

Varieties of Non-Anthropocentrism: Duty, Beauty, Knowledge and Reality

The complexity of understanding and navigating human–nature relations calls for diverse angles of philosophical approach, and the articles in this issue exemplify that diversity, engaging questions of ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics and epistemology. They are connected, however, by a thread that runs through environmental philosophy: a desire to broaden or reframe understandings of humans’ places in, perceptions of, and obligations to the natural world. Relatedly, each of the contributions can be seen as an effort to push beyond narrow forms of anthropocentrism: Jake Monaghan defends biocentric individualism against a key objection; Yasha Rowher considers the potential implications of taking seriously obligations to prevent extinction and biodiversity loss; Fernando Arribas Herguedas seeks to extend Allen Carlson’s environmental aesthetics to agricultural landscapes; and Roope Oskari Kaaronen draws on process philosophy and the epistemology of Michael Polanyi to reconceptualise humans’ place in nature. What is striking about these contributions are the distinct ways in which they develop non-anthropocentric environmental philosophies¹: whereas early discussions of non-anthropocentrism focused heavily on questions of intrinsic value, those questions do not dominate the discussion here, and there is significant attention to implications and applications in contemporary contexts.

Monaghan’s article cleaves most closely to traditional debates, seeking to support the view that any living thing can have interests, and thereby, intrinsic value. Monaghan defends biocentric individualism by arguing that all living things have interests; this is because all living things are susceptible to death, which is an intrinsic bad. On this view, having interests does not require sentience, nor does it depend on desires. Monaghan also sidesteps controversial ethical debates over the concept of harm. He argues simply (p. 123):

1. Death is a *prima facie* harm;
2. Harm is a setback of interests;
3. Non-minded creatures can die;
4. So, non-minded creatures can be harmed;
5. So, non-minded creatures have interests.

1. For a lucid and provocative critique of the ambiguities and problems with ‘centrism-terminology’ in environmental ethics, see Samuelsson 2013. Here, I am using ‘non-anthropocentric’ in a fairly common sense, to refer to ethical and aesthetic theories which hold that human beings and their interests are not the exclusive basis of values and obligations (as discussed in the articles by Rowher, Monaghan and Arribas Herguedas) and to metaphysical theories that challenge a sharp human/nature distinction and associated forms of human exceptionalism (as, in my view, Kaaronen’s process metaphysics approach does).

From this conclusion, Monaghan goes on to argue that we have at least some obligations to non-minded creatures, such as *pro tanto* negative obligations not to kill them. However, Monaghan acknowledges that his view is susceptible to a common counterargument against positions that derive obligations from interests, an objection John O'Neill describes in terms of a fact–ought gap (O'Neill 1992). According to this objection, there are entities for which an objective good exists though we lack any obligation to promote that good. For example, survival might be good for (or in the interests of) a certain virus or disease, but that doesn't imply that we should refrain from killing it. To this, Monaghan replies that the fact–ought gap can be bridged by the principle that 'we ought not violate interests without good reason'. He then argues that apparent counterexamples to the claim that interests can generate obligations can be explained by reference to this principle, which allows *pro tanto* duties not to violate interests to be overridden with good reason. The right to self-defence provides such a reason. Thus, the right to self-defence can explain how it is that we have obligations in line with biocentric individualism – *prima facie* obligations not to violate the interests of other living things – while it remains morally permissible to kill harmful viruses or disease-carrying mice. Although Monaghan's approach doesn't require comparative assessments of intrinsic value, Monaghan is careful to indicate that the version of biocentrism he defends does not require that all living things have *equal* intrinsic value. In this, he and others diverge from moral theories that assert that 'all who have inherent value have it *equally*, whether they be human animals or not' (Regan 1990, p. 186), such as Tom Regan's animal rights theory or Paul Taylor's biocentric egalitarianism (Taylor 1981).²

Like Monaghan, Rowher focuses on duties to other-than-human entities, though his emphasis is on species rather than individual organisms. After a brief thought experiment to support biodiversity's intrinsic value, Rowher argues for a moral obligation to save species imperilled by human actions in order to prevent anthropogenic extinction and biodiversity loss. He explores this obligation in the case of small Australian marsupials, arguing that humans should act to protect marsupial species threatened by introduced predators such as the red fox and the domestic cat.

This is where Rowher's position begins to diverge from traditional pleas for biodiversity conservation through common practices such as land use restrictions, protected areas or control of introduced species. Rowher argues that standard conservation measures such as habitat restoration and the creation of protected areas have significant limitations in the marsupial case – thus, more innovative measures are required. More specifically, he claims that cognitive enhancement of small marsupials could enable them to better evade predators, and that we have a duty to enhance if it is possible to do so with minimal risk. Rowher sees a number of positive features to this approach: 1) it wouldn't

2. For a recent discussion of biocentrism and comparative welfare differences, see Nolt 2017.

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require the eradication of introduced predators as has been undertaken elsewhere, often controversially (see Meurk 2015, Katz 2014);³ 2) it could eliminate the need for fenced reserves to protect the marsupials (as currently used); and 3) if the enhancement were achieved through genetic intervention, it could serve as a relatively permanent solution to the threat posed by predatory cats and foxes, enabling marsupials ‘to make their own way in the world, with or without us’ (p. 150) even if political will shifts away from conservation. Rowher acknowledges that his proposal faces various objections, including the introduction of new ecological risks and the problematic domination of other species. However, he believes that these and other concerns can probably be overcome. His article will likely spur spirited discussion among those who think these concerns cannot be so easily answered as well as those sanguine about the approach. For further discussion of related issues, see Steinwall (2015), which explores the value of naturalness in relation to more interventionist approaches in Swedish nature reserves; Piaggio et al. 2017, which offers a broad discussion of potential genetic interventions to conserve biodiversity; and also the 2012 Special Issue of *Environmental Values* on Synthetic Biology.

Like Rowher and Monaghan, Fernando Arribas Herguedas supports a version of non-anthropocentrism, in this case with respect to environmental aesthetics. Arribas’s article takes as its starting point the importance of Allen Carlson’s ‘requirements of environmentalism’, which include the requirement that environmental aesthetics be ‘acentric’ rather than ‘anthropocentric’ and focus on the environment itself rather than on ‘scenery’ (Carlson 2017, Arribas Herguedas p. 171). Carlson’s aesthetics for natural environments is consonant with these requirements: it asserts that natural environments have inherent aesthetic value, and that appreciating that value requires knowledge. More specifically, scientific knowledge from geography, biology, ecology and geology can assist in providing the knowledge needed to aesthetically appreciate natural environments.

Arribas’s critique is that Carlson stops short of embracing the implications of his own view for human-influenced landscapes such as agricultural systems and instead adopts a human-centred, functional approach to the aesthetics of cultural landscapes. According to this functional approach, contemporary agricultural landscapes can be appreciated in relation to their functional design, the qualities they possess that enable them to fulfil certain human goals (Arribas Herguedas p. 171, Carlson 2000, pp. 186–187). But as Arribas explains, this conception of functional fitness rests on human ends and obscures the ecological damage caused by contemporary agricultural practices. It is Carlson’s view of aesthetics for *natural* environments – which appeals to a scientifically-informed conception of natural beauty and links aesthetics to sustainability – that Arribas believes is on target. Thus, he argues for the extension of Carlson’s

3. T.C. Boyle’s novel, *When the Killing’s Done*, and the film, *Restoring Balance: Removing the Black Rat from Anacapa Island*, also provide perspectives on one such case.

nonanthropocentric environmental aesthetics to landscapes clearly shaped by human beings. In doing so, he calls into question a sharp human/nature distinction, for it is this distinction that supports different environmental aesthetic standards for human-influenced and natural landscapes.

This blurring of the human/nature distinction is carried further in the article by Roope Oskari Kaaronen, which seeks a reorientation away from substance-centred metaphysics toward an ontology of processes. Rather than expanding the circle of moral value to encompass nonhuman life, or extending a nonanthropocentric environmental aesthetics to human-influenced lands, Kaaronen argues for a process-based metaphysics in which the very *things* foundational to much of European philosophy are no longer seen as primary; instead, processes form the ontological foundation of reality. Kaaronen suggests that such a shift has the potential to open up new ways of conceiving and acting in relation to nature. As he explains:

By reversing the ontological order of priority (that is, by prioritising process over substance) process philosophy can ... provide a philosophical framework for reinterpreting the paradigmatic bifurcations – most prominently the human–nature dichotomy – which have left a significant mark on human dwelling and its environmentally pathological manifestations. (p. 182)

This reinterpretation would challenge ‘the ontological separation of things from their surroundings’ and that between products and processes; it would foreground change rather than stasis; and it would disrupt ‘the disjunction between systems and individuals’ by emphasising ‘the reciprocity between the cognitive and macro [e.g., socio-economic] systems’ (p. 188).

Kaaronen argues that Michael Polanyi’s idea of tacit knowledge can make a further contribution to the reconception of human-nature relations. Polanyi embraces ‘a philosophical system bridging the knower and the known, the subject and the object as well as facts and values’ (p. 191) in which the idea of tacit knowledge plays a key role. Tacit knowledge is a form of knowing that language can’t fully express; it incorporates tacit presuppositions and experiential, embodied knowledge. This conception does not view knowledge as external and inert, but rather as internalised and practical, shaping the way we dwell in the world. Kaaronen argues that insights from process philosophy and Polanyi’s tacit knowledge can inform modes of ecological education that emphasise process and experience. This in turn may support a shift toward more sustainable action, for example by producing greater awareness of the ongoing processes in which we participate through our consumption choices (production, transport, use, disposal). Environmental policy may then relate to this in different ways, from the popularised liberal notion of using cognitive models to ‘nudge’ people toward more sustainable action (Hukkinen 2016) to a more in-depth understanding of the roles of structure and agency involved in the psychosocial engagement of individuals in unsustainable practices (Groves et al. 2016). Kaaronen’s article thus integrates a call for a metaphysical and

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epistemological shift with practical suggestions regarding humans' ways of thinking, being and acting in the world.

Although a common thread runs between them, each article in this issue develops a distinctive perspective and deserves attention in its own right. Together, they show the diverse forms that contemporary environmental philosophy can take. Whether through an effort to refine and defend biocentric individualism; consideration of how best to protect biodiversity; extension of a nonanthropocentric environmental aesthetics to agricultural lands; or a reframing of human-nature relations through process philosophy, the authors here develop engaging and provocative proposals for thinking and rethinking humans' places in, perceptions of, and responsibilities to the broader world.

MARION HOURDEQUIN
Colorado College

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