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Humanism, Biocentrism, and the Problem of Justification

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ABSTRACT

Curren and Metzger's work makes a bold, normative claim: The moral goal of sustainability is human flourishing. Their eudaimonic theory has as its summum bonum 'living well' according to the fundamental psychological needs and potentials of our species. With this, Curren and Metzger implicitly affirm precisely what, today, many theoretical ethicists strain to deny — a stable human nature. (Or what Marx, emphasizing humanity's sociality, termed 'species-being') Relatedly, Curren and Metzger's work stands in clear opposition to the 'deep ecology' tradition as well. For deep ecology criticizes any special focus on human need as an illicit 'speciesism' and instrumentalization of nature. Though the authors do not engage with deep ecology specifically, their contrast (and surprising confluence) with this school of thought is well worth exploring. For the meta-ethical assumptions on either side of this humanist/biocentric divide have real import for how sustainable policies are conceived and crafted.

KEYWORDS

Eudaimonia; rule utilitarianism; humanism; deep ecology; biocentrism

Curren and Metzger approach environmental ethics with a refreshing theoretical seriousness in a field dominated by casuistry. According to them, their overall argument leads 'not to a specific set of policy recommendations, but to a broad conceptualization of the normative principles that should inform such recommendations' (2017, p. 238). Their project also seeks to make use of timeless facets of human nature in filling out these normative strictures. Indeed, one dominant feature of their ethic of sustainability is an unapologetic focus on 'the human' as the locus of moral concern. As such, they outline a 'eudaimonic theory of justice,' concerned with a flourishing of the human collectivity, undergirded by an imperative to 'respect others as rationally self-determining persons' (2017, pp. 232).

In this, Curren and Metzger appear diametrically opposed to another strongly speculative approach within environmental ethics, that of Deep Ecology. Though a diverse tradition, Deep Ecology is marked by a rejection of anthropocentrism in favor of 'biocentric egalitarianism,' or the equal inherent value of each living thing. A second grounding principle, that of 'holistic ontology,' emphasizes the interconnectedness of all biological life on Earth (Taylor, 1986).

Prima facie, Curren and Metzger's stance has a pragmatic advantage over Deep Ecology. As has been pointed out in the literature, the Deep Ecologist is ill-equipped to offer any specific moral or policy guidance, owing to their unwillingness to prioritize some life forms

over others (according to sentience, sapience, or any other measure). The duty to 'respect all life as-such' cannot adjudicate between eating carrots and farming veal (Fox, 1984). At the same time, Deep Ecology has perennially stood accused of misanthropy, owing to its characterization of humans as merely an overpopulating, resource-hungry species (Bookchin, 1988, pp. 11–13).

Curren and Metzger's ethic of sustainability, by contrast, aims at preserving equal opportunity for future generations. Drawing on basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), sustainable policies ought to ensure universal and cross-cultural necessities of human fulfillment, and specifically the desires for competency, autonomy, and fulfilling relationships (2017, pp. 235–236). It should be noted, however, that some values and conditions which the authors take to be timeless appear rather specific to our current stage of capitalism and technological development. This includes their affirmation of 'property-owning democracy', and the claim that continued economic growth is inherently 'incompatible' with sustainability (2017, pp. 235–236).

Despite such differences, there are several problematic similarities between Curren and Metzger's ethic of sustainability and Deep Ecology. First, both frameworks present difficulties in establishing their fundamental normative claims. For its part, Deep Ecology (in its classic formulation) offers no demonstration that all life does have equal intrinsic worth. What is offered instead is merely a phenomenological approach aimed at some 'direct intuition' of that belief (Naess, 1984).

In the words of Arne Naess, 'the equal right to live and blossom is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom' (Naess, 1973, p. 96). But the appeal to 'obvious value axioms' should be met with skepticism. There is nothing obviously normative about a given life form's apparent teleology. A rose bush may typically blossom in the spring, though there is no evidence that it subjectively desires this event, or that it is otherwise objectively 'good' that this occurs. Likewise, weather events may manifest in regular, predictable patterns – but it is far from obvious that this is inherently 'good' or 'right' especially if we imagine this occurring on a distant planet devoid of any sentient life forms. The Deep Ecologist must show why all biological teleologies carry normative import, but inorganic ones do not.

For their part, Curren and Metzger do not seem to offer a rigorous demonstration that we ought to respect one another as 'rationally self-determining persons'. Instead, they stipulate this as basic to what they call 'common morality' since it is supposedly prevalent across many cultures, and especially, the common-law traditions of anglophone countries (2017, p. 232). However, such ubiquity is not a justification for the moral principle itself, and arguments of this type suffer from the fallacy of *consensus gentium*. Merely because the legal traditions of England, Canada, and the United States consider mutual respect to be 'self-evident' does not entail that this is so.¹

One of the great strengths of the authors' work is recognition of the importance of moral theory. However, at times, their desire to consider practical application stunts the theoretical discussion. This is evidenced by assertions of the type that,

...there is no need to begin by assuming that the entire edifice of value and principle we have accepted is systematically corrupt and must be replaced. We already know a great deal about what is good for human beings and other living things (2017, p. 232).

Indeed, we needn't assume that all existing moral frameworks are obsolete, but neither are we warranted in merely assuming their legitimacy.

Second, both Curren and Metzger and Deep Ecology express moral guidance in strongly deontological terms. Both are therefore subject to the problem of conflicting duties. With Curren and Metzger, the authors derive the duties of ‘truth-telling’, ‘non-coercion’, ‘mutual aid’, and ‘entering into social contracts’ from their allegedly ‘common morality’ (2017, pp. 232–233). Yet one could easily imagine scenarios in which two or more of these duties conflict. For example, enforcing social contracts that govern a geographic area will involve some degree of coercion toward those unwilling to abide by such covenants. Likewise, both harm and coercion are predictable results of abandoning entrenched, ecologically harmful industries which nonetheless provide livelihoods for thousands of families. As we have seen, this problem of irresolvable, conflicting duties applies to Deep Ecology as well; for if every organism has an absolute *right* to live and flourish, then there can be no basis for our consuming, exploiting, or limiting any one organism as opposed to another in the course of our metabolic existence.

One strategy for dealing with these common problems would be to naturalize the moral discourse; instead of a language of rights and duties, a hedonistic ethics of ‘goods’ may be apt. This consequentialist approach allows for a greater capacity for moral guidance. For, unlike conflicting rights, competing goods (e.g. non-harm, mutual aid, transparency) can be non-arbitrarily selected for according to their relative hedonistic benefit within a particular context. At the same time, a consequentialist approach would still accommodate certain (duty-like) guiding principles of ecological sustainability, albeit in the manner of a ‘weak rule utilitarianism’. Finally, this would also have the benefit of locating value in a descriptive feature of the world which is already normatively charged (i.e. subjective happiness or desire). This seems less problematic than axiomatically asserting the moral worth of life-as-such, appeals to intuition, or of assuming the validity of current moral norms of respect.

Neither would such an approach contradict Curren and Metzger’s laudable focus on human flourishing, their *eudaimonic* ethic. For while it is true that the ability to experience pleasure and pain extends to non-human animals, the case can be made that the capacity for such emotion positively correlates to cognitive capacity. To be sure, classical utilitarianism has generally separated intelligence from affect. To cite Jeremy Bentham’s famous dictum, ‘The question is not can they [i.e. animals] reason? Nor, can they talk? But can they suffer?’

Yet mere sensation in the absence of cognition could not, in principle, result in either pain or joy—but only a purely mechanical reflex, lacking any moral import. The normative significance of a sensation (good or bad) depends on their being an inner life, self-concern, and so some degree of intelligence. Presumably, greater degrees of intelligence correlate to greater potential for complex and intense emotion. The moral ‘flatness’ of Deep Ecology’s egalitarian biocentrism is thereby avoided, and special attention can be given to the specifically human requirements of meaningful work, social affirmation, and autonomy (Curren & Metzger, 2017, p. 235–236) At the same time, this humanism needn’t exclude animal ethics from the conversation, and does not rely on an illicit speciesism or anthropocentrism. For inherent value is not accorded to humanity as such, but rather to humanity’s highly evolved capacity for self-awareness and self-concern. But these are faculties which echo throughout the animal kingdom at large.

Note

1. Perhaps the authors would respond that the moral consensus they perceive is not the *grounding* for their normative claims, but rather an *indication* of their veracity. Indeed, the authors also

invoke Immanuel Kant's moral 'constructivism' as a basis for their assertion that any morality must respect the dignity and free-will autonomy of individuals. Yet this presumption, too, requires justification if it is not to be question-begging. Namely, why are *these* values, in particular, considered indispensable to ethics in the first place? Is this not, in the end, an appeal to 'common' (yet unjustified) intuitions about ethics and rationality? (Cohen, 2003; Timmons, 2003).

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