Itch Scratching, Patio Building, and Pesky Flies: Biocentric Individualism Revisited

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Biocentric individualism, the position that all life has intrinsic value, is of no practical help in policy-making contexts. Examples commonly used in discussions of biocentric individualism are themselves alienating and threaten to make environmental philosophy appear irrelevant to policy decisions. Hence, both biocentric individualism and typical discussions of it are problematic for those wishing to make environmental philosophy useful in policy. A recent article by Jason Kawall, in which he attempts to defend biocentric individualism, demonstrates these points.

BIOCENTRIC INDIVIDUALISM AND THE AVERAGE PERSON’S INTUITIONS

In a recent paper in Environmental Ethics, Jason Kawall defends biocentric individualism, the position that all living beings have intrinsic value, against the objection that it is contrary to the average person’s intuitions. He then argues that virtue-based approaches to biocentric individualism are superior to rule-based models in providing guidance to moral agents. In this paper, I argue that he is wrong on both counts and I explore the implications for the field of environmental philosophy more generally.

Although Kawall does not provide a full defense of biocentric individualism, he is concerned to defend it against the objection that it flies in the face of “common-sense” morality in Western contexts and should therefore be discarded. Kawall suggests that the following thought experiment demonstrates that biocentric individualism “is not as contrary to common-sense morality as it might first appear (even in the West).” This is a concern because if the clash is too extreme, the position might be too far removed to be viable in Western contexts. The experiment is as follows: imagine that you are walking down the street and see a small insect in front of you. You could easily avoid killing the

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2 Following Kawall, I am limiting my discussion to what he calls “Western contexts.” I am not arguing that “reverence for life” is counterintuitive or meaningless in other cultural contexts.
insect by slightly adjusting your step at no expense to yourself. According to Kawall, “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.” Kawall claims that this intuition remains even if we stipulate that you won’t get your shoes dirty if you crush the insect, that the insect is just some “common bug” rather than a rare, beautiful butterfly, and that you are aware that insects of this sort do not feel pain. Hence, we have a case where we value something simply because it is a living thing.

While some people may not share this intuition, the fact that it seems a very common one “shows that a virtue of reverence for life may not be as foreign to common Western moral intuition as we might expect.” Kawall addresses the obvious objection that while it may be easy to have intuitions about the value of life when there is no conflict on interests, we also have few qualms about engaging in massive killings such as using pesticides on fields. As Nicholas Agar points out, “. . . 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.” In response to this rather obvious objection, Kawall argues that “reverence for life” is only one value among others. The question of how demanding the value of “reverence for life” will be, given the existence of other valuable projects, needs to be addressed. Hence, Kawall holds what he calls a modest form of biocentric individualism. Other projects and values are to be weighed against the value of life to allow for situations in which it is morally appropriate for other interests to win out in the final analysis.

It seems to me that Kawall has missed the mark in several respects here. The “average” suburban aesthetic/ethic in North America not only allows for pesticides on fields, which might be justified in order to feed people, but it also allows for massive destruction in the name of beauty. Not only does it not call for heroic blade-of-grass rescue acts, it demands the exact opposite. It is not merely an aesthetic, but an ethic, often with legal penalties for noncompliance. We engage in an aesthetic that requires mass killings, an aesthetic which signals that we as a culture value domination and control over other living beings. The beauty itself is in successfully “conquering your lawn” as the many commercials offering help in the war against weeds demonstrate.

According to Webster’s dictionary, reverence is defined as “A feeling or attitude of deep respect, love, and awe, as for something sacred.” Frankly, I find the typical lack of concern for living nonhuman beings in contemporary

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4 Ibid., p. 341.
5 Ibid.
7 One could also raise the issue of whether it is the individual blades of grass or the lawn itself that is the “individual” to be protected by biocentric individualism. However, I won’t address this question here.
American society, including obviously sentient beings, to be shockingly irreverent. The idea that there is intrinsic value in each and every living being is certainly not expressed in the public cultures or the policies of contemporary North American society. Even if there is a common intuition that every living being has value, it clearly conflicts with other intuitions and common ideas about how we should treat living beings.

In discussing the issue of possible inconsistency or hypocrisy, Kawall responds that this is not a particular problem for biocentric individualism. “Many people will pay thousands of dollars for surgery for their companion animals, but not give a thought to veal cattle. People can be kind and devoted to members of their nation, yet ignore others. So the mere fact that people are inconsistent in their behaviors 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.” It is certainly true that the fact of people’s inconsistency, which is really much more pronounced than the example provided above (such as having a pet dog and supporting experiments on dogs), does nothing to tell us whether the view is internally flawed. However, “reverence” and “awe” are powerful feelings. The intuition that all life has some—possibly relatively little—value is far from awe. Complacency about cruelty to animals or massive destruction of weeds hardly exhibits “awe” for all living things. Thus, even if there is some intuition that life is valuable, if it does not play out in any meaningful practices, if people usually (almost always) allow trivial human interests to trump the nontrivial interests of other beings, the claim that common-sense morality is not far from reverence for life seems just plain false.

Kawall attempts to get quite a lot of mileage out of our supposed intuition that all life has value. It turns out that biocentric individualists not only believe that it is better to avoid killing insects when there is absolutely no cost to the agent, but they also worry about the morality of swatting “pesky flies” and of building patios (unless perhaps the reason for this is to reach a compromise between humans and pesky flies by screening in patios). Mark Michael has suggested that some actions reflecting reverence for life be classed as supererogatory. Kawall argues against this position. Along with the problem of specifying which actions are supererogatory, a problem to which I return shortly, there is the problem of patterns of action. According to Michael, “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.” Michael offers the example of pesky flies. While not swatting them may reflect reverence for

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life, if one swats them no moral duty has been violated. Kawall objects that while it may be true of each individual situation that no duty has been violated, a person who never refrains from swatting pesky flies is not exhibiting the virtue of reverence for life. He worries about the moral character of a person who gives to environmental groups and volunteers for them. Suppose he or she had a series of encounters with pesky flies "every night for a summer: say one hundred nights. It would appear that in each individual case, sparing the fly would be supererogatory," according to Michael.\textsuperscript{10} Kawall states, "But there is something worrying here. Shouldn’t the flies win at least sometimes?"\textsuperscript{11} I find it striking that the agent described above is arguably a better moral agent than your average individual. Most people neither spare pesky flies nor volunteer for environmental advocacy groups. If biocentric individualism implies that the interests of pesky flies should even sometimes win over the interests of irritated humans, then biocentric individualism is quite far from the average person’s common-sense morality. I am not taking a position on the swatting of pesky flies here. However, I was under the impression that biocentric individualism is the position that each individual being has value. Hence, it would seem that in my encounter with each "pesky fly" I am either violating a duty not to harm \textit{that} fly or I am not. In each situation I am either violating a duty or I am not. It is difficult to understand how my behavior in some later situation (or an earlier one) with a different fly can impact on my duty in this situation. We cannot have it both ways. Either reverence for life requires that I refrain from killing flies in a series of identical situations or it doesn’t—and, as I previously stated, if it does, it is very far removed from the average person’s behavior or moral intuition.

Biocentric individualism also requires that we worry about patio building. Paul Taylor develops a deontological biocentric individualism in which all living beings are said to be of equal value. We are not to consider humans more than other beings based on capacities such as sentience, intelligence, or anything else. There have been a host of objections to this position that I won’t bother to rehash here. However, Joseph DesJardines’s objection that it would not allow us to do things that most of us find acceptable is relevant to the present discussion. In thinking about the morality of building a patio, one would have to consider all of the deaths involved in digging up the lawn. According to DesJardines:

If I am not allowed to build the patio, Taylor’s ethics may require too much of us. This is more than simply saying that 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

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Kawall, “Reverence for Life,” p. 347.
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.12

Kawall agrees that a strict application of Taylor’s egalitarian principles seems to establish a morality that is highly impractical for the vast majority of people. He adds that strictly abiding by Taylor’s ethic would not allow adequate space for other morally valuable projects. Hence, it would sometimes be wrong to apply Taylor’s rules. Taylor admits this:

> It is doubtful whether a complete specification of duties is possible in this realm. . . . In all situations not explicitly or clearly covered by these rules we should rely on an 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.13

Recognizing that there are limits to any deontological system is what causes Kawall to argue for a virtue-based approach. I return to this point shortly.

What is of interest here is that the approach suggested by Taylor is wildly out of line with most people’s intuitions and with common-sense morality. While there may be cases that are not clearly covered by Taylor’s ethic, and therefore rely on some vague notion of “respect for nature” (which for Taylor is Kantian and highly problematic itself, but I won’t go into that here), there are numerous cases that appear to be clearly covered, such as patio building, that generate results far afield from common-sense morality in contemporary American society. However, I believe that Taylor’s position more accurately reflects an attitude of “reverence” or “awe” for each living being than one that allows most patio building, and therefore that such an attitude is highly uncommon. It is also impractical. This is why I am not a biocentric individualist. I do not believe that we can give meaningful, lived content to the idea that every living being has value, and certainly not reverential value!

Kawall argues that other attempts at grounding biocentric individualism are also highly unintuitive and also fail to give adequate moral guidance. Their failure is shown in the qualifiers such as “other things being equal,” or “generally speaking,” commonly used in the phrasing of moral principles. As I stated above, I believe that the reason so many counterintuitive results are generated by these theories is simply because the theories themselves are counterintuitive. They become less counterintuitive as we water them down. However, the question

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then becomes, at what point do such positions become something other than “reverence for life”? In Kawall’s version of the position, there are other values that can outweigh the value of life. He is searching for a position that gives all life some value but not equal value, given the existence of other morally important qualities such as sentience. Hence, he attempts to justify the possibility that some beings might be more valuable than others while holding onto biocentric individualism, that all beings have some value. This possibility seems plausible on the face of it, but I argue that the strategy fails in the end. In order to be in line with common-sense morality about swatting pesky flies and building patios, and so forth, the position we are shopping for would have to allow nonbasic human interests to trump the interests of other living beings on a regular basis. Kawall offers such a position. In fact, he maintains that even trivial human interests can trump the interests of some living beings on a regular basis, “our fleeting and trivial desires can properly outweigh the life of a nonsentient being.”\(^{14}\) He states: “Suppose you have an irritating itch; I would suggest that it is often legitimate for you to scratch it, even if doing so will likely end the lives of many microorganisms.”\(^{15}\) The use of the word *legitimate* is interesting here. What does it mean? Would it be better not to scratch it if it is only a very slight itch? Would it remain morally better to refrain from scratching unless scratching was somehow helpful to a person’s overall health? Does it matter? Is this really an important and serious moral question?

In my view, common-sense morality and the average person’s intuitions clearly indicate that the microorganisms involved do not have intrinsic value at all. That it is never better to avoid scratching, unless it is for purposes of human health such as not spreading one’s poison ivy. Even touching things involves killing cells. If one doesn’t have to consider the moral value of certain beings at all in deciding what to do, then I say that they have no value. Forms of biocentric individualism that allow trivial human interests to trump basic interests of nonhumans simply are not truly biocentric in any meaningful sense, they certainly don’t express reverence for all life, and this is just fine with me. I don’t hold the position that every cancer cell has intrinsic moral value, I am virtually certain that most people don’t. In fact, I believe that those who say they do hold it, but that it can always be trumped, are basically deluding themselves. I return to this point below.

**VIRTUE-BASED BIOCENTRIC EGALITARIANISM**

Thus far I have attempted to show that anything plausibly called “reverence for all life” is highly counterintuitive in Western contexts. Versions that account for troubling counterintuitive results, that allow for serious and even trivial


\(^{15}\) Ibid.
interests to trump basic interests of certain living beings, are not meaningfully biocentric, although they may be correct. Hence, I have argued that Kawall’s claim that reverence for life is not wildly out of line with common intuitions and common-sense morality in the West is false. Kawall’s second project is to show that given the problematic counterexamples and the vague nature of principles commonly offered in attempts to justify biocentric individualism (for example, qualifiers such as other things being equal and generally speaking), a virtue-based approach offers a better grounding for biocentric individualism or “reverence for life.” Simple rule-following is not enough. Kawall suggests that we make virtue basic rather than rules. He offers the example of benevolence, quoting Walter Shaller. If there is a duty to be benevolent,

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).16

Because we cannot formulate the duty of benevolence clearly as a rule, we cannot define the virtue of benevolence as a disposition to follow the rule. Therefore, Kawall wants to take the virtue as basic. “People who possess the virtue will be disposed to act in certain ways, though not on the basis of simple rule-following. Note that benevolence does not require us to be helping at every moment, nor is it empty.”17 Hence, Kawall offers the following account of morally right action. “An action is right for an agent in a given set of circumstances if and only if a fully informed, unimpaired, virtuous observer would deem the action to be morally right.”18 We thus “appeal” to virtuous observers who:

. . . consider the individual involved (and his or her roles, obligations, capacities, etc.) and make a judgment relative to him or her. Thus an agent need not act precisely as some virtuous agent would in order to act rightly (thus we need not 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 observer would suitably approve of his or her actions as right, given full-information about circumstances, the agent, his or 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.19

17 Ibid., pp. 389–90.
18 Ibid., p. 356.
19 Ibid.
Virtuous observers have full information, full understanding of the agent’s motives, patterns of past behavior, and can “accurately predict the long-term consequences of various courses of action.”\textsuperscript{20} It is crucial that such observers are completely “unimpaired.” They are not coerced, or “under the influence of drugs which diminish mental acuity, and so on.”\textsuperscript{21} If I am understanding this point correctly, the proposal is that when I am unsure whether a particular action is correct, I can seek out a virtuous observer to tell me. Importantly, this is not a thought experiment in which I try to imagine what I would do if I were a virtuous observer. Rather, I am to seek out an actual flesh-and-blood person to judge for me. But, how is another human being going to have access to all of my motives, my past patterns of behavior, and to top it off the ability to see into the future and know for sure what the consequences of my actions will be? Is this a human being I am seeking or is it God? It seems to be a human being if it can become mentally impaired by taking drugs, but the rest of its abilities seem clearly superhuman. The only way another human being could have access to my motives is if I tried to tell him or her what my motives are. I guess this means that I would have to have access to all of this information, but if so, then I would be the virtuous observer myself! Interestingly, if I were a virtuous observer, it is unclear how I would even know I am.

Let’s assume that I have leanings toward Kawall’s “modest” biocentric individualism. I have a serious intuition that all life has value, and I am thinking about mowing the lawn. I am aware that mowing would involve destroying the lives of many beings, I am also aware that there are situations where my interests can trump the interests of some living beings, that even some of my trivial desires can at times do so. I just don’t know what my obligations are in this particular situation with respect to my lawn. On the current proposal, I am to seek out virtuous observers, accurately disclose my motivations, past patterns of behavior, and so forth, and the virtuous observer will “just know” what my obligation is regarding the lawn. Apparently, if I get an answer that I am unhappy with I can seek another virtuous observer, who, having the identical facts and abilities just might come up with the answer I want. But now another difficulty arises. How am I to know whether all of the virtuous observers would agree in this case or not? Wouldn’t I have to know what my obligation actually is in order to know whether it is reasonable to consult another observer? I am also a bit unclear as to how these observers, if they really have identical facts and abilities, can disagree as to what my obligation is regarding this particular lawn mowing. It seems that, in certain circumstances, and under identical conditions of choice, such observers could reach opposite conclusions and both be right!

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 357.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
Recall Kawall’s objection against the suggestion that some acts expressing reverence for life are supererogatory. According to Michael, “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.”

Kawall insists that this suggestion is inadequate on the grounds that (1) we must wonder whose intuitions are at stake; and (2) that the proposal is simply ad hoc in that whenever a case strikes us as counterintuitive we can just label it supererogatory. Michael would have to provide some explanation of why jumping to the supererogatory is permissible that would unify all the different cases, which he does not and probably could not. Finally, (3) it seems like whenever we don’t want to do something, we can just claim that it is supererogatory. This problem depends in part upon whose intuitions are included by Michael. Michael attempts to deal with these problems by suggesting that “whether or not a situation is supererogatory depends upon the weight and number of various competing interests that are at stake in that specific situation.”

The idea is that we should be weighing various competing interests in shaping our intuitions. However, Kawall charges that doing so is really no concrete help at all, asking “But how are these to be weighed? It hardly seems there will be a strict calculus for us to follow. Even if there were, we would soon find ourselves facing Callicott’s worry of endless, impossible calculation.”

Kawall is certainly correct that Michael fails to offer something that can provide a strict calculus for us to follow. In addition, the problem of whose intuitions are to count is a major concern. However, I fail to see how Kawall’s criterion fares any better in providing concrete guidance in particular situations. In fact, I argue that it fares worse. Recall that “An action is morally right for an agent in a given circumstance if and only if a fully informed, unimpaired, virtuous observer would deem the action to be morally right.” This claim seems obviously, yet trivially true as an action-guide for humans in the real world. Just as defining the supererogatory in terms of not violating duties is trivially true, it fails to tell us what to do in situations where we may be puzzled. But, I maintain that Kawall’s suggestion is even more problematic. First, as I argued above, these “observers” seem to have knowledge and abilities that mere humans don’t have. Either they have the power to look into my mind in order to accurately know my motivations, or they are dependent upon me to accurately reveal them. If they have this power, they are not mere humans, and for all we know such aliens don’t even exist. If they don’t have such power,

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22 Michael, “To Swat or Not to Swat,” p. 172.
23 Ibid., p. 179.
24 Ibid., p. 347.
25 Ibid., p. 356.
their conclusions are often likely to be flawed as people can often misunderstand their own motivations. A simple example should clarify this point. Incest survivors often feel compelled to burn themselves with cigarettes. They are also often puzzled as to why they have this compulsion, and seek psychological help in order to figure it out and stop the behavior. As I understand it, this behavior is almost diagnostic of incest survival. The motivation behind self-mutilation is to distract oneself from painful, repressed, memories. However, while such behavior is common, those engaging in it often have absolutely no memory of childhood abuse, and no clue as to why they feel compelled to engage in such destructive behavior. The issue of what is motivating someone at various times is highly complex. Agents are often out of touch with their own motivations. In addition, even if an agent is accurately disclosing his or her motivations to one of these judges, the judge must then have the power to accurately and unerringly predict what the result of a given action will be. Unless predetermination is true, what will happen when someone takes an action is open to countless contingencies that depend upon how a situation unfolds. Hence, the qualification that virtuous observers are able to do so seems incoherent. If they are able to unerringly predict the future, I would argue that they are not mere human beings (we can argue about the powers of psychics another time). We have no evidence that such beings exist. Obviously, if they don’t exist, they can’t be of help in guiding our actions at all.

Where do these considerations leave us? While it might be true that the morally right action is the one a virtuous person (stipulated as having the abilities provided by Kawall) would deem is morally right, it is of absolutely no help to human beings trying to figure out what to do in genuinely morally puzzling situations. Kawall is quite aware of the looming objection that his approach fails to provide adequate guidance, although he misses the point that these observers seem to be altogether alien. In response to the objection that his suggestion provides inadequate guidance because it provides no rules, Kawall argues that his account is not offered as a decision procedure. It is the virtues themselves that shape attitudes. Kawall quotes David Solomon on this point, “within an EV (ethics of virtue) it is not the theory of the virtues that is supposed to be primarily action-guiding, but rather the virtues themselves.”

Ideal observers who possess the virtues need not appeal to the account of rightness to guide their actions or judgments, 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

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virtues and the visual systems themselves which guide these agents, not the
theories which are built upon their behavior. 27

The point is that the virtuous person does not even need to be aware of the
correct theory of virtue as long as he or she is properly motivated by the virtues
themselves, just as someone can see well without knowing anything about the
proper physiological account of vision. But I don’t understand how this
realization solves the problem of how Kawall’s virtue-based ethics is supposed
to guide us. First, on the vision analogy, it seems that I could be a virtuous
observer and not be aware of it, just as one can have excellent vision and not
be aware of it in terms of not knowing it is superior to the vision of other people.
How can I tell whether I am a virtuous observer or not? If I am, my intuitions
will be superior to those of many others. But how am I to know whether they
are? Similarly, if I cannot tell whether I am a virtuous observer, how will I
know whether someone else is? I need to have some picture of the kind of
behavior and values a virtuous person would have. Although I might be wrong,
I might just as well use that picture to guide my own behavior as to go out
seeking some external observer who fits the bill.

More frighteningly, Kawall’s theory may leave us at the mercy of people
presenting themselves to us as “virtuous” and expecting us to follow their
advice. People presenting themselves as “moral visionaries.” We need the
ability to judge such people, especially if they are attempting to seize power
(like certain politicians). We need to be able to trust in our judgments. If we ask
someone else for advice, we need to expect more from them than “the truth”;
we also need an explanation of why it is true: otherwise, we will be mindlessly
accepting advice as people in cults often do, which can be positively dangerous.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I argue that approaches such as Kawall’s may actually be
dangerous in three concrete respects. First, the sorts of examples Kawall
discusses, which are common in current literature in environmental ethics, are
so far out of line with common-sense intuitions and morality that they threaten
to make environmental philosophers appear irrelevant in policy making con-
texts. Second, the idea that we can meaningfully “revere all life” can make us
feel good, but such empty slogans may do no more than comfort those who say
them, and alienate those who think they are meaningless platitudes. This idea
may cause needless rifts between people who should be working together.
Finally, I argue that the proposal that we rely on “moral visionaries” is perhaps
the most dangerous of all.

With regard to the first point, recall that Kawall is determined to show that
most people have intuitions that are in line with reverence for life because if

they don’t, the position may simply be too far removed to be viable in Western contexts. I agree with him in terms of strategy. However, if we are concerned that our focus not be too far removed from most people’s intuitions or concerns, then we should consider the examples discussed by Kawall and others that are common in the field of environmental ethics. These “troubling” examples include the morality of swatting pesky flies, mowing the lawn, building patios, and finally itch scratching. Even I, who enjoy a good romp through the theoretical jungle, have a hard time focusing on the morality of itch scratching. I fear that most people would feel equally silly focusing on the moral status of pesky flies, lawn mowing, or patio building. Strategically, instead of generating these troubling counterexamples, I believe it would be better to focus on concerns that really matter to more people, and to ground discussions on more robust intuitions than the one that all life has value, which seems to evaporate almost immediately when put to the test. We have pressing issues that many people find morally puzzling, such as whether and how to genetically modify foods. If we, as environmental philosophers, wish to contribute to ongoing public debates, I would argue such issues are a better focus. Otherwise, we are in danger of simple irrelevance.

My second point is one of both theory and strategy. I have argued that to “revere” something is to hold it in high estimation. Doing so is serious business. I don’t think that most people in Western contexts hold that every living being has intrinsic value. Even if they do, the way that the interests of nonhuman living beings are systematically trumped for the sake of the most trivial human interests is not indicative of “reverence” at all. The more interesting question is whether we behave as if most living beings, including sentient ones, even including some rather unfortunate human beings, have any value at all, and not whether we “revere” each living being. My theoretical point is that the position that all life has value, if it means I must think about the moral value of skin cells before scratching, is meaningless as a guide to action. If I do not have to consider the value of the cells in deciding whether to scratch, then it does not make any practical difference whatsoever whether they have some kind of value or not. I actually agree with Kawall that there is a hierarchy of value and that the interests of some beings often trump the interests of others. However, I disagree that in a system where skin cells always lose, it makes no sense to say that they have any independent value at all. Hence, I think that it is a mischaracterization of Kawall’s position to say it either reveres all life, or that any theory can meaningfully hold that every living thing has intrinsic value. However, there is another worry. If the theory of biocentric individualism is meaningless as an action-guiding ethic, it may still “feel good” to say that one has “reverence for all life.” It may cause a superior attitude, and such attitudes are notoriously unhelpful. In Eichmann in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt notices that whenever Eichmann seemed to be approaching the idea that he might have been involved in something horrible, he tended to repeat slogans that made him
more comfortable. Arendt argues that one strategy of Nazism was to generate and disseminate phrases that gave followers a kind of feeling of elation and basically stopped moral thought.28 I am not claiming that the statement “all life has intrinsic value” stops moral thought, but rather that it sends it down the wrong track, focusing on the kinds of examples discussed above, while failing to contribute anything that will be of concrete use in moral decision making. It may feel good, even exhilarating to state it, but it seems of no practical use. It could also lead to practical irrelevance, and be at least somewhat dangerous.

Finally, I am worried about Kawall’s suggestion that we seek the opinion of ideal observers in morally puzzling situations. As I stated above, I find the idea that a morally right action is one that a virtuous observer would approve of to be trivially true but completely unhelpful in guiding action. I find Kawall’s discussion of so-called “virtuous observers” to be extremely disturbing for several reasons. First, these observers are not people. They have powers and abilities far beyond what any flesh and blood human could have. They are psychic, able to predict the future, and they are psychologists, able to accurately read our motivations. Even if such people did exist, I find the suggestion that I should go looking for one when I am morally puzzled to be highly problematic. Has anyone ever met one? How would we know? If someone came over to me and told me not to worry because they had perfect moral intuitions, I would run the other way. Mind you that on Kawall’s version, this person would not have to have any knowledge of virtue theory itself; they would just have to be moved by the actual virtues. I suppose the person might not even be able to explain to me why I should trust them. Again, this is of no practical help. I call this virtuous observer a “moral visionary.” It is extremely dangerous to trust people who believe they are visionaries. In fact, people who believe they are visionaries are often dangerous fanatics.

It seems to me that in order to responsibly choose one of these visionaries, I would have to have a fairly sophisticated virtue theory, and also a picture of what kinds of behavior a virtuous person would engage in. To return to the vision analogy, if I have limited vision, and I want to find someone who “sees better” to help me, I have to have some picture of what “seeing better” would be, of what such a person would see. I have argued that in order to find a visionary that I could responsibly trust, I would have to have such a sophisticated understanding of both virtue theory and virtuous behavior in particular circumstances that it would no longer become necessary to seek out a guide. To my way of thinking this is a very good thing. We need to teach people to think and feel for themselves, while taking note of good (but most likely non-ideal) examples. We certainly don’t want to encourage people to stop thinking and to just take the word of so-called “visionaries” who “just know” what is right but

cannot even explain why! That we are to rely upon such “visionaries” is in my mind perhaps the most dangerous suggestion of all.