St. Francis, Paul Taylor, and Franciscan Biocentrism

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The biocentric outlook on nature affirms our fellowship with other living creatures and portrays human beings as members of the Earth’s community who have equal moral standing with other living members of the community. A comparison of Paul Taylor’s biocentric theory of environmental ethics and the life and writings of St. Francis of Assisi reveals that Francis maintained a biocentric environmental ethic. This individualistic environmental ethic is grounded in biology and is unaffected by the paradigm shift in ecology in which nature is regarded as in flux rather than tending toward equilibrium. A holistic environmental ethic that accords moral standing to holistic entities (species, ecosystems, biotic communities) is more vulnerable to these changes in ecology than an environmental ethic that accords moral standing to individuals. Another strength of biocentrism is its potential to provide a unified front across religious and scientific lines.

I. INTRODUCTION

In what follows, I briefly explore the overlaps and commonalities between one particular Christian environmental ethic, that of St. Francis of Assisi, and one particular secular environmental ethic, biocentrism. The environmental philosopher Paul W. Taylor, well known as a defender of biocentrism, has developed an approach to environmental ethics that shares interesting affinities with the environmental ethic of St. Francis of Assisi.1 Essentially my points will be that these two ethics are compatible, mutually reinforcing, defensible, and particularly resilient in the face of significant changes that have taken place in ecology. Instead of conceiving of nature as tending toward equilibrium and in balance, today many ecologists think of nature as tending toward disequilibrium and in flux. Although some theories of environmental ethics may be affected by this change, such as J. Baird Callicott’s ecocentrism, biocentrism with its core commitment to individual beings, is notably unaffected.

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II. PAUL W. TAYLOR’S BIOCENTRISM AND ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Before Taylor develops his theory of environmental ethics, he first explains that a theory of human ethics should have three main components: a belief system, an attitude of respect, and a system of rules and standards. He argues that a theory of environmental ethics should have an analogous structure to a theory of human ethics. Both should contain three main parts: a belief system, an attitude of respect, and a system of rules and standards. Consequently, his theory of environmental ethics is comprised of a belief system (the biocentric outlook on nature), an attitude of respect (respect for nature) and a system of rules and standards (consisting of four rules of duty, the general virtues, the special virtues, five priority principles for the fair resolution of conflicting claims, and the ethical ideal, a “total picture or vision of what kind of world order would be ideal according to the structure of normative principles we have accepted”).

With regard to the three main components of a theory of environmental ethics Taylor asserts that “The belief-system supports and makes intelligible the adopting of the attitude, and the rules and standards give concrete expression to that attitude in practical life.” According to Taylor “the biocentric outlook on nature,” the particular belief system, or philosophical world view upon which his environmental ethic depends, contains four beliefs that form the core of the biocentric outlook:

(a) The belief that humans are members of the Earth’s Community of Life in the same sense and on the same terms in which other living things are members of that Community.
(b) The belief that the human species, along with all other species, are integral elements in a system of interdependence such that the survival of each living thing, as well as its chances of faring well or poorly, is determined not only by the physical conditions of its environment but also by its relations to other living things.
(c) The belief that all organisms are teleological centers of life in the sense that

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2 Ibid., pp. 41–42.
3 Ibid., p. 307. The four rules of duty are the rule of nonmaleficence, the rule of noninterference, the rule of fidelity, and the rule of restitutive justice. The general virtues—“those traits of character needed for deliberating and acting in the right way, no matter what particular moral rules and principles are being applied and followed”—are conscientiousness, integrity, patience, courage, temperance, disinterestedness, perseverance, steadfastness-in-duty, benevolence, compassion, sympathy, and caring. The special virtues—“the specific character traits associated with each of the four types of duty”—are considerateness, regard, impartiality, trustworthiness, fairness, and equity. Ibid., pp. 172, 199–200. Too many of Taylor’s commentators ignore most of these elements of Taylor’s theory and conceal the developed structure of the theory when they refer to his view as simplify a “Kantian” ethic.
4 Ibid., p. 44.
5 Ibid.
Taylor believes that what partly underlies the biocentric outlook on nature is the belief in biological evolution. He claims that an evolutionary view of life on Earth leads us to see that all living beings in the Earth’s Community of Life have a common origin.

Once we come to accept the biocentric outlook on nature, Taylor believes, we will see that the only appropriate attitude to take toward all living things is the attitude of respect. The rules and standards that Taylor develops are the ones that he believes that anyone who sincerely adopts the attitude of respect for nature would adopt. The crux of a biocentric environmental ethic is the principle that we ought to act so as to respect the worth of all living things. If we bear in mind the basic outline of biocentrism and then look at the life and works of St. Francis, it seems rather clear that St. Francis maintained a biocentric outlook on nature and took an ethical stance that is consistent with such an outlook. I primarily focus on Francis’ *Canticle of Brother Sun* (sometimes alternatively titled *Canticle of the Creatures*), a work that many acknowledge as a good summary of Francis’s thought. G. K. Chesterton, for example, says that it is “a supremely characteristic work,” and “much of St. Francis could be reconstructed from that work alone.”

As evidence that Francis saw humans on the same terms as other beings in the community of life—Taylor’s belief (a)—we can point to the many times that Francis concerned himself with the welfare of nonhuman creatures such as ants, crickets, falcons, fish, flowers, lambs, larks, pheasants, rabbits, robins, swallows, trees, and worms. Not only would Francis address human beings as “Brother,” or “Sister,” but he would also address nonhuman creatures as ‘brother’ and ‘sister.’

Because Francis also adopts this practice when referring to inanimate objects such as “Sir Brother Sun,” “Sister Moon,” “Brother Wind,” “Sister Water,” “Brother Fire,” and “Sister Mother Earth,” some might conclude that biocentrism may not be an appropriate description of his ethic, for doesn’t a biocentric ethic focus on living creatures? True, if we look at Francis’ *Canticle of Brother Sun*, we will see Francis using these familiar terms in addressing inanimate objects, but we will also notice the insinuation that the inanimate objects (sun, wind, water, fire, and earth) are valuable because of what they provide to God’s creatures.

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6 Ibid., pp. 99–100.
Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun, who is the day and through whom You give us light. . . . Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather through which You give sustenance to Your creatures. . . . Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste. . . . Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom You light the night. . . . Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.10

Francis shows appreciation to God for these valuable objects but they are appreciated for their instrumental value, not because they are individuals pursuing their own good. On a straightforward reading of Francis’ Canticle, the sun is the means through which God gives creatures light, the wind is the means through which God gives air to His creatures, water is very useful to God’s creatures, fire lights the night of creatures, and the earth sustains God’s creatures.

A related objection to my regarding Francis as holding a biocentrism is the idea that since God is most supreme, Francis really held a theocentric environmental ethic. But I don’t think the term theocentric properly captures Francis’ ethic. It is a matter of focus and emphasis. In the field of environmental ethics the labels anthropocentric, biocentric, ecocentric, etc. call attention to those entities that hold moral value: those entities about which we ought to be concerned that our life styles are affecting. Anthropocentrists hold that only humans hold moral value, consequently, our environmental ethic is gauged on how humans are affected. Biocentrists hold that living things hold moral value and, consequently, our environmental ethic is gauged on how living things are affected. Ecocentrists hold that ecological wholes such as species, ecosystems, or biotic communities hold moral value, and so, our environmental ethic is gauged on how these holistic entities are affected. Along these lines, to hold a “theocentric” environmental ethic would be to hold that only God holds moral value and our environmental ethic is gauged on how God is affected.

But this view does not appear to be Francis’ position. A possible way to make the term theocentric fit would be to say that God is in nature such that there is no distinction between creator and creation. In other words, to make “theocentric” capture what Francis had in mind we would have to ascribe pantheism to him. Most commentators, however, seem to agree that Francis was not a pantheist.11

A less theoretical and more practical response to the suggestion of “theo-

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Franciscan Biocentrism

In fact, we are mistaken if we think that Francis was concerned with “the environment” or “nature,” because in his writings “Francis himself never used the term *natura.* . . . Francis instead talks of the ‘heavens,’ ‘earth,’ and ‘the world,’ and ‘all creatures which are under the heavens.’”

I don’t need to spend much time discussing how Francis espoused beliefs (b) and (c) of Taylor’s biocentric outlook (the ones about biotic interdependence and individual’s pursuing their goods). It is well documented that “Francis . . . envisioned a harmonious and interdependent community of creation,” and

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“reverenced all other creatures, each in their own kind of creaturehood.” 16 Each creature praised God in its own particular way. “Creatures, each having autonomous worth and beauty, are yet brothers and sisters to each other, aiding each other, gladly performing their divinely allotted functions.” 17 I think it is clear that Francis appreciates the interdependence of living things and holds that each creature is pursuing the end for which God has designed it.

As evidence that Francis would agree with belief (d) of Taylor’s biocentric outlook—the denial of human moral superiority over the rest of creation—we can point to Francis’ claim that there is nothing wrong with wild animals overtaking humans: “Obedience subjects a man / to everyone on earth. / And not only to men, / but to all the beasts as well / and to the wild animals./ So that they can do what they like with him, / as far as God allows them.” 18 By Francis claiming that wild animals are permitted to do what they like with humans it seems that Francis is not aligning himself with the mainstream Western belief that human beings are inherently morally superior to nonhumans. Francis is saying that it is not the case that human beings must be saved from wild animals at all costs.

Later Franciscans, such as Bonaventure, for instance, would likely disagree with the denial of human moral superiority. In Bonaventure’s Life of St. Francis when he refers to nonhuman creatures he calls them “creatures lacking reason.” This phrase could be interpreted as hinting at Bonaventure’s more mainstream classical view that creatures that possess reason reflect God in a special way, and are therefore morally superior. According to Taylor, however, who rejects the notion of human superiority, the act of rejecting human superiority logically leads us to species impartiality. With species impartiality then the rule of noninterference that applies to humans, also applies to nonhumans.

Should we take the fact that Francis gave the birds permission to leave after he delivered his sermon to them as evidence that Francis retained a traditional hierarchical moral ordering of God’s creatures? 19 If we compare this act of politeness with Francis’ willingness to allow himself to be overtaken by wild animals—possibly with the cost of a lost human life—it seems more reasonable to say that in terms of moral standing, Francis’ view is that humans are not inherently superior to other living creatures. Etiquette is one thing, but suggesting that humans put their lives on the line for a nonhuman creature is a weighty moral claim.

Like Taylor, St. Francis believes in a common origin of all living things and this is the background assumption that underwrites the theoretical reasonableness of biospherical egalitarianism; however, Francis does not attribute their

16 Hansen, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 55.
17 Sorrell, St. Francis of Assisi and Nature, p. 137.
19 Sorrell thinks so. Sorrell, St. Francis of Assisi and Nature, p. 47.
common origin to evolution, rather, he believes that all creatures have the same origin in God the creator. In his Life of St. Francis, Bonaventure explains that Francis’ use of “brother” and “sister” when addressing all creatures “no matter how small” is due to Francis’ belief that all creatures have the same source.20 Francis’ relationship with the particular members of the Earth family is not one of stewardship or caretaker but rather one of mutuality.21

According to Bonaventure, “Francis, the model of humility, wanted his friars to be called Minor and the superiors of his Order to be called servants, in order that his followers might learn from this very name that they had come to the school of the humble Christ to learn humility.”22 The Franciscan order of friars is called O.F.M. (Order of Friars Minor). Francis’ humility was inspired by the teachings of Jesus as they were recorded in the New Testament. Superiority and pride are anathema for someone like Francis who shows a great deal of humility. It seems clear that the humility that Francis worked toward had its inspiration in the New Testament. Francis has no reservations about acting with humility toward nonhuman living creatures. After all, all living things have their source in God. Taylor, who also emphasizes the single source of all living things, also endorses an approach of humility. But Taylor’s emphasis on humility does not have its source in Scripture, Taylor’s position is grounded in science and rational argument.

In support of belief (d), Taylor sets out to show that the main arguments that have been used for centuries to prove that humans are superior simply do not hold up. He analyzes the three historical arguments based on “(a) the essentialist view of human nature found in classical Greek humanism; (b) the idea of the Great Chain of Being found in the metaphysics of traditional Christian monotheism; and (c) the dualistic theory of the philosophy of Rene Descartes. . . .”23 He finds all three arguments to be flawed and he reaches the logical conclusion that humans are not superior to other living things. The facts that the common arguments supporting human superiority are faulty and that many of the sciences such as biology, ecology, paleontology, etc. tell us that we haven’t been around for very long leads to “morality without hubris,”24 a humble attitude regarding the status of human beings vis-à-vis other living creatures, an attitude commonly endorsed by ethicists these days.

With this brief sketch of Francis and biocentrism, the environmental ethic of

22 Bonaventure, Life of St. Francis, pp. 232–33.
St. Francis can thus be construed as a form of biocentrism. Francis and Taylor are in agreement with their “biocentric outlook on nature,” their attitude of respect for nature, and many elements of the standards and rules that Taylor describes. Biocentrism is an individualistic environmental ethic that accords full moral standing to each and every living creature, whether animal or plant. The biocentric outlook on nature sees human beings as members of the Earth’s community of life who are on the same terms with other living members of the community. Biocentrists affirm our fellowship with other living creatures and hold that we are all equal members in the whole community of life on Earth.

III. CONTEMPORARY ECOLOGY, BIOLOGY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

In recent years important changes have been taking place in ecology. Formerly, ecologists took the balance of nature “as a paradigmatic statement,” but now ecologists increasingly acknowledge that there is “flux,” “chaos,” and “disharmony” in nature. Where once it was thought that nature, if left alone, would tend toward equilibrium, now ecologists admit that disturbance and disequilibrium are natural states.

In addressing these important changes J. Baird Callicott asks “What implications for environmental ethics have these deconstructive developments in contemporary ecology?” He answers that it “depends on which environmental ethic you have in mind. . . . The Judeo-Christian stewardship environmental ethic would seem to be little affected. . . . And the biocentric environmental ethic of Paul W. Taylor (1986), which was never very well informed by ecology, would also seem to be little affected.”

Callicott gives the impression that Taylor is naïve concerning ecology, but a closer look at Taylor’s book reveals that he wasn’t naïve; rather, he was alert to the troubles associated with basing an environmental ethic on the notion of a “balance of nature.” Taylor says that “One point of philosophical importance in this way of looking at ecosystems and their biota is that what has been called ‘the balance of nature’ can no longer be assumed as a kind of basic norm built

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into the order of the natural world."30 Taylor seems to be on the pulse of contemporary ecology in his suspicions concerning “the balance of nature,” while Callicott doesn’t address reservations about the balance of nature until ten years after Taylor.31 Even though Callicott faults Taylor for not “being informed about ecology,” in hindsight it appears that Taylor’s leeriness toward “the balance of nature” was much to the point.

Callicott claims that as an ecocentrist, the environmental ethic he defends is (unlike Taylor’s) the most informed by ecology, and consequently his theory is most vulnerable to recent changes in ecology.32 Callicott’s environmental ethic importantly differs from biocentrism in that Callicott’s holistic environmental ethic accords moral standing to holistic entities such as species, ecosystems, and biotic communities (which is what is meant by the term ecocentrism). Since the ontology of these holistic entities is increasingly questionable in the light of contemporary ecology, a holistic ethic that presupposes their existence and persistence is vulnerable to changes in ecology.33 And an environmental ethic that accords moral standing only to individual entities is not vulnerable to these changes. For Franciscan biocentrism, the new ecology simply reminds us (as does the book of Job) that there is an unpredictable quality in nature that limits what we can confidently know regarding the processes of nature. It does not undermine the existence of the individuals to which biocentrism ascribes inherent worth.

Callicott is correct that Taylor’s theory is not based on assumptions within ecology. However, Taylor’s reason is that he is skeptical of the extravagances in using ecology to support environmentalism and instead bases his theory on the science of evolutionary biology, a feature that neither Callicott nor any of Taylor’s other commentators point out. For example, Taylor’s position that humans are not superior to nonhuman creatures and that evolution does not culminate in humanity are points about evolution that evolutionists such as Stephen Jay Gould feel they need to repeatedly make to overcome the attempts of those who try to use evolution to support human hubris.34

Second, Taylor’s biocentric outlook on nature likewise relies upon biological evolution as providing the scientific evidence that all life has a common origin. Third, Taylor’s belief (c) of the biocentric outlook in which he asserts

that all organisms are teleological centers of life in the sense that each is a unique individual pursuing its own good may seem like a quaint Aristotelian notion that is out of place in contemporary science,\textsuperscript{35} but a closer look at contemporary philosophy of biology tells us otherwise. Teleology may have been banished from physics but it is still alive in biology. “During the past decade biologists have become increasingly teleological in the terminology used to describe the activities of living organism.”\textsuperscript{36}

Lastly, Taylor’s biocentric individualism is consistent with the classical Darwinian view of natural selection in which natural selection selects for individuals not groups. As philosopher of biology Elliott Sober puts it, “. . . Darwinism is a profoundly individualistic doctrine. Darwinism rejects the idea that species, communities, and ecosystems have adaptations that exist for their own benefit. These high-level entities are not conceptualized as goal-directed systems; what properties of organization they possess are viewed as artifacts of processes operating at lower levels of organization.”\textsuperscript{37}

In discussing natural selection, we must address the question of “What exactly is it that is selected? What is it that wins or loses in the struggle for survival and reproduction? In an argument that is much appreciated by today’s biologists, Darwin argued that it must be the individual organism. It cannot be the group—be this population or species or whatever—to which the organism belongs.”\textsuperscript{38} Although Michael Ruse is in agreement with Darwin that the unit of selection is the individual organism, Sober describes how biological theorists disagree on what counts as the unit of selection. In philosophy of biology it is called the units of selection problem. “The choices are not limited to the group versus the organism; they need to include the gene as well.”\textsuperscript{39} Sober and David Sloan Wilson have coauthored a work in which they argue that it is mistaken to assume that there is only one kind of selection, whether organismic, group, or genetic; they develop a pluralist account of selection, one in which the unit of selection is sometimes recognized as the individual organism, sometimes the group, and sometimes the gene. My sense is that we should consider the units of selection problem when thinking about the holism/individualism issue in environmental ethics.

In Mark Sagoff’s widely anthologized article where he describes the tension between a holistic and an individualist ethic, Sagoff includes a quote from Tom Regan. Regan asks, “Were we to show proper respect for the rights of individuals who make up the biotic community would not the *community* be preserved?” Sagoff replies, “I believe this is an empirical question, the answer to which is ‘no.’ The environmentalist is concerned about preserving evolutionary processes; whether these processes, e.g., natural selection, have deep enough respect for the rights of individuals to be preserved on those grounds, is a question that might best be left to be addressed by an evolutionary biologist.”

In answer to Sagoff’s question, there are biological grounds for thinking that natural selection does favor individuals, as I have shown above. It is the classical Darwinian view of selection.

Nevertheless, Callicott does give important reasons why a holistic ethic is defensible and desirable. He claims that our most pressing environmental concerns are the biodiversity crisis and the eradication of ecosystems, and so an environmental ethic that does not embrace holistic entities lacks practical interest. The reason why the land ethic is so popular among professional conservationists, he says, is that conservationists are not concerned with individuals.

This claim may be true, but does it necessitate our introducing holistic entities into our ontology? If we consider that upheavals in the traditional ecological paradigm affect the status of holistic entities partly because they are abstract entities that have a natural home in a certain ecological theory, then maybe we should be more cautious about according abstract holistic entities an ontological and moral standing. When the theory changes, the abstract entity that the theory countenances must change. With biocentric individualism, however, we preserve the “simple directness” that we find in Francis, which is captured in his *Canticle of the Creatures*. Just as Taylor’s environmental ethic was not, as even Callicott points out, firmly wedded to ecology, in the same manner a Franciscan environmental ethic need not be firmly wedded to ecology, ecocentrism, or ecoholism.

If an individualistic environmental ethic can accommodate environmental concern for the biodiversity crisis and eradication of ecosystems (as Regan suggests) while at the same time retain its individualism and remain unaffected
by upheavals in ecology then such an environmental ethic will be in a better position than an ecocentric environmental ethic. A challenge to biocentric individualism then is whether it can reasonably address wide-scale environmental problems.45

A different challenge can be raised against Francis’s environmental ethic. The new ecology calls into question Francis’s belief about the community of creation. Francis had envisioned a harmonious community of creation, while the new ecology tells us that nature is in disharmony and communities are accidental collections or patches. We can answer this challenge if we interpret the core of his environmental ethic as biocentric individualism. In doing so we can safely leave the assumption about a stable and harmonious community behind.

Also, belief (b) of the biocentric outlook on nature, the one in which all individuals in nature are regarded as interdependent, may seem to conflict with contemporary ecology. Some early twentieth-century ecologists and late twentieth-century environmentalists asserted that everything in nature is interdependent with everything else. Contemporary ecologists, however, have pointed out that such a conception is exaggerated. Biocentrists, however, need not espouse such an extravagant claim. Depending on how one interprets the interdependence claim, to assume that because each individual is interdependent that the whole of nature must be thoroughly interdependent comes close to committing the fallacy of composition. We can regard interdependence as a salient feature of each and every living creature without exaggerating the overall interdependence of nature as a whole. We could see interdependence in a rather pluralistic way such that each individual living thing is interdependent with other living things, but not every living thing is interdependent with every other living thing. For many followers of Franciscan metaphysics, everything is relational; all that exists, they say, exists within relationships. But again we need not fallaciously infer from that claim that Franciscans thereby assert that everything is related to everything else.

Given Francis’ interactions with and respect for individual creatures it is most natural to interpret his ethic as individualist. When we think of Francis’
way of addressing creatures as “brother,” “sister,” etc., we can interpret that as “a way of showing in a poetic and emotional way Francis’ affection for and affinity with creatures.” 46 This way of thinking about creatures “serve[s] to link humankind with creatures in a positive emotional manner, aiding people to identify with them and feel their kinship with them.” 47 Holists such as Callicott are asking humankind to identify with and feel kinship for abstract wholes. Critics of Callicott’s ecocentric environmental ethic point out that such a feat is not realistic for human agents, for genuine moral sentiments do not apply to inanimate objects. 48 Even though Francis himself also addressed the sun, moon, wind, and fire—inanimate objects toward which he felt affection—these nonliving entities are not abstract entities, they can sensibly be regarded as individuals that are valued for their instrumental value.

IV. CHRISTIANITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

In the previous section, I mentioned that Callicott believes that a biocentric and a Judeo-Christian environmental ethic seem little affected by recent changes in the ecological paradigm. Those comments come from someone who maintains neither a biocentric nor a Judeo-Christian environmental ethic. Yet Callicott, though not a defender of a Judeo-Christian environmental ethic, nonetheless acknowledges “that the Judeo-Christian stewardship environmental ethic is especially elegant and powerful.” 49 With this statement one may at first think that Callicott is offering a different view from that of Lynn White, Jr., the historian normally regarded as someone who blames environmental problems on Christianity. Yet, White acknowledges that a Christianity with a Franciscan orientation has the makings of an effective and viable environmental ethic.

White explains that our ecological crisis is partly to blame for our attitude toward the natural environment and how we conceive our relationship to the natural environment. He traces these attitudes to the Middle Ages. White claims that ideas such as (i) the human dominance of nature, (ii) the notion that each item of creation has the purpose of serving human needs, and (iii) the idea that humans are not on a par with nature but rather transcend it, all derive from western Christianity. The medieval mind had taken seriously the Biblical injunction to rule the wild animals, to subdue the earth, to have dominion, and to occupy a privileged position on the Earth at the top of a moral hierarchy.

White’s article provoked much controversy and criticism. One important

46 Sorrell, St. Francis of Assisi and Nature, p. 128.
47 Ibid.
criticism of White’s analysis is that he hadn’t gone far back enough, that ancient Greek and Roman thought also shared the anthropocentric view which asserts that in the created world, only human beings have moral standing. We need only think of Plato and his metaphysical dualism, and Aristotle and his hierarchical view in which all creatures have as their purpose to serve human needs and then we can see that these conceptions were agreeable to the Christianity of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. It may be true that an anthropocentric environmental ethic may be to blame for much environmental degradation and it may also be the case that traditional Christianity encouraged people in their anthropocentrism. But having made his case about Christianity’s role in encouraging anthropocentrism, White then claims that we shouldn’t reject Christianity.

According to White, “Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.” Yet St. Francis takes an alternative Christian view that recognizes the intrinsic worth of each creature. Thus, White proposes Saint Francis as the “patron saint for ecologists.” He thinks Christianity can be modified, that there are resources in its tradition to help it overcome its unhelpful and potentially destructive attitudes and conceptions. He proposes Francis as an alternative to mainstream western Christianity because Francis “tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures.”

However, G. K. Chesterton points out that Francis was not bringing something new to Christianity but was helping to develop and bring out what was already latently present in Christianity. Chesterton sees both Francis and St. Thomas Aquinas simply as reaffirming the Incarnation, by bringing God back to Earth. As evidence that underscores Chesterton’s point that Francis was not creating a biocentric form of Christianity entirely anew, we can look to the fact that Francis was often paraphrasing Scriptures. In fact, the subject matter of The Canticle bears a firm relationship to the subject matter in Genesis I. Scholars also point to Psalm 8 with its repeated line, “O Lord, our Lord, your greatness is seen in all the world!” and Psalm 148, “Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, shining stars. Praise him, highest heavens, and the waters above the sky. . . . Praise him, hills and mountains, fruit trees and forests; all animals, tame and wild, reptiles and birds” as probable sources that Francis (perhaps unconsciously) used. But the most direct and obvious predecessor of Francis’ Canticle comes from The Book of Daniel. The parallels between

51 Ibid., p. 52.
53 Hansen, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 41.
Frances' *Canticle* and Daniel's "The Song of the Three Young Men," are unmistakable. In the song three young men sing praises to God for all that exists in creation. This kind of evidence bears out Chesterton's point that rather than Francis inventing something anew, he is developing, condensing, crystallizing and emphasizing certain elements of the Christian tradition that made their way to Francis via the old and new testaments of the Bible.

Not only did Francis reflect on the Christian tradition and then advocate for respecting all creation, but he sought to develop an ethic, an attempt to carry out his vision in a way of life. Francis tried to harmonize his ideas and his practices. Taylor, the theoretical biocentrist, also spends a lot of time working out the practical implications of his environmental ethic. As Francis' ethic was challenging to himself and his followers, not only in how it encourages us to change our thinking but in how to put these principles into action, so also is Taylor's biocentrism a challenge to our thinking and our acting.

Taylor takes the biocentric vision, situates it within a theory of ethics, and supports its assumptions with rigorous argument. He also develops practical principles for rationally managing the dilemmas that arise. He is not dogmatic, he is clear that not all dilemmas can be satisfactorily ironed out but this is not a mark against his theory of environmental ethics because no theory of ethics should expect precision. "There will always be some cases of conflict in which the right thing to do is undecidable."56 As Aristotle said, "we should not seek the same degree of exactness in all sorts of arguments alike."57 In other words, we should not ask for more precision that the subject matter allows.

In the third part of Taylor's theory of environmental ethics, the system of rules and standards, he introduces an element he calls "the ethical ideal"58 that we should appeal to when a moral conflict cannot be satisfactorily resolved and when we become discouraged that our ethics can really be put into practice. Ideals are important because they help us uphold our vision and to keep the end in view. But as Taylor says, "Great efforts will be needed to emancipate ourselves from this established way of looking at nonhuman animals and plants," and "...we must not confuse the difficulty of a task with its impracticability."59 In his discussion of the ethical ideal, Taylor refers to some people who have made the moral shift from anthropocentricity to biocentricity; these individuals are ideal moral characters who stand as exemplars for us when we become discouraged about our abilities to act consistently with our principles.60 I suggest that Francis was one of these individuals to whom Taylor is referring. Unlike Taylor, Francis was not a scholar, but he was a man with a vision.

Taylor’s theory of environmental ethics, though not a contemporary articu-
lation of the Franciscan world view in the strict sense, nevertheless develops key aspects of Francis’ environmental ethic. Taylor’s work is done in the true Franciscan spirit because he not only shares the biocentric vision (the biocentric outlook on nature and respect for nature), but he attempts to enact this world view by establishing principles that guide our actions toward the environment and by seeking ways to implement these principles (the system of rules and standards).

The facts that Taylor was a scholar and Francis was not and that Taylor bases his biocentrism in science and rationalist ethics while Francis bases his in religion and scripture speak to the cross-sectional appeal of biocentrism. A practical unity can cut across a theoretically and scientifically motivated environmental ethic (Taylor’s) and a scripturally and religiously motivated environmental ethic (St. Francis’). This cross-sectional potential of biocentrism across biological science, religion, Christianity, and rationalist ethics is an important strength. Taken with its compatibility with the classical Darwinian view of selection, its cautiousness concerning holistic entities, and its imperiousness to the proposition that nature is in flux, biocentrism adds up to an impressive option in environmental ethics. Although the flux, imbalance, and impermanency of nature do indeed escalate the difficulties for an environmental ethic that countenances the elusive, vague, and hard-to-define ecological holistic entities such as ecosystems and species, an environmental ethic that limits itself to the worth of each living thing occupies a much different position in the current state of affairs.

Since the extensive literature on space exploration includes virtually nothing on the environmental ethics associated with it, this collection represents a scholarly landmark. Hargrove is to be commended for launching into this new area of ethical inquiry, just as he did in founding the journal, Environmental Ethics.

—KRISTIN SHRADER-FRECHETTE

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