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Student Name: Manfred Freuding

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Module tutor: Rebekah Humphreys

Assignment title: Essay – What light does environmental ethics throw on the extent of moral standing?

Assignment due date: 19 August 2022

I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism.

Name: Manfred Freuding.....

Assignment Mark

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This piece of work reveals extensive research which has been effectively assimilated & synthesised to provide a detailed answer to the essay question. Claims are generally evaluated thoughtfully, & the essay has a very clear structure with signposting & sub-conclusions at relevant points. It is clear that you have fully engaged with the reading material & you've presented a critique that has allowed you to develop your own view in relation to the essay question. The distinction between moral standing & moral significance could enable you to overcome some of the problems discussed, and in places more explanation is needed. But, overall, this is an excellent essay.

Comments:

Marker 1 signature:

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What light does environmental ethics throw on the extent of moral standing?

I. Introduction

The emergence of environmental ethics as a new field in philosophy dates roughly back to the 1970s (Brennan and Norva, 2022). While earlier philosophy had not been completely silent about the relationship between human beings and nature, the spotlight was turned on environmental problems not by philosophers, but by ecologists like Aldo Leopold (Attfield 2014, p. 36). This philosophical blind spot seems surprising, not lastly because environmental ethics turns out to be a source of fruitful discussion: This holds particularly true for questions concerning the extent of moral standing. Here, there is a close connection with the discussion of who ^{or what} may be included in the circle of bearers of intrinsic value and, as a result, of moral standing (Brennan and Norva, 2022).

With this in mind, this essay will attempt to examine what debates in environment ethics reveal about the extent of and criteria for moral standing. This examination will as a first step take a brief look at more traditional anthropocentric theories which "limit moral standing to human beings" (Attfield, 2014, p. 30) and place only instrumental value on the environment (Attfield, 2014, p. 31).

The next section will discuss a more progressive theory, namely sentientism. This approach defines the ability to feel pleasure and pain as a threshold for moral standing and extends moral consideration to some animals (Brennan and Norva, 2022).

In order to flesh out the question of moral standing, however, this essay will focus on two theories which stand in starker contrast to the above-mentioned views: biocentrism and ecocentrism. A trait shared by both theories – and by sentientism – is that they leave anthropocentrism behind, a move pioneered by such philosophers as Naess, Taylor and Callicott (Attfield, 2014, p. 38-40).

Biocentrism ~~means~~ ^{extends} the extension of moral standing to all living things (Goodpaster, 1978, p. 314), and it therefore represents an individualist egalitarian theory based on the extension of existing rights to ever newer spheres (Callicott, 1993, p. 119). No longer relying on rationality or sentience, this theory uses being alive as the criterion one needs to fulfil to earn moral standing. A problem facing such life-centric theories is that the formulation of interests of living things may offer a distorted view of reality because that they cannot articulate their wishes. Any account thereof is hence necessarily made from a human perspective (Taylor, 2021, pp. 120-122). This is vaguely reminiscent of the Nagel's notion that it is impossible for human beings to understand what it is like to be a bat (Van Gulick, 2021). Another issue facing advocates of life-centric theories is that they may lead to seemingly absurd conclusions such as the extension of moral standing to inanimate rocks – if one were to use existence as a criterion instead of the quality of being alive (Hunt, 1980).

Next to be examined will be ecocentrism, the most salient example of which is Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which formulates the stability of the ecosystem as the most important objective (Leopold 1993, p. 108). This notion on giving weight only to systems instead of to individuals naturally generates some controversy. Its critics note that such a system is not plausible since it cannot serve as a basis for normative ethics with its entire focus on the collective good (Attfield, 2014, p. 38). Here, too, it will be whether the theory proposed can make a vital contribution to discussion of moral standing despite such weighty counterarguments.

The examination will conclude by fusing the lessons learned in the process into a clearer picture of the contribution discourse in environmental ethics can make to the extension of moral standing beyond the realms of anthropocentrism and sentientism.

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II. Examining the role of moral standing in environment ethics

This section will attempt to throw light on what discourses in environmental ethics can teach us about the extent of moral standing within the meaning that "[a]n entity has moral status if and only if it or its interests morally matter to some degree for the entity's own sake" (Jaworska and Tannenbaum, 2001). The examination will start by looking at the more traditional anthropocentric view, giving human beings dominion over nature and relegating any other being to a mere instrumental role (Attfield, 2014, pp. 30-31). This will be followed by a review of more egalitarian views such as sentientism and biocentrism and a discussion of holistic theories.

II.1 Moral standing in the anthropocentric view

The anthropocentric view is arguably influenced by two factors: religious views which give human beings a special and leading role as compared to other beings and things in nature (Attfield, 2014, p. 31) and Cartesian dualism which affords human beings a special place in an otherwise mechanical world because of their rationality (Attfield, 2018). Values attached to the environment are for the most part instrumental (Attfield, 2014, p. 31) and seen through the lens of what harms or benefits human beings. A historical example of this is Kant's view on the treatment of animals, which argues against harsh treatment of animals because of its negative effect on character (Marquis, 1989, p. 193). Owing to such shortcomings, critics called for a new system of ethics that goes beyond this Western tradition. The reason is that even in its more benign form it does not afford sufficient moral standing to the environment and any other entity beside living beings to save the environment from undue harm (Routley, 1993, pp. 13-15). A step in this direction was taken by the animal liberation movement, which argued for an extension of moral standing to animals, a position to be discussed below.

II.2 The sentientist perspective on moral standing

Animal liberationists argue that animals should be awarded moral consideration because they feel pain and "there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration" (Singer, 1993, p. 22). This marks a departure from the traditional view that based moral standing on rationality and linguistic abilities (Callicott, 1980, p. 316). Animal liberation can be regarded as an extension of liberation movements in the human sphere, during which rights were extended to previously disenfranchised people (Singer, 1993, p. 24). Also, proponents of this theory point out the inherent contradiction in the use of such criteria as linguistic ability and rationality, which in many cases are not even fulfilled by all human being. (Callicott, 1980, p. 316). Defence of the mistreatment of animals on grounds that such practices help human beings can also be countered by pointing out the analogy of such arguments to the argumentation employed to justify the institution of slavery (Singer, 1993, p. 27).

It appears that sentientism rests on a more solid foundation than anthropocentrism because it is based on logical continuation of the arguments used in political liberation movements and is therefore more internally consistent. On the other end of the spectrum, however, its stance on moral standing is open to criticism for being too narrow in scope. Proponents of ethical holism such as Callicott argue that this theory offers no new approach because it merely redraws existing boundaries, while still excluding some entities from moral consideration (1980, p. 318). The theory proposed by Callicott, in turn, places its focus not so much on the end of suffering, which he considers part of nature (Callicott, 1980, p. 333), but on the stability of the biotic community (Callicott, 1980, p. 311). Proponents of life-centric ethics, which argue for a duty to all living organisms (Taylor, 1993, p. 67) argue that sentience may be just as arbitrary a criterion as

But it is morally significant, as Goodpaster would claim.
rationality or linguistic abilities (Goodpaster, 1978, p. 316). These rival theories and their contributions to the question of moral standing will be reviewed in more detail in the following sections.

II.3 Moral standing in biocentric theories

Biocentrism – like ethical holism – is a non-anthropocentric theory. However, what distinguishes it from ecocentrism is its focus on the well-being of individual organisms instead of on the stability of ecosystems and species (Taylor, 1993, p. 67), the latter being regarded as merely a system with no value of its own (Sterba, 1995, p. 192). Taylor bases his theory on the notion that natural organisms have a good of their own (Taylor, 2021, p. 120) and the idea that the well-being of living organisms is an end in itself and moral standing is not based on sentience and the capacity to feel pain (Taylor, 1993, pp. 66-67). In order to establish the nature of the good of living organisms such as plant life, use is made of science and biological facts (Taylor, 2021, pp. 120-122), which results in the conclusion that the good is "the full development of biological powers" (Taylor, 1993, p. 67). Coupled with the observation that human beings are part of the interdependent community of living things on earth (Taylor, 1993, p. 70) and the notion that there is also an intrinsic confirmation bias in the way certain traits such as rationality are chosen as threshold criteria for moral standing (Sterba, 1995, p. 193), this leads to the conclusion that there is no base for human superiority.

Good This places human beings on par with all living organisms, which Taylor refers to as species impartiality, where all beings possess inherent worth (1993, p. 81). While this proposition sounds innocuous, it may pose problems where conflicts of interest arise between human beings and living organisms of other species. How does biocentrism handle such conflicts? Taylor suggests a right of self-defence to ensure one's own existence, i.e. to meet one's own basic needs, as a justification of violation of the basic needs of other species. However, Taylor permits such violations to meet even non-basic human needs if otherwise even greater wrongs were committed (Sterba, 1995, p. 198). An example of this is the destruction of land to build a library. While arguing that as little harm as possible should be committed in such cases, Taylor introduces a principle of restitution for wrongs committed (Norton, 1987, pp. 266-267). A modified version of biocentrism – biocentric pluralism – goes a little further in this respect and takes a narrower view of the self-defence principle in that it only allows violations of basic needs of others to secure one's own basic needs, (Sterba, 1995, p. 198). To resolve conflicts, proponents of biocentric pluralism propose a mixture of ethical individualism and holism in that as long as basic needs are not met, the focus is on individual rights, but as concerns non-basic needs, the good of the entire community of life is taken into account, thus trumping individual needs (Sterba, 1995, pp. 201-202). *Very good.*

Criticism of the biocentric outlook can take aim at the grounds on which moral standing is afforded to living organisms that are not sentient. This is based on the notion that such organisms as plants lack interests. While they have needs that have to be fulfilled to ensure their functioning, their functioning is assigned by human interests alone. This means that they are not interested in their well-being for lack of even rudimentary consciousness. An example of this is that a tree needs water to thrive, but the thriving of the tree has value only in the eyes of human beings (Feinberg, 1974, pp. 51-55). However, as Goodpaster notes, it is not impossible to ascribe to plants an interest in staying alive (Goodpaster, 1978, p. 319). This claim can be supported by the Aristotelean notion of final causes or natural ends (Feinberg, 1974, p. 52) because if it is the natural end of, for instance, an acorn to develop into an oak tree, one could arguably say that staying alive is in the tree's interest. When one affords interests to living organisms purely through the lens of human interests, controversial outcomes may emerge as a result (1978, p. 319). The reason for this is that the argument could be interpreted to mean that only things that serve human interests really matter.

Critics also claim that interests ascribed to plants by human beings merely reflect haughty romantic ideals (Goodpaster, 1978, pp. 322-323). However, such acts of ascribing interests are much more likely influenced by scientific principles through which human beings have gained an objective understanding of the needs of non-sentient living organisms (Taylor, 2021, pp. 120-122). An instance of this is recent research that resents research that proves trees behave and communicate in more advanced ways than was previously believed (Grant, 2018). This also helps to put into perspective the objection that the reliance on biological facts is tricky, because of the constant evolvement of science (Taylor 2021, p. 119) since in this case scientific findings seem to support the biocentric position.

Another argument raised against biocentrism is that it is not practical because it is too demanding on human beings. Even if it is assumed that it is right to harm another living organism to secure one's basic needs, which is a deviation from human ethics, where killing someone to obtain food is still considered illegal, the clash of non-basic needs of human beings and the basic needs of other species poses a problem. That is why Taylor – unlike Sterba – seems to abandon a restrictive view of needs and opts for giving priority to some non-basic human needs over basic needs of other living organisms (Taylor, 2021, p. 126). Also, the distinction between individualism and holism cannot be maintained so strictly, especially if one regards the issue of compensation for wrongs committed, which would benefit the species and not the individual plants (Norton, 1987, p. 266). A possible reply is that that practicality alone cannot be a deciding factor in affording moral standing to previously disenfranchised beings. A similar argument could have been made in previous times against the enfranchisement of hitherto suppressed parts of the population, and biocentrism can be regarded as a continuation of this tradition (Callicott, 1989, p. 313). Furthermore, as noted by Goodpaster, affording moral standing to living beings does not necessarily mean that in the event of a conflict of interests there will be no other criteria to establish whose interests take priority (Goodpaster, 1978, p. 323). This, however, would destroy the symmetry between human ethics and environmental ethics (Norton, 1987, pp. 265-266), especially if one thinks of moral standing connected to an inviolable sphere of negative rights, to which there is no exception except for in rare cases such as self-defence (Mack, 2022).

The extension of moral standing to all living organisms – while feasible – faces some severe problems, in particular regarding its implications in the face of non-basic human needs and the management of conflicts of interest. In the following section, therefore, the extension of moral standing to ecosystems and species will be discussed in order to find out if it offers a more viable alternative.

II.4 The ecocentric view of moral standing

Ecocentrism was formulated as a way to create a new ethics. Callicott suggested a system that goes beyond animal liberation theory and places value on entire systems (Callicott, 1984, pp. 299-301). Proponents of this theory argue that since ethical bonds between people are based on sentiments that are extended to ever larger communities over time (Callicott, 1993, pp. 111-112), it is not impossible for people to develop ethical consideration for the biotic community (Callicott, 1993, p. 116). This trend is supported by the development of scientific knowledge, as people learn of the instrumental value of certain species or organisms (Norton, 1987, p. 263).

While this may not sound much different from the respect for living organisms proposed by Taylor, there is a major difference: ecocentrism places importance not so much on individual members of the biotic community, but on the stability of the entire system. This marks a grave departure from animal liberation theories and even allows for hunting of animals (Callicott, 1980, p. 311). A reason for this is that Callicott sees animal liberation theories as defective for the excessive concern for domestic animals and for not paying enough regard to wild animals and species (1980, p. 324).

Ecocentrists justify this view by reference to new insights into ecology highlighting the interrelatedness and interdependence of the entire ecosystem, which previously had been seen as inhabited by individuals (Callicott, 1980, p. 321). The integration of individuals into the biotic community is seen as a next logical evolutionary step following the integration of individuals into society (Leopold, 1993, p. 96). This is regarded as necessary to turn people into citizens of the biotic community (Leopold, 1993, p. 97), instead of them being intruders who bring the system into disarray (Leopold, 1993, p. 104). This is supported by historical accounts of how human success has relied on cooperation with the biotic community, for instance in the cultivation and settlement of the Americas by European settlers (Leopold, 1993, p. 98). All these factors combine to give ecocentrism its holistic character (Callicott, 1993, p. 121) in which "[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of biotic community, it is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Leopold, 1993, p. 108).

Critics may point out that ecocentrism lies outside the range of value-based ethics. If the stability of the ecosystem is the paramount objective, then common values such as keeping promises play no role (Attfield, 2014, p. 38). However, the relegation of individuals to instrumental value can arguably also be found in some forms of consequentialism where the maximization of good is the highest principle (Sinnot-Armstrong, 2021). In this regard, one could also point out that ecocentrism follows utilitarian ideals through its focus on achieving the maximum good for all living and non-living organisms, namely the stability of the ecosphere. While this may be true, it should be noted that consequentialism in all its facets is not restricted to the maximization of good as its only principle. Another point is that calculating what contributes to the stability of the interconnected ecosystem depends on biological facts. This means that decisions taken would have to be based on scientific knowledge, but this is problematic since as noted above facts can change over time giving way to radically new insights (Bird, 2022).

Tying in with the notion of the collective good is the assertion that ecocentrism is not so far outside of accepted ethics because it can be compared to the political philosophy espoused by Plato. There, the individual is also relegated to an instrumental role (Callicott, 1980, pp. 327-328). While this is true, one should not forget that Plato's political philosophy is not universally revered nowadays – some, as Popper, even see it as a precursor of modern-day totalitarianism (Brown, 2017). Callicott also seems to acknowledge this, when he notes that being part of nature with its inequalities unimaginable to human beings could lead to unsavoury practices such as letting people die for the sake of the species (Callicott, 1993, p. 125). It is quite telling that Callicott – who likely was aware of the implications of ecocentrism – later retracted his most extreme statements in favour of a concentric circle theory. In this theory, those at the centre enjoy more rights and obligations than those – for instance other living organisms – at the periphery. This way, the respect for the basic rights of human is ensured (Callicott, 1988, pp. 167-168).

Furthermore, there is the notion of people moving beyond nature. Callicott places the blame for the most cruel effects of ecocentrism on humans having grown disproportionately and adopting an unnatural lifestyle (Callicott, 1980, p. 326). Interestingly, his most severe condemnation of factory farming is not the fact that farm animals are treated badly, but that they have been relegated to an unnatural status (Callicott, 1980, p. 335). This turns on the question whether human beings themselves are part of nature or whether they exercise dominion over nature as espoused by more traditional ethics. However, if one considers human beings current position as an effect of the natural process of evolution, then claiming that one has to return to a more natural lifestyle seems counterintuitive and – against nature.

A last point of discussion is the notion whether a collective – such as the biological community – can have moral standing. This is disputed by Feinberg who argues that as opposed to states nature has no fixed organisational structure and no established rules for the discharge of duties and the assumption of

More explanation needed here.

Is this anthropocentric, do you think?

responsibilities (Feinberg, 1974, p. 56). A counterpoint to this is that species are more than just a sum of their parts and can be harmed and benefitted and thus have interests different from their individual members (Sterba, 1995, p. 192). Furthermore, by pointing to the non-existence of an organisational structure, one ignores the high degree of organization of nature, as described by Leopold (1993, p. 102). There is also a certain bias in judging this question from the exclusive standpoint of human-centred ethics and systems; in the same vein one might argue against the existence of individual human beings if one adopts the perspective of molecular biology (Callicott, 1993, p. 123).

II.5 Summary of the analysis on moral standing in environment ethics

The examination conducted has looked at the issue of moral standing in approaches to environmental ethics: anthropocentric, sentientist, biocentric and ecocentric views. A main takeaway is that the approach to moral standing seems to fall into two different camps: individualist and holistic theories. It was shown that the sentientist and the biocentric view are extensions of the anthropocentric view, as they continue a trend of liberalisation to extend moral standing to all living organisms.

These individualistic theories appear at first sight less problematic than the holism of ecocentrism, but a closer look reveals the underlying issues. Sentientists face the problem as to what would happen to farm animals upon their release and whether they would be able to survive in the wilderness (Callicott, 1980, p. 331). However, conflicts between the basic needs of human being and the basic needs of domestic animals are easier to resolve than in biocentrism, for instance through recourse to a vegetarian diet. With its focus on the ability to feel pleasure and pain, furthermore, sentientism can be perceived as too narrow in scope and as using sentience as an arbitrary cut-off point when deciding on moral standing.

In this regard, biocentrism in which moral standing turns on the fact of being alive appears to provide a more viable alternative. Here, too, however, remains the problem of the negotiation of potential conflicts between human beings and living organisms since the need for nutrition and the need of a plant to live are in conflict with each other (Goodpaster, 1978, p. 313). While this conflict could be resolved by giving priority to the the basic needs of human beings priority vis-a-vis the basic needs of non-human beings (Sterba, 1995, pp. 198-199), this could be seen as being excessively restrictive on human beings and would require a commonly agreed definition of basic needs. On the other hand, allowing some non-basic human needs to trump the basic needs of non-humans (Norton, 1987, p. 266) or separating criteria for moral standing from the criteria for deciding conflict cases (Goodpaster, 1978, p. 311) helps avoid such conflicts, but places plants and human beings on a different moral footing as regards their right to live. Being reminiscent of the concentric circle theory proposed by Callicott (1988, p. 168), this leads to a second-class moral standing for plants, which though an improvement over having no moral standing, reserves a special sphere of rights to human beings and thus is reminiscent of anthropocentric ethics.

Holism in its extreme form as presented by Callicott in 1980 appears to be more consistent in this regard since it relegates all organisms, including human beings, to an instrumental value in service of the well-being of the entire ecosystem. This kind of theory is fundamentally at odds with normative ethics and has a strong misanthropic and totalitarian bent, which led to Callicott to formulate a modified view – the above-mentioned concentric circle view. Strictly speaking, ecocentrism lies outside the scope of ethics in that it does not rely on rights at all because individual members of a species are awarded rights based on the welfare of the species (Sagoff, 1993, p. 92). In addition to that, there are also concerns about the implementation of ethical holism. This system would be so demanding on human beings that it would require a strong and powerful authority to enforce its rules on everybody. It is far from plausible that any human-led government would be willing to implement a system in which humans play only an instrumental role.

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Among the theories examined, biocentrism therefore seems to offer the most viable approach to extending moral standing beyond human beings. While the issue of affording second-class moral standing to such organisms as plants may appear somewhat arbitrary, one may look at it as an equivalent of the graded rights enjoyed by human beings. An instance, of this are voting rights afforded only from a certain age.

III. Conclusion

This essay has attempted to examine the contributions of environmental ethics to the question of moral standing. In order to do this, first the main theories were analyzed, starting with the anthropocentric view, in which nature is seen as having instrumental value, in view of the needs of humans. Then, sentientism and biocentrism which extend individual rights to animals and living organisms based on the criteria of sentience and being alive respectively, were examined. The analysis concluded with ecocentrism which is not based on individual rights but the well-being of the ecosystem and thus deviates sharply from the other three views. It was found that the anthropocentric view and sentientism share the problem that the criteria for moral standing can be seen as arbitrarily chosen to keep the circle of right bearers as small as possible, but they do not face many problems as regards practical implementation. Biocentrism casts a wider net, but faces issues as regards the resolution of conflicts between plant life and human beings. Ecocentrism however, being more consistent, faces the problem that in its extreme form it can lead to an arguably ecofascist system which cannot be implemented without appropriate enforcing authorities. The examination concluded with the finding that – despite shortcomings – biocentrism offers the most viable solution to the extension of moral standing to all living organisms in that uses as wide a criterion as possible and – through a grading of moral standing in the event of conflicts – also can be implemented reasonably well.

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