

Holistic versus individualistic non-anthropocentrism

I applaud *The Ecological Citizen* for defending ecocentrism, a worldview the Earth needs urgently. Many of the Journal's articles to date have targeted anthropocentrism as their main opponent. However, holders of that patently defective view arguably now comprise a minority, even of Americans (Leiserowitz *et al.*, 2005). The real battle seems to have shifted from theory to practice, where anthropocentrism remains firmly entrenched (McShane, 2016). Meanwhile, two other rivals of ecocentrism remain largely unchallenged in these pages, on either theoretical or practical grounds: sentientism and biocentrism.

Sentientists hold that all sentient animals have intrinsic value. But they deny a further claim that biocentrists assert: that non-animal organisms, such as plants and fungi, also have moral significance for their own sake (Varner, 2001; Attfield, 2013). What sentientism and biocentrism share is a commitment to moral *individualism*. According to both, the intrinsic value of a species or ecosystem reduces to the sum, average or some other function of its individual constituent organisms' well-being. What distinguishes ecocentrism from these rival views is the idea that such an ecological whole is 'more than the sum of its parts'. That is, in addition to the well-being of its constituents, certain *holistic* properties count for their own sake as well, such as overall diversity and integrity within the species or ecosystem. Proponents of holistic ecocentrism must show how and why their view is superior not only to anthropocentrism, but also to its non-anthropocentric but individualistic alternatives.

Arguments for ecocentrism in general can make some headway against sentientism and

biocentrism. For example, I have contended that – depending on the answers, currently unknown, to certain empirical questions – individualistic theories commit their adherents to endorsing one of two repugnant extremes: utter human domination of the planet, or human extinction. Ecocentrism's intrinsic-valuation of biodiversity saves it from this dilemma, and justifies the obviously preferable middle ground: an Earth with thriving populations of all 10 million species, including humans. To further vindicate ecocentrism, I have found it necessary to get more specific about what it entails. The best-known exponents of the view – such as Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess and Val Plumwood – have offered much inspiration and food for thought. However, I submit that the lesser-known theorist Peter Miller synthesized such insights more coherently and convincingly than any of these more famous thinkers have. Miller defined intrinsic value as "richness", which is in turn a function of *variety*, *harmony* and *achievement* (Miller, 1982; 1983). One advantage of such an axiology is that it arguably explains the intrinsic goods involved in sentience, and in life, better than even sentientism or biocentrism can (Mikkelson, 2019).

So far, I have stressed the need to champion ecocentrism against sentientism and biocentrism. However, I will close by noting one important value judgment on which all three of these non-anthropocentric theories converge: that at least at anywhere near current levels, livestock farming is a massive net disvalue. Ecocentrism counts not only the harms inflicted by this industry on individual domestic and wild organisms, but also its devastation of biodiversity and ecosystem function (Machovina *et al.*, 2015). Ecocentrists thus have even

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greater theoretical motivation than non-anthropocentric individualists do, to fight the global scourge of animal agriculture. However, in practice, sentientists like Peter Singer and Martha Nussbaum have probably inspired more people to reduce or eliminate their meat consumption than have ecocentric thinkers (but see Tudge [2018]). Thus, while ecocentrists should advance their worldview against all forms of moral individualism, they should join their fellow non-anthropocentrists in seeking to dramatically diminish the livestock industry, and rewild the land that this will free up (Mikkelson, 2018). ■

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