

## Biocentric Ethics: Some Pitfalls

Idorenyin Francis Esikot<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Arts, Department of Philosophy, University of Uyo

**Abstract:** Biocentric ethics has incorporated non-human beings into the ethical cum moral sphere. This it has done by granting them moral status and moral relevance. This paper argues against this attempt. It holds the view that to have a moral status one must have a moral sense which consist in rationality, intentionality and responsibility. It concludes that the duty to preserve the environment is more of an ecological rather than a moral one.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Biocentric Ethics, Morality, Moral Sense

### 1. Introduction

Ethics like other fields of study is not static but increasingly saddled with new challenges brought to the fore by the quest in other disciplines as well as by its desire for a better understanding of man and his environment. The result has been the widening of its scope and its concern, such that of recent, some ethicists have contended that it does not merely cover human conducts, but have effects on other non-human beings hitherto not regarded as having any unique moral relevance.

The biocentric theory thus marks a remarkable and radical change in the way the world and our place in it is viewed. The biocentric outlook affirms our fellowship with other living creatures and portrays human beings not only as members of the universal community but of similar or equal moral standing with other living creatures hitherto denied every moral attributes and status.

Nature therefore, does not exist to be used by humans as they deem fit, but that humans are simply one specie among others with similar entitlements. All life is to be regarded as having inherent value at least for the reasons of being part of the biotic community and for being moral agents. Paul Taylor (1986) captures this point succinctly thus, "whatever the species may be, none is thought to be superior to another and are held to be equal to consideration" (p.79). A worthwhile biocentric ethics is thus tied to equal respect for lives, human and non-human.

This paper is an attempt to re-examine the biocentric thesis and the assumptions upon which it rest. It aspires also to examine the moral efficacy of these assumptions in view of the moral prescriptions derivable from them. Finally, it attempts to point out some of the moral deficiencies arising from a tenacious defense of these assumptions. To accomplish these goals the paper shall elucidate briefly some key concepts, discuss the central thesis

of biocentric ethics, examine its assumptions and indicate some of its pitfalls.

### 2. Conceptual Clarifications

According to Daniel Bronstein et al (1972) ethics is:

...the general principles which are assumed in coming to a decision, as to what choice among alternative courses of conduct one ought to make. These are the subject matter of ethics or moral philosophy. (pp. 130-131).

It follows from this view that ethics is concerned with the principles of right and wrong conduct and what alternatives, if any, are available. In this sense, our viewpoints are as relevant as our actions, since the former may be a moral propellant to the latter and vice-versa. Ethics is concerned not only with the practical consequences of our conduct but more importantly, on how we decide or ought to decide on any issue.

This is consistent with Aristotle's advocacy for practical philosophy against a subject of mere intellectual interest. According to Aristotle as quoted by Feinberg (1985):

...we are not concerned to know what goodness essentially is, but how we are to become good men, for this alone gives the study its practical value. We must apply our minds to the solution of the problems of conduct (p. 423).

Ethics as a branch of philosophy is thus concerned with the determination of the rightness and wrongness of human actions and the various implications of such decisions. It concerns some rational criteria by which actions are evaluated as right or wrong, good or bad.



Idorenyin Francis Esikot (Correspondence)



access.esikot@gmail.com



+2347065379343

Biocentric Ethics on the other hand is a life-centred ethics. It views all life as possessing intrinsic value. It accepts the moral significance of all living creatures and gives them equal moral consideration whenever decisions are at stake. It is an ethical viewpoint that asserts that non human species have inherent value which demands their treatment in line with this fact. In other words, human beings are not superior to other species of nature in a moral or ethical sense.

Although Mouchang and Lei in their article “Biocentric Ethical Theories” are of the opinion that biocentric ethics is a specific ethical theory which calls for a rethinking of the relationships between humans and nature while biocentricism encompasses all living things in nature, both concepts shall be used interchangeably in this discourse. Not only is it difficult to see the dire need for such conceptual bifurcation but that such position is akin to a similar effort in the history of ethics to raise intellectual quibbles on the moral distinction between consequentialism and consequentialist ethics. Biocentric ethics in this discourse is an ethical theory that evaluates natural things from the fact of their having life. It sees everything that has life as possessing inherent value and is best describe as an attitude of life, therefore, characterized by what Albert Schweitzer its earliest proponent calls “reverence for life”.

The basic tenet of biocentric ethics is encapsulated in the view that all living creatures have a good of their own and a moral standing that makes their flourishing or attainment of their good intrinsically valuable. The recognition of such status in a sense is to be viewed as a moral imperative. In summary, biocentric ethics incorporates the following views:

- (i) Humans and all other living species are members of the biotic community.
- (ii) All species are part of a system of interdependence.
- (iii) All living organisms have a good which they pursue in their inherently unique way.
- (iv) Human beings are not inherently superior to other living creatures or forms of life. To shade further light on our subject matter, we shall consider (though briefly) the views of some precursors of biocentric ethics.

### 3. Some Notable Precursors of Biocentric Ethics

There is no doubt that much of Western philosophical tradition has been human centred (anthropocentric). Value has been conceived in terms of what has worth for humans unlike Buddhism and Taoism where ethical theories also attempt to delineate rules and

principles relating to humans and nature. A notable exception to this anthropocentricism however, is Albert Schweitzer whose philosophy emphasized both the value of non-human forms of life and human obligation to protecting and conserving these forms of life. Hence, Schweitzer’s “reverence for life” principle was a precursor of modern biocentric ethics (although some historians have also traced the origin of biocentric philosophy to Charles Darwin’s ecological thoughts).

For example Donald Worster traces today’s biocentricism philosophies which he sees as part of a recovery of a sense of kinship between man and nature, to the reaction by the British intelligencia of the Victorian era against the Christian ethics of dominion over nature. He points to Charles Darwin as an important spokesman for the biocentric view and quotes from Darwin’s notebook on *Transmutation of Species* (1837). This publication some have argued had biocentric undertone by introducing evolution and removing humans from their supernatural origin, and placing them in the framework of natural laws.

Whatever implication Darwin’s view had on man-nature relations, Schweitzer made it more effective when he asserts thus:

Ethics is nothing other than reverence for life. Reverence for life affords me my fundamental principle of morality namely, that good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil (Online).

In other words, reverence for life is the fundamental axiom of morality. Schweitzer argues that in nature what reverence for life demands accords with the ethical principle of love. According to Mouchang and Lei, for Schweitzer true philosophy must start from the most immediate comprehensive fact of consciousness, and this may be formulated as ‘I am life which wills to live, and I exist in the midst of life which wills to live’.

In the same vein Paul Taylor, considered as a contemporary precursor of biocentric ethics in his work *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* developed a more comprehensive view anchored on the premise that people must develop a renewed respect for nature. Taylor avoids the concepts of intrinsic and instrumental values which have led to a hopeless deadlock in evaluating morally relevant matters. Taylor’s approach is to develop the concept of inherent worth of natural things as criteria of moral consideration. According to him, the inherent worth of natural things is based upon its final cause and captured by what he calls

“teleological centers of life”. By definition teleological centers of life refer to a group of things that carry the same living function or purpose and thus each shares a common uniqueness or inherent value. Essentially for him, all that is required to have inherent value is to be alive. The teleological centre of life is an ecological concept that offers unique impression of a species fitting into a greater whole.

There may be duties which require us to protect the ecological systems, but these are only indirect duties to the individual living things inhabiting the system. All living things have a good of their own. The adoption of this outlook recommended by Taylor suggests adopting the attitude of respect for nature. This respect for nature is not an emotional loving sentiment but a feeling of moral obligation to acquire a global perspective of life and to act appropriately toward the environment for the compelling reason that it is the right thing to do. All of the foregoing considerations are based on Taylor’s argument that a theory of human ethics should have three main components: a belief system, an attitude of respect and a system of rules and standards.

According to Taylor (1986) “the belief system supports and makes intelligible the adoption of the attitude and the rules and standards; this give concrete expression to that attitude in practical life” (p. 44). Taylor’s four ‘priority rules’ namely: the rule of non interference, the rule of fidelity, the rule of nonmaleficence, and the rule of restitutive justice are borne out of this belief. While the rule of nonmaleficence is our negative duty to refrain from harming any organism or species, the rule of non interference is the negative rule to refrain from interfering with the freedom of individual organisms or the biotic community. The rule of fidelity requires that we maintain a level of honesty with all forms of nature, especially with animals with which we thrive on matching wits. Lastly, the role of restitutive justice requires the restoration of imbalance created by human actions. The violation of this rule is the rejection of the most basic tenet of biocentric ethics, that all organisms are equal in inherent value.

It is necessary at this point to elucidate the major assumptions of biocentric ethics and examine what degree of moral support they provide for the theory. This shall be our focus presently.

#### **4. Re-examining the Basic Assumptions of Biocentric Ethics**

The assumption that all living creatures have an inherent value is one that demands a serious concern. For a value to be inherent in anything, it implies that it is part of the thing in question either originally or naturally. One difficulty posed by this assumption is

that the biocentrist does not say what exactly this value in question is. Could it be dignity, life or some sort of a quality not easily definable? We shall explore the possibilities later on.

Literally, to have inherent value is to have an intrinsic value as contrasted with extrinsic value. What really is intrinsic value? Does intrinsic value refer to a single quality or generality (that is several qualities that sums as intrinsic)? If so what are these qualities? How exactly is intrinsic value determined? These seems to be some of the questions biocentrists must attempt to answer if they hope for converts, but unfortunately, most biocentrists have not done enough in this regard in terms of articulating their position more thoroughly.

But let us attempt answers to the above questions, though we do not pretend to be most competent and infallible in this regard. Value we know is the worth of a thing; to have value is to have a worth, something important either by virtue of something in or about the object or subject of reference. At the same time we often speak of negative values and sometimes they serve as contrast and clear indicators to what is required or expected as a rule of action or practice in situation where positive guide are not spelt out.

So we assume that an intrinsic value is not of the last category or type, rather it is a positive value. The crucial question then is, in what does intrinsic value consist? Beardsley (1965) argues that we would never know if anything has intrinsic value because it can only be determined by considering it in relation to a segment of a life or of many lives. In other words, comparison is one way of determining what has or does not have intrinsic value.

On the other hand, some theorists’ think that there is an order within ‘valuable whole’ a conditioning of some elements by others and that it is this ordering that explains or accounts for why ‘the wholes are good’. That is to say that the internal relations surrounding an object or action reveals how valuable the object or subject is. An object has intrinsic value when its value is independent of anything external to it. Thus, why some thinkers lay emphasis on internal relations, Beardsley emphasizes external relations.

Debates and controversies as to what is intrinsic value or what has intrinsic value is not uncommon in the history of philosophy. Aristotle for instance held the view that the fact that all things, both brutes and men pursue pleasure was evident that pleasure is somewhat the chief good. For Mill, the sole evidence that it is possible to produce that anything is (intrinsically) desirable is that people do actually

desire it. So for some, a thing being intrinsic is a function of the agreement of large proportion of sentient animals who feel that way.

But even when there is consensus that something has intrinsic value, is intrinsic value a matter of consensus? Is there no possibility of a knowledgeable majority being mistaken? To say that it is intuitively grasped is open to the attack of the possibility of conflicts of intuitions and the charge that such intuitive beliefs have a non rational cause. Do we assume that because an object is known to have intrinsic quality that such could be extended logically to similar objects? The problem that analogy poses is the challenge of ascertaining that the analogous object(s) are of equal degree of similarity, besides the fact that knowledge of the known is extended to the unknown which inevitably destroy the zeal to explore the unknown.

Assuming intrinsic value on grounds of naturalness or usefulness is open to the accusation of over-generalization as most natural or useful things are extrinsically valuable. Take for instance, if we assume the universe naturally has intrinsic value, does it follow that each individual thing in it has intrinsic value? Think of the accidents, the joy, the peace, the natural and human laws, the strife and the pains to mention a few. To hold this view is to be guilty of the fallacy of division. On the other hand, is intrinsic value determined experientially as when I claim to know that sustained joy is intrinsically good? But experiential claims like this are in relation to an incident or event, but what incidence or event are other creatures or living species? Again, on experiential claims to knowledge, an ethical egoist for example might consider something of an immense benefit to him as having intrinsic value, and his claims would be as valid as our counter claims.

Hence, if we were to extend our argument above with respect to the universe having an intrinsic value, we can only assert that there is the possibility that certain other things in the universe might have intrinsic value, but that will not entail the conclusion that all other living creatures have intrinsic value. Yet this assumption would not destroy the view that such creatures and other inhabitants of the universe do provide "supportive value", perhaps, by virtue of which the universe has intrinsic value. This implies that everything that has life or exists certainly does have a "supportive value" to the universe as a whole, but that all living creatures have intrinsic or inherent value is a supposition that the biocentrists are yet to demonstrate convincingly by addressing the initial questions we posed above. Even where the biocentrists concedes that intrinsic value are of different degrees they would need to tell us what

these degrees are and how they are determined.

The second assumption of the biocentrists is that which extends or ascribes moral status to animals apart from man. Two issues deserve consideration on this matter namely: what does it mean to have a moral status? And are other animals and living things moral agents?

Beginning with the first question, Udo Etuk's paper on "Moral Personhood" provides an insight for determining what it means to have a moral status. Explaining what "moral personhood" is, Udo Etuk (2008) asserts:

I mean that someone is not merely a human being, but one capable of appreciating moral values, able to take moral responsibility for his actions; able to recognize and pursue forms of conduct which will enhance the survival and smooth functioning of the society, and to discourage or disallow both himself and others the kinds of conduct which are inimical to life itself and the smooth functioning of the society (p. 3).

For this reason he disagrees with Nowell-Smiths (1972) view that "the need for morality arises because men are social animals. The human baby cannot survive without the help of her parents ..." (p. 151). Furthermore, Udo Etuk opines that, chimps, too, are social animals; but that in itself can never constitute an ape colony into a moral community; or would it make sense to call chimp behavior "conducts" and to judge them by moral standard.

From the above view it is deducible that morality is not synonymous with sociality, nor does morality consist in just being a living creature. It is also true that when morality is at stake, someone or something either has a moral status or does not, something is either moral or is not. There is no middle ground. There is no doubt also that to ascribe any attribute to something, such must display evidence of the possession of the attributes in question. For example, to describe a man as religious, such an individual must act or live religiously.

To have a moral status, one must display or have a moral sense which consist in the capacity to approve or appreciate certain kinds of conducts perceived as virtuous; and to disapprove of and discourage certain other kinds as vicious. That is to say that such a being must possess a demonstrable capacity for moral reasoning. Thus, any claims of a moral status must necessarily entail the claims of rationality, intentionality and responsibility. To argue to the contrary is to attempt to create ethical obscurity or confusion where there is none. For example, do we

objectively blame a wild beast for wandering from its abode to attack a man who had the opportunity of escaping but did not? Would we not rather blame the man than the beast? Would we say that moral restraint should have served to check the beast from attacking the man? Are moral qualities ascribable to things in the same manner that colours may be proposed for an unpainted platform?

Morality when in operation generates determinate reciprocal relations. It follows that, in a proper moral relationship, the moral concern should not be one directional; it should be from man to other non-human animals and from them to man. Hence, our relationship to other non-human living beings can only be normal or appropriate but not moral.

Our position seems to have equally dealt with our second question whether non-human animals are moral agents? But we shall explore this question further not because we anticipate a different inference from the above, but at least for the purpose of satisfying our curiosity. Let us say that when someone claims to be a moral agent, the person is simply saying that he or she has certain rights, duties, and obligation he or she is conscious of. This position derives from the fact we had earlier alluded to namely: that morality generates reciprocal rights and obligation. One reason we have for treating persons as persons is that they stand on the same foundation with us as moral agents; hence the obligation for care and concern. It is doubtful if this can objectively be said about human and non-human animals.

More so, it does not appear that humans have absolutely no concern for non-human animals or nature as a whole, as biocentric ethics seems to imply. What is true is that such concerns have always been there, but because of the very frequent clashes of interest it is natural that such concerns must give way to the stronger one whenever such clashes occur. That is, human interest must necessarily take priority over non human interest in situations of clashes. The attempt therefore to place man and other animals or nature as a whole at par shows a lack of understanding or appreciation of the human situation.

Watson (1983) has suggested that if this parity theory is granted, what follows is that “human ways – human culture – and human actions are as natural as are the ways in which any other species of animals behaves” (p. 252). He believes that following the biocentric arguments ultimately will take us back to the basic beliefs of anthropocentrism. For him therefore, the extinction of species is nature’s way and that if humans were to instigate their own self-destruction by exploiting the rest of nature, then so be it.

But supposed we ignore Watson’s view temporarily and hold that non-human animals are moral agents, it would seem to follow from this that moral rule and codes should apply both to human and other non-human creatures of nature. The interdependency theory thus overstretched would require that other non-human moral agents be equally instructed that their survival is dependent on the survival of man, hence the need for them to follow these moral rules religiously too. The point is that the biocentrist proposal of a moral concerned from human to non-human creatures and not vice-versa is a tacit acknowledgment that other non-human creatures are not moral agents. Thus, even if we accept Singer’s view as quoted by Christian (2009) that “ethical reasoning

... pushes against our initially limited ethical horizons, leading us always toward a more universal point of view” (p. 382),

this does not imply or established the fact that other creatures apart from man are moral agents. It simply just amounts to talking to man who is a moral agent to reconsider his moral dispositions as it affects the rest of nature.

On the biocentric assumption that human beings are not inherently superior to all other creatures of nature, we have established above the difficulty of deciding what intrinsic value is. If it is a matter of having life, then there is no denying the fact that the killing of one thousand human beings will raise moral concerns and condemnation more than killing five thousand rams. We had hinted above also that we speak rather of ‘supportive value’ rather than intrinsic value in the sense of all creatures of nature contributing to the biotic community where interdependence is required for survival. In the requirement of ‘supportive value’ therefore, is to be found ‘the *raison de etre*’ for preserving or changing our attitude towards our environment. Biocentric ethics is thus an ethics of “moral considerability” to use the words of Goodpaster.

So interpreted, it follows then that biocentric ethics is a species of utilitarian or consequentialist ethical theory – which asserts that the rightness of an action entirely depends on the value of its consequences. This is so because the biocentrists who argues that all human and non-human lives be considered sacred will definitely open himself up to the attack of denigrating human value and dignity. This view is supported by some biocentrists appeal to feelings of pains and pleasure as the ground for granting equal moral consideration or status for human and non-human being. Thus, if biocentric ethics has utilitarian leanings, then it is open to all the other utilitarian attacks as well.



### 5. Conclusion

So far we have shown that some of the biocentrist's assumptions are weak and compromises human values, rights and dignity. Not only does this philosophy obscure and diverts attention from the primary place of man in the universe, but it places the world on atheistic foundation.

More so, if nature as a whole were to be a moral entity, then such societies that have always held this belief and reverence for nature certainly ought to be a moral heaven of some sort now. But this is not the case. Rather contemporary developments in technology, education and science as manifested in several forms of sophistications in commerce, warfare, economics and social dynamics shows that man is but the most significant factor (apart from God) in the survival of not just the human race but other living creatures as well.

Could biocentric ethics be an enlightened animistic philosophy attempting to link humanity with the ancient age where veneration and respect for natural object were unassailable? Well, whatever the case may be, trepidation surrounds this new approach to ethics in view of its evolutionary bias and the fact that we are yet to determine in a conclusive manner the experiential states of all non-human creatures.

This is not to say that the need for a greater concern for our environment is not a legitimate one in view of recent environmental threats, but the ultimate justification of such concern can never be found in the assumptions of biocentric ethics or any other philosophy that denigrates man and morality. The duty to preserve the environment is more of an ecological necessity and the only moral thing about

this is that it is the right and normal thing to do in view of the supportive value required for the continuity of the universe.

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