

Biocentrism

Biocentrism is an ethical perspective which places intrinsic value on all living things, and considers life itself to have moral standing. In comparison, sentientism places such value and moral standing on beings which are believed to be sentient.

Anthropocentrism considers human beings to be of the most moral importance (Humphreys, 2016). From an anthropocentric viewpoint, animals and other living things (such as plants) may be granted indirect moral consideration, and instrumental value may be placed on them with regards to their value towards human beings. For example, animals may be considered valuable as human companions, as is the case with pets. They may be granted moral consideration with regards to how they are treated, purely because human beings tend to feel empathy, and to see an animal mistreated causes the human to feel unpleasant emotions. However, from an anthropocentric viewpoint, animals do not possess inherent moral rights. Increasingly in modern times, humans are becoming more aware of their detrimental impact on the environment, and many people make efforts to be more environmentally conscious, through actions such as recycling. However, this consideration towards the environment is often an anthropocentric one, with the intention of preserving the environment for the benefit of future human beings, rather than preserving it because the environment itself is considered to have rights and intrinsic value.

For something to have intrinsic value means that it has independent value within itself, that is separate from how it may be regarded as useful to others. Conversely,

instrumental value refers to the value something has in relation to how it may be useful to things with intrinsic value (Humphreys, 2016). For example, from an anthropocentric viewpoint, human beings are considered to have intrinsic value simply because they are humans. A human baby may not yet have the capacity for language or rational thinking, but they have value and are deserving of moral consideration simply because they are human. From a perspective of sentientism, all living things which are sentient have intrinsic value. The issue with this viewpoint is that sentience is an ambiguous thing. Human beings lack the knowledge to understand the degree to which animals experience feelings and sensations. Further to this, it is unknown exactly which living things are sentient. The Animal Welfare Bill introduced in UK parliament recognises all vertebrate animals as sentient beings (GOV.UK, 2021). This bill, however, disregards invertebrates (such as spiders and insects) as sentient beings, despite it being unknown exactly their capacity to feel. This lack of understanding is one reason biocentrism may be a more morally sound perspective than sentientism.

Whilst there are reasons to argue that biocentrism is a more morally sound ethical perspective, it is difficult for humans to apply this perspective to their ways of life. If we should grant moral consideration to all living things, does that render it morally unjust to pick fruit from a tree, or to tread on grass? Whilst such a lifestyle may be restrictive, it is not entirely unheard of. Followers of Jainism believe in a principle of non-violence, and aim to avoid causing harm to all living things, including animals and plants. Jains are encouraged to follow a vegan diet, with monks and nuns abstaining from the consumption of root vegetables, such as potatoes, radishes, and carrots, for the bulbs

are seen as a living being with the potential to sprout (Laidlaw, 1995). This highlights one important element of biocentrism- it aims to be inclusive of all things that have the capability to flourish, thrive, grow, or reproduce. Jains subscribe to this way of thinking, and consequently believe it to be morally unsound to pull potatoes from the ground when doing so would prevent them from flourishing. Another extent Jains go to to avoid inflicting harm is to wear masks on their face, to prevent them from inhaling small insects and other such airborne lifeforms (Laidlaw, 2005). Jains are representative of how, although restrictive, it is indeed possible to live a life that grants moral consideration to all living things.

It is not necessary, however, to take an identical approach to that of Jain monks when adopting a biocentric perspective. Biocentrism doesn't dictate that one must entirely avoid causing harm to all living things in order to live a morally sound life, but rather it promotes the reduction of unnecessary harm to all living things. It suggests that morally, there is a difference between a man cutting down a tree for firewood to save himself from freezing to death, versus a man who cuts down a tree for no reason other than to test out his new chainsaw. Anthropocentrism and sentientism would deem there to be no moral or ethical difference between these two scenarios, for the tree is not deserving of moral consideration, and therefore the man's treatment of it is of no relevance to morality. This is illustrated in Sylvan's (1973) "Last Man" example, which proposes a scenario in which the last ever man on earth goes about painlessly eliminating all other living things, including plants and animals. From an anthropocentric viewpoint, this man does nothing wrong, for if he is the last man on earth, his actions are of no

consequence to other human beings. Despite this, many people would agree that his actions are immoral or unjust. For this view, many would give the reason that it is unnecessary destruction. The avoidance of unnecessary destruction is at the core of biocentrism.

Biocentrism is a perspective which places intrinsic value and moral standing on all living things. It promotes the preservation of the environment not only for the benefit of humankind and other sentient beings, but because the environment has value within itself that warrants moral consideration. To grant such consideration to all sentient beings raises the issue of a lack of knowledge and understanding, for we don't know for certain what other beings feel or experience. This encourages us to consider, why should we grant consideration towards humans or to a beloved pet dog, but not to other lifeforms, such as a root vegetable which has the potential to flourish, grow, and reproduce? The lifestyle of Jain monks proves that it is indeed possible to avoid harm to all living things, and if it can't be avoided entirely, we can at least make efforts to reduce it.

References

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