

## Reverence for Life as a Viable Environmental Virtue

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There have been several recent defenses of biocentric individualism, the position that all living beings have at least some moral standing, simply insofar as they are alive. I develop a virtue-based version of biocentric individualism, focusing on a virtue of reverence for life. In so doing, I attempt to show that such an approach avoids certain problems that afflict other, rival biocentric individualisms. More broadly, I attempt to show that a virtue-based approach allows us to avoid common objections to biocentric individualism, based on its supposed impracticability (or, on the other hand, its emptiness).

In this paper I defend a virtue of reverence for life, providing a particular understanding of biocentric individualism. Those who espouse biocentric individualism claim that all living things have at least some intrinsic moral value insofar as they are alive. In other words, the claim is that all living things (even bacteria, ants, and grass) have some moral status – not because they are beautiful, or because they are helpful to humans, but simply in virtue of being alive. I will not enter here into the vexed question of whether such intrinsic value is to be discovered in the world, or whether it is simply a human projection.

I first attempt to show that this position is not as contrary to commonsense morality as it might first appear (even in the West), and that it does not rest on a naïve anthropomorphism. In the second section of the paper, I try to show that such valuing of all life does not require us to hold absurdly demanding positions. And in the third section of the paper, I try to show that, on the other hand, valuing life as such will have an impact upon our way of life – it isn't an empty value.

There have been several recent defenses of a moral concern for all living things, in both consequentialist and deontological forms.<sup>1</sup> My approach here is virtue-based, and in the fourth and fifth parts of this paper I attempt to show that such an approach avoids certain problems – and fills in certain gaps – that we find in these other theories. I will treat reverence for life as one virtue among many others. Thus, reverence for life involves valuing living beings, just as honesty involves valuing truth, or benevolence involves valuing increasing well-being.

The current proposal is more modest than that espoused by many other biocentric individualists, in that they often suggest that valuing individual living things can provide us with an adequate environmental ethic.<sup>2</sup> I make no such claims for the position I espouse – reverence for life will simply be one plank among many others that will together form a suitable moral foundation for our interactions with other living beings and the natural world as a whole.

Similarly, Albert Schweitzer treats reverence for life as foundational for all morality, even with respect to our interactions with other human beings:

Reverence for life affords me my fundamental principle of morality, namely that good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and that to destroy, to harm, or to hinder life, is evil.<sup>3</sup>

I will focus on reverence for life especially as it applies to non-human life. More broadly, of course, I agree that this virtue will concern humans insofar as they are living things, but I do not wish to embrace Schweitzer's emphasis on reverence for life as foundational.

Finally, I will not in this paper discuss the issue of *why* we should treat living things as intrinsically valuable. Many authors have developed promising justifications for such valuations.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I wish to focus on a second prominent set of objections to such views – that they would either be so demanding as to be impracticable, or so watered-down as to be empty.

### **I - How Common is this Position?**

We can begin by considering whether attributing intrinsic value to all life is too radical a departure from ordinary moral intuitions in the West; if the clash of intuitions is too extreme, we might

worry that the position is too far removed to be viable in the West. Even writers who defend individualistic biocentrism suggest that the position will clash radically with current commonsense morality.<sup>5</sup> I hope here to present a thought experiment that will show that even those in the West who would deny attributing intrinsic value to all living things in fact share certain common intuitions that would support such value attributions.

Consider the following situation: You are walking along a sidewalk and notice that there is a small insect just ahead of you. You can easily avoid killing it by slightly adjusting your step, and at no expense to yourself. Most of us will hold that in this sort of case you ought to avoid stepping on the insect. It is not an overwhelming moral duty, but it does seem like a simple good thing to do. We thus have a straightforward case in which most people (who don't consider themselves biocentric individualists) attribute some degree of intrinsic value to a creature simply in virtue of its being a living thing.

We can see that it is the mere fact that it is a living creature which motivates our action by noting that we are not concerned with, for example, avoiding getting our shoes dirty with a crushed insect. We stipulate that our shoes would be unaffected; our reactions do not change with this modification. We are not told that the insect is a beautiful or rare butterfly, so it does not seem to be obvious aesthetic values at work in our intuitions. We are also not considering a case in which we might be concerned about hurting a sentient being like ourselves. The case does not involve a dog or other being whom we expect would feel pain if stepped on.

The case also lets us avoid charges of naïve anthropomorphism. We aren't giving the insect a name, or talking about her plans, etc. Nor do we attribute any mental states to the insect. There is no claim that the insect would suffer. We are simply considering an insect without any further anthropomorphizing details. Thus, our moral intuitions seem to be grounded simply in the fact that this is a living creature that we would be destroying.

One might object that while the anthropomorphic details are not made explicit in the description of the case, the example relies on us having such attitudes prior to considering the case. This seems

rather dubious. People who explicitly deny mental states to insects still share the reaction that there is something at least mildly wrong in killing even an insect when all one has to do to avoid this result is adjust one's step by an inch or two. We could also consider a variation in the case in which we would kill a small plant by stepping on it and crushing it. This tends to evoke a similar reaction as in the original case, and we need not attribute mental states to a plant.

Of course, I do not claim that everyone will share this reaction to the insect example. But at the very least, it seems a very common reaction - and shows that a virtue of reverence for life may not be as foreign to common Western moral intuition as we might initially expect. It is important to show that there is a plausible virtue and value at stake here - one which many people acknowledge at a certain level (as shown by the example), but one which they may not have considered in any depth.

There is an additional worry here. True, we might share these intuitions about killing insects when we can easily avoid this while walking. But on the other hand, we seem to have few qualms about taking massive quantities of life (e.g. using pesticides on fields) without a second thought. As Agar puts it, "We may be happy intoning the phrase 'all life is precious' but we certainly feel in no way committed to heroic blade-of-grass rescue acts."<sup>6</sup> We can distinguish two issues. First, we must address how demanding a virtue of reverence for life will be, given that we have a wide range of additional projects and values at stake; this will be a central concern throughout this paper.

The other issue is a possible inconsistency or hypocrisy - it sounds nice to say that all life is valuable, but we certainly don't seem to follow through on this. But this is not a problem peculiar to biocentric individualism. Many people will pay thousands of dollars for surgery for their companion animals, but not give a second thought to the plight of veal cattle. People can be kind and devoted to members of their race/religion/nation, yet ignore others. So the mere fact that people are inconsistent in their behaviours and intuitions with respect to biocentric individualism does nothing to show it to be a particularly flawed view, or one which could never take hold in Western contexts.

What sort of things might this valuing of life entail? Here we can turn to some passages from Schweitzer:

A man is really ethical only when he obeys the constraint laid on him to help all life which he is able to, and when he goes out of his way to avoid injuring anything living. [...] If he works by lamplight on a summer evening, he prefers to keep the window shut and to breathe stifling air, rather than to see insect after insect fall on his table with singed and sinking wings.<sup>7</sup>

Whenever I injure life of any kind I must be quite clear as to whether this is necessary or not. I ought never to pass the limits of the unavoidable, even in apparently insignificant cases. The countryman who has mowed down a thousand blossoms in his meadow as fodder for his cows should take care that on the way home he does not, in wanton pastime, switch off the head of a single flower growing on the edge of the road, for in so doing he injures life without being forced to do so by necessity.<sup>8</sup>

But such a virtue would not be limited to actions like these. A genuine reverence for life would involve a concern to protect life on a larger scale than this - so it would involve a concern, and effort to stop the destruction of such things as coral reefs and rainforests.<sup>9</sup> It would involve a mixture of both small and large efforts, sometimes saving a single insect à la Schweitzer, other times giving to a conservation group to preserve an ecosystem teeming with life. We can compare here the virtue of benevolence, which might have us helping another person carry some packages, but also contributing to or participating in large-scale disaster relief.

## **II - Would Countenancing Such Value Be Too Demanding?**

A natural worry is that valuing all life will lead us to absurd conclusions. First, would valuing all life lead us to the position that the life of a human being and the life of a microbe are equally valuable? If we could only save one of their lives would we be left tossing a coin to decide? Surely this would be absurd. Second, it might seem that we would not even be able to breathe or move, for in doing so we may harm various microscopic organisms. John Passmore suggests that

the Jainist principle [of avoiding harm to all living things] [...] is far too strong. This is the more obvious now that we are aware of the minute living organisms which everywhere surround us. In breathing, in drinking, in excreting, we kill. We kill by remaining alive.<sup>10</sup>

Third, we might wonder whether we would ever be able to act, given that we'd be attempting to calculate the interests of all living things in all situations. J. Baird Callicott argues that

An equitable system for resolving conflicts of interests among individuals is a reasonable, *practicable* goal if the individuals whose interests are to be equally considered are relatively few and far between [...] [But] when every living thing is extended moral considerability, then the *practicability* quotient approaches zero; a point of moral overload is reached and the whole enterprise of ethics threatens to collapse into absurdity.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, we must ask - would attributing intrinsic value to all living things become too demanding?

In response to the first question, we need to recognize that attributing intrinsic value to life does not require us to treat every living thing in the same way, as there may be many other properties of living beings that have intrinsic value. Thus, while life may be intrinsically valuable, so too is love, and so we would have reason to prefer those beings who are capable of loving relationships over those who are not (were we forced to choose). More generally, we can and do attribute value to rationality, compassion, creativity, the capacity for morality, and so on. Life may have intrinsic value, but it does not follow that it is the only property of living beings with such value. Thus, we may value humans more than other mammals due to their possession of other intrinsically valuable traits, mammals more than insects, and so on.<sup>12</sup> This is all compatible with attributing at least some level of intrinsic value to all living beings.

What of the second worry, that we would be unable to do anything because with every movement we are likely destroying life? An initial point in response is that humans have a right to exist (if we wish to speak in this language) at least equal to that of other creatures. We note that, for example, elephants probably kill many organisms with every step. It seems 'natural'. If so, perhaps humans can similarly be allowed to kill some organisms, to the extent that this is necessary to leading a flourishing human life.

As such, it is compatible with attributing intrinsic value to all life to set limits. We are morally permitted to act in self-defense - we can kill animals who attack us, take antibiotics, swat mosquitoes,

and so on. We need to eat, so we will need to kill other organisms. We need to move in order to flourish ourselves, and will harm life when we do so. We can develop more intricate relationships with other humans and mammals, and so may act in ways that favour their interests (much as a bee ‘favours’ the interests of her hive). Hence, we need not hold that we cannot do anything for fear of harming life; a very broad range of action is available to us. We are complex creatures with complex needs that must be met in order to flourish.

This does not entail that we can justify any act simply by saying we need to do it to flourish. We may need some form of transportation to get to our place of work in a human community - this doesn't mean we can thereby justify driving a monstrous SUV (perhaps a bicycle or public transportation would be viable). We will need to be sensitive to a range of values even as we strive to flourish ourselves. The point here is simply that we can still lead flourishing lives, and recognize a wide range of values, even while we attribute value to all living things. We'll return to the issue of guidelines and balancing demands in section V.

We might ask whether valuing all life in this way may lead us to ignore other, more important concerns: “While this all sounds very noble, the time we spend taking a spider out of our house instead of killing it could be better spent on projects to help suffering people. The money we give to environmental causes could be better spent stopping human suffering or perhaps the suffering of sentient animals in factory farms. Thus, attributing intrinsic value to all life will divert us from other, more important projects”. In response, note that this sort of attitude rests on a certain utilitarianism, and leads to implausible results. It could apply just as well to most of our projects: time spent helping a theatre group could be better spent helping a foodbank, the money spent on an occasional nice meal could be better spent on other things, and so on.

I certainly do not claim that all of our current practices are just fine, and not in need of change. Rather, I stress only that the attitude which would see acting on the intrinsic value of life as a waste of resources would have us see most every project besides helping with the greatest catastrophes as a waste of resources. Such an attitude ignores valuable projects, and sees only the most extreme. It would be

rather as if one were to claim that the police should stop worrying about rape, because murder is still more heinous.

An alternative attitude would instead acknowledge that we live in a world rich with possibilities, and also with many needs. There is a wide range of work to be done. Giving to earthquake relief is obviously important and valuable, but so too is giving to a local school, even if lives are not immediately at stake. The general point is that, yes, attributing intrinsic value to all life might *at times* lead us to divert some resources away from other important projects; this is simply part of our condition. But notice also that valuing all life typically will not significantly divert us from other important projects (not using pesticides on our lawn does not prevent us from donating to UNICEF). We are finite beings – we cannot do everything, all of the time. We instead must have a range of projects, and try to balance them as best we can. And the proposal here is that one of the projects we should have involves acknowledging value in all living things.

Finally, there is the third worry, that we would be left trapped in place – not as we are not allowed to move or kill, but because we'd be left in an endless and hopelessly complex series of calculations to figure out how the interests of all living things affected by our actions are to be balanced.

We can begin by observing that this sort of problem will plague most ethical theories, at least in their simplest forms. Utilitarianism might require us to calculate potential pleasures or pains at every moment. Kantianism might require us to constantly verify that we are acting in accordance with the categorical imperative. So, even if there were a problem here for reverence for life, the theory would not be obviously worse off than most consequentialist and deontological theories.

A common move at this point is to distinguish between a decision-procedure and a theory of the right. Thus, a utilitarian might claim that we ought not to attempt to maximize happiness at every moment – we ought not to use the utilitarian theory of the right as a decision-procedure. Utility would only be maximized if we don't explicitly act as utilitarians. In this way, the problem of excessive calculation might be avoided. I agree with this general line of response, but will suggest that once we



turn away from theories of the right as decision-procedures, virtue theory (and especially the virtues themselves) provide us with better guidance than rival theories.

### **III – Reverence for Life and Supererogation**

We thus have answers to the concerns that attributing intrinsic value to life would be extremely - and implausibly - demanding. But now we must face worries from the other side, and those who fear that the pendulum has now swung too far in the opposite direction. Does it become too easy? If we can permissibly kill other organisms so frequently, it starts to seem that the supposed value of life is so minimal as to be empty. Is there a real value here? Does it actually make any demands on us?

In section V of the paper I will propose that we can best understand the demands that attributing value to all life places on us in terms of a virtue of reverence for life, and appealing to the judgements of virtuous agents. In the current section I will begin by considering an approach which I think does make it too easy to ignore the value of other living things. Section IV will be devoted to other biocentric individualistic positions. My preferred approach can then be seen in relief against these alternatives.

In a recent article,<sup>13</sup> Mark Michael has proposed classifying many actions that reflect reverence for life as supererogatory, or “beyond the call of duty”.

Supererogatory acts are ones which, while morally good and commendable, are not duties. If some action other than the supererogatory one is performed, there has been no failure to act on a duty, and nothing wrong has been done.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, we do not have a duty not to swat pesky flies (Michael's example), but we perform a morally praiseworthy, supererogatory action when we do so refrain. Michael is careful to stress that not every case of interspecies conflict is a ‘supererogatory situation’. There will be many cases when it is simply our duty to sacrifice our interests for those of other living things – perhaps a case in which a person wants to bulldoze acres of rainforest in order to build a series of rather pointless parking lots. But Michael suggests that appeal to the supererogatory will help us to account for our intuitions in many problematic cases.

While Michael's approach has some attractive features, certain worries arise. For example, how is it that we are supposed to balance the factors to decide whether a given action is supererogatory?

Michael is rather unclear on this:

The suggestion is not that *all* cases of interspecies conflict *must* be supererogatory situations, but rather that nothing stands in the way of identifying those particular conflicts as supererogatory that otherwise yield counterintuitive results.<sup>15</sup>

This proposal requires clarification on at least three counts. First, we must wonder whose intuitions are at stake, when Michael speaks of counterintuitive results. Are we to include those of a greedy oil tycoon? Second, the proposal seems rather *ad hoc*. Whenever cases strike us as producing counterintuitive results, we can jump to the supererogatory. There is no explanation of why this would be, and what would unify all of these cases. Third, it seems that whenever we don't want to do some act X, we can claim that doing X would be supererogatory (as we find the claim that we have duty to sacrifice our interests in the given case counterintuitive), and that we don't really fail in our moral duties if we fail to do X. Of course this latter problem does depend in part on whose intuitions are included by Michael.

Elsewhere, Michael suggests that

Whether or not a situation is supererogatory depends on the weight and number of various competing interests that are at stake in that specific situation.<sup>16</sup>

This helps to some extent – our intuitions should be shaped by the weight and number of various competing interests in a given situation. But how are these to be weighed? It hardly seems there will be a strict calculus for us to follow. And, even if there were, we would soon find ourselves facing Callicott's worry of endless, impossible calculation.

We can introduce a second problem for Michael by considering a case involving humans and the virtue of benevolence. We have a worker whose office is located in the downtown core of a large metropolis. She gives generously to several charities, and is an active volunteer. She is thus quite a good moral agent – perhaps not a saint, but concerned and more active than most of us. Everyday she

encounters several homeless persons, given her time downtown. Now there could well be hundreds of such people in the area, so we should not consider it her duty to help each one of them at every time – unless we are willing to embrace extremely demanding moral standards. She'd likely end up without time or money for any other projects (including other morally valuable projects).

So what we shall we say of each individual encounter she has with a homeless person? If we say that in each particular case, providing some form of assistance would be supererogatory, we end up with another problem. Now it seems that this manager could simply ignore the homeless people around her, without any failure of duty. She does, after all, volunteer and gives elsewhere. She thus satisfies any Kantian imperfect duty to help others. But there is something troubling about this possible blindspot in her moral vision.

The parallel worry in the case of valuing life can be seen in a case where a person gives to various environmental groups, and volunteers with them. In the borderline cases loosely introduced by Michael, she could always favour her own interests. Suppose we had a series of encounters with pesky flies – every night for a summer; say 100 nights. It would appear that in each individual case, sparing the fly would be supererogatory, according to Michael. But there is something worrying here. Shouldn't the flies win at least sometimes?

Perhaps we could avoid the objection by trying to state a stronger duty. Thus, we might add something like the following requirement: "In these generally supererogatory situations, you should perform the optional action about 1 in 5 times." But this would allow us to perform the supererogatory action constantly for a week so that we could ignore it for the following month. More broadly, we could try to stock up on supererogatory actions in our youth so that we could slide into complacency at a later age. Surely this would not be a virtuous life.

The examples we have considered illustrate limits to the use of the supererogatory as a solution to borderline cases. Thus, we have reason to believe Michael's proposal concerning reverence for life or biocentric individualism will be inadequate. By focusing on individual actions, we overlook the general pattern of an agent's behaviour. We might not be able to say in any particular case that an agent

should help, but we can look at the agent's overall pattern of behaviour and find flaws. The problem is that taken in isolation, it seems like each particular action is to some extent optional. But clearly over the course of a certain number of trials, the agent had better have acted in the optional fashion at least a few times. To fail to do so reflects a flaw in the person's character, and an inadequate commitment to the values at stake.<sup>17</sup>

#### IV – Taylor, Sterba, and Varner

In this section I will briefly consider three recent, rival biocentric individualisms. I will be focusing on a quite narrow range of objections to these positions, and will limit my presentation of the views to those points relevant to the objections. I hope to show that developing adequate responses to these objections will lead us to a virtue-based approach of the kind that will be developed in section V.

*Taylor*

Paul Taylor develops a deontological version of biocentric individualism.<sup>18</sup> He stresses the equality of all species – we cannot consider humans to be more valuable simply due to their sentience, intelligence, or what-have-you. To guide us in our interactions with other beings, Taylor provides us with a set of four general rules, and a set of five priority principles for resolving conflicts between the interests of humans and other beings (and conflicts between the four rules). Here we will only consider two of the rules and one of the priority principles. First, there is a rule of non-interference which tells us not to interfere with the freedom of other creatures (and ecosystems as a whole); second, there is a rule of non-maleficence, which tells us not to do any harm to any entity in the natural environment that has a good of its own;<sup>19</sup> and third, there is the principle of self-defense, which allows moral agents to defend themselves against dangerous or harmful organisms (given reasonable precautions to avoid the conflict).<sup>20</sup>

Agar presents the following objection to Taylor's theory:

The principle of self-defense constrained by the requirement of species-impartiality and rules of noninterference leads to some problems. What should our attitude as third parties be to conflicts between humans and other living beings? The bacterium *vibrio cholerae* causes

cholera. Many would claim that intervention on behalf of cholera-stricken humans in distant communities is morally worthy. Yet for the biocentrist, we have morally valuable humans on the one hand and equally morally valuable, but far more numerous, *vibrio cholerae* bacteria on the other. It is morally permissible for infected humans to cure themselves, but in assisting them we fail to act in a way that is impartial between species.<sup>21</sup>

To intervene on behalf of a fellow human is not allowed by self-defense, and runs contrary to the rules of non-interference and non-maleficence. Surely this is too demanding, and also morally implausible. Note that more broadly, we'd have no basis for favouring tigers over bacteria, dogs over grass, and so on. This is not simply an issue of bias in favour of humans. We need to recognize different varieties of value. While members of all species may be equally valuable insofar as they are living, we can also value sentience, intelligence, and so on. To ignore such values is to embrace an impoverished and implausible axiology.

Joseph Des Jardins raises a related problem for Taylor's approach, focusing on a case in which he is considering digging up part of his lawn in order to build a patio, presumably killing millions of microbiotic organisms, the grass, and so on, in the process. The following dilemma arises:

If I am not allowed to build the patio, Taylor's ethics may require too much of us. This is more than simply saying it is counterintuitive. [...] Rather, Taylor's standard would require a level of attention and care far beyond most people. [...]

On the other hand, if I am allowed to build the patio, Taylor must show exactly why such a nonbasic interest as this can override the basic interests of the grass and microorganisms.

Clearly, we would never allow the mass killing of humans for the sake of a patio.<sup>22</sup>

It seems that if we were to strictly apply Taylor's rules, we would not be allowed to build the patio. Nor could we justify almost any action not essential for survival (or, at least, for meeting some basic need). Such actions will surely involve our killing other organisms, and for the sake of a non-basic interest. So, while we might have strict rules to govern our behaviour, these rules seem to yield highly counterintuitive results in a wide range of cases. As Des Jardins notes, Taylor's strict rules seem to

establish a morality that would be impracticable for the vast majority of humans. I would add that strictly abiding by these rules would not allow us adequate space for other morally valuable projects. It would not only be extremely difficult to fully follow Taylor's rules; it would be wrong to do so.

Finally, while Taylor generally construes virtues as derivative from rules and principles, there is one crucial exception:

It is doubtful whether a complete specification of duties is possible in this realm. [...]n all situations not explicitly or clearly covered by these rules we should rely on the attitude of respect for nature and the biocentric outlook that together underlie the system as a whole and give it point. Right actions are always actions that express the attitude of respect, whether they are covered by the four rules or not.<sup>23</sup>

Thus Taylor seems to recognize that there are limits to any deontological system, and that in the final account, we must turn to virtues and virtuous attitudes (both of which go beyond any mere disposition to follow simple rules) to guide us. And this is of a piece with the current proposal.

### *Sterba*

James Sterba has also defended a deontological form of biocentrism, similar in many respects to that of Taylor. In a recent presentation of his view, Sterba develops five principles to guide us in our interactions with non-human life. Among these are

The principle of defense that permits actions in defense of both basic and nonbasic needs against the aggression of others, even if it necessitates killing or harming those others, unless prohibited [by the principle of nonaggression or the principle of nondefense].<sup>24</sup>

and

The principle of nonaggression that prohibits aggression against the basic needs of others either (1) to meet nonbasic needs, or (2) even to meet basic needs if one can reasonably expect a comparable degree of altruistic forbearance from those others.<sup>25</sup>

Sterba's modifications to Taylor's position would seem to allow us to intervene on behalf of a human against cholera-causing bacteria. Sterba doesn't phrase his principles in terms of self-defense. Rather,

the needs that one defends could belong to another individual. So, according to the principle of defense, we could defend another human against the aggression of disease-causing bacteria. Nor could we attack a human who is taking antibiotics on behalf of the bacteria he is killing, because of the principle of nonaggression (as we might expect altruistic forbearance from a human).

Certain problems remain. We could intervene on behalf of humans against bacteria. But what of a cat? We cannot expect any sort of altruistic forbearance from a cat. So it would seem we could simply flip a coin to determine whether we should defend the cat, or defend the bacteria. Or – a cat-lover might intervene on behalf of the cat, but a bacteria-lover could intervene on behalf of the bacteria. More broadly, it seems that Sterba's principles give inadequate protection to other sentient beings, ones from whom we cannot expect altruistic forbearance. We could not object to a person who would choose to save the life of a bacterium over the life of a whale. To avoid such possibilities, it seems we need to recognize a plurality of values.

Second, note that Sterba's proposal is also subject to the difficulty raised by Des Jardins. That is, the principle of nonaggression would seem to prohibit our building a patio in our backyard, as it would be an instance of acting against the basic needs of others on behalf of a nonbasic need. Again, it is hard to see how we could perform any action that is not in service of meeting some basic need (or defending ourselves against the aggression of others).

Finally, we can consider the last of Sterba's principles:

[T]he principle of rectification, which requires compensation and reparation when the other principles have been violated. Obviously this principle is somewhat vague, but for those who are willing to abide by the other four principles, it should be possible to remedy this vagueness in practice.<sup>26</sup>

Sterba recognizes that this principle is rather vague, but suggests that those who are willing to abide by his principles will be able to work out how to implement the principle in practice. I believe this is a step towards recognizing the need for virtuous agents; no simple rule will be adequate for guiding us. An obvious understanding of Sterba's claim is that as we follow the four principles, we will come to

develop a virtuous character, which will in turn allow us to make proper judgements in borderline cases (and others).

### *Varner*

Gary Varner defends a sophisticated consequentialist form of biocentric individualism. He works with three assumptions, and the following three principles:

- (P1) Generally speaking, the death of an entity that has desires is a worse thing than the death of an entity that does not.<sup>27</sup>
- (P2') Generally speaking, the satisfaction of ground projects is more important than the satisfaction of noncategorical desires.<sup>28</sup>
- (P3') Other things being equal, of two desires similarly situated in an individual's hierarchy of interests, it is better to satisfy the desire that requires as a condition of its satisfaction the dooming of fewer interests of others (whether these interests be defined by desires or biological interests).<sup>29</sup>

Note that Varner is careful to qualify these principles as only holding in general. We do not have a strict set of principles here, simply useful generalizations. This I take to be a plausible move on the part of Varner. Simple, strict rules in ethics tend to be open to obvious counterexamples.

Varner treats principle P2' as justifying favouring the interests of humans who have a ground project (roughly, a complex set of long-term projects which are crucial to one's identity) over those of other creatures. Thus, P2' "implies that it is better to eat nonhuman organisms and thereby doom all of their interests than to doom one's ground project."<sup>30</sup> Agar presents the following problem for Varner:

If we accept Varner's priority principle [P2'], we should look out for the interests, however trivial, of all beings with ground projects before we look to nonsentient nature. The desires of friends (human ones), relatives, and the famine stricken for art deco homes, parts for Playstation game consoles, and food should all come before the needs of keas and horseshoe crabs. Given that there are so many human interests, it seems unlikely that moral considerations could guide us to a project centred around biocentric value.<sup>31</sup>



Thus, it soon becomes too easy to override the value of other living things that lack ground projects, given that our projects will frequently have an impact on other beings (humans) with ground projects. In these cases, on Varner's proposal, we should choose projects that help ourselves, and these other humans. Other creatures are left at the margins.

Varner's principle P3' might be of some help here. It suggests that (in general), it is better to satisfy desires which do as few interests of other beings as possible (compared to other desires of similar importance in the being's hierarchy of desires). Generally speaking then, it is better to satisfy those of our desires which cause as little harm as possible to other beings.

But a problem remains. Varner does not tell us how good we must be; he doesn't tell us whether we must always choose the very best project available. If we were to do this, it seems we would be required to act as pseudo-saints, constantly devoting ourselves to ground projects that interfere with as few desires as possible – artistic and other morally valuable projects would need to be abandoned; after all, a life of sitting meditation (for example), would cause less harm to other beings than a life in which one paints, travels, and so on. But Varner does not tell us to do this. Indeed, Varner does not even tell us to reach a certain level of goodness. We could choose to act on the worst possible ground project according to P3' – all that we would be told is that there are better ground projects available. But we are not told that we must choose any of these better projects. Thus, we require further guidance than Varner gives.

Recall also that Varner is careful to qualify his principles and assumptions as generalizations which allow for exceptions. We are not given an explanation of how to determine when these exceptions obtain, or why they obtain; it appears that there is simply an appeal to our intuitions. I will propose that we can appeal to the judgements of virtuous persons to determine when these generalizations do not hold, and also to provide guidance as to how good we must be in our ground projects.

### V – Reverence for Life as a Virtue

We can now tie the various strands of our discussion together. Recall the worry that biocentric individualism would require us to be constantly calculating the impacts of our actions, leaving us unable to act. Joel Kupperman suggests that beyond any correct moral theory, to be a good moral agent will require a certain sort of character, including

- (1) A mechanism to pick out situations that are ethically problematic,
- (2) A mechanism for perceiving ethically problematic situations in such a way that certain features seem salient,
- (3) Sensitivity to features that are important but not picked out by (2),
- (4) Concern, so that what is picked out as ethically salient matters,
- (5) Commitment, so that there is integrated long-term loyalty to values, projects, etc.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, to make good on the suggestions of other biocentric individualists, there is need for moral agents with such traits. We need to develop the right sort of sensitive character in order to apply any of the rival biocentric individualisms; and such sensitivity cannot be given in a rule. To see this, consider the futility of having a rule that tells us to pick out morally relevant features of ethically problematic situations. To be able to apply the rule will itself require an ability to pick out morally relevant features; such a rule would be about as effective as a rule which tells us to be insightful and creative in solving problems. We now have an initial indication of the importance of having a sensitive, committed character to any sort of biocentric individualism.

Next, we can return to the problems that arose in thinking about biocentric individualism in terms of duties and the supererogatory, such that we are left without adequate guidance as to what makes situations supererogatory, and as to how frequently we must act in a supererogatory fashion. An alternative<sup>33</sup> approach is presented by Walter Schaller.<sup>33</sup> Suppose we have a duty to be beneficent or benevolent<sup>34</sup> - to give, and to help others. How could we spell out what this duty is?

Some formulations - "Help everyone who needs help" – are clearly too strong, too demanding.

Others are more plausible but otherwise flawed. The rule "Help other people as much as

possible" raises the question: how much is "possible"? It is possible to give all of one's money to the poor and homeless, but doing so would surely go beyond the requirements of this duty.

[...] The rule "One ought to help other people sometimes, to some extent" is flawed for just this reason: it fails to capture the fact that on some occasions the refusal to help another person is wrong (e.g., when a drowning child can be rescued with no danger to the rescuer).<sup>35</sup>

We cannot formulate the duty clearly as a rule. And as such, we obviously cannot define the virtue of benevolence merely as a disposition to follow the rule. So, why not take the virtue of benevolence as basic? People who possess the virtue will be disposed to act in certain ways, though not on the basis of simple-rule following. And note that benevolence does not require us to be helping at every moment, but nor is it empty.

Compare the virtue of honesty. Agents who possess this virtue value truthfulness in their relations with others, and with themselves. They treat the truth as intrinsically valuable. But honesty does not require us to speak as many truths as possible. And we don't always have to tell the truth – consider the usual sorts of cases of criminally insane persons asking us where their victim is hiding. Honesty does not demand that we not go hiking, even if the time spent hiking is time we could instead have spent telling more truths to more people. On the other hand, clearly a person cannot be honest if she never or only rarely speaks the truth. The value must be acted on; the virtue must be engaged.

I take it that this is a particular strength of virtue ethics. There is a recognition of many projects and values, and the need for balancing concerns. When we have simple rules to guide behaviour, we tend to find obvious and gross counterexamples. Our lives are too rich to treat most such rules as anything other than rules of thumb.<sup>36</sup> We have many projects, and value many things. Living things will have some intrinsic value for those who embrace reverence for life. This does not require us to hold that it is an overriding value in every case; but nor are we allowed to simply ignore the value at stake (while still maintaining a virtuous character). It is another value to be balanced in our lives. And we can find models for ourselves on how to balance our own commitments.

A virtue ethics approach allows us to respond to a worry raised by Agar against moral pluralists in general:

Pluralism about human ends seems plausible because each of the supposedly conflicting and incommensurable human goals has a relatively secure place in our affections. The same is not true of life-value. Without some principled means for ranking biocentric value alongside human-centered value, even the most fleeting and trivial human desire may end up deserving more attention than the life of a nonsentient being.<sup>37</sup>

As a first point, I would suggest that sometimes, *pace* Agar, our fleeting and trivial desires can properly outweigh the life of a nonsentient being. Suppose you have an irritating itch; I would suggest that it is often legitimate for you to scratch it, even if this will likely end the lives of many microorganisms. To deny this is to enter into an implausibly demanding ethic that again would allow us to do almost nothing except what is essential to our bare survival. But that being said, it is not clear why Agar claims that every or any human desire may end up *deserving* more attention than the life of a nonsentient being for a moral pluralist. Desert is a normative notion; while it might be claimed that we may, as a descriptive fact, tend to underestimate the value of other beings, this does not thereby show that pluralism typically endorses (normatively) such inattention to living things.

Within a virtue ethics approach, we will need to weigh the value of living beings with other values; but certainly we would not be allowed to simply ignore such biocentric value, or downplay it, even if we lack a strict rule to guide us. Recall the virtue of benevolence – this virtue does not require us to help at every moment, and can be outweighed by other concerns. But a person who only very rarely helps others (given ample appropriate opportunities) is clearly not benevolent; in some cases the person must act benevolently. In the case of reverence for life, the value of other living beings can be properly outweighed by other concerns; but this in no way entails that this value is always properly outweighed. Agar's claim does not hold.

Consider again the virtue of benevolence. We do not have a strict rule to guide benevolence. Yet we can certainly identify benevolent people. We can also identify malevolent people, and the rest

of us. Sometimes we may not agree on particular borderline cases, but we can identify paradigms of each. We can model our behaviour on that of these exemplars, and appeal to their judgements. I propose that we understand reverence for life in a similar way. There won't be a simple rule allowing us to determine what we must do in each case. But we can certainly identify people (like Schweitzer, many Jains, and many Buddhists) who clearly espouse a reverence for life.

Of course, while we can pick out such paradigms of virtue further questions must be answered. Must we always be as good as Schweitzer or these others? Schweitzer himself seems to reject any proposal that we must all act as saints at every time, simply in order to meet our basic moral requirements. He writes:

[Reverence for life] demands from all that they should sacrifice a portion of their own lives for others. In what way and in what measure this is his duty, this everyone must decide on the basis of the thoughts which arise in himself, and the circumstances which attend the course of his own life. [...] The destiny of men has to fulfil itself in a thousand ways, so that goodness may be actualized. What every individual has to contribute remains his own secret.<sup>38</sup>

Schweitzer seems to intend a broad moral relativism, but we may worry that he allows too much. If we allow each individual to determine the limits of her own moral requirements we will need to face those who are immoral and who would set their standard for behaviour far below any acceptable range. So while we can agree with Schweitzer that there are different moral models and a wide range of possible good lives for persons, it is inadequate to simply leave morality in the hands of ordinary individuals who can be ill-informed, vicious, and biased.

I propose the following as an account of morally right action:

An action is morally right for an agent in a given set of circumstances iff a fully-informed, unimpaired, virtuous observer would deem the action to be morally right.<sup>39</sup>

Intuitively, the proposal suggests that we determine the status of an action by appealing to the judgements of the virtuous (and of course, among the relevant virtues of the virtuous would be the virtue of reverence for life). The virtuous observers consider the individual involved (and her roles, her

obligations, her capacities, etc.) and make a judgement relative to her. Thus, an agent need not act precisely as some virtuous agent would in order to act rightly (thus, we need not all be moral saints at all times); on the other hand, the account does not allow an individual to simply set her own standard of rightness (regardless of her vices). What matters is whether an ideal virtuous observer would suitably approve of her actions as right, given full-information about the circumstances, the agent, her motivations, and so on. Importantly, the proposal does not require that all such observers deem the action to be right; it is enough that just one would deem it so.

We can briefly consider the traits of the observers. With full-information about a given case such observers would be able to understand the motives of the agents involved and their patterns of past behaviour, understand the commitments of the agents involved, accurately predict the long-term consequences of various courses of action, and so on. Thus, they will not lack information crucial to good decision-making – information that may not be available to an agent immersed in a situation.

Next, the observers will have virtuous characters to draw upon in interpreting and assessing the action before them, crucially including the virtue of reverence for life. Ultimately, we will thus need a theory of the virtues (and a method for identifying virtuous persons). This goes beyond the scope of the current paper, but note that we could, for example, make use of traditional accounts (such as those of Aristotle, or Aquinas), drawing on notions of human flourishing.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, such observers must be unimpaired – they must not be coerced, or under the influence of drugs which diminish mental acuity, and so on. The presence of any of these sorts of impairments could clearly lead to questionable judgements. Thus, the current position can be seen as blending elements from virtue and ideal observer theories.

We can return to an objection that has been lingering beneath the surface since our discussion of Callicott's objection (concerning endless moral calculations). I have claimed that we can appeal to the judgements of virtuous ideal observers in determining the moral status of actions. But could this approach be empty in the sense that it gives us no inadequate guidance? After all, we are not given any specific, concrete rules.

The crucial point in response is that we - and the virtuous ideal observers - need not appeal to the present account as a decision-procedure. Rather, it is the virtues themselves that will shape our attitudes, and especially those of the virtuous ideal observers. As David Solomon puts it, “within an EV [ethics of virtue] it is not the theory of the virtues themselves which is supposed to be primarily action guiding, but rather the virtues themselves.”<sup>41</sup> Compare the current account to a physiological theory of vision. Ideal observers who possess the virtues need not appeal to the account of rightness to guide their actions or judgements, just as persons with good visual systems need not appeal to a theory of vision in order to see well. Similarly, we should not expect a virtue theory itself to provide us with wisdom or virtue, any more than familiarity with a theory of vision will in itself improve our eyesight. It is the virtues or visual systems themselves which guide these agents, not the theories which are built upon their behaviour. Solomon writes:

It is not the theoretical account either of the point of the virtue of justice [for example] or of its role in the overall economy of practical thought that is supposed to guide action, but rather the virtue of justice itself. With this point in hand, however, the proponent of an EV can argue that it is not implausible that such a developed virtue can guide action with at least as much specificity and decisiveness as any rule or principle.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, agents who possess the virtues will be given adequate guidance, and the objection is shown to be rather unfair to the virtue theorist. A virtue theory does not itself guide action, but a virtuous agent can be guided just as effectively as a utilitarian or deontologist. As an agent develops virtues (particularly the virtue of reverence for life) and gains knowledge of particular situations her judgements will match those of a virtuous ideal observer. We must strive to imitate those who are virtuous, and gain knowledge.

Furthermore, notice that we can still make use of various rules of thumb in guiding our behaviour, particularly when we are first developing the virtues; indeed we could appeal to the rules of Sterba, Taylor, or others as such general guides. We simply need to bear in mind that these rules are not basic, and can be overridden. Thus, even if we have not yet developed the virtue of reverence for life,

we can still make use of advice from the virtuous and apply *prima facie* rules. In this way, we will be guided in our actions.

The position I have described here may not satisfy all those who attribute value to all living things – in particular it might be seen as too modest. I have stressed that merely embracing a reverence for life as I have presented it will not constitute an adequate environmental ethic. It is only one member of a larger set of concerns that, taken together, would force significant change upon us. In developing our environmental policy and behaviours, we can appeal to a reverence for life, a concern for sentient beings and suffering, aesthetic values, possible ecosystemic values, various anthropocentric concerns, and so on. It is through the functioning of all these values that we will arrive at an adequate environmental ethic, and it seems to me wrong to focus on any particular one of these – including reverence for life – to the exclusion of others. Here I simply hope to have shown that a virtue of reverence for life is itself a viable, livable virtue.

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<sup>1</sup> See Nicholas Agar, *Life's Intrinsic Value: Science, Ethics, and Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); James Sterba, "A Biocentrist Strikes Back," *Environmental Ethics* 20 (1998): 361-76; Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); and Gary E. Varner, *In Nature's Interests? Interests, Animal Rights, and Environmental Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Agar, *Life's Intrinsic Value*, p. 63, and Varner, *In Nature's Interests?*, p. 9.



<sup>3</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Spiritual Life: Selected Writings of Albert Schweitzer*; with an introduction by Robert Coles and Bob Kerrey; edited by Charles R. Joy (Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1947), p. 262.

<sup>4</sup> Agar, Taylor, and Varner all provide such justifications. See also Kenneth Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable," *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 308-25; and Robin Attfield, *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Schweitzer, *The Spiritual Life*, p.273, or Varner, *In Nature's Interests?*, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Agar, *Life's Intrinsic Value*, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Schweitzer, *The Spiritual Life*, p. 273.

<sup>8</sup> Schweitzer, *The Spiritual Life*, p. 276.

<sup>9</sup> Agar, Taylor, and Varner all discuss the issue of how to account for the value of ecosystems and species within a biocentric individualistic framework.

<sup>10</sup> John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> J. Baird Callicott, "The Search for an Environmental Ethic" in Tom Regan, ed., *Matters of Life and Death*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Random House, 1986), pp. 402-3.

<sup>12</sup> See David Schmidtz, "Are All Species Equal?," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 15 (1998): 57-67.

<sup>13</sup> Mark A. Michael, "To Swat or Not to Swat: Pesky Flies, Environmental Ethics, and the Supererogatory," *Environmental Ethics* 18 (1996): 165-80.

<sup>14</sup> Michael, "To Swat or Not to Swat," p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> Michael, "To Swat or Not to Swat," p. 172. Michael sometimes speaks of 'supererogatory situations', referring to situations in which there is an obvious action available to an agent which would be morally good, but which is not a moral duty – cases in which a supererogatory alternative is clear and plausibly performed.

<sup>16</sup> Michael, "To Swat or Not to Swat," p. 179.

<sup>17</sup> On a more theoretical level, this points to a flaw in any moral theories that assess the moral status of actions in isolation, and that ignore broader patterns of behaviour.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor does include an important role for virtues in his approach; indeed his discussion of virtues is insightful. But he treats the virtues as derivative from rules and duties: “With respect to environmental ethics, the attitude of respect for nature is *expressed in one’s character* when one has developed firm, steady, permanent dispositions that enable one to deliberate and act consistently with the four rules of duty [...] Those dispositions are the virtues or good character traits that make it possible for a moral agent to regularly comply with the four rules” (Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, p. 199).

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, pp. 172-9.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, pp. 264-9.

<sup>21</sup> Agar, *Life’s Intrinsic Value*, p. 80.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph R. Des Jardins, *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2001), p. 146.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, p. 171.

<sup>24</sup> Sterba, “Biocentrist Strikes Back,” p.363.

<sup>25</sup> Sterba, “Biocentrist Strikes Back,” p. 365.

<sup>26</sup> Sterba, “Biocentrist Strikes Back,” p. 368.

<sup>27</sup> Varner, *In Nature’s Interests?*, p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> Varner, *In Nature’s Interests?*, p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> Varner, *In Nature’s Interests?*, p. 95.

<sup>30</sup> Varner, *In Nature’s Interests?*, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> Agar, *Life’s Intrinsic Value*, p. 85.

<sup>32</sup> Joel Kupperman, “Character and Ethical Theory” in French, Uehling, and Wettstein, eds., *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 121.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Schaller, “Are Virtues No More Than Dispositions to Obey Moral Rules?” in Louis Pojman, ed., *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1998), pp. 388-395. Reprinted from *Philosophia* 20 (1990): 185-207.

<sup>34</sup> I will use ‘beneficence’ and ‘benevolence’ interchangeably.

<sup>35</sup> Schaller, "Are Virtues No More Than," pp. 389-90.

<sup>36</sup> A virtue theory can allow for actions that would always be wrong (consider torturing people simply for your own pleasure). These would be actions of which no virtuous agent would approve.

<sup>37</sup> Agar, *Life's Intrinsic Value*, p. 81.

<sup>38</sup> Schweitzer, *The Spiritual Life*, p. 268.

<sup>39</sup> For additional discussion, see my "Virtue Theory and Ideal Observers," *Philosophical Studies* 109 (2002): 197-222, and "Inner Diversity: An Alternative, Ecological Virtue Ethics," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 8 (2001): 27-35.

<sup>40</sup> In unpublished work I attempt to provide an alternative account of the virtues, avoiding certain problems for those accounts grounded simply in human flourishing.

<sup>41</sup> David Solomon, "Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics" in French, Uehling, and Wettstein, *Moral Concepts*, p.439.

<sup>42</sup> Solomon, "Internal Objections," p.439.