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At the Centre of What?

A Critical Note on the Centrism-Terminology in Environmental Ethics^{*}

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ABSTRACT

The distinction between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric theories, together with the more fine-grained distinction between anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism, are probably two of the most frequently occurring distinctions in the environmental ethics literature. In this essay I draw attention to some problematic aspects of the terminology used to draw these distinctions: the ‘centrism-terminology’. I argue that this terminology is ambiguous and misleading, and therefore confusing. Furthermore, depending on which interpretation it is given, it is also either asymmetric and non-inclusive, or superfluous. Although I find it unlikely that the centrism-terminology will be abandoned, I end the essay by providing a suggestion for an alternative way to categorise theories in environmental ethics.

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KEYWORDS

Anthropocentrism, non-anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, biocentrism, environmental ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

The distinction between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric theories, together with the more fine-grained distinction between anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism, are probably two of the most frequently occurring distinctions in the environmental ethics literature (and they have also found their way outside the internal environmental ethics debate, to occasionally appear in more general discussions about environmental matters). In this essay I draw attention to some problematic aspects of the terminology used to draw these distinctions: the ‘centrism-terminology’. I believe this terminology to be highly problematic, and the main aim of the essay is to reveal the major reasons behind this belief.

When one finds a certain terminological practice problematic, it may be that one ultimately hopes that this practice will eventually become abandoned. Often, however, that is not likely to happen, and this may very well be the case with the centrism-terminology. The second best option, then, is that people adhering to the practice become aware of its problems, try to be cautious when using the terms in question, and are careful to provide clear definitions of them when they choose to use them. I hope this essay can at least contribute to the latter. I believe that by uncritically using the centrism-terms one does environmental ethics a disservice, and hence this contribution can be seen as a request to writers in various environmental disciplines to steer away from this terminology.

Those who have read some introductions to environmental ethics are probably familiar with the following general picture. Theories in environmental ethics can be divided into three main stances as regards which entities they take to be directly morally important:¹

anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism (of which the latter two are non-anthropocentric theories). According to anthropocentrism, only human beings (or possibly human states or groups of humans) are directly morally important; according to biocentrism, all but only living organisms (or possibly some states of living organisms) are directly morally important; and according to ecocentrism, at least some natural whole (or possibly some states of this whole or these wholes) is directly morally important. While ecocentric theories are holistic, biocentric theories are individualistic (and anthropocentric theories are typically individualistic).²

This is a rough account, and no doubt a generalisation – different textbooks give slightly different characterisations – but generally this is the picture that for instance many new students of environmental ethics meet when they begin to approach the field. As will be apparent throughout the text, I find this account problematic. I believe that it tends to give a distorted picture both of the discipline of environmental ethics and of the various types of theory that feature within it. This is at least partly due to certain problematic aspects of the centrist-terminology used to provide this account, or so I argue. To be more precise, I argue that the centrist-terminology is ambiguous and misleading, and therefore confusing, and that depending on which interpretation it is given, it is also either asymmetric and non-inclusive, or superfluous. I end the essay by providing a suggestion for an alternative way to categorise theories in environmental ethics. But as indicated above, I consider it unlikely that the centrist-terms – being so deeply rooted in the environmental ethical discourse – will be abandoned within a foreseeable future. As already explained, the purpose of this essay is a more modest one, namely, to draw attention to some of the problems pertaining to the centrist-terminology, and, hopefully, to contribute to more caution being shown by environmental ethicists (and others) who still want to use it.

2. AN AMBIGUOUS AND MISLEADING TERMINOLOGY

One of the sources of the problems pertaining to the centrism-terminology is that it is ambiguous in ways that make it confusing. To begin with, ‘anthropocentrism’ (and correspondingly ‘non-anthropocentrism’) is used to denote both ethical views and other kinds of views, especially ontological views (various versions of the idea that humans are, in some sense, at the centre of the world, or the idea that there is a sharp ontological divide between humans and other beings).³ In this essay I am only interested in anthropocentrism as an ethical view, and thus I will leave ontological anthropocentrism (and other possible kinds of anthropocentrism) aside. But even if we look exclusively at ethical anthropocentrism we find ambiguities. A major ambiguity is due to the fact that ‘anthropocentrism’ is sometimes used to denote what Frederick Ferré (1994: 72) has called *perspectival anthropocentrism* – the view that values, reasons, obligations, and so on, are seen from a human perspective –, rather than the *normative anthropocentrism* described above (i.e., the view that only humans are directly morally important). I return to perspectival anthropocentrism in section four. In this section I concentrate on an ambiguity of ‘normative anthropocentrism’.

If one just looks at the terms ‘anthropocentrism’, ‘biocentrism’ and ‘ecocentrism’ (when used in a normative sense), it is easy to get the impression that the role of these terms is to distinguish theories on the basis of what their advocates take to be, in some sense, at the *centre* of moral concern, i.e., what kind of things they take to be *most* important, morally. My own experience from teaching environmental ethics is that many students get this impression (which is natural due to the centrism-component of these terms). However, hardly any authors in environmental ethics (to my knowing) use these terms in this *centrism-interpretation*.

As the centrism-terms are most commonly used – in what we may call their *ordinary interpretation* – ‘anthropocentrism’ refers to views according to which *only* (but not necessarily all) human beings are directly morally important, ‘biocentrism’ refers to views

according to which *all and only* living things (organisms) are directly morally important, and ‘ecocentrism’ refers, roughly, to views according to which *at least some* ‘natural whole’ is directly morally important (some authors may want to reserve the label ‘ecocentrism’ for views according to which natural wholes of some particular kind are directly morally important, usually ecosystems).⁴ Given this ordinary usage of these terms, the expression ‘centrism’ is clearly misleading, for the question of moral importance is here not a matter of degree, but an all-or-nothing thing. To say that a theory is anthropocentric, in this sense, is to say that the only entities that are directly morally important according to this theory are human beings. And to say that a theory is biocentric is to say that this theory restricts moral importance to (all) organisms. It is not the case, according to these theories, that other things than human beings and organisms, respectively, are also morally important, but less so than human beings or organisms; they are not morally important at all. (Proponents of the different centrism may of course hold that within the set of entities which they include as morally important, different entities possess different degrees of moral importance. Thus a biocentrist may think that animals are more morally important than plants, for instance.)

Moving over to ecocentrism, as this term is most commonly used today, an ecocentrist need not hold that some natural whole is at the centre of moral concern, i.e., that some such whole is what is most important, morally. For instance, in the view of one of the most well-known proponents of ecocentrism, J. Baird Callicott, our moral obligations are generated through community relations. According to this view, we belong to many different communities; some small and intimate, such as our family and our circle of friends, and some large and remote, such as humanity as a whole and the whole biotic community. Callicott (1989: 93) uses a wide notion of community, to include families, neighbourhoods, towns, nation-states, ecosystems, etc. He suggests that

we graphically represent the expansion of our moral sensibilities from narrower to wider circles...like the annular growth rings of a tree... In such a figure the inner rings remain visible and present and the outer are added on, each more remote from the center, from the moral heartwood. (Callicott, 1999: 168)

Each community generates its particular moral obligations, where these obligations get stronger the closer to the centre one gets: 'since they are closer to home, they come first' (Callicott, 1989: 58). Hence, one's strongest obligations are to one's family members, while one's weakest obligations are to such nonhuman creatures with which one only shares the biotic community as a whole. It is quite obvious that this ecocentric theory does not put nature, or natural wholes, above human beings (or at least human communities), as regards their direct moral importance. Nature is not at the centre of moral concern.

When the first ecocentric theories were sketched in the 1970s they were often more radical than they are today, and some of them were really *eco-centric* (in the centrism-interpretation, that is). Callicott's own theory at that time is a case in point (e.g. Callicott, 1995 [1980]). But being accused of ecofascism and misanthropy (on account of being ready to sacrifice individuals – even human beings – for the sake of some natural whole), ecocentrists have tended to weaken their theories.⁵ To be an ecocentrist has come to mean roughly that one ascribes direct moral importance to some natural entity that is not itself an organism (in the biological sense of the word). In the centrism-interpretation, several of today's so called ecocentric theories – such as Callicott's – are really anthropocentric, since their advocates hold human beings (or human communities) to be more important, morally, than other things (natural wholes included). Likewise, several biocentrists hold that, although all living organisms are directly morally important to some degree, the more 'developed' an organism is (in some sense of 'developed' taken to be morally relevant), the more important it is from

the moral point of view (perhaps because it is taken to have more, deeper, and stronger interests).⁶ Since human beings are taken to be the highest developed organisms (in the relevant sense), they are also held to have the highest moral importance.

Here I think we have part of the explanation as to why the centrism-terms are not used in the centrism-interpretation. In this interpretation few theories would count as non-anthropocentric, and, more importantly, many philosophers who take themselves to be non-anthropocentrists (several ecocentrists and biocentrists, but also some so called sentientists who think that humans have stronger interests than other sentient beings) would count as anthropocentrists. It is also unclear precisely what kinds of theories would count as anthropocentric on the centrism-interpretation. Would a theory count as anthropocentric only if it took *all* humans to be more important (morally) than all other things, or would it suffice that it took *some* humans to be more important (morally) than all other things? On the other hand, using the centrism-terms in the ordinary interpretation has the arguably undesirable consequence that even a theory ascribing almost negligible direct moral importance to just one natural whole would count as an *ecocentric* theory.

Although few environmental ethicists explicitly use the centrism-terms in the centrism-interpretation (actually, I cannot name one who does), it sometimes lurks in the background, causing confusion. A very recent example where this is apparent can be found in David R. Keller's introduction to environmental ethics in the anthology *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*, which he has also edited. In his account of anthropocentrism Keller states that 'Anthropocentric philosophers are unanimous in agreeing that moral obligations extend only to other humans' (Keller, 2010a: 10). Here 'anthropocentrism' is clearly used in the ordinary interpretation. But on the next page Keller continues:

A simple and straightforward strategy of extending moral considerability to nonhuman biota is to grant intrinsic value to all living things in the natural order. Such an ethic confers more intrinsic value to beings higher in the hierarchy and less intrinsic value to beings lower in the hierarchy. In the natural order, humans are at the top and therefore have the greatest amount of intrinsic value. Such a biocentric ontology and axiology is anthropocentric, but it acknowledges that all beings in the natural order have at least some intrinsic value. (Ibid: 11)

If the term ‘anthropocentric’ is used in the ordinary interpretation in this passage, it seems to be a straightforward contradiction of Keller’s statement from the previous page. If anthropocentrists are unanimous in agreeing that moral obligations extend only to other humans, then, clearly, an axiology according to which all living beings have intrinsic value is not anthropocentric. Hence, ‘anthropocentric’ must be understood in the centrism-interpretation for this passage to make sense, but Keller has given no indication whatsoever that he has changed his use of ‘anthropocentrism’ between these two passages.

There is what many would consider a rather embarrassing circumstance for anthropocentrism (in the ordinary interpretation) which may provide part of the explanation of why several writers, more or less unintentionally, tend to occasionally give ‘anthropocentrism’ a centrism-interpretation. Anthropocentrism in the ordinary interpretation holds that only human beings are directly morally important. This means that we cannot act wrongly towards other animals. If I torture a cat, or even a chimpanzee, I am not doing anything wrong towards the cat or the chimpanzee, according to anthropocentrism – I am not wronging these animals. To the extent that my action is wrong, it is wrong because it harms some human being; me or someone else (some anthropocentric deontologists could perhaps say that there is something wrong with unnecessary destructive actions of this kind, but they

cannot claim that I have a reason to refrain from the action for the sake of the animal that I am about to torture). Are there really modern philosophers who want to defend such a view? Or are those who claim to be anthropocentrists in the ordinary interpretation (who argue against non-anthropocentrism in this interpretation) rather anthropocentrists in the centrism-interpretation?

To sum up, the ambiguity between the centrism-interpretation and the ordinary interpretation makes the centrism-terminology rather confusing, and the fact that the centrism-terms are not typically used to denote theories according to which some things are at the *centre* of ethical concern (or at the centre of anything else) makes the terminology misleading.

3. AN ASYMMETRIC AND NON-INCLUSIVE TERMINOLOGY

The above discussion reveals yet another reason why the distinction between anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism is problematic. In the ordinary interpretation, the distinction conveys a disturbing asymmetry. While anthropocentrism is the view that *only* humans are directly morally important, biocentrism is the view that *all* (and only) organisms are directly morally important. The term 'ecocentrism', finally, is used to cover any theory assigning direct moral importance to *some* natural whole, irrespective of what else it takes to be directly morally important. Different ecocentrists – writers who call themselves ecocentrists – take different things to be directly morally important.⁷

Besides adding to the confusion surrounding the centrism-terms, this lack of symmetry between anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism contributes to making the centrism-terminology non-inclusive. That is to say, there are views (relevant to environmental ethics) that this terminology does not cover. The clearest case of such a view is so called *sentientism*, according to which all and only creatures that possess sentience are directly morally important.⁸ However – even if sentientist theories are sometimes omitted from presentations

of environmental ethics – this non-inclusiveness of the centrism-terminology might be considered a rather small problem (if a problem at all), given that the term ‘sentientism’ is often used by environmental ethicists and others alongside the centrism-terminology in order to refer to such views.⁹ Still, I think this non-inclusiveness conveys a bigger problem:

The distinction between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism – which appears to be one of the most fundamental distinctions in environmental ethics – clearly gives the impression that environmental ethicists are divided into two main camps as regards the question of what entities are directly morally important: anthropocentrists and non-anthropocentrists. But this impression is incorrect. As noted above, an anthropocentrist in the ordinary interpretation is someone who does not assign any direct moral importance whatsoever to any non-human (but who does ascribe it to humans), and very few environmental ethicists subscribe to this view. Rather, those environmental ethicists who are neither biocentrists nor ecocentrists are usually sentientists of some kind. Hence the two main camps in environmental ethics as regards the question of what entities are directly morally important are rather sentientism and non-sentientism. And sentientism, of course, is a type of non-anthropocentrism (whereas anthropocentrism is an expiring kind of view). So even if we can use ‘sentientism’ alongside the terms ‘anthropocentrism’, ‘biocentrism’ and ‘ecocentrism’, this does not help us get rid of the false picture of environmental ethics resulting from the widespread practice of the distinction between non-anthropocentrism and anthropocentrism.

The centrism-terminology may be considered non-inclusive for another reason as well. As stated in the introduction of this essay, the general picture of environmental ethics comprises the view that ecocentric theories are holistic (in an ethically relevant sense). Indeed, most environmental ethicists seem to regard this as more or less a conceptual truth.¹⁰ The problem of non-inclusiveness arises from the fact that, given certain plausible

interpretations of ‘holism’, some of the theories ascribing direct moral importance to natural entities that are not organisms are not holistic. On these interpretations (and under the assumption that ecocentric theories are necessarily holistic) there are non-anthropocentric, non-sentientist theories in environmental ethics which are neither biocentric nor ecocentric, and which consequently are not covered by the centrism-terminology. The interpretations of ‘holism’ that I have in mind here are interpretations according to which an ethical theory is holistic if and only if it takes certain entities to be directly morally important somehow in virtue of their being wholes, or in virtue of their belonging to some whole. Theories that are holistic in this sense explain the direct moral importance of some entities by reference to what we may call *holistic relations*; either relations between parts and whole, or relations between different parts within a whole.

Callicott’s theory is a good example of a theory that is holistic in this sense, since it takes our moral obligations to be generated through community relations (see previous section). Eric Katz (1997: 33ff.) has distinguished between two different holistic models in environmental ethics, both of which represent holism in this sense: *the community model* (of which Callicott’s theory is a version) and *the organism model*. While the community model respects the autonomy of the members of the community (the whole), the organism model views the whole as analogous to an organism, where the parts are nothing but parts; they are not autonomous, but merely elements in the whole (i.e., only the whole may be a bearer of direct moral importance). The reason why it is plausible to consider these models as holistic is that they give an explanatory role to holistic relations in accounting for the direct moral importance of at least some entities.

Now, there are many non-anthropocentric, non-sentientist, non-biocentric theories in environmental ethics which are not holistic in this sense. These are theories according to which certain entities that are not organisms are directly morally important by virtue of

possessing some property (or combination of properties) the possession of which is at most contingently related to the fact that these entities are wholes, or parts of wholes (that is to say, holistic relations do not play an explanatory role in accounting for the moral importance taken to arise as a result of these properties). Examples of such properties are naturalness (e.g. Elliot, 1997; Katz, 1997: part II), complexity (e.g. Elliot, 1997: 61ff.; Samuelsson, 2009: 145ff.), integrity (e.g. Westra, 1994), beauty (see e.g. Carlson and Lintott (eds.), 2008), and the possession of interests (e.g. Rolston, 1988: 98-100, 231; Johnson, 1991).

For some (but certainly not all) of these properties, it may be thought that only so called natural wholes possess them, or even that their instantiation in natural wholes is somehow explained by the fact that their possessor is a whole. But there is no necessary (in any sense) connection between any of these properties and the fact that their possessor is a whole. A non-whole *may* also possess these properties, and to the extent that they give rise to direct moral importance, they do so also when non-wholes possess them. Consider a single organism, such as a plant. A plant may be considered natural, complex, beautiful, or bestowed with integrity or interests, and the possession of any of these properties *may* be taken to give the plant direct moral importance. But when a plant is considered directly morally important because it possesses one or more of these properties, this is not because it belongs to a whole or is related in some way to other entities belonging to some whole. To the extent that its (supposed) moral importance depends on some of these properties, it would possess this moral importance even if it was not related to any whole, or to any other thing.

There is nothing in the fact that a certain whole is a whole that accounts for, or explains, its moral importance (or the moral importance of its parts), when this importance is taken to depend on some of these properties. On an interpretation of 'holism' according to which a theory is holistic if and only if it takes the direct moral importance of some entities to arise as a result of holistic relations, theories that base direct moral importance on some of the

properties listed above are not holistic. Consequently, if ecocentrism implies holism, such theories are not ecocentric either.

Why does this fact pose a problem? As in the case of sentientism, I think it is a weakness of the centrism-terminology if it does not cover a kind of theory held by so many participants in environmental ethical debates. But a more serious problem is that some non-holistic versions of non-anthropocentric, non-sentientist, non-biocentric theories run the risk of being more or less neglected from presentations of environmental ethics (such as introductory books and encyclopaedia entries). Having consulted quite a few such texts I actually think there is such a tendency,¹¹ and yet theories of this kind are common among contemporary environmental ethicists (see the examples listed above). Against this background, I take the holistic connotation of ‘ecocentrism’ to provide at least a weak reason to look for an alternative to the centrism-terminology.¹²

4. A SUPERFLUOUS TERMINOLOGY

The concepts of anthropocentrism, biocentrism, ecocentrism and non-anthropocentrism that I have considered so far are *normative* concepts: the various views they refer to express opinions about which entities are directly morally important (or about the relative strength of the moral importance of some entities).¹³ Sometimes, however, the terms ‘anthropocentrism’ and ‘non-anthropocentrism’ are used in a quite different sense in environmental ethical literature; they are given a *perspectival* interpretation.¹⁴ In this interpretation the distinction between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism is taken to concern the question of what perspective, or point of view, we take (or have to take) when valuing the world around us. The question then is not what is morally important, but from what perspective something is morally important. On this understanding of the centrism-terminology, a theory according to which nature has intrinsic value is still anthropocentric if it holds that this intrinsic value is

acknowledged from a human perspective. Perspectival anthropocentrist Eugene Hargrove (1992: 184) writes, ‘It [“anthropocentric”] simply means “human-centered,” and refers to a human-oriented perspective – seeing from the standpoint of a human being’. To be a perspectival anthropocentrist is thus to believe that all values and reasons are seen, or acknowledged, from a human perspective.

A first thing that we may note about *perspectival anthropocentrism* is that this is not the kind of anthropocentrism that philosophers who call themselves non-anthropocentrists primarily oppose. These philosophers are *normative* non-anthropocentrists, and nothing prevents such non-anthropocentrists from accepting *perspectival* anthropocentrism. Two clear examples of normative non-anthropocentrists who accept perspectival anthropocentrism are Callicott and Robert Elliot. Elliot (1997: 16) defends an indexical theory of intrinsic value which ‘claims, roughly, that a thing has intrinsic value if and only if it is approved of (or would be approved of) by a valuer in virtue of its properties’, and Callicott (1999: 259) suggests that ‘we base environmental ethics on our human capacity to value nonhuman natural entities for what they are’. Of these two environmental ethicists, at least Callicott is generally considered a paradigm case of a non-anthropocentrist, or more specifically, an ecocentrist. But also Elliot is usually placed within the ecocentrist camp. If the concept of anthropocentrism is supposed to belong to the same category as the concepts of ecocentrism and biocentrism, then anthropocentrism has to be the view that only human beings are directly morally important. It is anthropocentrism in this sense that non-anthropocentrists – such as Robin Attfield, J. Baird Callicott, Robert Elliot, Lawrence E. Johnson, Eric Katz, Tom Regan, Holmes Rolston III, Peter Singer, and Laura Westra – oppose. In relation to this point we may further note that ‘anthropocentrism’ and its opposite ‘non-anthropocentrism’ are the only centrism-terms which are occasionally given a perspectival interpretation.¹⁵ I have not seen the terms ‘biocentrism’ and ‘ecocentrism’ used in this way.

Almost needless to say, the perspectival use of ‘anthropocentrism’ (and ‘non-anthropocentrism’) adds to the confusion surrounding the centrist-terms. It is clear that perspectival anthropocentrism is sometimes confused with normative anthropocentrism. For example, in the introduction to anthropocentrism in the anthology *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*, Keller (2010b) lists what he calls five ‘defining features of anthropocentrism’, but he does not include perspectival anthropocentrism among these (actually, he does not mention this sort of anthropocentrism at all). Yet he presents one of the contributions to this anthology – Beckerman and Pasek, 2010 [2001] – as a contemporary defence of anthropocentrism, even though its authors only defend perspectival anthropocentrism, and not normative anthropocentrism (or any of the other five anthropocentric features that Keller lists).

My suspicion is that some philosophers implicitly assume that normative anthropocentrism in some way follows from perspectival anthropocentrism. But no normative claim follows from perspectival anthropocentrism (which is an entirely descriptive view). The fact that all values are seen or acknowledged from a human perspective does not tell us what we have reason to value, or what is valuable. The case is analogous to the case of knowledge. The fact that all (human) knowledge is reached from a human perspective does not tell us what we have reason to believe, or what the world is like. Or consider what we may call *perspectival egocentrism*. The fact that all values that I see or acknowledge are seen or acknowledged from my perspective – which they (trivially) have to be – does not tell me what I have reason to value, or what has value. It certainly does not imply that only I possess value.

This brings us to my main point about perspectival anthropocentrism: that it is inevitable. This is actually also one of the points that some writers using ‘anthropocentrism’ in this sense want to make. Hargrove, for instance, writes:

I do not think that it is possible for humans to avoid being anthropocentric, given that whatever we humans value will always be from a human (or anthropocentric) point of view. Even when we try to imagine what it might be like to have the point of view of (or be) a bat, a tree, or a mountain, in my view, we are still looking at the world anthropocentrically – the way a human imagines that a nonhuman might look at the world. (Hargrove, 1992: 201)

Similar points are made by Ferré (1994: 72), Tim Hayward (1997: 51-2), Onora O’Neill (1997: 127) and Wilfred Beckerman and Joanna Pasek (2010 [2001]: 86).

O’Neill (1997: 127) seems to suggest that realist theories according to which values are objective – i.e. in some sense human-independent – may escape perspectival anthropocentrism, but as Beckerman and Pasek (2010 [2001]: 86) point out,

in some fundamental sense, even objectivists are no less anthropocentric than those who believe that nature has purely instrumental value. For it is simply inevitable that, to whatever view we subscribe about the value of nature, it will always be our human view. There is no other perspective available to us and there is no other perspective that can be adopted in our treatment of the non-human world.

This claim is clearly true, but it is a trivial truth. Obviously, the world can only be seen from some perspective or other, and since the only perspective available to us humans is a human perspective, we can only see the world from that perspective. Who disagrees with that?

The question of whether values are human-independent is different from the question of whether we can escape a human perspective. Even if values *are* human-independent, we can

only see or acknowledge these values from a human perspective (or from a human point of view). (Consider again the analogy with knowledge: one may believe that our knowledge of the world is knowledge of an objective reality but still believe that all knowledge is reached from a human perspective, and thus ‘human-centred’.) Hence perspectival anthropocentrists need not hold that all values are subjective. Perspectival anthropocentrism simply states that (however we should understand the nature of values) values are acknowledged from a human perspective. Hargrove, for instance, argues that most values are independent of human judgement (Hargrove, 1992: 202).

The fact that perspectival anthropocentrism cannot be avoided (by human beings) – not even by moral realists – makes it trivially true. This point is well summarised in the quotation from Hargrove above. Whenever an ethical consideration is made – at least here on earth – it is made from a human perspective; it is seen from the standpoint of a human being. There simply is no room for perspectival non-anthropocentrism in an ethics for human agents. Consequently, the centrist-terminology becomes superfluous in the perspectival interpretation.

The only non-anthropocentrists who could reasonably be said to partly adopt a nonhuman perspective are those who base the direct moral importance of natural entities on their supposed possession of interests. These ethicists have to ask what is in the interests of these entities, from their perspective. But not even these non-anthropocentrists can altogether escape a human perspective. There is a gap to be bridged between the fact that something is in the interests of an entity, and the assertion that this fact matters morally. For this fact to matter morally, it has to provide a moral reason for moral agents to take it into consideration (see further Samuelsson, 2010: 526-9). Such reasons are acknowledged from a human perspective. Again, in the perspectival sense the distinction between anthropocentrism and non-

anthropocentrism turns out to be superfluous. On our planet, an ethical theory cannot be non-anthropocentric in this sense.

But if the perspectival anthropocentrists themselves agree that anthropocentrism in this sense is inevitable, then who am I quarrelling with? No one, really, but the point is that neither are the perspectival anthropocentrists. No one should, or has to, reject anthropocentrism in this sense. Non-anthropocentrism in environmental ethics is normative non-anthropocentrism, not perspectival non-anthropocentrism. Hence, those who defend perspectival anthropocentrism are mostly fighting straw men.¹⁶ If ‘anthropocentrism’ is used in the perspectival interpretation, then who are the non-anthropocentrists that these anthropocentrists disagree with?

As a final critical comment about perspectival anthropocentrism, it seems to me somewhat arbitrary to talk about *anthropo*-centrism given this interpretation. What makes perspectival anthropocentrism trivially true are two facts: (1) that I inherently belong to the group of human beings; (2) that I cannot escape my own perspective. But this means that for any group *X* to which I inherently belong we can form a trivially true perspectival *X*-centrism. I am inherently a mammal, so mammal-centrism (in the perspectival interpretation) is trivially true, and the same goes for organism-centrism, animal-centrism, primate-centrism, and so on. Of course, not all mammals, organisms, animals or primates have a perspective in the relevant sense, but that point applies to human beings as well: for instance, neither newborn babies nor comatose persons possess such a perspective. And some non-humans plausibly do (at least some non-human primates).

It would be less arbitrary to talk about perspectival *ego*-centrism, since it is really *my* perspective that I cannot escape. When it comes to the perspectives of others – in the sense of ‘perspective’ in which it is true that I cannot escape my own (or a human) perspective – the perspectives of other humans are on a par with the perspectives of dogs or apes. One might

also talk about perspectival *valuer*-centrism, since the point of the authors using the term ‘anthropocentrism’ in the perspectival interpretation is that when values are acknowledged, or ‘seen’, they are always acknowledged or seen from the perspective of a valuer (but not necessarily a human valuer, even if it would be true that here on earth only human beings happen to be valuers in the relevant sense).

To conclude, in the perspectival interpretation the distinction between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism is simply superfluous. Perspectival anthropocentrism is trivially true, because we cannot escape our human perspective (just as we cannot escape our mammal perspective, or as I cannot escape my own perspective). But this shows neither that non-humans cannot be directly moral important, nor that values cannot be human-independent. To reserve the centrism-terms for the perspectival interpretation is thus not a viable option, since in this interpretation these terms do not refer to interesting positions.

5. ALTERNATIVES TO THE CENTRISM-TERMINOLOGY?

However problematic one finds the centrism-terminology, it would not be so prevalent in the environmental ethics literature unless it served some important purpose. As far as I can see, this purpose is to provide a tool for classifying theories on the basis of which entities they take to possess direct moral importance. But there are other, less problematic ways to do that than to adopt the centrism-terminology.

To begin with, I think we could often simply replace the distinction between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism with the distinction between sentientism and non-sentientism. There is a clear division between those who believe that sentience is a requisite for direct moral importance and those who do not share this belief (non-sentientism should thus not be understood here as the view that sentience does not matter for questions of direct moral importance, but as the view that sentience is not all that matters). And if we

sometimes need to talk about so called anthropocentric theories, there are many different ways to explain that we are dealing with theories that take direct moral importance to be restricted to humans only. However (as discussed above), since not many philosophers nowadays subscribe to the view that only humans are directly morally important, I take this to be a peripheral question.

Another clear division is to be found between those non-sentientists who take the possession of interests (in a wide sense) to be a requisite for direct moral importance, and those who do not. Virtually all so called biocentrists belong to the former group, but here we also find some philosophers who think that some non-living entities (non-organisms) – such as species and ecosystems – possess morally significant interests (e.g. Johnson, 1991). The latter group consists of those who ground the direct moral importance of some natural entities at least partly on some other property or set of properties than the possession of interests. Holists – in the sense discussed in section three – belong to this group. Here I suggest that we simply talk about interest-based theories and non-interests-based theories. Since this is a distinction within non-sentientist theories we need not add that these theories are non-sentientist when we characterise them.

A third useful distinction is that between individualism and non-individualism, where individualism refers to theories restricting direct moral importance to individual organisms, whereas non-individualist theories assign direct moral importance to at least some natural entity that is not an organism. If we combine these three distinctions with the distinction between holism and non-holism, I think we have resources for generally giving more fine-grained, more relevant, more accurate, and less misleading characterisations of theories in environmental ethics than what the centrism-terminology permits. Although the holism/non-holism distinction – as discussed in section three – is not itself a distinction concerning the kind of entities taken to be directly morally important, I think it is an uncontroversial claim

that those who are called holists in environmental ethics do take some natural whole(s) to possess direct moral importance (at least partly on account of what I have called holistic relations). Hence, saying that a theory in environmental ethics is holistic in this sense implies saying that it is a non-sentientist, non-interest-based, non-individualist theory.

The distinctions drawn above give us the following scheme of theory-types in environmental ethics (EE):

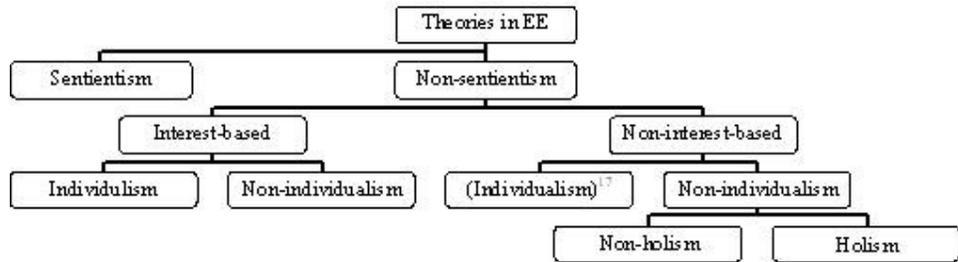


FIGURE 1.

As shown in Table 1 below, these distinctions give us resources for providing labels corresponding roughly to the centrism-terms (except for ‘anthropocentrism’, as explained above).

TABLE 1.

Anthropocentrism	-
Biocentrism	(Interest-based) Individualism ¹⁸
Ecocentrism, when it is not taken to imply holism	Non-individualism
Ecocentrism, when it is taken to imply holism	Holism

While letting us categorise the same types of theory that the centrism-terms are used to categorise, these distinctions together also allow for more specific characterisations. For instance, we can talk about non-individualist non-holism, referring to theories that base the

direct moral importance of nature on such (non-holistic) properties as naturalness, complexity, integrity, and beauty (see the discussion in section three above).

Needless to say, I do not expect all readers to be satisfied with the way of categorising theories in environmental ethics that I have suggested here. But whatever we think of this particular suggestion, we cannot disregard the problems pertaining to the centrism-terminology. This terminology is ambiguous, confusing and misleading, and that is a reason for both writers and teachers of environmental ethics to take a critical stance towards it. Even if you do not want to abandon the centrism-terminology, you should at least take care to sort out the different meanings of the centrism-terms. If ‘anthropocentrism’ refers to ‘seeing from the standpoint of a human being’, then who are the non-anthropocentrists? And if to be a non-anthropocentrist is to ascribe direct moral importance to some nonhuman object, then who are the anthropocentrists?

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NOTES

¹ Usually, when characterising the different ‘centrisms’, writers in environmental ethics use the term ‘intrinsic value’ for expressing *direct moral importance*. I want to avoid this practice

since one can hold something to be directly morally important (morally important for its own sake, or non-instrumentally) without ascribing to it intrinsic value (cf. McShane, 2007: 170-1). The most common alternative to ‘intrinsic value’ is probably ‘moral standing’ (or ‘moral considerability’). Thus Robin Attfield (2003: 192-3), for instance, characterises ecocentrism as ‘the normative stance that holds that ecosystems have a good independent of that of their component individuals, and as such have their own moral standing; and that their attaining or sustaining their good has intrinsic value’. This way of characterising the centrism is common among environmental ethicists who take the possession of (what they take to be) morally significant interests to be a necessary condition for direct moral importance. For the difference between moral standing and intrinsic value, see e.g. O’Neil, 1997. Instead of ‘intrinsic value’ or ‘moral standing’, I use the expression ‘direct moral importance’, which is intended to capture both these terms.

² Some recent examples of introductions to environmental ethics mediating this general picture are Attfield, 2003: 188-9, 192-3; DesJardins, 2006: 150, 273; Jamieson, 2008: 145-53. Another, elucidating account of the centrism along these lines is J. Baird Callicott’s contribution to the entry on ‘Environmental Ethics’ in *Encyclopedia of Bioethics* (Callicott, 1995: 676-83).

³ See, e.g., David Keller (2010b: 59), who distinguishes several views – ontological and ethical – which he claims to be typical for anthropocentrists (at least historically).

⁴ This is roughly how most environmental ethicists seem to use these terms, irrespective of whether they are anthropocentrists, biocentrists or ecocentrists. See, e.g., Norton, 1984: 133; Callicott, 1999: 14-5; McShane, 2007: 170; Keller, 2010a: 10-7; and the works listed in note two above.

⁵ For accusations of ecofascism and misanthropy, see, e.g., Regan, 1983: 361-3. For Callicott’s switch to a weaker ecocentrism, see Callicott, 1995 [1980]: 29-30.

⁶ See, e.g., the accounts of biocentrism given in Palmer, 2003: 19-23, and Keller, 2010a: 11-2.

⁷ Callicott (1999) is primarily arguing that communities, and in particular biotic communities (but also their members), are directly morally important. Robert Elliot (1997), for instance, seems to put the focus on nature areas and nature as a whole. Others, such as Laura Westra (who – to add even more to the confusion – chooses to call herself a biocentrist, although she is clearly an ecocentrist in the ordinary interpretation) focuses primarily on ecosystems (Westra, 1994). In addition, many ecocentrists hold species to be directly morally important (e.g. Johnson, 1991: Ch. 4).

⁸ This is a kind of view held by many participants in environmental ethical debates, e.g., Singer, 1975; Regan, 1983; Thompson, 1990; Jamieson, 1998.

⁹ Separate centrist-terms have also been suggested for theories of this kind, e.g., ‘psychocentrism’ (see, e.g., Keller, 2010a: 11).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Callicott, 1995: 680; DesJardins, 2006: 170; Jamieson, 2008: 149.

¹¹ For instance, some kinds of such theories are very sparsely dealt with (if at all) in Callicott, 1995; Attfield, 2003; DesJardins, 2006; O’Neill et al., 2008.

¹² The problem of non-inclusiveness becomes even more serious when we consider the fact that some environmental ethicists seem to want to reserve the term ‘ecocentrism’ for views holding that *ecosystems* are directly morally important (see, e.g., the quote from Attfield in note one). A theory according to which some natural wholes possess direct moral importance need not include ecosystems among these wholes.

¹³ This is an important point. The question of which centrist one adheres to (when the centrist-terms are used in this normative sense) is not, as is sometimes assumed, a question of how one conceives of value – e.g., whether or not one takes values to be in some sense objective (see further my discussion in Samuelsson, 2010). As Katie McShane (2007: 170) writes: ‘Since anthropocentrism is a normative view, not a metaphysical (or even metaethical)

view, its definition should avoid a commitment to particular metaphysical positions as far as possible’.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Hargrove, 1992; Ferré, 1994: 72; Hayward, 1997: 51-2; O’Neill, 1997; Beckerman and Pasek, 2010 [2001].

¹⁵ These terms also seem to be the only centrism-terms that are sometimes given some non-moral interpretation (e.g. some ontological interpretation).

¹⁶ There may be some exceptions. Some of those who defend the view that some natural entities are directly morally important because they possess interests seem to think that these interests establish values that we do not need a human perspective to acknowledge. See my discussions in Samuelsson, 2009: 91-2, and Samuelsson, 2010: 526-9.

¹⁷ I put ‘individualism’ within brackets here since I do not know of any theory assigning direct moral importance to all and only living individuals for some other reason than their (alleged) possession of interests, but such theories are of course possible.

¹⁸ To the extent that there exist non-interest-based individualist theories, perhaps some people would want to refer to such theories as biocentric. If so, biocentrism rather corresponds to individualism. However, there may also be interest-based individualist theories that take some other set of organisms than the set of *all* organisms to constitute the set of interest-bearers. Such theories would not be biocentric in the ordinary interpretation. However, virtually all existing interest-based individualist theories do take the set of interest-bearers to be identical to the set of all organisms, so, practically speaking at least, (interest-based) individualism corresponds to biocentrism.

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