anthropocentrism reflects the full range of *human values* (my emphasis).²² The article also concludes with what is surely an anthropocentric

¹⁸ Aldo Leopold, 'The Land Ethic' from: *A Sand Country Almanac* (1949) (reprinted; Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1987) pp.201-226. Leopold raised crucial questions about the absence of an ethic dealing with '...man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it.'

¹⁹ Including protest marches and demonstrations against nuclear weaponry and nuclear power, animal liberation actions, Greenpeace campaigns, conservation work, and the emergence of Green Party politics in Europe and Britain, debates about the ethics of human impact upon the global environment and its living species were evident throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Many ethical stances were forged in response to scientific findings. See, for example: J.R. McNeill, *Something new under the sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York; Norton & Co., 2001; first published 2000) pp.336-340.

²⁰ The interplay does not appear to have been the subject of much research. Perhaps the animal liberation movement may offer the clearest example of the influence of academic philosophy upon activists and vice versa, with controversy, for instance, about the ethics of releasing mink from fur farms into the wild. The extermination of rats on islands to protect ground-nesting birds is supported by conservationists but criticized by some in animal liberation.

²¹ Attfield's position, of biocentric consequentialism, is more clearly explained in his textbook: Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics*, *op.cit.* pp.42-45.

²² This appears to be a common position in environmental philosophy, when it is assumed that 'nature' is something 'other', from which humans are separated by virtue of their rationality and self-consciousness. The ideological and moral separation of humans from nature in the early modern period, is addressed by Thomas, who concludes that the resultant confusion persists. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London; Penguin, 1984; first published 1983) pp.30-41;173-191;300-303.

perspective, '...that without concern for the living nonhuman beings of the present and future we unduly narrow our own horizons.'²³

Frequently missing from interminable disputations about the possibility of moving beyond an anthropomorphic ethic is the acknowledgement that, through their evolutionary acquisition and use of tools and technology, whether exercised in fully rational ways or not, human beings have acquired powers over all other living beings on this planet that materially separates them from those other beings.²⁴ Rather than endlessly revising whether or not non-anthropomorphic ethics are possible, should we not accept the inevitability of our distinctly human perspectives, yet also fully respect the interests of all non-human beings, and urgently seek ways to eradicate or minimize the damage that we inflict on them that arises from our own modes of existence? The effort to understand non-human interests is essentially scientific; the requirement to respect those interests is ethical and not solely instrumental.²⁵ Even if human interests benefit from respecting the good of non-human beings, human superiority is not inherent or desirable. Notwithstanding his criticisms of perspectival anthropocentrism, Attfield does not explain how a normative environmental ethic may be formulated that is entirely independent of human values and human judgement of moral standing.

1305 words

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(3991 words in total, excluding titles, bibliography & footnotes)

²³ Hayward notes that human-centeredness is desirable if well-balanced conceptions of being human encourage decent treatment of non-humans. He opines that anthropocentrism in ethics '...when properly understood, is actually less harmful than harbouring the aims of overcoming it'. Tim Hayward, 'Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem', *Environmental Values*, 6 (1997) 49-63 (52;61).

²⁴ Recognizing that humans have evolved differently, with different consciousness (from other animals) Johnson worries that 'our apparent power over nature' may deflect human beings from considering the morality of the ways in which we treat the non-human world: Lawrence E. Johnson, *A Morally Deep World: An Essay on Moral Significance and Environmental Ethics* (Cambridge, USA; Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp.23-26.

²⁵ Goodpaster's defence of the moral consideration due to all life forms seems logically consistent with 'nutritional, scientific, and medical practices of a genuinely life-respecting sort': Kenneth E. Goodpaster, 'On Being Morally Considerable', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 75, 6 (June 1978) 308-325 (324). However, his attempt to justify the necessary killing of animals for food, experimentation, and the advancement of knowledge supports Attfield's finding that Goodpaster's version of moral consideration is consistent with 'weak anthropocentrism.'

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✓ Very well-researched piece of work