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Environmental Value and Anthropocentrism

ABSTRACT: *The critique of traditional Western ethics, and in particular its anthropocentric foundations, is a central theme which has dominated environmental philosophy for the last twenty years. Anthropocentrism is widely identified as a fundamental source of the alienating and destructive attitudes towards the nonhuman world which are a principal target of a number of salient ecophilosophies. This paper addresses a problem about articulating the concern with anthropocentrism raised by the influential formulations of deep ecology by nature liberation proponent Val Plumwood.*

Anthropocentrism, or *human-centeredness*, is widely acknowledged as a central concept in environmental philosophy, where it is used to draw attention to a systematic and unjustified bias in traditional Western attitudes to the nonhuman world (Naess 1973). Val Plumwood (1993, 1996) has argued that anthropocentrism plays an analogous role in green theory to androcentrism in feminist theory and ethnocentrism in anti-racist theory. Plumwood calls human-centeredness "anthrocentrism" to emphasize this parallel.

The concept of anthropocentrism is, however, problematic, and its usefulness, and even its ultimate coherence, has been challenged by a number of environmental philosophers. Plumwood finds this as extraordinary as imagining feminists being divided over the need for the concept of sexism or as blacks being divided over the need for the concept of racism. Indeed, Plumwood argues persuasively that various "centrisms" constitute the core concepts which are vital for the articulation of various species of systematic bias. Plumwood (1996, 126ff.) goes on to

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suggest that it is not the concept of anthropocentrism which is at fault but rather certain perverse interpretations of the concept of anthropocentrism.

One of the preeminent purveyors of perverse interpretation and confusion, according to Plumwood, is myself. There is a great deal which I support, admire, and applaud in Plumwood's paper, "Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism" (1996), and indeed in many of her other extensive writings. However, there are aspects of this paper of Plumwood's about which I have reservations. These reservations concern her interpretation of the central claims in my paper, "Anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology" (Grey 1993). In this paper I reply to charges leveled against me by Plumwood and clarify the claims which I advanced in that paper.

A second distinction, importantly related to anthropocentrism, which has also been a focus of attention in the articulation of environmental philosophy, is the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values. This distinction is another subject of Plumwood's critique. According to Plumwood (1996), articulating an adequate ethic of respect for nature is a two-step process. First, it is necessary to reject instrumentalism, that is, to acknowledge that nonhumans are intrinsically valuable, and to include them in the universe of moral discourse. Plumwood argues that the dualistic ethical framework, which is the legacy of Descartes, is largely responsible for consigning nonhumans to the category of mere instruments whose only value is "use" value. Beyond this there is also a need for reformulating a notion of human virtue and human identity, and a reconnection of nature in non-mechanistic ways (Plumwood 1993). The critique of anthropocentrism plays a role in this further task.

It is perversely flattering to be acknowledged as the author of a breathtakingly audacious argument. However, it is perplexing to find the arguments attributed to be unrecognizable, and vexing to find the imputed conclusions in many instances to be precisely the opposite of what I believed myself to have stated. Plumwood's reconstruction of my position, I claim, involves serious misrepresentation. Some of the misrepresentation is subtle; for example, Plumwood says I claim "the search for a non-anthrocentric ethic is 'a hopeless quest'" (1996, 126). What I said is the search for a *genuinely* non-anthropocentric ethic *seems to be* a hopeless quest (Grey 1993, 473, emphasis added). Much of the detail is tedious to track, and in this note I will by and large address the more general picture.

In the paper (Grey 1993) which is the target of Plumwood's critique I was at (what I thought were considerable) pains to stress the need for an enlarged, enriched, and fortified notion of human interests, which explicitly acknowledge obligations to, and the value of, nonhuman and natural items. Plumwood (1996), however, throughout her paper, takes me to be defending what I take to be an extremely narrow and reactionary form of "anthrocentrism." This so-called "cosmic anthropocentrism" (or "anthrocentrism") which Plumwood attributes to me seems to me, as it seems to Plumwood, to be a thesis of egregious perversity. I deny paternity.

Again, Plumwood attributes to me the claim that “constraints on human conduct can take into consideration only human interests” (1996, 126); what I actually said was technological changes “have prompted the question whether constraints on human conduct should take into consideration more than purely human interests” (Grey 1993, 464). On top of this Plumwood charges me with the (to my mind repugnant) doctrine that “only human beings can be morally considerable” (1996, 126), an ugly doctrine for which Benton (1993) has coined an ugly word: *anthroposcopy*. I protest.

Plumwood (1996, 127) identifies four steps in my argument:

1. To avoid [abandon] anthropocentrism one must eschew human locations or bearings (i.e., refrain from interpreting the world in terms of human experience and values).
2. However, this is impossible (stepping outside the human scale of judgment provides no basis for organizing preferences).
3. Therefore anthropocentrism is unavoidable, and;
4. Therefore only human interests are morally considerable.

With great respect this reconstruction is a travesty. Plumwood’s gloss led me to revisit my paper and examine it in a hermeneutic spirit which I have not before applied to my own writings, to try and comprehend to what extent the paper is capable of supporting Plumwood’s alternative reading. The central heresies attributed to me, viz., the claims that “only humans can be morally considerable” (1996, 126) and “the universe of moral discourse is confined to humans” (1996, 149 n.8) are not substantiated by textual quotes—though I acknowledge that some of the other misinterpretations are substantiated by careless expression and lapses, most of which are contradicted elsewhere in the paper.

Well, what position was I attempting to articulate? Rather than an exciting, original, and manifestly fallacious argument, I was attempting to forge a position which seems to me to have many affinities with Plumwood’s own. Indeed I am happy to declare myself an anti-anthrocentrist as Plumwood articulates this position.

The worry that motivated my paper is one that has been raised by other writers (e.g., Norton 1991), namely that articulations of deep ecology often try to correct anthropocentric bias by developing and defending a conception of environmental value which downgrades or denies human values and concerns altogether, and in so doing renders them marginal or useless for decision and action (Dobson 1990). My claim was that this fails to deliver a scheme of values which provides the means to evaluate and to order better and worse states of the world. Values have to be anchored or centered in the lives of preference-havers. This is perhaps an obvious, almost trivial, point but one which is nevertheless often neglected, with serious consequences. I do not of course suggest that this important point is overlooked by Plumwood.

What is wrong with (or missing from) at least some articulations of deep ecology is that they do not provide us with any helpful way of organizing our intuitions about better and worse states of the world, unless they are fortified with what I claimed were recognizably anthropocentric elements. Deep ecology (in some of its formulations) attempts to prescind altogether from human concerns, and when this happens it is difficult to see how anything useful can be said about praxis, or practical choice. From a "planetary perspective" we may be going through another mass extinction, not the first, and almost certainly not the last. It's just biological business as usual. The perspective of Gaia is not a plausible or useful one to adopt in organizing our lives. That was the point which I labored (in Grey 1993).

The word "anthrocentrism" is not yet in the dictionary, but perhaps its time will come. "Anthropocentrism" can, however, be found. Although I am usually suspicious of the usefulness of dictionaries as instruments for helping to resolve philosophical perplexity or illuminating philosophical puzzles—they are unreliable guides, embodying the prejudice and folly as well as the wisdom of our ancestors—in the present case they are worth a look. Dictionaries consistently identify a fundamental ambiguity in "anthropocentrism," which includes an axiological as well as an epistemological meaning. This is a fundamental ambiguity which I think has done much to obstruct discussion.

According to the *Macquarie Dictionary* (Delbridge 1991) "anthropocentrism" has the following meanings:¹

1. regarding [hu]man[s] as the central fact of the universe;
2. assuming [hu]man[s] to be the final end and aim of the universe;
3. viewing and interpreting everything in terms of human experiences and values.

Values are supposed to guide our decisions and actions, and at least in that sense it is inescapable, even trivial, that we cannot disconnect our values from human interests and concerns. Though this is an obvious point it is one which I thought was worth making precisely because of the prevalence of its denial. Its denial is worrying because, as a number of writers have pointed out (e.g., Dobson 1990) it appears to rule out the use of *prudential* arguments for the modification of attitudes and practices regarding the natural world, whereas for many these include the most important, *but not the only*, considerations.

Plumwood (1996, 128) acknowledges the inevitability of *epistemic locatedness*, approvingly quoting a passage from Iris Young which nicely expresses a point which I wholeheartedly support:

Reflection, an ability to take some distance from one's immediate impulses, intuitions, desires and interests in order to consider their relation to the demands of others, their consequences if acted upon, and so on. This process does not require, however, that one adopt a point of view emptied of particularity, a point of view that is the same for every-

one; indeed it is hard to see how such a universal point of view could aid reflection that leads to action at all. (Young 1991, 105)

Eliminating our interests and concerns is impossible if we are to forge a framework which will enable us to articulate an ethic of concern for the nonhuman world. As Plumwood says this decentered "cosmic" understanding "yields a contrast which is irrelevant to the main purposes of environmental concern" (1996, 129). But even if it were possible to detach ourselves from our concerns, such self-denials, Plumwood again acknowledges, would not be desirable. However, extending and developing a concern for the interests of others through the development of empathy, is perfectly possible. This is how Plumwood conceives the major task of environmental philosophy and it has my implicit support. It certainly does *not* involve the objectionable sense of anthropocentrism, "regarding [hu]man[s] as the central fact of the universe" or "assuming [hu]man[s] to be the final end and aim of the universe" (Delbridge 1991).

Perhaps by Plumwood's lights I am guilty of a kind of "low redefinition" of "anthropocentrism," extending the scope of this key term so that it's difficult to withhold. Plumwood complains of a comparable low redefinition of "instrumentalism."² However, it could be replied by Norton (or myself) that Plumwood has in effect provided a low redefinition of *anti-anthropocentrism* (or "anti-anthrocentrism") in a way which has been calculated to meet a key concern of my critique. Plumwood and I both agree that the choice is *not* between a selfish anthropocentrism (such as the lamentable anthroposcopy) and a decentered "cosmic" understanding which eliminates the interests and perspectives of the base class. Rather we need an account which acknowledges but also transcends those interests. It seems to me that Plumwood's "liberation model" of anti-anthrocentrism is intended to do precisely this.

In contrast to the "absurd," "perverse," "hegemonic centrism" ("cosmic anthropocentrism") which is the target of Plumwood's critique, Plumwood's own liberation account of anti-anthrocentrism provides practical and behavioral orientation and closes "the gap between ecophilosophy and ecopolitics to validate and theoretically illuminate the sorts of practical responses adopted in green activism" (1996, 139). Indeed, Plumwood's "liberation" anti-anthrocentrism has an eerie familiarity. To put the point bluntly, Plumwood seems to have attributed to me the conclusion of my own reductio argument, "cosmic anthropocentrism," and proceeded to occupy the very position to which that argument was intended to direct one.³

How useful are models taken from anti-racist and feminist liberation political movements for illuminating conceptual issues in ecophilosophy? I believe that they are very useful indeed. Plumwood clearly and persuasively draws attention to systematic parallels between the major "anti-centric" movements. Her feminist reading of anthropocentrism (reading anthropocentrism as structurally similar to andro-

centrism) is extremely fruitful. Plumwood emphatically rejects human-centeredness in the sense of selfishness and teases out an ethic of care and respect.

The liberation model, articulated with the help of a sharp and delightful domestic analogy, is not an ethic of self-denial, but extends consideration to a wider class, incorporating a widening of the interests of the base class. The liberation model extends concern beyond previously accepted but unacceptably restricted boundaries of the base class of humans. It is less radical a thesis than many articulations of deep ecology by delivering a politically practical model that is pure gain. I am happy to nail my colors to the mast of Plumwood's "liberation" model of anti-anthrocentrism. This is anti-anthrocentrism with a human face!

In conclusion, apart from Plumwood's regrettable misrepresentations of my work, there is much in her paper which I support and applaud. It is a politically empowering critique which is located very much within the ecological resistance movement. It avoids a major weakness of theories of ecological or evolutionary ethics which are unhelpful for policy guidance and political action.

Plumwood certainly succeeds in making my argument a lot more interesting than I intended, but only by transforming it into something which is unrecognizable to its author.

Schoepenhauer said that all truth passes three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as self-evident. The task of articulating a framework and principles for the proper consideration of the claims of nature has reached the second stage. Let us hope that it soon advances to the third.

NOTES

1. The ambiguity in the *Macquarie* definition is also clearly stated in *Webster*, which defines "anthropocentrism" as: "1. considering man to be the most significant entity of the universe; interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experiences. However, there is no suggestion of value in the entry in *The Shorter Oxford*, which defines "anthropocentrism" as: "cent[e]ring in man; regarding man as the central fact of the universe, to which all surrounding facts have reference" (Little 1944).
2. The low redefinition of a term extends its range of application. Low redefinition of "egocentric" or "selfish," notoriously, quickly renders any action or choice "selfish" but thereby renders the principle of universal self-interest vacuous. See Williams (1973) and Nowell Smith (1954).
3. To block another possible misunderstanding: I am *not* of course suggesting that Plumwood's conclusions were in any way influenced by my own.

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