

Killing birds: Deliberations on Anthropocentrism

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The Encyclopaedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy (Callicott & Frodeman, 2009, pp. 58-59) defines Anthropocentrism as ‘human-centeredness’, referring to a particular archetypal way of thinking which promotes the exceptionalism of the human being (Ricketts & Pelizzon, 2011, p. 4). Anthropocentrism may be understood in ethical, ontological or epistemological terms. The ethical version of anthropocentrism holds that only humans possess intrinsic value. The ontological view places humans at the centre of the universe and as the ends of creation. The epistemological view stipulates that human beings gain knowledge and an understanding of the universe in terms of themselves, with knowledge being somehow or other related to humanness. Anthropocentrism is considered by some philosophers such as Arne Naess as a worldview that lies at the root of many environmental problems, including species extinction and the general decline of the environment as a whole (Naess, 1973, p. 97).

In what follows I will discuss some argument for and against anthropocentrism, and I will evaluate whether or not this attitude can be justified. It will be argued that engagement with certain intellectual perspectives and reflections can show that we can go beyond anthropocentrism. However, it shall also be noted that the very manner one views nature is inevitably anthropocentric, since, one tends to reach conclusions through human variables such as linguistic or cultural encasement, using human concepts to try and

understand things which would be best understood outside human perspectives.

Anthropocentrism

Alan Watts (1971) considers how there is a difference in ‘style’ (by which he means the manner of expression or presentation) between human beings and the rest of nature, even if the former is inexorably part of the latter. He contemplates how nature is not made of the “straight lines” and rigid categories that humans tend to impose onto nature, since wherever one looks upon human involvement, one sees the control and constriction of ‘boxes’, in both the physical sense in the case of things like buildings or in the conceptual sense in the case of intellects. Nature on the other hand is free and uncontrolled, contrasting with the apparently neat and simple categories human beings use to classify it.

Watts (ibid.) points out, for instance, that humans approach nature in terms of numbers and language, and considers these to be general logical crudities too simple for a total understanding of nature. Words and numbers, according to Watts, are turned into systems of symbols which humans confuse with the world itself, and further confuse humans’ part in the universe.

This mind-set leads to a division between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, where a ‘subject’ is a conscious being and the ‘object’ is that which the being is interacting with found outside himself. In this paradigm, a ‘subject’ and ‘object’ can only exist as separate and immiscible entities, and holding this perspective causes humans to

differentiate between themselves and nature in a way that disregards nature as their condition for existence, whilst consequently elevating themselves to a standard of centrality (Nimmo, 2011, p. 59). Clinton Sanders (2006, p. 64) observes, that a particular factor in the anthropocentric view of animals has to do with their lack of capacity for language, thus rendering them “mindless, selfless and emotionless.”

In *Being and Time* Heidegger refers to the distinction between Being and entities (Heidegger, 1962, p. 93). Entities are commonly perceived objects like tables or letters, while Being refers to the manifestation of entities in the context of human existence. Animals would exist irrespectively and independently of human existence, and would not “be” in terms of Heidegger’s consideration of Being. Humans are able to see entities as they are, rather than merely have “access” to them the way animals do, in the sense that animals fail to perceive entities as such but only have a superficial understanding of them. This is apparently because of their failure to possess language.

Contemporary Western society is shaped by a philosophical tradition that is fundamentally anthropocentric, starting off with Plato’s initial differentiations about the soul, and Aristotle’s advances on this, denying animals reason in his *Politics* (1995, p. 54), thus denying any possible involvement of theirs in the moral-political community. The *Politics* presupposes a natural hierarchy based on the capacity to reason, which allows for the blatant exploitation of animals due to this distinction that he makes. Aristotle makes the same distinctions in rational ability amongst

human beings, such as the case he makes for the justification of slavery. He states that slaves are thus by nature due to their inability to reason to their fullest capacity. Hence they are incapable of controlling their own lives and must seek the guidance of others. Aristotle uses this situation to justify why a superior ought to rule over an inferior, as applied to the rest of nature.

It is clear that humans, at least in the West, have a long history of using their intellect and understanding to dominate other entities, thus leaving the material world without a specific purpose other than that of existing for human beings, as instrumental to human whim.

Limits of Anthropocentrism

But is the view which suggests human superiority justified? Watts observes that in the face of the complexity of nature, humans only tend to have a crude interpretation of it (Watts, 1971). He gives the example of how astrologers in the past would attempt to explain the human mind or soul by drawing a crude map of the universe centred on the person in question, extenuating further the idea of human grandiosity by emphasising human centrality. In the contemporary sphere, quantum mechanics would not completely discredit this interpretation, since if it is true that the universe is infinite, then the logical inference would be to view every point or atom within it as its necessary centre. However, this still translates into a symptomatic response to this complexity as an inability to feel at ease with the rest of nature due to this perceived grandiosity.

Nietzsche, in his book *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* writes about how, in terms of every creature humans have shared the earth with, including the seemingly unimportant gnat, humans feel as though they are its fulcrum, and therefore feel that they have every right to exploit all its resources and claim it as their own. He rebuts that humans have no right to judge the gnats or impose any value system onto them, but they would nevertheless be imagining the gnat's perspective from their own, human, point of view (Nietzsche, 1873, pp. 459-460).

The main justification of this behaviour is humans' possession of rationality, with language as its most lauded manifestation. It seems that language may be used to boost humans onto a plane of moral superiority over the rest of nature, since it is this faculty that defines our humanity, and thus our superior rationality. However, this system of symbols may also be seen as a manner of discrediting human beings as overly simplistic in the face of the complexity of nature due to the linearity exhibited in their production of language, in the sense that when humans speak or write, these come about as unidirectional and systematic rather than all at once the way nature manifests itself (Watts, 1971). Humans are thus unworthy of this self-proclaimed supremacy, since in the face of all the merits of possessing the faculty of language, it is still crude and simple in comparison to nature, which manifests itself in an ineffable and unmitigated outburst. So it seems that while language is humanity's most lauded manifestation and its most concrete evidence of rationality, it is also a limitation of humanity.

There is a confusion that comes from this mistake in the attribution of significance to language whereby language becomes the measure of the self. Language thus goes on to perpetuate the elusive idea of the ego, and a further centring on the self. It is by doing away with the ego that humans can transform themselves and shift the focus from themselves back to nature and regain knowledge of the way humans really are, that is, as being part of nature rather than separate from it.

One can pinpoint this confusion within the lexical distinction made between the words ‘person’ and ‘human’. One is more likely to see oneself as a person before being a human, or as a person *above* being human, feeling instinctively that the former word carries more dignity over the latter. However, etymologically, ‘person’ is derived from the Latin *persona*, having the sense of an ‘assumed character in a drama’, originally meaning “mask” and “false face” (Harper, 2014). The word ‘human’, on the other hand, is derived from the Latin *humanus*, a word related to *homo* meaning “man”, and also related to *humus* meaning “earth”; thus having the notion of “earthly being” (Harper, 2014). It seems, therefore, that humanity has come to be more comfortable identifying with a word that has the sense of a falsity than with a word that relates it directly and clearly to nature.

The Way Forward

For Heidegger, humans fulfil their humanity by existing in such a manner that allows entities outside themselves to be left unadulterated, rather than force them to serve their needs

exclusively. This is since the order of nature is not derived from a divine or human plan but out of the capacity for harmonisation between all types of entities, where individuals “adjust themselves to other individuals” (Dombrowski, 1994, p. 31). In other words, an eradication of the cultural phenomenon of anthropocentrism would allow for a more balanced and considerate interplay between humans and their fellow constituents of nature, whereby humans understand the necessity of taking the rest of nature into consideration when seeking to satisfy their own needs and desires.

Humans tend to talk about any rights nature possesses as a matter of ‘rights *of* nature’ or ‘rights *for* nature’, where in the former case there is the sense of recognising the intrinsic rights nature possesses, and where in the latter there is the sense of arguing for the granting of rights to nature (Ricketts & Pelizzon, 2011, p. 10); whichever consideration, however, is based on the exclusively human notion of possessing rights. In order to shift away from this anthropocentric framework, humans ought to engage in a more neutral kind of attitude towards nature, eventually reaching a stage where the evaluation of nature having rights is no longer an issue. Nature’s dignity and sovereignty would belong to it by sole virtue of it being *nature*, and these attributes would not be a matter of ‘rights’ bestowed upon it, or recognised as belonging to it, by the benevolent [*sic*] and enlightened [*sic*] human being.

Conclusion

When faced with the question about whether there can be a case for anthropocentrism, I am inclined to disagree, and therefore I am of

the conviction that anthropocentrism should be rejected. The consideration of an irrevocable gulf separating humans from nature is a flawed misconception brought about by eons of self-centredness and human epitomising, based on the fact that humans possess faculties of reason which other species lack. This fact should not translate into a misuse of nature for humans' own desires, but ought to be a realisation that this intellectual facet is merely a manifestation of nature par with any other manifestation exhibited by nature. It is by realising that ours is a thwarted and fabricated grandiosity that we may be able to harmonise the dissonance within which we have encased our relationship with nature.

§ **References**

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