

---

**This is an electronic reprint of the original article.  
This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.**

**Author(s):** Kortetmäki, Teea

**Title:** Anthropocentrism versus Ecocentrism Revisited: Theoretical Confusions and Practical Conclusions

**Year:** 2013

**Version:**

**Please cite the original version:**

Kortetmäki, T. (2013). Anthropocentrism versus Ecocentrism Revisited: Theoretical Confusions and Practical Conclusions. SATS: Northern European Journal of Philosophy, 14(1), 21-37. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sats-2013-0002>

All material supplied via JYX is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.

Teea Kortetmäki

# Anthropocentrism versus Ecocentrism Revisited: Theoretical Confusions and Practical Conclusions

**Abstract:** One of the hardest questions in environmental philosophy is the debate between anthropocentric and ecocentric accounts of value. I argue that a great deal of the disagreement in this debate arises from a) misunderstanding of the concepts used in the debate and b) unfruitful reading of vaguely framed arguments. The conceptual and argumentative analysis of the debate shows that many arguments can be ignored as they either contain conceptual confusion or concern issues that are actually irrelevant to the centrism division. However, there are arguments that maintain their relevance, and these arguments have important consequences on the practical environmental ethics. Hence, contrary to Bryan G. Norton's optimism about the "centrism convergence" on the level of practical environmentalism, I contend that disagreements prevail even in practice. As a solution, I suggest that the centrism debaters should focus on the practical level and work to find space for agreement.

**Keywords:** anthropocentrism, deep ecology, ecocentrism, environmental philosophy, intrinsic value

---

**Teea Kortetmäki:** University of Jyväskylä, Finland, E-mail: teea.kortetmaki@jyu.fi

## Introduction

One of the most disputed questions in environmental philosophy can be characterized as an intellectual debate between anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches (see, for example, writings in Light & Rolston III 2003 and Keller 2010). The discussion is also known as "anthropocentrism *versus* nonanthropocentrism debate," as the term "ecocentrism" may as well be used to refer to only one variety of nonanthropocentric approaches (others being hierarchical biocentrism, egalitarian biocentrism and psychocentrism).

There is a terminological jungle around the centrism debate and, consequently, many questions have born from the confusing uses of the terminology.

I contend that a multiplicity of arguments presented around the centrism debate are based on either misunderstandings or unfruitful readings of some earlier, vaguely framed arguments. The main purpose of this paper is to clarify the centrism debate and to grasp the real heart of the debate and disagreement: what the centrism debate is about and what it is not. This is done by collecting the central arguments from both approaches and clearing away those arguments that are shown to be either irrelevant to this debate or based merely on terminological confusions.

I will start by clarifying the terminology and basic arguments of those philosophers who can be classified as representatives of the anthropocentric approach. As can be seen, anthropocentrism itself has gone through a revision from its early times. Next, I will give the same treatment to nonanthropocentric philosophers, collecting their arguments and central conceptions. Then, I will compare these argument-concept networks with the aim of pointing out the irrelevant and relevant differences. Finally, I will discuss whether these differences are relevant to practical environmental thinking. I will conclude that the practical differences are still very relevant, but the hope of converging lies in the possibility of seeing the practical disagreements as differences of degree, not as differences of kind. The summary table of the differences can be found in the Practical Conclusions section.

## Making sense of anthropocentrism

In philosophy, an anthropocentric approach is a system of values with emphasis put on humans, but what does this emphasis mean to different philosophers who classify themselves as anthropocentrists? In *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*, David R. Keller suggests the following characterization:

- 1) Anthropocentrists see hierarchy in natural order, where humans are above all other biota. This hierarchy is often both ontological and ethical.
- 2) The first point often results in metaphysical dualism, an ontological divide between humans and other nature. This may be accompanied with soul/body division, where it is held that only humans have souls.
- 3) Other nature is seen mechanistically; it obeys natural laws and is therefore controllable, whereas humans make exceptions because of their free will.
- 4) Humans are the only beings seen as intrinsically (in the meaning of “non-instrumentally”) valuable; other beings and environment can have only instrumental value.
- 5) It is held that human beings constitute the moral community. (Keller 2010, 59.)

However, this characterization is old-fashioned and does not do justice to the anthropocentrism advocated by contemporary environmental philosophers (outside the group of environmental philosophers, there may well be people advocating even the old-fashioned anthropocentrism). This type of human-centered approach should be labeled “old anthropocentrism” to avoid confusion. It was common in earlier times when philosophers treated questions related to nature mainly when they wanted to make arguments justifying the free use of environmental resources and nonhuman beings. For example, Thomas Aquinas saw man as the only possible moral end because man was an image of God and, consequently, other creatures were created to be used and directed by us rational ones (Aquinas 1928 [1264], 88–92). Followers of the same tradition were Descartes, with his machinistic-mechanistic worldview (Descartes 2010 [1985], 69), John Locke, who argued that God gave the earth to mankind for making use of it (Locke 2010 [1698]) and Immanuel Kant, who denied the possibility of animal self-consciousness and argued that animals exist merely as a means to an end, that is, man (Kant 2010 [1930], 82).

Moreover, no matter what views current anthropocentrists actually represent, the previous list does not seem accurate for defining anthropocentrism. Although it is true that anthropocentrism is characterized by a hierarchical attitude towards nature (Keller’s point 1), metaphysical dualism (point 2) can be, at most, a typical but not a defining feature of anthropocentrism, as it is possible to be a monist (or a pluralist) and still maintain that the entities we conceive as other human beings still have moral priority over other conceived beings in all cases. Furthermore, it is possible to reject the mechanistic worldview (point 3) but still advocate anthropocentrism. It is also possible to hold that, if moral community is understood as a community of members who have moral agency, only humans constitute a moral community, but many other creatures, although not members of this community of agency, still have moral standing: that is, one can agree with point 5 in the list, but still be a nonanthropocentrist. Keller’s distinction in his fourth point is also too crude: many people think that virtue, friendship, knowledge, aesthetic qualities, happiness, justice and several matters alike have noninstrumental value. A further distinction is the goodness of states-of-affairs to be promoted, and “worth” and “dignity” of humans as ends in themselves (to be respected).

These days, most of the anthropocentric environmental philosophers either disagree totally with the aforementioned anthropocentrists (Aquinas, Descartes and Kant) in the environmental issues or at least prefer to refine their theories into a new, more environmentally sound direction: an example of the latter are Tom Regan’s works on defending animal rights with arguments that are based on a Kantian account. [Regan’s anthropocentrism is evident when Regan (2009,

xxix) argues that if we had to choose between saving the life of one human or a million dogs, the dogs should in all cases be sacrificed and that increasing the number of dogs in this dilemma makes no difference.] The essential starting point for today's environmental anthropocentrists is a real concern for the environmental situation. They all agree that, currently, our exploitation of nature is excessive, and the situation must be changed. What, then, forms the heart of this new anthropocentrism? A very simple characterization that distinguishes current anthropocentrism from nonanthropocentrism is made by Callicott (1999, 14): anthropocentrists are not willing to attribute intrinsic value to nature (whereas nonanthropocentrists are). This formulation is a clue guiding us in a right direction, but the issue at hand is more complex.

Whereas the old anthropocentrism had its motivation in justifying the free exploitation of nature with philosophical (more or less questionable) arguments, the new anthropocentrism is genuinely concerned about the environmental issues themselves, expressing discontent with the current situation of human exploitation of nature. The best known present-day anthropocentric environmental philosophers are John Passmore, Bryan G. Norton and Eugene Hargrove.

John Passmore, who wrote the first edition of *Man's Responsibility for Nature* in 1974, has been viewed as an unequivocal anthropocentrist. He discusses whether instrumental or intrinsic value arguments are more proper for advocating wilderness preservation, concluding that the intrinsic value argument is difficult to incorporate; in addition, there are many instrumental values that can be attributed to wilderness, and they should be enough for preservation (Passmore 1980, 101–111). In another text, Passmore argues that “very familiar ethical principles are quite strong enough to justify action against ecological despoilers”: new ethics is not needed. Utilitarian arguments for conservation are sufficient (Passmore 2010, 108–109). Passmore states his anthropocentrism very clearly: “an ‘ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the plants and animals growing on it’ [...] would have to be justified by reference to human interests” (Passmore 1980, 187).

Bryan G. Norton argues that environmental ethics cannot be derived from the interests of nonhumans or the interests of future human generations. For Norton, anthropocentrism means the view that only humans are loci of fundamental value, whereas competitive environmental ethics presuppose that non-human entities have value independent of human value. He contends that the ambiguity of the term anthropocentrism has made the centrism debate more important than it actually should be (Norton 2003, 163–164). Norton (1991, 240) supports his anthropocentric approach by maintaining that what is good for mankind in the long run will also be good for nature. He also believes in the

convergence hypothesis, asserting that “if one takes the full range of human values – present and future – into account, one will choose a set of policies that can also be accepted by an advocate of a consistent and reasonable nonanthropocentrism” (Norton 1997, 87).

Norton distinguishes two forms of anthropocentrism: a strongly anthropocentric value theory holds that all valuations are explained by reference to human *felt preferences*, which include any occurring preferences, whether “rational” or not. In contrast, weak anthropocentrism rejects possibly irrational felt preferences and accepts only rationally pondered preferences as relevant. Weak anthropocentrism grants two reasons for protecting nature: first, by emphasizing our close relationships with other species and by suggesting the ideal of a harmonious relationship with the environment and, second, by valuing rational value formation processes to which nature contributes. The ideal of harmony does not need to attribute intrinsic value to natural objects (Norton 2003, 165). Norton argues that the relevant distinction is not between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, but between individualistic and holistic ethics: he suggests that an adequate environmental ethic must be holistic (Norton 2003, 167). He has proposed a value system that focuses on protecting processes and systems instead of individual entities (Norton 2000, 1038–1039). He has also turned his focus to practical environmental philosophy instead of “ideological fight” (the centrism debate), arguing that consensus can be found on the practical level. However, Norton is still clearly an anthropocentrist, which can be seen in his characterization of sustainability; I will return to this point when I compare anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism from the practical environmental viewpoint.

Also, Eugene Hargrove (who himself, interestingly, has had a long debate with Norton about intrinsic values) sees the term ‘nonanthropocentric’ as laden with confusion and definitional problems. He argues that a great deal of the confusion arises from taking nonanthropocentric to mean noninstrumental and anthropocentric to mean instrumental valuing of nature (Hargrove 2003, 175).

Hargrove makes a distinction between two kinds of intrinsic values linked with nonanthropocentric valuing: objectivist and subjectivist accounts of intrinsic value. He finds the subjectivist nonanthropocentric intrinsic value theory of J. Baird Callicott most plausible but argues Callicott’s value theory to be actually a weak anthropocentric intrinsic value theory that he himself is advocating (Hargrove 2003, 176; 182–183). For Hargrove, anthropocentric means human-centered, in a sense referring to a human-oriented perspective, seeing things from the human viewpoint (Hargrove 2003, 175). He then seems to equate anthropocentrism with a subjectivist account of value and nonanthropocentrism with an objectivist account of value (as he categorizes Callicott as an anthropocentrist based on Callicott’s subjectivist account of value). For me, it seems

that, at this point, the problems of Hargrove's distinction become clear. John O'Neill has shown, with plausible argumentation I contend, that it is a fallacy to equate objectivist and subjectivist accounts of value with anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism (O'Neill 2010, 120–124). The metaethical question of whether values can exist with or without human-oriented valuing processes is not at the heart of the centrism debate; indeed, it seems to be rather irrelevant to the debate. Although I agree with Hargrove on the issue that identifying anthropocentrism with instrumentalism may be too straightforward, I disagree with his proposal that we are all necessarily anthropocentric because of the subjectivism of our valuation and human viewpoint in observing the world. The same point applies also to the argumentation of Drenthen (2011), where it is claimed that ecocentrism is actually an extreme form of anthropocentrism because it believes in absolute validity of the concepts that actually arise from human perspective.

One ethical distinction must be made at this point to minimize the possible sources of confusion between centrisms. Ethical issues contain a vast amount of questions that are intrahuman in their very nature: questions like “can it be morally right to lie in certain occasions?” or “should we keep our promises?” don't always have any particular environmental consequences in themselves. From the viewpoint of environmental problems and sustainable lifestyle, they are irrelevant although they have relevance in our social sphere. This part of ethics could be labeled as *social ethics*: issues within the social ethics sphere are intrahuman, and discussing this area of ethics is at least anthropocentered, already by its definition *social*. This point is rather obvious, but it must be mentioned here to avoid the misunderstanding that nonanthropocentrists would blame someone for being anthropocentric if one even discussed the issues belonging to this sphere. This distinction has also important implications concerning the problem of ecofascism, which nonanthropocentrism is sometimes accused of; this question will be discussed later in this paper.

The above-presented variations of new anthropocentrism, advocated by John Passmore, Bryan G. Norton and Eugene Hargrove, have both differences and similarities. They all show real concern about environmental problems, and they agree that all possible human preferences justify actions that harm the environment: preferences must be considered in some way. Differences between these philosophers can be found in the detailed questions of intrinsic value (Hargrove advocates a possibility of nonanthropocentric intrinsic value, although he claims it is actually weak anthropocentric intrinsic value). They also ground their ethics in different schools: Passmore is a utilitarian, Hargrove advocates virtue ethics and Norton is an environmental pragmatist.

As O'Neill has argued, the metaethical question of an objectivist *versus* subjectivist account of value is on another level; it can lead to both accepting and

denying intrinsic value and, hence, does not belong in our inquiry concerning the centrism debate. I will therefore ignore it here.

New anthropocentrism does not pronounce the special position of humans as strongly as its “predecessor,” old anthropocentrism. However, the traces of the special position belief can be seen clearly in certain passages such as in one of Passmore’s: “I treat human “interests” as paramount. I do not apologise for that fact” (Passmore 1980, 187). Likewise, Norton (2003, 163–164) contends that nonhuman or future generation interests cannot be taken into account in ethics. Overall, human interest prioritization or nonhuman interest dismissal is constitutive to new anthropocentrism.

Another common denominator for the anthropocentrism of today is the type of argumentation that is seen to oblige us to care for the environment. Passmore’s approach favors familiar utilitarian fashion: the interest in our own well-being gives rise to environmental obligations, as we are currently using resources and ecosystem services in unsustainable ways. To ensure our own maximum well-being (or preference-satisfaction), measures need to be taken. This utilitarian-type line of arguments is based on the interest of one’s own benefit and advantage. Norton’s convergence argument presented earlier is rather similar: it pleads in the first place to our long-term human values (Norton 1991, 240). Environmental obligations are justified by what is either good for humans or good of humans: in other words, anthropocentric concern for the environment arises distinctively from human-oriented motivations.

I suggest that the argumentative heart of the present anthropocentrism (more exactly, environmental anthropocentrism) is the following:

- 1) We should view ourselves as (responsible) managers of the biotic community.
- 2) An appeal to the interests of present and future humans ensures adequate environmental ethics.
- 3) Humans are prioritized in ethical issues, but there is a limit to what extent environmentally damaging action is justified.
- 4) Natural objects do not have intrinsic value that is independent of their value for humans.
- 5) Some (sentient) animals may have moral standing; nature does not have it.

## Making sense of nonanthropocentrism

Among the first philosophers that could be called the proponents of a nonanthropocentric worldview are Stoics, for whom nature and living in agreement



with it (in addition to God-as-nature metaphysics) were crucial. However, considering the thinkers who have discussed specifically nonanthropocentrism in the environmental framework, pioneers of the field are Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold, whose land ethic has often been considered as the first draft of holistic ecocentrism: it could be said that he wrote environmental ethics before such a discipline was acknowledged (Callicott 1999, 7). Much has happened since Leopold: nowadays, the umbrella of nonanthropocentrism covers a looser group of different ethical approaches, and it is necessary to explore this field to get an idea of what is common for the approaches that label themselves nonanthropocentric.

One difference between varieties of nonanthropocentrism can be found in the scope of moral considerability: the focus can be either on individuals or on systems (species or ecosystems). Keller (2011) labels individualistic nonanthropocentrism polycentrism and more holistic approach ecocentrism.

Polycentrism, or biocentrism, can be divided into egalitarian and hierarchical forms. Hierarchical biocentrism is a form of polycentrism in which all organisms are considered as able to be valuable both intrinsically and instrumentally (Ferré 2010, 159). This view is advocated by Frederick Ferré, who has labeled his approach as an organismic worldview. This approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of the organisms and is, in that sense, holistic, but it retains individuals as the centers of intrinsic value (Ferré 2010, 160). The term hierarchical means that more weight is put on certain properties of the organisms than on others, and this leads to hierarchical differences. For Ferré, this property is complexity, as can be seen when he argues for the justification of eating clams: “It is reasonable to hold that the intensity, complexity, intrinsic satisfactoriness of the clam-eating person’s gustatory experience is immensely richer than the general glow of organic well-being that may pervade the interior psychological life of the undisturbed clam” (Ferré 2010, 160). The hierarchy that is based on the organism’s complexity is closer to anthropocentrism than egalitarian nonanthropocentrism. If there is a possibility that an anthropocentrist can also attribute intrinsic (in the sense of non-instrumental) value to nonhumans, then Ferré’s view becomes even closer to the anthropocentrism. Some egalitarian biocentrists hold that biocentrism means commitment to species egalitarianism (Sterba 2011, 167), and in their view, Ferré may be viewed as an anthropocentrist. Yet, I do consider Ferré as a nonanthropocentrist because of his emphasis on the organismic interconnectedness and the intrinsic value of nonhuman beings. His arguments may also receive more acceptance among certain types of anthropocentrists who feel too concerned about the consequences of egalitarianism.

Egalitarian biocentrism, defended by, for example, Paul W. Taylor and James P. Sterba, is different in the sense that every living entity possesses the

same intrinsic value, although in conflicting situations the basic needs of humans can override the basic and nonbasic needs of other beings (Sterba 2010, 184–188). Sterba has been categorized as polycentric because he contends that basic needs are individual rights; yet he also holds that, in many cases, we are justified in acting on holistic grounds (Sterba 2010, 188–189). Although the main focus is on individuals, polycentrists may also recognize the worth of totalities.

Polycentrists' main antipathy for "pure holists" concerns situations where the good of species (or community or ecosystem) is always prioritized over the good of individuals: as Frederick Ferré puts his argument, holistic and egalitarian biocentrism can lead in terrible directions such as exterminating excess people (to enhance the situation of ecosystems and other species), the worst of which could be called ecofascism (Ferré 2010, 155–156). This doubt is legitimate when prioritization of the totalities is not only *prima facie* but absolute in its nature. Holistic, rights-dismissing utilitarianism could actually lead to the horrors mentioned by Ferré. Yet, it is unclear whether any proponents of holistic environmental ethics would actually support this view: at least I have not found any environmental philosopher who supports ecofascism.

Holistic nonanthropocentrism, or ecocentrism, was introduced to the philosophical community by Aldo Leopold, whose land ethic in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949/1960) was one of the cornerstones of environmental philosophy. Leopold's main critique of anthropocentric attitude is that its nature-relation is merely economic; consequently, we seem to ignore the welfare of those beings and things in nature that don't have any direct economic value to us. Ecological conscience can awaken our feelings of responsibility toward nature also where we don't have economic motives for responsibility. (Leopold 2010, 193–201.) The central idea in Leopold's ethics is that humans ought to view themselves primarily as members of the biotic community instead of separate human society; this gives rise to real concern for other beings and ecosystems. As Callicott interprets Leopold, the land ethic is both holistic and individualistic; thus, the "danger of ecofascism" critique expressed by Ferré and Regan does not hit its target (Callicott 2001, 120–121).

Callicott has answered the ecofascism critique with the following arguments. First, the land ethic is not a substitute, but an addition to our human ethics (labeled earlier as social ethics in this article): this is analogous to the fact that we may be both citizens and family members, but the latter does not imply rejecting the laws and morals of the republic. Second, Leopold does not discuss only holistic entities but mentions also the fellow members of the land community: in other words, the individuals are considered in his thinking (Callicott 1999, 68–71).

Despite the fact that Leopold was the pioneer in nonanthropocentrism, his significance for my paper is not as important as Callicott's, who has continued to develop the ideas of Leopold. The reasons for Leopold's insignificance are mostly historical: before Leopold's time, there were hardly any environmentally oriented philosophers, and consequently no new-anthropocentric environmental philosophers either. Leopold's critique was directed toward people who represented the old-fashioned anthropocentrism, and consequently the context of his works is partly different.

One of the best known proponents of modern ecocentric philosophy is Arne Næss, who did remarkable work on building the basic framework for deep ecology and formulating the environmentalist principles philosophically. Deep ecology has strong connections with ecological knowledge (at the same time acknowledging our limited ecological knowledge) and idea of interconnectedness in nature (Næss 1989, 26–28; 78–80). When nature's interconnectedness is correctly acknowledged, it gives rise to a holistic approach. Næss compares deep ecology to "shallow ecology," practice-as-usual: shallow ecology has the objectives of combating pollution and the depletion of natural resources, but those objectives are isolated from the broader problems mankind has concerning the ways of life, economic systems and power structures; shallow ecology also views and treats whole entities such as rivers and ecosystems in a fragmentary way (Næss 2001, 192–195). Deep ecology can be said to have two dimensions or forms: as a movement, it is more loosely formulated and consists of environmentalists who urge "deeper" and stronger reactions to environmental problems. As a philosophical framework, it contains sharper formulations and principles.

According to Warwick J. Fox, deep ecology in the movement sense is actually an umbrella term that covers all ecocentric environmentalists: in other words, the deep ecology movement is practically synonymous with ecocentric movement (Hay 2002, 42). At this point, I do not take a stand on whether we can here identify ecocentrism with deep ecology; other ecocentric thinkers need to be explored first.

Warwick J. Fox diverged himself slightly from the deep ecology framework, but, strongly influenced by it, he has created holistic environmentalism that he calls "transpersonal ecology." Like Næss, Fox was strongly impressed by Spinoza's notions of self-realization. In self-realization, one realizes his wider Self, that is, actually the whole universe. For Næss, "the diversity of different individuals and approaches remains, as we share and shape our connections to the larger." We are not dissolved in the larger Self, but we see other people and other forms of life as also being parts of ourselves (Næss & Rothenberg 1989, 9–10). In his transpersonal ecology, Fox emphasizes the *trans-* prefix as referring

to extension of the self that goes *beyond* individuality: this transformation is concerned “with *opening* to ecological awareness; with realising one’s ecological, wider, or big Self; or [...] the this-worldly realisation of as expansive a sense of self as possible” (Fox 1990, 198). When the expansion of the self takes place, there is no need for altruism appeals anymore as the self-realizer identifies him/herself with nature and other persons and wants to treat them accordingly. Consequently, the arising feeling of responsibility toward the world follow then “naturally,” not in a logical but in a psychological sense (Fox 1990, 247). Yet, even in this case, there may actually emerge conflicts “within the self”; the idea of self-realization does not in itself resolve how to handle situations where interests conflict.

The holistic nonanthropocentrism, as represented here, puts emphasis on the whole systems, but as can be seen both in all discussed writings, it does not reject the moral significance (or rights) of individuals. Individual beings ought to have possibilities to flourish, for species could not flourish without flourishing individuals; individuals are the constituents of the ecosystem and possess intrinsic value as well (Glasser 2001, 207). Hence, individual flourishing is not irrelevant for the whole system. As was earlier shown, the individualist nonanthropocentrism, or polycentrism in Keller’s terms, are willing to avoid holism because they fear that this view rejects individual rights and leads to ecofascism. This seems to be an understandable but unnecessary fear, as well as a confusing one: I attempted to show here how holistic approaches often consider also individuals to some extent, and how many of the individualistic approaches also value the wholes; the distinction between polycentrism (containing biocentrism) and ecocentrism is partly misleading. Although a distinction can be made – ecocentrism emphasizing more the values of totalities, and polycentrism emphasizing the individuals – the interests are partly overlapping, and often the term “ecocentrism” is used to refer also to polycentrism (Drenthen 2011). As both approaches can give the whole biosphere non-instrumental value, favor the whole biosphere’s flourishing and value the existence and well-being of other species as well, I will call them both ecocentric as opposed to anthropocentric system of values.

Based on the main arguments represented, I suggest that the argumentative heart of the present nonanthropocentrism can be summarized in the following theses:

- 1) We should view ourselves as members of the biotic community.
- 2) An appeal to human interests alone does not ensure adequate environmental ethics.
- 3) Humans have no prerogative to use the environment in a way that hinders the flourishing of other forms of life and other species.

- 4) Nonhuman forms of life also have intrinsic (noninstrumental) value.
- 5) Other life forms than animals also have moral standing.

## Theoretical confusions

The first confusion concerning the centrism debate was the one I mentioned at the beginning of this paper: Keller uses anthropocentrism to refer merely to the old anthropocentrism, characterized by grand hierarchy, dualism between human and nonhuman nature, a mechanistic worldview and seeing only humans as worth of moral consideration (Keller 2011, 59). This could almost be called an anachronistic fallacy, as the forementioned views are not present in current environmental philosophical debate. Hence, this type of division adds nothing to the centrism discussion.

Another conceptual confusion that is used to defend anthropocentrism is the view that as we can have only a human viewpoint, we are always anthropocentric. This is the criticism Beckerman and Pasek profess: “Since ‘anthropocentric’ simply means ‘seen from the standpoint of a human being’, then all views about the status and value of nature are equally anthropocentric” (Beckerman & Pasek 2010, 86). They also show how deep ecology, often presented as the flagship of the nonanthropocentrism, is fundamentally anthropocentric, letting human interests step in. Deep ecology states that humans have a right to reduce other life’s richness only to satisfy their vital needs, and according to Beckerman and Pasek (2010, 85), “the ‘vital needs’ to which reference is made are, presumably, the vital needs of human.” My answer to this is twofold: first, it is rather provocative and simplifying to claim that “anthropocentric” “just means simply something,” as the ongoing debate has produced so many understandings of it. Second, concerning the vital needs mentioned in deep ecology: how else could this restriction be expressed? Would it be nonanthropocentrism that humans ought to act only to satisfy the vital needs of bats or ferns? Well, surely this would not be anthropocentrism, but neither ecocentrism; it would be batism or fernism. It is true that we look at things from our human bodies and viewpoint, but the nonanthropocentrists have not made this criticism toward anthropocentrism.

The two abovementioned issues are the clearest points of conceptual confusion within the centrism debate. They are not serious within the debate; I hope they will be dismissed in the future discussion as unfruitful as they do not raise any disagreements. However, real points of disagreement still exist. I will now discuss their practical consequences.

## Practical conclusions

Anthropocentrism has been shown to be characterized by the centrality of humans, relevance being not in the human viewpoint toward the world, but in the tendency to prioritize human preferences over nonhuman ones and to question the noninstrumental value of nonhumans. Moreover, motivation and arguments for environmental concern are human-oriented. Anthropocentric environmentalists argue usually that we are justified to use nature according to our preferences as long as the criteria of environmental sustainability are fulfilled. The notion of “sustainability” is defined in anthropocentric ways: it refers to maintaining nature, climate, pollution levels and the renewable natural resources in a condition that allows and supports human flourishing, now and in the future. The Brundtland Commission’s path-breaking but thoroughly anthropocentric report defines sustainability in the following way: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The needs referred to are needs of the people, especially the needs of the world’s poor.<sup>1</sup> Another example of the human-centeredness of anthropocentrism’s sustainability conception comes from Norton, who has tried to overcome the centrism debate merely by turning his focus on the practical side: “A set of behaviors is thus understood as sustainable if and only if its practice in generation  $m$  will not reduce the ratio of opportunities to constraints that will be encountered by individuals in subsequent generations  $n, o, p$ ” (Norton 2005, 97–98). This definition would still allow us to decrease environmental diversity a great deal, as far as the human generations are able to live with that decrease.

In contrast to anthropocentrism, ecocentrism is then characterized by the centrality of ecosystems or the biosphere, varying degrees of egalitarianism between species and valuing the nonhuman species, ecosystems and life itself regardless of its use-value for us. Reasons for environmental concern arise not only out of human interests, but also from seeing the biotic community as having a moral standing in itself. The difference from anthropocentrism is obvious when we consider the notion of “sustainability” in an ecocentric sense: as all life forms<sup>2</sup> and their flourishing are valuable in themselves, exploiting nature

---

<sup>1</sup> From A/42/427. Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Available from <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm#I> (accessed April 14, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Some exceptions apply: it is nowadays widely accepted that certain harmful life forms such as some viruses and bacteria ought not to flourish, the main reason being their very negative influence on the flourishing of other life forms.

cannot be called sustainable when it threatens the flourishing of other life forms and species, though not yet human flourishing. This argument has practical implications also to climate policy: at the moment some emission mitigating practices (for example, producing certain types of biofuel crops) can be accepted by anthropocentrists due to their carbon emission mitigating impacts, but ecocentrism cannot accept a practice that so greatly reduces biodiversity in the crop area and, in addition, is merely a short-sighted tool that does not advance changing the unsustainable practices that actually cause the problems.

It must be noted that the idea of considering all life forms as valuable does not lead to a risk of paralysis in conflicting ethical situations in the way Norton (1991, 224) ponders. An analogue: if an anthropocentric considered all humans to have an equal right to flourish (and I think he does), he would surely be able to make some ranking of interests and importance, even in the more severe interest conflict situations. The *prima facie* principle of egalitarianism between species does not lead to the inability to solve conflicts. Ecocentrism can solve the dilemma in the way Sterba suggested, the general principle being that human nonbasic needs cannot override the basic needs of other species in general. This principle leads to a more radical concept of sustainability and environmental ethics than the general moral principles of anthropocentric environmentalism.

The abovementioned descriptions of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are still far from exclusive. As was seen, there are anthropocentrists who place non-instrumental value on nonhuman beings; there are also ecocentrists who argue for hierarchy in ethics (Frederick Ferré to mention). This point makes an argument that suggests we probably should see the definitions of centrism as concepts in the way Wittgenstein saw the words in general: they may not have exact borders and they cannot be defined exhaustively, but they are still useful for discussion. Hence, we may be unable to categorize some borderline cases like Ferré's value system in a neat way to the anthropocentrism–ecocentrism categories. Yet we understand that, in general, ecocentrism strives for the view that we must consider the nonhuman needs and other species so important that human nonbasic needs cannot override them by default, even if the anthropocentric criteria of sustainability were met. The anthropocentric conception of sustainability, sustaining the earth suitably for human life to flourish now and in the future, is not enough for ecocentrism.

My concluding view of the main characteristics of both centrism, their differences and the issues that are irrelevant in comparison are given in Table 1.

Although many of the centrism debate arguments could be rejected as being based on conceptual confusions or misreading the arguments from ecocentrists, one point of disagreement is left: the question of how we ought to

**Tab. 1:** Differences between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism.

Anthropocentrism		Ecocentrism
<b>Defining features</b>		
Humans are managers of the biotic community		Humans are members of the biotic community
Human interests define adequate ethical principles		Good of the biotic community defines adequate ethical principles
Humans are ethically prioritized, but there is a limit to what extent environmental damage is justified		Humans have no prerogative to use environment in a way that hinders the flourishing of other species
Environment is valued for its value to humans (yet, the value may be other than instrumental)		Life forms and ecosystems are valued in themselves, regardless of their value to humans
Brundtlandian definition of sustainability involving only human generations		Notion of sustainability involves other life forms and whole ecosystems
<b>Other typical yet non-defining features</b>		
Individualism		Holism
Viewing environmental problems separately: climate change, biodiversity issues, erosion ...		Seeing environmental problems comprehensively as a consequence of an unsustainable lifestyle
<b>Extreme forms</b>		
Techno-optimistic resource exploitation		Ecofascism/totalitarianism
<b>Differences in practical issues</b>		
Sustainability Accepts still increasing land use		Demands decreasing land use, promoting diversity
Climate change	Aims to restrict warming to a level sustainable for humans	Sets stricter limits for tolerated warming levels than what human sustainability demands
Climate actions	Accepts solutions that may threaten diversity (e.g., fuel crops)	Rejects climate-friendly but diversity-hostile solutions
Population	Accepts growth as long as human sustainability is secured	Tolerates no population growth and demands decrease
<b>Issues irrelevant to the centrism debate</b>		
Human viewpoint in observing and experiencing the world		
Question whether entity <i>x</i> can have rights		
Objectivist <i>versus</i> subjectivist accounts of value		
Holism <i>versus</i> individualism		
Extension of the self (possible within both centrisms)		
Sentientism (possible within both centrisms)		



consider what type of action can be conceived as sustainable and at what level is the threshold of unsustainability. This disagreement is not merely theoretical: as sustainability is currently the key criterion for evaluating policies from the environmental viewpoint, this difference between centrism extends to the practical policymaking level. Hence, on these grounds, the convergence Norton suggests is still not clear. However, as the disagreement in the practical level can be viewed as concerning the threshold of unsustainability, it can be argued to be a difference of degree, not a difference of kind. Through constructive negotiations oriented to practical issues, there may be space for reaching agreement between both centrism – but it may require a more ambitious understanding of sustainability among the anthropocentric environmentalists.

## References

- Aquinas, T. 1928. *The Summa Contra Gentiles* (Part II, Book 3, Chapter CXII). London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne. Originally published in 1264.
- Beckerman, W. and Pasek, J. 2010. "In Defense of Anthropocentrism." In D. R. Keller (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 83–88.
- Callicott, J. B. 1999. *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Callicott, J. B. 2001. "Holistic Environmental Ethics and the Problem of Ecofascism." In M. E. Zimmerman, J. B. Callicott, G. Sessions, K. J. Warren and J. Clark (eds.) *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 111–125.
- Descartes, R. 2010. "Nonhumans as Machines." In D. R. Keller (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 69–72.
- Drenthen, M. 2011. "Ecocentrism as Anthropocentrism." *Ethics, Policy and Environment* 14: 151–154.
- Ferré, F. 2010. "Persons in Nature: Toward an Applicable and Unified Environmental Ethics." In D. R. Keller (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 154–161.
- Fox, W. 1990. *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*. Boston/London: Shambhala Publications.
- Glasser, H. 2001. "Demystifying the Critiques of Deep Ecology." In M. E. Zimmerman, J. B. Callicott, G. Sessions, K. J. Warren and John Clark (eds.) *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 204–217.
- Hargrove, E. 2003. "Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value." In A. Light and H. Rolston III (eds.) *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*. Cornwall: Blackwell Publishers, 175–190.
- Kant, I. 2010. "Indirect Duties to Non-humans." In edited by D. R. Keller (ed.), *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 82–83.
- Keller, D. R. (ed.) 2010. *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

- Leopold, A. 2010. "The Land Ethic." In D. R. Keller (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 193–201.
- Light, A and Rolston III, H. (eds.) 2003. *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*. Cornwall: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Locke, J. 2010. "Nature as Economic Resource." In David R. Keller (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 77–81.
- Næss, A. 1989. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*. D. Rothenberg (ed. and trans.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Næss, A. 2001. "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects." In M. E. Zimmerman, J. B. Callicott, G. Sessions, K. J. Warren and J. Clark (eds.) *Environmental philosophy: from Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 185–203.
- Norton, B. G. 1991. *Toward Unity among Environmentalists*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Norton, B. G. 1997. "Convergence and Contextualism: Some Clarifications and a Reply to Stevenson." *Environmental Ethics* 19: 1: 87–100.
- Norton, B. G. 2000. "Biodiversity and Environmental Values: In Search of a Universal Earth Ethics." *Biodiversity and Conservation* 9: 8: 1029–1044.
- Norton, B. G. 2003. "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism." In A. Light and H. Rolston III (eds.) *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 163–174.
- Norton, B. G. 2005. *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- O'Neill, J. 2010. "The Varieties of Intrinsic Value." In D. R. Keller (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 103–110.
- Passmore, J. 1980. *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*. 2nd ed. London: Duckworth.
- Passmore, J. 2010. "Attitudes to Nature." In D. R. Keller (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 103–110.
- Regan, T. 2009. "The Case for Animal Rights." In S. M. Cahn (ed.) *Exploring Ethics: An Introductory Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sterba, J. P. 2010. "Kantians and Utilitarians and the Moral Status of Nonhuman Life." In D. R. Keller (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 182–192.
- Sterba, J. 2011. "Biocentrism Defended." *Ethics, Policy and Environment* 14: 167–169.