

REVIEWS

The Review Section of E&A consists of three parts. The first is made up of brief reviews of books and articles (and perhaps films, etc.) that are concerned in some way with the rights and wrongs of human treatment of non-human animals. The second part of this Section is entitled 'Replies' and contains comments on or responses to reviews published in earlier issues of E&A. By letter the Editor invites the authors of works reviewed to respond, and by this proclamation in each issue invites all other interested readers to submit comments. The third part of the Reviews Section is a list of works of which reviews are invited. Any member who wishes to review any work in this continuing 'Reviews Needed' list should contact the Editor.

Bryan G. Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism," *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 1984), pp. 131-148

Anthropocentrism is usually understood to be the view that only human beings or human conscious states (such as happiness or pleasure) are intrinsically good. The nonhuman world, including nonhuman animals, has only instrumental value as a means of producing human good.

This view is almost universally rejected by those writing on environmental ethics and animal liberation, or at least by those trying to find an acceptable environmental ethic and by those defending animal rights. For example, Aldo Leopold and his followers hold that anthropocentrism is unacceptable as a basis for an environmental ethic, that is, an ethic that can be used to justify preserving the environment, because it inevitably leads to the exploitation of nature, to using nature as a mere means of satisfying trivial human desires. Anthropocentrism is also rejected by Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and others in the animal liberation movement. They usually argue that it is simply an unwarranted bias or prejudice, analogous to racism or sexism, that cannot be rationally defended. It is objectionable because it results in

animal exploitation and suffering since it allows animals to be used as a mere means of producing human satisfaction, as meat to be eaten or things to be experimented on.

Despite this general consensus on the unacceptability of anthropocentrism, Bryan Norton tries to defend it, or at least a version of it which he calls "weak anthropocentrism." He wants to show that we do not need to embrace nonanthropocentrism in order to formulate a satisfactory environmental ethic; instead we can use weak anthropocentrism.

Norton begins by distinguishing between two different forms of anthropocentrism. The first form is called "strong anthropocentrism" and it is similar to the sort of anthropocentrism that is often rejected. As Norton defines it, "a value theory is *strongly anthropocentric* if all value countenanced by it is explained by reference to satisfactions of felt preferences of human individuals." (p.134) A felt preference is any desire or need of a human individual. But the satisfaction of all of these desires will result in harm to the

environment; the desire for more and more consumer goods will lead to increased production which in turn will cause pollution of the air and water and the production of toxic wastes. Not only does strong anthropocentrism give us no way of criticizing those who exploit nature and ruin the environment, it also seems to support the exploiters and polluters, provided they are satisfying strongly felt preferences of many human individuals. It should be clear enough, then, that strong anthropocentrism is unsatisfactory as an environmental ethic.

Norton agrees that strong anthropocentrism is unacceptable, but he thinks that there is a second form of anthropocentrism, "weak anthropocentrism" as he calls it, that avoids the difficulties of the first form. As he formulates it, "a value theory is *weakly anthropocentric* if all value countenanced by it is explained by reference to satisfaction of some felt preference of a human individual or by reference to its bearing upon the ideals which exist as elements in a world view essential to determinations of considered preferences." (p. 134) It is considered preferences that distinguish weak anthropocentrism from the strong version. A "considered preference," as Norton defines it, is a desire or need consistent with a "rationally adopted world view—a world view which includes fully supported scientific theories and a metaphysical framework interpreting these theories as well as a set of rationally supported aesthetic and moral ideals." (p. 134)

But why is weak anthropocentrism more acceptable than the strong form? Norton gives two reasons. First, there are world views which emphasize the close relationship between the human species and other species and the environment, and these world views can be used as a basis for

criticizing preferences that merely exploit nature and animals. Second, these world views can appeal to the value of experiences of natural objection in human value formation. That is, in so far as values are formed and informed by contact with nature and other species, they take on value as teachers of human values.

Now what world views does Norton have in mind? At one point, he mentions Henry David Thoreau. No doubt Thoreau thought that we can learn from nature, but it is not clear that he thought of nature as having only instrumental value. In passages where he personifies Nature, it sounds like Nature has an intrinsic value independent of human consciousness. So Thoreau's views are not clearly anthropocentric. Besides, Thoreau's writings obviously do not constitute a full-fledged world view complete with scientific theories, metaphysical framework, and rationally supported aesthetic and moral ideals.

The only examples of genuine world views that Norton discusses are Hinduism and Jainism. Both of these religions explicitly teach nonharming: we should not kill other nonhuman creatures such as cows or even insects, and we should not harm the natural environment either.

But are these two religions really anthropocentric in the sense of ascribing intrinsic value only to humans and their experiences? Norton assumes that they are. Thus he says that in proscribing the killing of insects and other nonhuman creatures, the Hindus and Jains "show concern for their own spiritual development rather than for the actual lives of those insects." (p. 136) But this is a misunderstanding of Hinduism and Jainism, as a brief consideration of their metaphysical views shows. According to Jainist metaphysics, the locus of all value is not human beings, but souls

(*jivas*) which are eternal, blissful, and omniscient. These souls are not found only in human beings, but also in the bodies of animals and plants. All of these souls have the same properties and the same moral status; there is no important difference between the souls found in humans and those found in nonhuman creatures and living things. The reason for not killing an animal, then, is that it is an "ensouled" person just like a human being. This is about as far away from standard anthropocentrism as you can get!

(For a good discussion of Jainism, see Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).)

In Hinduism, the locus of value is again the soul, but this soul or Atman (according to the Upanishads) is identical with the all-pervasive, ultimate reality called the Brahman. Animals have the same moral status as humans because they have souls too, and that is the main reason why it is wrong to kill them and eat them. In fact, in so far as everything participates in Brahman, everything is "ensouled" and should be treated with respect. Surely this is not anthropocentrism as it is usually understood. Certainly it is not the sort of anthropocentrism that one finds in Christianity where only humans have immortal souls and animals do not.

Norton's so-called "weak anthropocentrism," then, turns out to rely heavily on nonanthropocentric world

views like Hinduism and Jainism. As such, it presents no threat at all to advocates of nonanthropocentrism, despite Norton's claims to the contrary.

Of course Norton could avoid this problem by appealing to clearly anthropocentric world views such as Christianity. But then he will have a very hard time showing that his weak anthropocentrism does not reduce to the unacceptable strong version. For he will no longer be able to give his two reasons for preferring the weak over the strong form. Unlike Hinduism and Jainism, Christianity does not emphasize a close relationship between humans and other species and the environment. On the contrary there is a radical separation. Humans have souls and animals and the environment don't, and humans have a God-given "dominion" over animals and nature. This implies that humans can use animals and nature for their own purposes, including the satisfaction of their desires for meat, automobiles, and other luxury items. Christianity hardly gives us any solid basis for criticizing preferences that merely exploit nature and animals. Furthermore, Christianity does not teach us to form our values in contact with animals and nature. Rather God and humans are the source of all values. If weak anthropocentrism appeals to an anthropocentric world view such as Christianity, then, it seems to reduce to strong anthropocentrism, a view that Norton himself agrees is unacceptable.

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