

The Anthropocentrism of the Cosmic Perspective Argument

Seth Sivinski

University of Montana, Andrew Blewett III School of Law

Joseph Ulatowski

University of Waikato, New Zealand

Abstract

New developments in cosmology make it unlikely that life on Earth is unique. The Cosmic Perspective Argument states that given these developments we should not be concerned with the Earth's environmental degradation. In this paper, we argue that although scaling our analysis upwards into the cosmos provides the Cosmic Perspective with its strength, when we apply the Cosmic Perspective downwards, the view appears to be terribly flawed. After examining the Cosmic Perspective at an individual level the problems that arise intensify and seemingly not only break the argument at an individual level but also on a much larger scale as well. These problems show the need for a framework that takes into full account the complex and interconnected nature of the environment, thus one that only deep ecology may provide. (130 words)

Some people and environmental groups, like the Sierra Club Foundation and the Audubon Society, have sought to protect the environment first and foremost (and sometimes at any cost), especially non-human animal species, plants, mountains, and rocks, while others have preferred the view that human interests should be set above concern for the environment. We call the former the *non-anthropocentric view* and the latter the *anthropocentric view*. Proponents of the anthropocentric view believe mankind is separate and superior to the natural world. According to this view, we should not be concerned with the effects that our actions have on the environment. Some non-anthropocentric theories are more egalitarian than anthropocentric

views and consider all living and non-living species to be equal. Therefore, it is not acceptable to further human interests at the expense of other animals, vegetation, or objects of nature.¹

In this paper, we critically examine non-anthropocentric views that argue human induced damage is both natural and inconsequential to achieve a self-sustaining environmental ethic. According to one view, comparing past natural catastrophic events with the damage humans inflict upon the environment shows how the damage that we do to the Earth is insignificant. Call this the Planetary Perspective Argument (“PPA”). According to another view, which extends the first, when we account for the discovery of distant Earth-like planets, not only is human life insignificant but human damage to the environment is unimportant. Call this the Cosmic Perspective Argument (“CPA”).² In this paper, we show that if the PPA and CPA are correct, then at a sufficiently micro-level the two positions yield no moral reason for us to improve ourselves but to waste away our lives. Proponents of the PPA and CPA serve merely to justify human shortsightedness and continue our destructive path. This unpalatable consequence of taking up either the PPA or CPA should warrant our not accepting the two views. Along the way, we contend with a potential criticism of our view that suggests the “micro” viewpoint is irrelevant. Applying PPA and CPA to a micro-level shows that the larger macro-level analysis about assuaging environmental concerns is more convenient than it is true.

1. The Planetary and Cosmic Perspective Arguments

¹ What humans do can negatively affect the environment, but we should not overlook the fact that animals and natural events can harm the environment too. Beavers that build dams or otters that build holts can adversely alter local ecosystems. Natural events, also, cause damage to the environment. Tsunamis, sinkholes, and mudslides forever change landscapes, not to mention the toll they have on human lives. Think here of the sinkhole in Tampa where a man was literally sucked into the Earth and killed or the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and the tsunami it precipitated, killing thousands of people, devastating the landscape, and causing one of the greatest nuclear fallouts the world has seen since the 1986 Chernobyl accident.

² See Neil Manson, “Anthropocentrism, Exoplanets and the Cosmic Perspective,” *Environmental Ethics*, 34 (2012).

To avoid slipping into an anthropocentric view many writers try to look at the environment from a view external to the human predicament. One way of doing this is to look at the world from the standpoint of geologic time because, from this viewpoint, human interests may be consigned to the background. This leads proponents of the PPA to look at the world in a regimented model of ages defined by the dominance of one species. From here, they suggest that human dominance is nothing special. Looking at the world from the geologic timescale, the damage that dominant species do to the environment is insignificant, relative to the catastrophic events that already have befallen the Earth. Since the Earth has survived these naturally occurring events, it surely will survive whatever harm humans may cause.

PPA thinkers have claimed that their view is non-anthropocentric because they look at the life of the planet using a much more encompassing geologic time-scale. PPA proponents have said that the environmental concerns of other theories whose time-scale is shorter are too narrowly focused. William Grey states, "If in the long run time overwhelms all, does not that reduce our concerns to insignificance?"³ Grey further shows that whatever we do really does not matter in the long run.

The thought that nothing we do now will have any significant impact on the distant future is not relevant for the assessment of present significance. The confusion underlying this thought has been nicely pinpointed by Thomas Nagel, who has argued that if nothing matters in a million years, then by the same token nothing that will matter in a million years matters now. And in particular, the fact that in a million years nothing will matter, does not matter now. That is to say, the (alleged) future insignificance of the

³ William Grey, "Anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 71 (1993), p. 467.

present entails the present insignificance of the future, and hence the present insignificance of the future insignificance of the present.⁴

For Grey, our concern about the high rate of species extinction or glacial melting should be considered trivial given that these events occur over a very brief time-span. Accordingly, if one adopts the non-anthropocentric PPA, then worrying now about habitat destruction and environmental degradation caused by humans is unfounded.

Human intervention is nothing extraordinary; instead, humans merely contribute to a singular short-lived phase of Earth's long natural geological history. Grey has claimed that if one looks at the scale of evolutionary biology and life's ability to adapt and carry on, the conservationist's fears of things like rising oceans, desertification, and deforestation, lose some (if not all) of their moral thrust. In support of this line of reasoning, according to Grey, given that the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia will probably disappear and reform several times over the next one thousand years (or so), destruction of this habitat is morally irrelevant because it is not going to change the fate of the planet.⁵

While it would be dishonest for us to say that J. Baird Callicott is a friend of classical rationalism, which is exemplified by Grey's position, he has called concern and bias for our own time and the environment that surrounds us: "temporal parochialism". A concept that is looked upon favorably and adopted by proponents of the PPA. He writes:

The axiological orientation of classical rationalism has, in fact, been, in theory at least, so detached, general, and abstract that its conscription in service of non-anthropocentric

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

environmental ethics could easily boomerang in another way. One may morally decry the very real and imminent prospect of an abrupt, massive reduction of biotic diversity to be succeeded by a “mono-culture” consisting of tens of billions of human beings, their habitations, their economic cultivars (and the pests thereof), human transportation, distribution, and communication networks, and little else. However, if one forthrightly and articulately defends one’s considered intuition that this process of anthropogenic biological impoverishment is objectively morally wrong by positing organic “richness” (biotic diversity, complexity, and harmony) as objectively and impersonally good, one might well be accused of temporal parochialism. Considering our time as but an infinitesimal moment in the three and one-half billion year tenure of life on planet Earth, the present tendency of man to extirpate and eventually extinguish other species and take over their habitats for himself and his domesticated symbionts might be viewed quite disinterestedly as but a brief transitional stage in the Earth’s evolutionary odyssey.⁶

One who accepts temporal parochialism, such as Grey, shows how wrongheaded it is to focus on maximizing immediate potentially good outcomes without regard for analyzing the long-term environmental situation. It is notable that, in a recently published book, Callicott parts company with the PPA by arguing for an Earth ethic that sees the planet as a Gaian living, or even conscious, being,⁷ since “To have some chance of confronting global climate change successfully, we need to be equipped with an environmental ethic that is commensurate with its spatio-temporal scale.”⁸ Accordingly, we are responsible both to “immediate posterity [and to] the

⁶ J. B. Callicott, “Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory and Environmental Ethics,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21(1984), p. 304.

⁷ J. Baird Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 205-207.

⁸ J. Baird Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, p. 300.

unknown future.” In a sense, Callicott humbly admitting that our focus should be constrained to the “Holocene climate and the biota that is adapted to it.”⁹

Neil Manson not only agrees with Callicott’s form of temporal parochialism but wholeheartedly adopts and expands the PPA, claiming:

To say the biosphere as it is here and now is more valuable than the future one is to be guilty of *temporal parochialism*. ... Expanding our horizons beyond our short-term concerns here on Earth leads us to recognize the ultimate insignificance of human activity when viewed from the planetary perspective.¹⁰

If one is really concerned with life on Earth *sans phrase*, they will not discriminate as to what form of life it is that flourishes or when that form of life prospers. While some environmentalists seem to fear the results, given the likelihood of complete destruction of humankind, PPA thinkers view this merely as another step in the natural unfolding of Earth’s history and not something with which we should be gravely concerned.

Whereas the PPA removed itself from the human worldview by looking at the world from the view of the planet, the CPA seeks to do the same thing but from the view of the whole cosmos. Manson has described the CPA argument in the following way:

⁹ J. Baird Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet*, p. 298.

¹⁰ Neil Manson, “Anthropocentrism, Exoplanets and the Cosmic Perspective,” p. 283.

[T]he Cosmic Perspective Argument... is structurally analogous to the planetary perspective argument but has much more sweeping empirical premises driven by recent work in cosmology, astrobiology, and exoplanet science.¹¹

According to Manson, since human activity cannot affect life in the rest of the universe, human-induced climate change, and other potentially destructive phenomena are even less significant than proponents of the PPA have contended. Thus, if we really want to be non-anthropocentric, we would step all the way back and look at life itself, not just life on Earth.

Impetus for the CPA, according to Manson, comes from “recent work in cosmology, astrobiology, and exoplanet science indicating that elsewhere in the universe there are countless planets harboring life”.¹² Since scientists have begun to discover planets with Earth-like conditions in other parts of the universe (beginning in 1995) they have discovered countless Earth-like planets in the ‘habitable zone’ (the zone that allows for liquid water).¹³ As Manson rightfully claims, NASA scientists have hypothesized that a conservative estimate for the number of habitable planets in our own Milky Way galaxy is 20,000.¹⁴ In discussing inflationary cosmology Manson writes:

By the estimate of Alan Guth, the physicist who came up with the idea of cosmic inflation the universe is approximately a thousand sextillion times larger than the part we can currently observe. Given the ubiquity of Earth-like planets, it seems there is a

¹¹ Neil Manson, “Anthropocentrism, Exoplanets and the Cosmic Perspective,” p. 275.

¹² Neil Manson, “Anthropocentrism, Exoplanets and the Cosmic Perspective,” p. 276.

¹³ Neil Manson, “Anthropocentrism, Exoplanets and the Cosmic Perspective,” p. 285.

¹⁴ Ibid.

staggering number of chances for life to form elsewhere in the universe-certainly enough chances for the probability to be vanishingly small that only the Earth harbors life.¹⁵

As a result, the number of potentially life supporting planets increases proportionately with the increasing size of the universe. The probability of life developing is extremely low but given an almost infinite number of chances it is a reasonable assumption that the probability of life existing on other planets is quite high.¹⁶

Since preferring to protect entities important to us introduces too much subjectivity into an analysis and since a non-anthropocentric view attempts to eliminate biases toward our own species, we must employ a trustworthy objective source and that, so Manson has claimed, is Bayesian probability. Ridding us of implicit bias yields better results. In Manson's own words:

We can seek to preserve [life] if we like, but by doing so we are not making the cosmos any better. We are merely satisfying our partisan preferences. ... We cannot affect the overall or average amount of [life]; nor can we effect a decrease in the overall or average levels of the various properties non-anthropocentric value: biodiversity, interrelatedness and so on."¹⁷

No life-form existing now on Earth is special because it's highly likely that life exists elsewhere in the universe.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Throughout this paper, we assume that Manson's probability function is accurate and reflects the best indicator of the probability that life exists elsewhere in the universe.

¹⁷Neil Manson, "Anthropocentrism, Exoplanets and the Cosmic Perspective," p. 287.

According to Manson, human activity could not do anything to diminish the abundance of life existing elsewhere in the universe. The belief that there are likely numerous life-supporting planets makes life on Earth insignificant because anything humans or other life-forms destroy will apparently have no lasting dire effects. So, people have no basis for thinking that long-term fate of humans or the planet is morally significant.

In this section, we have reviewed the critical components of the PPA and Manson's CPA. On these two views, humans are a small and unimportant part of the much longer history of life on Earth and in the universe. Life was here before us, will be here after we are gone, and whatever we do will have little impact on the future of the planet itself or the universe. According to the PPA, humans are no more special than any of the other species who have dominated Earth in the past or will dominate it in the future. Therefore, there is no moral reason for us to protect the Earth from human-induced cataclysmic events. Similarly, according to the CPA, we have no moral obligation to protect the Earth from human-induced harms, given the likelihood that numerous other inhabitable Earth-like planets exists is very high. In the next section, we argue that the two views have an unpalatable consequence: we have no reason to improve our current situation because that would be to ignore others in similar circumstances.

2. Criticism of the Planetary and Cosmic Perspectives

The PPA has offered a position that takes into account *all* life on Earth, and the CPA has taken account not only of *all* life on Earth but of *all* life in the universe. Before proponents of the non-anthropocentric view jump on the planetary or cosmic perspective bandwagon, we would like to offer a cautionary tale about what endorsing this view might yield. If our analysis is correct, then wholesale agreement with the view may lead to some unpalatable consequences.

Let us begin by summarizing some interrelated objections to PPA and CPA. The two perspectives may be criticized in tandem because the arguments for each of these positions is structurally isomorphic. Ultimately, we argue that there are counter-intuitive anthropocentric results derived from the so-called non-anthropocentric views of PPA and CPA. Scaling the analysis downwards reveals that the two views are anthropocentric, and we believe this shows that the two views are mistaken—the most non-anthropocentric view of them all is nothing but a disguised piece of anthropocentrism.

The PPA and CPA seem to ignore that humans and natural phenomena cannot be categorized together since we humans are aware of our actions and their effects, and the natural world is blind to such anthropocentric elements. Claiming that there is a distinction between human and non-human destruction need not depend upon the assumption that human actions are not natural phenomena, the critical piece of the metaphysical puzzle proponents of the PPA and CPA have attempted to employ to break apart anything like deep ecology.¹⁸ The real issue is whether the harm humans do to other living things and ecosystems is the same as, e.g., the event of a meteor striking the Earth. While human action brings about an event, whether we think of the relation between agents and events, i.e., the Agency Theory, or between events and events, i.e., the Causal Theory, events themselves fail to have the feature of “bringing about” that actions do.¹⁹ It is correct to say that one event follows another event, but it is not in any robust

¹⁸ Neil Manson, “Anthropocentrism, Exoplanets and the Cosmic Perspective,” p. 276-281; Manson has summarized two anthropocentric positions or what he calls: biological anthropocentrism and personal anthropocentrism. He writes, “Biological anthropocentrism is thinking there is something special about being a member of the species *Homo sapiens*. Personal anthropocentrism is thinking there is something special about personal properties.” Despite that Manson has carefully dissected anthropocentric views that *assume* humans are superior to non-human species and the environment, he has not considered a third alternative where the anthropocentrism is a *result* or *consequence* of the view. Here, we show how the PPA and CPA, in fact, may be categorized in this third way. *Cf.*, Neil Manson, “Anthropocentrism, Exoplanets and the Cosmic Perspective,” p. 279.

¹⁹ Kent Bach, “Actions Are Not Events,” *Mind* 89: 114-120.; Roderick Chisholm, “The Descriptive Element in the Concept of Action,” *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964): 613-625.; G. H. von Wright, *Norm and Action: A Logical Inquiry* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963).

sense proper to speak of one event bringing about another event. At the very least, it is not correct because such talk presupposes that intentionality be ascribed to an event. It is inappropriate to say, “the tornado killed people of Moore, OK,” or “the tsunami wreaked vengeance upon the quiet inhabitants of Japan.” A tornado cannot “kill” anyone in particular, though people can die because of the destructive force of a tornado. Likewise, a tsunami cannot “wreak vengeance” upon anyone or anything because to suggest that would be tantamount to arguing that inanimate objects intentionally harm anyone or anything. Since it is possible to distinguish human actions from those events occurring in the natural world, the two cannot be identical, as proponents of the PPA and CPA seem to accept.

While it could be argued that rising ocean levels caused by human-induced climate change are not nearly as destructive as a massive meteor impact, the comparison breaks down. We notice a substantive difference between the purely natural random chance of a meteor impact and the rising ocean levels resulting from mankind’s self-serving behavior. The latter clearly is not a chance occurrence of natural phenomena. While acts of nature might have been far more devastating than anything humankind has done to the environment, it is wrong to claim that these two types of events are equivalent and that we ought to treat the two events equally if we support a non-anthropocentric view.

The same problem arises when we confront the view that the planet has been damaged worse by natural events than by events resulting from human intervention. We cannot call our own damage unimportant simply because worse has happened. If we believe that only damage affecting all the temporal stages of Earth’s history is significant, then it is impossible to claim that there have been, are, or will be any morally significant events. Even the most temporally widespread event cannot affect the Earth’s past. When the level of analysis is only the massive timescale of Earth’s history or the universe, the events of individuals’ lives become insignificant.

This serves to render as insignificant the acute damage done to the individual and those close to it by a party that is aware of its harmful action.

Perhaps the criticism leveled above is controversial because opponents will insist that humans are a part of the natural world and separating natural events from human action is more like a conjuring trick than founded in any principled distinction. So, let us grant that one might criticize the above position, set it aside, and present an alternative criticism.

Manson's claim that because it is so all encompassing the CPA serves as a universal ethical framework without an anthropocentric bias seems relatively convincing if we evaluate our actions in the context of a massive universal scale; however, one of the CPA's main shortcomings appears if it is viewed from the perspective of a smaller, more individualized scale. The CPA ignores the connected nature of life and does not seem to regard humans as part of the natural world but something outside it. This leads to an anything goes type of worldview that would not be sensible at the individual level, and no one should be expected to adopt such a removed view.

So far as we can tell, the PPA and CPA have to contend with a dilemma. Either we scale upwards as the PPA and CPA recommend and abandon the non-anthropocentric position or we scale downwards and be forced to admit that the individual events of one's life are insignificant. Suppose we take the first horn. If we scale-up, as the PPA and CPA have recommended, and view what we do to the Earth from the universe's perspective, then what we do is separable from the rest of the universe because we can do whatever we want to the Earth without it affecting any other part of the Earth or the universe. Of course, this is to abandon the non-anthropocentric perspective of Naess and deep ecology because the relational total-field image claims that whatever we do will affect some part of the environment (the universe) even if we do not know exactly what that effect will be. Suppose we take the second horn. If we scale-down our analysis, then Manson's view is absurd. Scaling-downwards suggests that we need not take

care of ourselves since there are nearly seven billion other people on Earth (and probably countless other people living in the universe), which suggests that our own life, including choosing to live well and choosing to act morally, is insignificant.

We are not the first to think of this problem. Arne Naess, the target of Manson's criticism, said that animals are all part of the natural environment, so the removal of one has a ripple effect throughout the environment as a whole. Naess writes: "the extinction of one species may eventually result in the extinction of hundreds of others".²⁰ The CPA's *weltanschauung* is what Naess called the "man-in-environment" viewpoint. The man-in-environment view seems to suggest that humans are separate from the environment as a whole and can choose to enter or exit it at will.²¹ Naess says that he supports a "relational, total field image," which is the opposite of the man-in-environment view, where "organisms [are] knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations."²² This man-in-environment view is the only way that the CPA can talk about life so generally and from such a removed viewpoint. According to it, we can say that no species are unique and therefore any extinction is unimportant because there are millions of species that will live in Earth's long history and likely trillions-upon-trillions more in the universe. This simplistic viewpoint ignores the fact that all animals on Earth, including humans, live in a complex environment. While Naess' non-anthropocentric view is Pollyannaish in its thinking that every living and non-living thing is deeply connected, the fact is that each organism lives in connection with many others. Extinguishing one species may likely have dire consequences on other species, as well. Moreover, if we take up something like a cosmic perspective, then a *universalized* deep ecologist may argue that all living and non-living things contained in the

²⁰ Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Athenaeum Press Ltd., 1993), p. 46.

²¹ Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long Range Ecology Movements A Summary," in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), p. 151.

²² *Ibid.*

universe are connected with one another. As a result, it is not acceptable to suggest that the environment is somehow separate from our human world.

Operative in the background of the CPA is something like the following argument: If life on our planet is nothing special, then no species is special. If no species is special, then no member of the species is special, either. The argument might work in a top-down direction, but as the scale becomes smaller the argument's main focus yields counter-intuitive results. We believe that the CPA leaves out the possibility of acting not on moral reasons but on choosing to live well and, perhaps, in harmony with the surrounding environment. In this sense, our view seeks to incorporate a means of living well into an environmental ethic that the PPA and CPA cannot accommodate.²³

Following the CPA and PPAs recommendation, we would be encouraged to view the things we do as unimportant and insignificant. There is no moral reason to take care of our bodies and no moral reason to try and make anything of our lives. When we look at how many people there are in the world and how many people have existed in the world's history, as well as how many people live on distant exoplanets, we see that we have no reason to take care of ourselves or others. To buy into the reasoning of the PPA and CPA seems to justify unchecked hedonism and vice.

If our lives are truly inconsequential, then there seems to be no harm in amounting to the proverbial couch potato. We could spend time doing frivolous things like watching television or sporting events. After all, watching television, for example, is only a few hours out of our day and it will not affect anyone else in the long-run. If Smith's brother gets sick, according to the PPA and CPA, Smith has no reason to help him. By helping him, Smith would be ignoring billions of other people in the world and in the universe who also happen to be sick. Smith

²³ We appreciate an anonymous reviewer of this journal for asking us to say more about our views here.

would merely need to think of them and their welfare to realize that her brother's an insignificant wretch whose life is no more valuable than an inveterate scotoplane. When taking this viewpoint it is easy to make living creatures seem unimportant and thus allow for easier justification of self-serving action. The virtuous alternative is for Smith to choose to live well by helping others in need, such as her brother. By so doing, she furthers the moral interests not only of her brother but of those with whom Smith's brother interacts.

It seems that the CPA yields an *anything goes* attitude because to do otherwise would be a form of parochialism. Everyone could leave their cars running in driveways, dump their trash into rivers, wreak havoc on the world's pristine environments, and treat fellow humans and other animals without respect. To act in ways inconsistent with this would be for someone to be guilty of *x*-type parochialism.

To destroy another's property is to harm that person. Before that person judges that the action is morally wrong, one would have to consider whether harming an individual's property really matters for all the other property owners there are in the world and in the universe. Believing that the destruction of someone's property is morally wrong when faced with the realization that the destruction of others' property has occurred elsewhere on the planet or in the universe is to be guilty of some kind of property parochialism.

A more vivid example might shed some light on property parochialism. Suppose someone robs a convenience store whose owner has suffered worse calamities in his life. The owner was stricken with cancer at an early age, was the victim of a having been struck by a drunk driver, and lost his siblings, children, and parents in a terrorist attack (a modern-day version of the Biblical Job, if you will). Furthermore, the store will continue to exist even if the robber shoots and kills the owner in a fit of rage. According to the PPA and CPA, since there are many more property owners out there in the world and the convenience store will continue to exist after the demise of its wretched owner, robbing and killing the owner is unimportant. To care more about

the individual whose life and property is destroyed, according to the PPA and CPA, is for me to be guilty of a kind of neighborly parochialism. But this does not fit well with our reaction to such a case. We choose to live well and choose to ensure that others around us live well. We do so because moral reasons are not the only reasons upon which we act. The case remains the same that the robber is directly harming the owner for his own gain and it does not seemingly matter that worse things have happened in the owner's life. The robber is still doing something wrong even if worse has happened to the owner.

If Jones gets drunk, drives his car, and kills someone, then Jones has harmed that individual (and maybe that individual's family). But there's no need to worry, according to the PPA and CPA. After all, there are almost 7 billion other people on Earth with as many families corresponding to each of these individuals. Moreover, there are perhaps infinitely more families existing in the universe. To think that any one of those individuals is more important than any other is to be guilty of some form of individual or familial parochialism. Again, Jones' choosing to drive drunk is a vicious act and one done from choosing to live in a way that is antithetical to choosing to live well. While there may not be any moral reason against doing so, according to the PPA and CPA, there seems to be reason against Jones' choosing to act so belligerently.

Wrecking one's car is no big deal, either, on the account of the PPA and the CPA. There are millions of other cars in America, not to mention the world or the universe. One car is nothing special, even if it belongs to a person and that person tries to take particularly good care of it. To care more for one's car than any other car is to be guilty of some form of automobile parochialism.

If one were to take the PPA and CPA arguments further by considering an even smaller microcosm and apply it to individual persons, counter-intuitive results become manifold. Suppose that you break your leg. According to the PPA and CPA, the right thing to do is not to mend the leg. For one, you have two legs, so there is still the leg you did not break. Given that

the other is still healthy, there is no reason to mend the broken leg. To mend the broken leg would be tantamount to a kind of bodily parochialism. Second, according to the PPA and CPA, we must remember that there are a multitude of legs in the world, and probably a “thousand sextillion” more legs in the universe. No more weight should be given to your own personal mishap than to any other person’s mishap. There seems no principled reason to judge that your leg deserves any more attention than the person’s leg in India. There are still plenty of perfectly well-functioning legs remaining in the world even if yours are not. To mend your broken leg over others who may have a similar injury is to be guilty of a kind of self-parochialism. What is left out of this analysis, contra the PPA and CPA, is that the victim of these misfortunes has had their life drastically affected and that this effect will ripple out into the environment.

This shows how as the scale gets smaller the PPA and CPA begins to break down, but this argument can be expanded as well. If we tie in Naess’ idea about each life-form being connected with every other life-form, then it is clear how this problem can be made bigger than just on the personal scale. The advances in cosmology put forward by Manson show us that nothing that we have or ever will have is unique or is special. The CPA ignores the interconnected nature and uniqueness that is seen throughout the natural world.

This problem stems from the largely general nature of the CPA and PPA. If a large enough perspective is taken, then it is possible to collect ecosystems into huge groups and again miss out on the fundamental complexity at the level of the individual. For instance, if a cosmic perspective is taken, it may seem reasonable to group all forests regardless of their location, climate, weather, ecosystems etc. into the group: forest. As long as there is the possibility of there being more ‘forest’ on Earth or in the universe no loss is important. This would miss out on the nuance and differences between something like a Siberian Taiga and an Ecuadorian cloud forest. Both are unique, but frameworks like the CPA do not allow for them to earn special credentials individually or collectively.

The PPA and CPA seem to serve in the justification of destructive and shortsighted human activities. Since it is the Age of Humans, we may as well enjoy it to the fullest. Environment be damned! William Grey describes the fleeting nature of human dominance over the Earth and also seems to suggest that we can do whatever we want. Grey claims:

It is instructive to pause and reflect on life on the planet from the expansive billion year geological perspective. Human occupancy of the biosphere thus viewed is but a blink of geological time. Some have concluded after ruminating on our comparatively modest spatial and temporal occupancy of the world, that we are, after all, not very significant in the scheme of things.²⁴

These statements make the impact of human activity appear less important than it really is. When coupled with the abrupt resetting of the world's ecosystem, it seems to suggest that the world will fix itself quickly. There will be no undue harm done to the Earth, so we should exploit the planet as much as possible because we can and, after all, it will take care of itself.

To find a self-sustaining axiom of environmental ethics is a lofty and worthwhile goal but these problems serve to show that the claims made by the PPA and CPA thinkers do not uphold the framework they attempt to create. Removing humans from the equation might seem at first like a positive step but that is not the case if such line of reasoning may be employed to justify destructive human behavior, as it appears the PPA and CPA do. Without looking at the small scale environment and ecosystems the PPA and CPA are not able to build a complete framework for understanding the world and its environment. The PPA and CPA methods for understanding the environment is a bit like flying over a disaster area as a way of coming to understand the

²⁴ William Grey, "Anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology," p. 466.

damage a hurricane has produced; it is impossible to get a full picture if the individual members of an environment are ignored. For a framework to be truly universal it must account for all levels of the environment.

3. Contending with Potential Criticisms

The CPA suggests that arguments like the one put forward above result only from our bias and desire to preserve the world that is known by humans. Manson would claim that the only reason we would differentiate between types of forests is because we have familiarity with them. The CPA would claim that such concerns are rooted in anthropocentrism. The problem is that we cause this catastrophic damage knowingly and continue with our behavior regardless. The argument that life on Earth is not unique may be true, but we ought to refrain from endorsing a conclusion where we can destroy other life-forms with abandon and treat our planet like trash.

Non-anthropocentric views do not live in a vacuum, as the PPA and the CPA seem to suggest. We have families, and our interest is to serve them first. No one can be expected to adopt the planetary or cosmic perspective without surrendering certain deeply held moral convictions, whether these convictions are appropriate or not.

In laying out the CPA, Manson has cited the common objections from many environmental groups. Phrases like ‘we only have one Earth’ are cited.²⁵ Manson has claimed that this is evidence of an anthropocentric bias and humans assuming that our species dominates the planet. In doing this he is trying to say that anyone who disagrees with him is not seeing the full picture or secretly wants to protect one’s own way of life. What he has ignored is that arguments like the CPA and PPA promote human exploitation of the environment more than he or advocates of the PPA have cared to admit. If we consider the world to be so insignificant and its

²⁵ Neil Manson, “Anthropocentrism, Exoplanets and the Cosmic Perspective,” p. 288.

history to be punctuated with defined eras in which one species is dominant, then it seems that we may exploit the Earth because it is the age of humans. Nothing is special or irreplaceable. We live in just another one of Earth's many geologic phases and should not assign too much importance to our actions. So, we should feel free to do whatever we want.

The problem again is that once this sentiment is taken to an individual level, there is no reason for anyone to take care of oneself or to respect anyone or anything. If simply being capable of exploiting the planet makes it acceptable, then we may harm those who are weaker and more vulnerable. In the grand scheme of things, the misfortune of a few will surely not affect anyone else. Reducing a segment of the world's population to unimportance, the PPA and CPA make it easier for people to continue the destructive behavior because the planet is not seen as a complete body.

After a careful analysis of the PPA and CPA it seems that these arguments are mistaken when we look at each from the large *and* small scale. The large scale argument ignores the individual species on the planet and forces us to overlook the interwoven nature of life. This is a viewpoint based entirely on quantitative analysis and not a comprehensive, total field-image view of the workings of life. On a small scale it forces the viewpoint that we are all unimportant and that we should not seek to better our lives in any way, nor should we care about anyone other than ourselves, because nothing is important or special. Both of these problems ignore the fact that any life-form is unique.

4. Conclusion

An advocate of the PPA and CPA might argue our recommendation that some species or ecosystems is unique suggests at best some disguised form of temporal parochialism or at worst a form of anthropocentrism both PPA and CPA seek to avoid. Yet, such a criticism fails to

account for one of our argument's main assumptions: the world's ecosystems are complex and diverse. The complexity and diversity of the universe's myriad ecosystems compel us to analyze the macro- and micro-environments. Since the world is complex and diverse, we cannot increase the scale without also seriously considering what would happen if we decreased the size of the scale too. Like the old adage: "not seeing the forest through the trees," it seems relatively clear that proponents of the PPA and CPA have attempted to devise a position that sees the forests from the trees. A forest has unique characteristics independent of the tree's characteristics, just as each tree has characteristics distinguishable from the forest's characteristics. Unfortunately, when we apply the PPA and CPA to the details, odd consequences result because their focus is too wide, geared too much toward an assessment of Earth in geologic time or in the universe. A framework that approaches life as holistically as the PPA and CPA will never provide a satisfactory or realistic picture of the more particular life-forms that exist in the universe.

If the PPA and CPA have successfully jettisoned an anthropocentric bias, then the scale of analysis should not matter. The arguments should work at the macro- as well as the micro-environment scale. That the CPA yields what appears to be a non-anthropocentric result on a massive scale does not mean that this viewpoint will operate just as well at the level of the individual. If we really want to find a way to understand the universe, we should look at it from as many different views as possible. Therefore, scaling downwards as a method of analyzing the CPAs validity is not only acceptable but necessary in order to truly test the CPA's framework. As successful framework must function at both the macro-level, i.e., Earth's geologic time or the universe, and the micro-level, i.e., the individual.

The CPA allows people to feel even more removed and separate, again falling into the viewpoint Naess describes as the "man-in-environment" idea. Gary Snyder says that once we remove ourselves so completely from the environment, we lose all meaningful connection with the Earth further allowing us to feel justified in defiling the planet and taking far more than we

need.²⁶ To truly understand the universe, we need to look at the universe from as many perspectives as possible and take into account what this analysis shows us. In looking for a universal non-anthropocentric environmental view, it is important to have a framework that takes into account the complexity and interconnectedness of the ecosystem. Unique or not, the planet Earth must be regarded as an interwoven community of ecosystems and species.²⁷

²⁶ Jack Turner “Gary Snyder and the Practice of the Wild,” in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 44.

²⁷ We are grateful for comments from the audience at the University of Wyoming Honors College Seminar and from referees employed by this journal. Moreover, this manuscript has benefited from feedback received from Rob Colter, Susanna Goodin, Franz-Peter Griesmaier, Jeff Lockwood, Marc Moffett, and Ed Sherline. We also appreciate the financial support of The Honors College of the University of Wyoming, and the unwavering support of its Director Duncan Harris.