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# **Comprehending Moral Anthropocentrism**

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### **Abstract**

*Anthropocentrism is widely referred in environmental ethics and ecological politics to criticize attitudes, values or practices which promote human interests at the expense of other species or the environment. To comprehend the notion of anthropocentricity we need to explore both of its good elements and bad elements by which it is shown that anthropocentrism does not always refer to mean wrong things, but to positive ones. The negative points of anthropocentrism can well be captured and understood in the modern terminology as instances of speciesism and human chauvinism. The positive points are very important to note as it makes ethics possible. We will argue as well that there is an element of anthropocentricity which is called 'perspectival anthropocentrism' which is not only not eliminable but also desirable, and we shall show that it is not bad thing. In this paper an attempt will be made to analyze the notion of moral anthropocentricity by taking into a brief account of speciesism, human chauvinism and perspectival anthropocentrism which make us to understand that anthropocentrism all is not bad.*

**Key words:** *Anthropocentrism, speciesism, human chauvinism, perspectival anthropocentrism.*

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**Introduction:** Anthropocentrism is widely referred in environmental ethics and ecological politics to criticize attitudes, values or practices which promote human interests at the expense of other species or the environment. Environmental ethics is the part of environmental philosophy which considers extending the traditional boundaries of ethics from solely including humans to including the non-human world, and ecological politics is the study of the relationships between political, economic and social factors with environmental issues and changes. Anyway to comprehend the notion of anthropocentricity we need to explore both of its good elements and bad elements by which it can be shown that anthropocentrism does not always refer to mean wrong things, but to positive ones. The negative points of anthropocentrism can well be captured and understood in the modern terminology as instances of *speciesism* and *human chauvinism*. The positive points are very important to note as it makes ethics possible. We will argue as well that there is an element of anthropocentricity which is called 'perspectival anthropocentrism' which is not only not

eliminable but also desirable, and we shall show that it is not bad thing. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyze the notion of anthropocentricity in environmental ethics by taking into a brief account of speciesism, human chauvinism and perspectival anthropocentrism which make us to understand that anthropocentrism all is not bad.

This paper contains three different sections. The first section would be concerned to give a brief account of meaning of anthropocentrism and how it can be overcome. The positive points i.e. *what is not wrong with anthropocentrism in ethics* would be discussed in section two. The third would be reserved for *what is wrong with anthropocentrism in ethics*. And at last a concluding observation would be drawn.

## I

The term ‘anthropocentrism’ comes from the Greek words ‘*anthropos*’ and ‘*kentron*’. ‘*Anthropos*’ means ‘human being’ and ‘*kentron*’ means ‘center’. So, etymologically, anthropocentrism means humancentredness. ‘Man is the measure of all things,’ ‘man to be at the centre of the universe,’ he is at the acme of this universe—all these assumptions regarding human paramountcy are anthropocentric. We should not forget that these anthropocentric assumptions have been challenged by findings of modern science. Anthropocentrism is often identified as the theoretical root cause of many things like present day eco-crisis, human overpopulation, and the extinctions of many non human species. It is believed to be the central problematique of contemporary environmental philosophy, which is also used to draw attention to a systematic bias in traditional Western attitudes to the non-human world.

We shall begin with Tim Hayward (Born 1955), is a professor of environmental political theory, who in his *Political Theory and Ecological Values* has seen this anthropocentric view from a novel but comprehensive perspective. He considers anthropocentrism as a ‘misunderstood’ problem. He holds that the attempt to overcome anthropocentrism surfaces from the European Enlightenment. The basic idea of the Enlightenment leads us to the direction that the right way to live is to seek progress, through the development of greater and matured insights, from a narrow, self-absorbed perspective to a wider and more inclusive perspective. According to Hayward, the blunt, unqualified criticism of anthropocentrism, however, is not only conceptually unsatisfactory, also it may be counterproductive in practice.<sup>1</sup>

An enquiry, following Hayward, into *what it means to overcome anthropocentrism* is first of all needed for grasping anthropocentrism. We can distinguish here between cosmological anthropocentrism and moral anthropocentrism (stated at the end of this section). Cosmological anthropocentrism is the theory, according to which, humans occupy a privileged place in this cosmos, in this natural order. In astrophysics and cosmology, this theory refers to the philosophical argument that observations of the physical universe must be compatible with conscious human life that observes it, that means, there must be humans for the physical universe to exist meaningfully. Thus cosmological anthropocentrism

commits an error in taking man to be at the centre of the universe, and as it fails to see that 'the way things are in the world takes no particular account of how human beings are, or how they choose to represent them'.<sup>2</sup> We should see the *Homo sapiens* as one part of a greater order of being. Humans can overcome anthropocentrism in this sense by having more knowledge about their actual place in the world. Such enlightenment can be arrived at either by a deeper study of the scientific discourses or by a mystical route.

As a matter of fact, anthropocentric assumptions have now gradually been criticized by the development of modern science, which undermines humans' cherished picture of themselves as the centrum of the universe, and show them instead to be a product of natural evolutionary processes. Contemporary ecological studies have shown us that we are related to each other and that we have a crucial and fundamental dependence on existential conditions, like members of other species. The Darwinian theory of evolution has, again, tended to undercut claims for the uniqueness of certain human faculties and characteristics. Overcoming anthropocentrism, in this sense, has been an integral part of the Enlightenment. But this seems to be paradoxical: the overcoming of anthropocentrism in science has been brought about by just those developments which are now seen by many as lying at the root of unacceptably anthropocentric attitudes and values. But this would appear paradoxical, says Hayward, if one expects to find a necessary correlation between cosmological and moral anthropocentrism. But there is no good and sufficient reason to expect this: even if humans do not in fact occupy a privileged place in the natural order, this fact needs not prevent them from trying to act as if they did, to 'dominate nature' whenever it seems to them they can get away with it.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, it is not only modern Western science that throws challenge to anthropocentric cosmology, but we should keep in mind that non-anthropocentric worldviews are also present in Eastern forms of enlightenment. For examples, the worldviews of the Hindus, the Buddhists, and the Jains, combine a humbler estimate of the human place in nature with a greater solicitude for other living beings. Thus it is surprising that contemporary deep ecologists often appeal to a more Eastern, and sometimes mystical, worldviews in raising their philosophy of environmental.

Thus we may find that the Eastern and Western forms of enlightenment point into the same direction. The basic idea common to both is that the right way to live is to seek progress, through the development of greater insight, from a narrow, self-absorbed perspective to a wider, more liberal, perspective. But the problem is that the understanding of science as thus striving for detachment and objectivity, it involves a tendency to be dispassionate as opposed to compassionate, be in regard to humans or non-humans. There may be some mystics and scientists, who keep faith in the intrinsic value of all beings. Intrinsic value is the value that an entity has in itself, for what it is, or as an end. The contrasting type of value of it is called instrumental value, the value that something has because it helps us to get or achieve some other thing. This instrumental consideration of nonhuman being are very much seen into the traditional western ethics and attitudes, but the

contemporary deep ecologists have opted for considering intrinsic value of nonhumans and thus overcome instrumentalism to certain extent.

What is important here to note, according to Hayward, is that this view is no more entailed than is a contrary one by the rejection of an anthropocentric cosmology.<sup>4</sup> All these demonstrate that the critique of moral anthropocentrism is to be taken up in its own terms. According to the moral criticism, anthropocentrism is the mistake of giving exclusive or arbitrarily preferential consideration to human interests as opposed to the interests of other beings. Anyhow, it may be said that one could hold onto that ethical view without subscribing to an anthropocentric cosmology. And thus the reasons for refusing an anthropocentric ontology do not necessarily have any direct bearing on moral anthropocentrism. For this an independent analysis is needed to see why moral anthropocentrism is wrong.

## II

Let us turn first to *what is not wrong with moral anthropocentrism* and then to *what is wrong with it*. A reflection will reveal that anthropocentrism in ethics derives its negative normative force on analogy with egocentrism. It may be noted that the ethical egoism is the view that whether or not people are like this, they ought to be like this; usually this is advanced in the form that rational behaviour requires attempting to maximize self interest. Anyway what is important to note that just as it is thought morally wrong to be self-centred in the collective case, so it is wrong to be anthropocentric. But the difficulty of such comparison is that anthropocentrism cannot simply be equated with human-centredness, if it is to perform the critical function envisaged of it, since there are many respects in which human-centredness cannot be avoided. These cases are unobjectionable or even desirable. If we want to have a precise idea of what is wrong with anthropocentrism, it would be wise to take note of these respects.

There are some ways in which humans really cannot help being human-centred. Our views of the world are shaped and limited by our own position and the way beings are within it. From the perspective of any particular being or species there are really some respects in which they are at the centre of it. Thus to the extent that humans have no choice but to think as humans, to see through human eyes, is what Frederick Ferré called 'perspectival anthropocentrism'.<sup>5</sup> It would appear to be inescapable. It also appears to be unavoidable that we should be interested in ourselves and our own species. Ferré writes, "We have no choice but to think as humans, to take a human point of view even while we try to transcend egoism by cultivating sympathy and concern for other centres for intrinsic value."<sup>6</sup> There are some actual respects in which human-centredness is nowise objectionable. As Mary Midgley writes, "We need...to recognize that people do right, not wrong, to have a particular regard for their own kin and their own species...I don't, therefore, see much point in disputing hotly about the rightness of 'anthropocentrism' in this very limited sense."<sup>7</sup> She points out further that human-centredness may in some respects be positively desirable: for just as this term 'self-centred' has been used metaphorically in the

past to describe a balanced conception of what it means to be a human, and of how humans take their place in this world. This refers to that type of conception bound up with normative ideas of ‘humanity’ and ‘humaneness’. Moreover, human-centredness may sometimes be positively desirable. It has been pointed out that self-love, properly understood, can be considered a precondition of loving others. By analogy, it could also be maintained that only if human well-being as such need not preclude a concern for the well-being of non-humans, including the natural environment; rather it may even serve to promote it. So, all these considerations are not intended to show that anthropocentrism as such is not a problem at all; rather they lead us to spell out more carefully what is supposed to be wrong with it.

### III

Let us, then, explore *what exactly is wrong with moral anthropocentrism*. It should first be noted that what is problematic in moral anthropocentrism, in environmental ethics, is a concern with human interests to the exclusion, or at the expense, of interests of other species of the biosphere. Following Richard Ryder’s terminology Hayward suggests here that the various illegitimate ways of giving preference to human interests are adequately captured by the modern terms ‘speciesism’ and ‘human chauvinism’.<sup>8</sup> These two terms are sometimes used as equivalents of anthropocentrism in the literature of environmental ethics; but, as Hayward rightly points out, it is important to distinguish between them as they are not equivocal and, sometimes, misleading in the ways anthropocentrism seems to be.<sup>9</sup>

‘Speciesism’ is a term coined by Richard Ryder, on analogy with sexism and racism, to mean arbitrary discrimination on the basis of species-membership.<sup>10</sup> It is an improper stance of refusing respect to the lives, dignity, rights or needs of animals of other than the human species. Like speciesism sexism has the inability or refusal to recognize the rights, needs, dignity, or value of people of one sex or gender. Again the same is true with racism is the inability or refusal to recognize the rights, needs, dignity, or value of people of particular races or geographical origins. A little thought would, however, reveal that it is possible to discriminate between human and non-human interests without being arbitrary in reasoning, and as such, it is possible to promote human interests without being speciesist. This means that any one of us can take a legitimate interest in other members of his/her own species without necessarily being detrimental to members of other species.

But humans can rightly be accused of speciesist behaviour when they give preference to interests of members of their own species over the interests of members of other species for morally arbitrary reasons. As for example, if it is wrong to inflict avoidable physical suffering on humans as because they are sentient beings, then it would surely be morally arbitrary to inflict avoidable suffering on other sentient beings. For this reason cruel and degrading treatment of animals is condemned as speciesist. As a matter of fact, purely instrumental considerations of non-humans fall into this category: as long as they are considered in terms of their instrumental value to humans, they are not considered ‘for their own sake’ – that is, in terms of their own good or interests. Hayward, however, reminds us

that the problem lies not with the giving of instrumental consideration as such to non-human beings, but in according them *only* instrumental value.<sup>11</sup> This sole consideration of instrumental value is objectionable. It may be noted here that instrumental consideration of other beings as such need not always be opposed to their well-being. Let us consider a human case where a doctor gives instrumental consideration to a patient's physiology in order to improve his/her well-being. There is nothing objectionable in it; rather it is necessary and positively desirable. But it is also necessary here on part of the doctor to keep in mind that the patient is also a person with dignity and worthy of respect, not simply an object to be manipulated.

The only question which is relevant here is whether non-humans are also beings of dignity and worthy of respect. If they are, then denying them such consideration must be speciesist. To answer this question one has to move to the level of meta-ethics and explain what it is that constitutes a being's dignity and worthiness of respect. Meta-ethics is a branch of analytic philosophy that explores the status, foundations, and scope of moral values, properties, and words. As applied ethics and normative theory is kept focusing on what is moral, meta-ethics focuses on what morality itself is. And to set up criteria of a being's dignity and worthiness of respect we need to reach at this meta-ethical level where the problem of human chauvinism can be easily identified.

'Human chauvinism' is a term which is used to refer to mindset which gets expressed in attempts to specify difference in ways that invariably favour humans. Richard Routley and Val Routley call it 'class chauvinism' and define it as 'substantially differential, discriminatory, and inferior treatment...of items outside the class, for which there is no sufficient justification'.<sup>12</sup> According to them, the stronger forms of human chauvinism 'see value and morality as ultimately concerned entirely with humans, and non-human items as having value or creating constraints on human action only in so far as these items serve human interests or purpose'.<sup>13</sup> Anyhow, the problem here is that what counts as 'being worthy of respect' is specified in terms which always favour humans. Thus a human chauvinist may quite consistently maintain that the moral arbitrariness of speciesism is always wrong, and still may persist in denying claims of relevant similarities between humans and other species. On his judgement, other animals, e.g., may not be deemed 'worthy of respect', as they allegedly lack certain features, like rationality, language and subjectivity, which define beings as worthy of respect.

Such attempts of denials as such cannot be objected to as speciesist in case the factual claims about the animals' capacities and the normative assumptions about worthiness of respect are supported by good reasons. But if the definition is formulated in such a way that intentionally excludes non-humans, then there is a legitimate scope for rethinking. Human chauvinism thus is essentially a disposition, and as such requires a kind of hermeneutic to uncover. Thus whereas 'speciesism can be conceptualized as a clear-cut form of injustice, human chauvinism involves a deeper and murkier set of attitudes'.<sup>14</sup>

It may here be mentioned that most writers of moral philosophy ignores the distinction between speciesism and human chauvinism, but Hayward thinks it important to observe the

distinction. It is inappropriate to label as speciesist a systematically developed argument to the effect, for example, that animals lack a morally relevant characteristic necessary for worthiness of respect. Obviously we need a precise criterion in terms of which discrimination might be claimed to be arbitrary or otherwise. Therefore, in order to defy such an argument one must either prove that the animal does in fact possess the relevant feature, or else give reasons demonstrating that the attribute is not a necessary condition of worthiness of respect. Yet it may seem difficult to present a definitive and irrefutable argument either of these sorts.

According to Hayward, what is involved in overcoming the defects associated with anthropocentrism, then, is the overcoming of speciesism in normative ethics and of the human chauvinist disposition which tends to reinforce speciesist reasoning.<sup>15</sup> What this means, at least in principle, may thus be restated: “Overcoming human chauvinism requires primarily a degree of good faith and the development of a sympathetic moral disposition; overcoming speciesism requires a commitment to consistency and non-arbitrariness in moral judgement combined with the development of knowledge adequate to ascertaining what is and is not arbitrary in our consideration of nonhuman beings.”<sup>16</sup> It is possible to overcome human chauvinism and speciesism in principle. But when we attempt to overcome it in practice we face with some limitations. Hence it is imperative to account for these limitations, if they are not to be confused with those aspects of anthropocentrism which are ineliminable but unobjectionable. And this ineliminable element lies in the discussion of *what is not wrong with anthropocentrism in ethics* mentioned earlier.

**Conclusion:** We should not feel any hesitation acknowledging the fact that speciesist anthropocentrism is a parochial, narrow-minded approach to nature which is responsible for the environmental pollution, resource depletion, and many other ecological problems which ultimately go against the interests of humans. Openness and greatness are the fundamentals of humans’ mind that very much absent into this speciesist anthropocentrism. As a kind of species egoism and species selfishness, moral anthropocentrism takes the non-human world as mere resource for us, devoid of any intrinsic value of their own. As a bias against other life-forms, it fails to recognize that we are part of the same integrated life-community, and other beings, having independent value, also belong to it. Anthropocentrism is surely objectionable when it emphasizes ‘human first!’ regardless of the consequences to other beings and the environment in general. So, the anthropocentricity which is based on instrumentalism cannot help us in the long run, we must take into account the ‘perspectival’ aspect of anthropocentricity without which no ethics is possible, having argued that this is unavoidable, and not something bad.

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