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## EDITORIAL

Exploring Non-Anthropocentric Paradigms 7  
*Francesco Allegri*

## INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Tom Regan for Animal Ethics 13  
*Francesco Allegri*

## STUDIES

### AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

Verso i diritti degli animali. Riflessioni e dibattiti nella storia del pensiero 19  
*Vilma Baricalla*

Respect, Inherent Value, Subjects-of-a-Life: Some Reflections on the Key Concepts of Tom Regan's Animal Ethics 41  
*Francesco Allegri*

Animalismo e non violenza. L'incidenza della lezione gandhiana sul pensiero di Tom Regan 61  
*Luisella Battaglia*

Almost Like Waging War: Tom Regan and the Conditions for Using Violence for the Sake of Animals 77  
*Federico Zuolo*

COMMENTS, DEBATES, REPORTS  
AND INTERVIEWS

Ricordo di Tom Regan. Intervista con Luigi Lombardi Vallauri <i>Francesco Allegri</i>	95
Author Guidelines	99

# Exploring Non-Anthropocentric Paradigms

## Editorial

**Francesco Allegri**

*Università degli Studi di Siena*

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[allegri2@unisi.it](mailto:allegri2@unisi.it)

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I assume the editorship of this journal in the sign of continuity with the previous management. In recent years *Relations* has been an important point of reference for those who want to address the issues of animal and environmental ethics from a non-anthropocentric perspective. We will continue along this path, exploring alternative points of view to the approach that has dominated Western thinking for millennia.

Historically the problem of who possesses moral status, i.e. of the entities that have moral importance as such<sup>1</sup>, has been effectively visualized with the metaphor of the expanding circle<sup>2</sup>. In fact, history confronts us with a process of progressive enlargement of the sphere of individuals considered moral patients. Initially the boundaries of the moral community are so narrow as to include only the human beings of one's own family or social group (if we put in parentheses religious obligations towards the divinity or deities, but they also have a particularistic nature). Everything outside of this sphere, of whatever kind, human or not, is below the threshold of moral consideration. Then slowly the circle extends until it comprises an entire people. But it does not go further. It is sufficient to think of the evaluation of an institution like slavery. For instance, in the Bible the strict prohibition against slavery applied to members of their own lineage is attenuated and disappears if it concerns individuals from different populations (see *Leviticus*, 25, 39-47). On the other hand also in Classical (Greek-Roman) thought, women, slaves, bar-

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<sup>1</sup> In other terms, all beings toward whom moral agents have *direct* duties.

<sup>2</sup> This metaphor dates back to Lecky 1869, 103. But it was later successfully taken up by Peter Singer, who entitled in this way one of his books (see Singer 1981).

barians are not clearly inserted in the moral community, they are located in a border area; and, if they are given any moral status, it is much lower than that of free males. The universalistic perspective is still far away in Plato and Aristotle, which seem to limit the domain of moral patients to the Greek world (Warren 2000, 14). Only a few philosophers argued that human beings as such are worthy of respect.

But even when common morality and philosophical reflections come to include all humans in the moral community, they are far from conceiving them in equal terms, namely from giving them equal dignity. Race and sex discrimination persist until the late twentieth century and are found in the legal codes of many countries (just think, to give just one example, the right to vote, denied to women for a long time). And in some areas of our planet they remain even in the twenty-first century.

The great turn in a non-anthropocentric direction starts from the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century when even a position that englobes the human community in an equal way, without discrimination of race and sex, begins to appear limiting and, in analogy with racism and sexism, is accused of *specism*, because it unduly bases the boundaries of the moral community on a mere biological fact like species belonging. On these bases, alternatives emerge that further extend the domain of moral patients and with which ethical-philosophical reflection is still confronted today. Schematically I group them into four options: (1) *rationalism* (or *personalism*), (2) *sentiocentrism*, (3) *biocentrism*, (4) *ecocentrism*.

The option of rationalism asserts that moral community is composed only by rational beings or persons. The discriminating element is no longer belonging to a species, as it cannot be belonging to a race or to a sex (otherwise we fall into racism or sexism), but possession of certain morally relevant inter-racial, interspecific, inter-sexual characteristics: the presence of states of consciousness, mnemonic abilities, a sense of the future, beliefs and intentionality; in a word those properties that make something a *person*, namely a self-conscious and rational entity.

But these characteristics, in addition to humans, do not only belong to possible extraterrestrial intelligences. If conceived in non-maximal terms, they are also possessed by non-human terrestrial animals, such as great apes, dolphins, whales, etc., and more generally mammals (but according to some even birds and fish), whose mental complexity is emerged (and emerges) in an increasingly convincing manner from evolutionary considerations and experimental data (behavioral and neurophysiological). Therefore, identifying in the concept of person the discrimination for inclusion in the moral community has as a result the inclusion of the

members of such animal species among moral patients. From this point of view, they too deserve the respect that is due to beings that are worth in themselves and not in function of something else.

On the other hand, if the concept of person in some ways is more extensive than the concept of a human being, from other points of view it could be more restrictive. In fact, if we adopt a functionalistic conception of person, limiting the moral community only to persons would seem to exclude human infants, who certainly are not able to exercise self-consciousness and rationality. But even by adopting a broader conception of person, atypical humans (humans with severe mental handicaps, due to genetic abnormalities, developmental defects, accidents, illnesses, etc.) are at risk of being left out of the range of moral patients. They do not even seem to possess the potential to exercise rational capacities. Leaving out non-paradigmatic humans, however, seems a rather counterintuitive result. And so, to avoid it, we are forced to further extend the boundaries of the moral community, enlarging them to include also those beings who possess the characteristics of atypical humans, that is to say, beings that are sentient, even if they are not rational or not fully rational. But at this point, for coherence, one is obliged to include non-human sentient beings, i.e. all sentient beings *tout court*, in the moral community, outlining the option we have called sentiocentrism. In this perspective the dividing line is marked not so much by self-awareness and rationality, but by sensitivity, i.e. the ability to have sensations and in particular those of pleasure and suffering, properties in possession of large sectors of the animal world. Where there are psychological states there is an entity worthy of direct moral consideration.

But for someone the moral community must overcome even the limits of sensitivity and to come to include all living beings, according to a point of view that sometimes is called biocentrism, in other cases vitalism, more rarely conativism. In the biocentric perspective, the status of moral patient is extended to every living organism, animal or vegetal, sentient or non-sentient, as a teleological center of life, with a good in itself. The *telos* of the organism is to reach a state of maturity and reproduce itself. Human action can prevent the achievement of this end.

Finally, there is an even wider conception of the moral community than biocentrism: ecocentrism. The defenders of the ecocentric approach challenge the individualistic or atomistic character of the biocentric conception. For the supporters of this line not only the individual entities are deserving of moral protection, but so are the totalities: species, ecosystems, food and biotic chains, and, in addition to them, the inanimate entities.

But the question of moral status is not limited to the topic of the *extension* of the moral community. It also includes the problem of its *internal structure*. Because once we have identified the range of moral patients, we must ask ourselves whether they are all to be placed on the same level, or whether the moral community is stratified on several levels. If the second alternative is true, a criterion of inclusion in the moral community is not enough to fully answer questions about the moral status of the entities; a criterion of comparison is also necessary to identify the levels of belonging. So – to use spatial metaphors – the problem of who possesses moral status is not yet fully defined when we have identified who is inside the moral community and who is outside it. There is also the problem of who is above and who is below. It remains, in other words, to establish whether those who are inside are included on an equal basis or not.

And therefore we will have, for instance, egalitarian and non-egalitarian forms of sentiocentrism or biocentrism. A clear example of egalitarian sentiocentrism can be found in the pages of Joan Dunayer. According to Dunayer, all sentient beings are within the moral community and on equal terms, there are no hierarchies. They all have the same moral status, regardless of their biological species or cognitive skills, because there are no convincing arguments to assert that the life of a more mentally complex being has more value than the life of a less complex being (Dunayer 2004). On the other hand in non-egalitarian versions, in addition to sensitivity, other components come into play, that pose the moral community on several levels. In this case, sensitivity is the condition for access to the moral community, whose internal structure, however, is determined by further factors. For instance, there are those who, while identifying sensitivity as the gateway to enter the moral community, believe that on a comparative level the greater cognitive, emotional and social complexity of a being gives it a greater moral status. This means that the parameters do not necessarily have to be taken separately. It may be that the parameter “reason” does not count for entry, but applies to assign more weight, i.e. in terms of comparison between moral patients. The attribution of a relevant weight to mental complexity on the comparative level can lead to believe that in case of conflict (the life of) a mentally more complex sentient being takes precedence over (the life of) a mentally less complex sentient being.

Even considering an entity, just because it is living, worthy of moral consideration does not necessarily mean putting all living beings on an equal footing with regard to moral status. The most articulated example of egalitarian biocentrism can be found in the texts of Paul Taylor, a Kantian deontologist who extends the value in itself and the idea of

respect to all living beings, who, in his opinion, possess the same inherent value (understood as the value in itself of things that are not states of consciousness, for which the expression “intrinsic value” is preferred; see Taylor 1986). Different ideas on how to structure the moral community of all living people can be found in the ethical vitalism (or conativism) of philosophers such as Goodpaster and Attfield. Attfield argues that all living beings have interests; even non-sentient ones like plants and bacteria. But the interests of the latter have (significantly) less moral weight than those of sentient beings (Attfield 1991, 154). In a conception of non-egalitarian biocentrism, therefore, even if mere life has inherent or intrinsic value, if a being, in addition to life, possesses sensitivity, this gives it a higher value. And indeed, the greater is its capacity to “feel”, the greater is its value. Moreover, if, in addition to sensitivity, a being also possesses qualities such as memory, sense of the future, rationality, self-awareness etc., its value grows further. A growth that has an additional increase the more these complex mental skills are developed.

These are, in brief, the perspectives that we have before us and on which we will focus our attention. In conclusion, let me make some thanks.

I am grateful to LED publisher, in the person of Valeria Passerini, for the trust placed in me and I hope to repay it with a constant commitment to keep the journal at the high standards expressed so far. A heartfelt thanks to all those who have renewed their adhesion to the project of *Relations* and to the new collaborators, who have accepted my invitation to participate in this exciting adventure. In the end, a special thanks to Matteo Andreozzi, who created this review and passed me the baton.

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