From Biocentric Individualism to Biocentric Pluralism

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Drawing on and inspired by Paul Taylor’s *Respect for Nature*, I develop a view which I call “biocentric pluralism,” which, I claim, avoids the major criticisms that have been directed at Taylor’s account. In addition, I show that biocentric pluralism has certain advantages over biocentric utilitarianism (VanDeVeer) and concentric circle theories (Wenz and Callicott).

INTRODUCTION

In a prophetic review of Paul Taylor’s *Respect for Nature* written in 1987, Brian Norton wrote that the book “by virtue of its clarity and comprehensiveness will provide a standard against which future theories of environmental value will be judged.”¹ In the ensuing years and even before with the publication of an earlier article, Taylor’s work has come almost to define the perspective of biocentric individualism.² I even owe my own current interest in environmental ethics to the persuasiveness of Taylor’s arguments. Of course, Taylor’s theory has had its critics as well as its supporters. Among other things, his theory has been criticized for being too individualistic, for being too demanding, for having principles that are inconsistent with the theory, and for failing to deal with our relationship with domesticated animals.³ In this paper, I propose to draw upon Taylor’s work, but also to go beyond it in an attempt to meet the criticisms that have been directed at his work.

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² This is the perspective that all individual living beings have intrinsic moral worth and that species and ecosystems count morally only as collections of individuals. Paul Taylor’s earlier article is “The Ethics of Respect for Nature,” *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981): 197–218. This article has been widely anthologized, appearing in many moral problems anthologies and in virtually every environmental ethics anthology.

BIOCENTRIC INDIVIDUALISM OR BIOCENTRIC PLURALISM

According to Taylor, all individual living beings as well as species populations can be benefited or harmed and have a good of their own, and, hence, qualify as moral subjects.\(^4\) Taylor, however, denies that species themselves are moral subjects with a good of their own, because he regards species as a class name, and classes, he contends, have no good of their own.\(^5\) Nevertheless, pace Taylor, species are unlike abstract classes in that they evolve, split, bud off new species, become endangered, go extinct, and have interests distinct from the interests of their members.\(^6\) For example, a particular species of deer but not individual members of that species can have an interest in being preyed upon. Hence, species can be benefited and harmed and have a good of their own, and so qualify on Taylor’s view as moral subjects. In addition, on Taylor’s view, ecosystems qualify as moral subjects since they can be benefited and harmed and have a good of their own, having features and interests not shared by their components.\(^7\) Following Lawrence Johnson, we can go on to characterize moral subjects as living systems in a persistent state of low entropy sustained by metabolic processes for accumulating energy whose organic unity and self-identity is maintained in equilibrium by homeostatic feedback processes.\(^8\) Modifying Taylor’s theory in this way so that it recognizes that species and ecosystems are moral subjects with goods of their own helps to deflect the criticism that his theory is too individualistic.\(^9\) We can further signal this change in Taylor’s theory by renaming it “biocentric pluralism.”

According to Taylor, however, showing that entities have goods of their own does not establish that we ought to respect them.\(^10\) To establish this respect, Taylor claims that it is necessary to establish the following four theses: (1) that humans are members of the Earth’s community of life, (2) that all living things are related to one another in an order of interdependence, (3) that each
organism is a teleological center of life, and (4) that the assertion of human superiority is groundless.\(^{11}\) Taylor spends most of his time arguing for the fourth thesis, since the other three theses are difficult to reject.\(^{12}\) To establish (4), Taylor argues that we have no non-question-begging grounds for regarding the members of any living species as superior to the members of any other. He allows that the members of species differ in a myriad of ways, but argues that these differences do not provide grounds for thinking that the members of any one species are superior to the members of any other. In particular, Taylor denies that the differences between species provide grounds for thinking that humans are superior to the members of other species. Taylor recognizes that humans have distinctive traits which the members of other species lack, such as rationality and moral agency. He just points out that the members of nonhuman species also have distinctive traits that humans lack, such as the homing ability of pigeons, the speed of the cheetah, and the ruminative ability of sheep and cattle.

For Taylor, there is no point in claiming that the distinctive traits that humans have are more valuable than the distinctive traits that members of other species possess because there is no non-question-begging standpoint from which to justify that claim. From a human standpoint, rationality and moral agency are more valuable than any of the distinctive traits found in nonhuman species, since, as humans, we would not be better off if we were to trade in those traits for the distinctive traits found in nonhuman species. Yet, the same holds true of nonhuman species. Pigeons, cheetahs, sheep, and cattle would not be better off if they were to trade in their distinctive traits for the distinctive traits of other species.

Of course, the members of some species might be better off if they could retain the distinctive traits of their species while acquiring one or another of the distinctive traits possessed by some other species. For example, we humans might be better off if we could retain our distinctive traits while acquiring the ruminative ability of sheep and cattle.\(^{13}\) But many of the distinctive traits of species cannot be even imaginatively added to the members of other species without substantially altering the original species. For example, in order for the cheetah to acquire the distinctive traits possessed by humans, presumably it would have to be so transformed that its paws became something like hands to accommodate its humanlike mental capabilities, thereby losing its distinctive

\(^{11}\) Ibid., pp. 99–168.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., pp. 129–56.
\(^{13}\) Assuming God exists, humans might also be better off if they could retain their distinctive traits while acquiring one or another of God’s qualities, but consideration of this possibility and other related possibilities would take us too far afield. Nonhumans might also be better off if they could retain their distinctive traits and acquire one or another of the distinctive traits possessed by the members of other nonhuman species.
speed, and ceasing to be a cheetah. As a result, possessing distinctively human traits would not be good for the cheetah. With the possible exception of our nearest evolutionary relatives, the same holds true for the members of other species: they would not be better off having distinctively human traits. Only in fairy tales and in the fantasy world of Disney can the members of nonhuman species enjoy a full array of distinctively human traits. Because there appear to be no non-question-begging perspective from which to judge that distinctively human traits are more valuable than the distinctive traits possessed by other species, the assertion of human superiority is groundless.

According to Taylor, given the groundlessness of the assertion of human superiority and the support that can be given for the first three theses of the biocentric outlook, the claim to human superiority must be rejected by any rational and informed person. He further argues that the rejection of this claim to human superiority, and more generally, of the claim that any species is inherently superior to any other, entails its positive counterpart: the principle of species impartiality.

Nevertheless, it is possible to recast Taylor’s argument here so that it rests more directly on normative premises. Consider the following formulation:

1. We should not aggress against any living being unless there are either self-evident or non-question-begging reasons for doing so. (It would be difficult to reject this principle given the various analogous principles we accept, such as the principle of formal equality: equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally.)
2. To treat humans as superior overall to other living beings is to aggress against them by sacrificing their basic needs to meet the nonbasic needs of humans (definition).
3. Therefore, we should not treat humans as superior overall to other living beings unless we have either self-evident or non-question-begging reasons for doing so (from 1 and 2).
4. We do not have either self-evident or non-question-begging reasons for treating humans as superior overall to other living beings. (That we do not have any non-question-begging reasons for doing so, I take to be obvious.)
5. Therefore, we should not treat humans as superior overall to other living beings (from 3 and 4).
6. Not to treat humans as superior overall to other living beings is to treat them as equal overall to other living beings (definition).
7. Therefore, we should treat humans as equal overall to other living beings (from 5 and 6).

Notice also that, on Taylor’s account, even when the members of a particular species would be better off having some additional trait, it would not follow that they thereby have greater intrinsic moral worth.


Ibid., pp. 154–68.

This formulation also extends the argument to all living beings, including species and ecosystems.
The advantage of this formulation of the argument for biocentric pluralism is that it makes clear what the normative premises are on which the argument rests (namely, 1 and 4). In Taylor’s formulation, one is never quite sure how the argument proceeds. Taylor is so concerned to establish that he is not making any illicit move from is to ought or from facts to values that he never clearly indicates what the complete set of oughts or values is from which his principle of species impartiality is to be derived. Biocentric pluralism remedies this defect in Taylor’s account.

PRIORITY PRINCIPLES FOR BIOCENTRIC PLURALISM

In order to make clear what the practical implications of his theory are, Taylor sets out a number of priority principles. As it turns out, these principles need to be modified and defended in order to establish what the practical implications of biocentric pluralism are. Taylor’s first priority principle is the following:

A Principle of Self-Defense: Actions are permissible that are absolutely required for maintaining the very existence of moral agents and enabling them to exercise the capacity for moral agency.

The content of this principle, however, is better understood, I think, if it is split into two principles. The first is:

A Principle of Human Defense: Actions that defend oneself and other human beings against harmful aggression are permissible even when they necessitate killing or harming individual animals or plants or even destroying whole species or ecosystems.

This principle allows us to defend ourselves and other human beings from harmful aggression (1) against our persons and the persons of other human beings that we are committed to or happen to care about and (2) against our justifiably held property and the justifiably held property of other human beings that we are committed to or happen to care about. It is analogous to the principle of self-defense that applies in human ethics, and permits actions in

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19 Ibid., chap. 6.
20 Ibid., pp. 264–69.
21 For the purposes of this paper, I follow the convention of excluding humans from the denotation of “animals.”
22 For an account of what constitutes justifiably held property within human ethics, see James P. Sterba, How to Make People Just (Totowa: Roman and Littlefield, 1988).
23 By human ethics, I simply mean those forms of ethics that assume without argument that only human beings count morally.
defense of oneself or other human beings against harmful human aggression.\textsuperscript{24} In the case of human aggression, however, it is sometimes possible to effectively defend oneself and other human beings by first suffering the aggression and then securing adequate compensation later. Because in cases of nonhuman aggression such compensation is unlikely to be available, more harmful preventive actions, such as killing a rabid dog or swatting a mosquito, are justified. There are simply more ways effectively to stop aggressive humans than there are to stop aggressive nonhumans.\textsuperscript{25}

The other principle that we need to replace Taylor’s principle is:

A Principle of Human Preservation: Actions that are necessary for meeting one’s basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings are permissible even when they require aggressing against the basic needs of individual animals and plants or even of whole species or ecosystems.\textsuperscript{26}

Needs, in general, if not satisfied, lead to lacks or deficiencies with respect to various standards. The basic needs of humans, if not satisfied, lead to lacks or deficiencies with respect to a standard of a decent life. The basic needs of animals and plants, if not satisfied, lead to lacks or deficiencies with respect to a standard of a healthy life. The basic needs of species and ecosystems, if not satisfied, lead to lacks or deficiencies with respect to a standard of a healthy living system. The means necessary for meeting the basic needs of humans can vary widely from society to society. By contrast, the means necessary for meeting the basic needs of particular species of animals and plants tend to be invariant.\textsuperscript{27}

In human ethics, there is no principle that is analogous to this principle of human preservation. There is a principle of self-preservation in human ethics that permits actions that are necessary for meeting one’s own basic needs or the

\textsuperscript{24} Of course, one might contend that no principle of human defense is applied in human ethics because either “nonviolent pacifism” or “nonlethal pacifism” is the most morally defensible view. However, I have argued elsewhere that this is not the case, and that still other forms of pacifism more compatible with just war theory are also more morally defensible than either of these forms of pacifism. See “Reconciling Pacifists and Just War Theorists,” \textit{Social Theory and Practice} 22 (1992): 21–38.

\textsuperscript{25} Notice too that the principle of human defense permits defending oneself and other human beings against the harmful aggression of individual animals and plants or whole species or ecosystems, even when this only serves the nonbasic needs of humans.

\textsuperscript{26} The principle of human preservation also imposes a limit on when we can defend nonhuman living beings from human aggression.

\textsuperscript{27} For further discussion of basic needs, see Sterba, \textit{How to Make People Just}, p. 45. Obviously, for any viable account of basic needs, some needs can be clearly classified as basic, others clearly classified as nonbasic and still others will be more or less difficult to classify. Yet the fact that not every need can be clearly classified as either basic or nonbasic should not immobilize us from acting with respect to clear cases.
basic needs of other people, even if this requires *failing to meet* (through an act of omission) the basic needs of still other people. For example, we can use our resources to feed ourselves and our family, even if this necessitates failing to meet the basic needs of people in Third World countries. However, in general, we don’t have a principle that allows us to *aggress against* (through an act of commission) the basic needs of some people in order to meet our own basic needs or the basic needs of other people to whom we are committed or happen to care about. Actually, the closest we come to permitting aggression against the basic needs of other people in order to meet our own basic needs or the basic needs of people to whom we are committed or happen to care about is our acceptance of the outcome of life and death struggles in lifeboat cases, where no one has an antecedent right to the available resources. For example, if you had to fight off others in order to secure the last place in a lifeboat for yourself or for a member of your family, we might say that it was morally permissible for you to aggress against the basic needs of those whom you fought to meet your own basic needs or the basic needs of the member of your family.28

Nevertheless, our survival requires a principle of preservation that permits aggression against the basic needs of at least some other living things whenever it is necessary to meet our own basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings. Here there are two possibilities. The first is a principle of preservation that allows us to aggress against the basic needs of both humans and nonhumans whenever it serves our own basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings. The second is the principle, given above, that allows us to aggress against the basic needs of only nonhumans whenever it serves our own basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings. Because the first principle does not express any general preference for the members of the human species, it permits even cannibalism provided that it serves to meet our own basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings. In contrast, the second principle does express a degree of preference for the members of the human species in cases in which their basic needs are at stake. Happily, this degree of preference for our own species is still compatible with the equality of all living beings because favoring the members of one’s own species to this extent is characteristic of the members of all species with which we interact and is thereby legitimated. The reason it is legitimated is that we are required to sacrifice the basic needs of members of the human species only if the members of other species are making similar sacrifices for the sake of members of the human species.29 In addition,  

28 It is important to recognize here that we also have a strong obligation to prevent lifeboat cases from arising in the first place.  
29 Notice that this is not an argument that since the members of other species aren’t sacrificing for us, we don’t have to sacrifice for them, but rather an argument that since the members of other species are not sacrificing for us, we don’t have to sacrifice our *basic needs* for them. An analogous principle holds in human ethics with regard to when humans should be willing to sacrifice their basic needs for other humans. Now it may be objected that the members of most
if we were to prefer consistently the basic needs of the members of other species whenever those needs conflicted with our own (or even if we do so half the time), given the characteristic behavior of the members of other species, we would soon be facing extinction (and fortunately, we have no reason to think that we are morally required to bring about our own extinction). For these reasons, the degree of preference for our own species found in the above principle of human preservation is justified. Accordingly, the principle of human defense and the principle of human preservation, with their accompanying justification, make clear what is, at best, implicit in Taylor’s principle of defense.

Taylor’s next two principles are:

A Principle of Proportionality: Actions that pursue nonbasic human interests are prohibited when they aggress against the basic interests of (wild) animals and plants and are incompatible with the attitude of respect for nature.

A Principle of Minimal Harm: Actions that pursue certain nonbasic human interests are permissible even when they aggress against the basic interests of (wild) animals and plants provided that they are compatible with the attitude of respect for nature and provided that no alternative way of pursuing those nonbasic human interests would involve fewer wrongs.

A great deal of criticism has been directed against Taylor’s principle of minimal harm and I have put it and his principle of proportionality together in this discussion to bring out what is objectionable about them. What is so difficult to comprehend with regard to these principles is how some ways of aggressing against the basic needs of (wild) animals and plants are incompatible with the attitude of respect for nature, whereas other ways of aggressing against the basic needs of (wild) animals and plants are compatible with the attitude of respect for nature. It is for this reason that Taylor’s theory has been criticized for having priority principles that are inconsistent with the theory.

As examples of actions that are prohibited by the principle of proportionality, Taylor cites the slaughtering of elephants for the ivory, from which items can be carved for the tourist trade, and all hunting and fishing that is done as

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other species are incapable of making this kind of sacrifice. This is true for most species, but irrelevant here because to ask this much altruism from humans just requires comparable altruism from the members of other species benefiting humans. Actually, this degree of altruism toward humans may be found in some species of domestic animals, e.g., dogs and horses.  

30 It should also be pointed out that the principle of human preservation does not support an unlimited right of procreation. In fact, the theory of justice presupposed here gives priority to the basic needs of existing beings over the basic needs of future possible beings, and this should effectively limit (human) procreation.

an enjoyable pastime. As examples of actions that are permitted by the principle of minimal harm, he cites building a library where natural habitat must be destroyed and constructing an airport, railroad, harbor, or highway involving the serious disturbance of a natural ecosystem. Given these examples, it would be preferable to consider the actions that Taylor regards as permitted by the principle of proportionality as serving basic rather than nonbasic human needs, or at least as justified when they do serve basic human needs. If we do so, we can replace these two principles with just one. It is:

A Principle of Disproportionality: Actions that meet nonbasic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of individual animals and plants, or of whole species or ecosystems.

This principle is strictly analogous to a principle in human ethics that prohibits meeting some people’s nonbasic or luxury needs when it conflicts with satisfying the basic needs of other people.

Without a doubt, the adoption of such a principle with respect to nonhuman nature significantly changes the way we live our lives. Such a principle is required, however, if there is to be any substance to the claim that all living beings are equal. We can no more consistently claim that all humans are equal and yet aggress against the basic needs of some humans whenever doing so serves our own nonbasic or luxury needs than we can consistently claim that all humans are equal and yet aggress against the basic needs of some humans whenever doing so serves our own nonbasic or luxury needs. Consequently, if the equality of all living beings is to mean anything, it must be the case that the basic needs of nonhumans are protected against aggressive actions that only serve to meet the nonbasic needs of humans as is required by the principle of disproportionality. Furthermore, substituting the principle of disproportionality here for Taylor’s two principles enables us to successfully

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32 Ibid., p. 274.
33 Ibid., p. 276.
34 It is important to recognize that relying on an account of basic needs here does not presuppose any essentialist theory of human nature. See Sterba, How to Make People Just, p. 45.
35 This principle is clearly acceptable to welfare liberals and socialists, and it can even be shown to be acceptable to libertarians by an argument I have developed at length elsewhere. See Sterba, How to Make People Just. See also the special issue of the Journal of Social Philosophy 22, no. 3 (1991) devoted to my book, which includes my “Nine Commentators: A Brief Response.”
36 Of course, libertarians have claimed that we can recognize that people have equal basic rights while failing to meet, but not sacrificing, the basic needs of other human beings. However, I have argued at length that this claim is mistaken. See the references in the previous note.
37 It should be pointed out that although the principle of disproportionality prohibits aggressing against the basic needs of individual animals or plants, or of whole species or ecosystems, the principle of human defense permits defending oneself and other human beings against the
avoid the criticism that the requirements of Taylor’s priority principles are inconsistent with his theory.\textsuperscript{38}

Taylor has two other priority principles. They are:

A Principle of Distributive Justice: Requires that when the interests of the parties are all basic ones and there exists a natural source of good that can be used for the benefit of any of the parties, each party must be allotted an equal share.

A Principle of Restitutive Justice: Requires that whenever the principle of minimal wrong has been followed or the principle of distributive justice has been imperfectly followed, some form of reparation or compensation is called for if our actions are to be fully consistent with the attitude of respect for nature.

Unfortunately, Taylor’s principle of distributive justice by requiring equal shares is far too demanding as a principle of human ethics let alone as a principle of interspecies ethics. When basic needs are at stake the principle of human defense and the principle of human preservation impose more reasonable requirements. Accordingly, we should simply discard Taylor’s principle of distributive justice, and so avoid the charge of being too demanding.

In addition, given the changes in the other principles, biocentric pluralism requires a different principle of restitution. It is:

A Principle of Restitution: Requires appropriate reparation or compensation whenever the other principles have been violated.

Obviously, this principle, like Taylor’s principle of restitutive justice, is somewhat vague, but for people who are willing to abide by the other three priority principles, it should be possible to remedy that vagueness in practice.

At this point, it might be objected that my reformulation of Taylor’s theory has not taken sufficiently into account the conflict between holists and individualists. According to holists, the good of a species or the good of an

\textsuperscript{38} It might be objected here that this argument is speciest in that it permits humans to aggress against nonhuman nature whenever it is necessary for meeting our own basic needs or the basic needs of humans we happen to care about. But this objection surely loses some of its force once it is recognized that it is also permissible for us to aggress against the nonbasic needs of humans whenever it is necessary for meeting our own basic needs or the basic needs of humans we happen to care about.
ecosystem or the good of the whole biotic community can trump the good of individual living beings.\textsuperscript{39} According to individualists, the good of each individual living thing must be respected.\textsuperscript{40}

One might think that holists would require that we abandon the principle of human preservation as I have formulated it. Yet, assuming that people’s basic needs are at stake, how could it be morally objectionable for them to try to meet those needs, even if doing so were to harm other species, whole ecosystems, or even, to some degree, the whole biotic community?\textsuperscript{41} Of course, we can ask people in such conflict cases not to meet their basic needs in order to prevent harm to other species, ecosystems, or the whole biotic community. However, if people’s basic needs are at stake, we cannot reasonably demand that they make such a sacrifice. We could demand, of course, that people do all that they reasonably can to keep such conflicts from arising in the first place, for, just as in human ethics, many severe conflicts of interest can be avoided simply by doing what is morally required early on.\textsuperscript{42} Nevertheless, when people’s basic needs are at stake, the individualist perspective seems incontrovertible. We cannot reasonably require people to be saints. Such a requirement is too demanding, and I have formulated biocentric pluralism so as to avoid the charge of being too demanding.

At the same time, when people’s basic needs are not at stake, we are justified in acting on holistic grounds to prevent serious harm to a species, an ecosystem, or the whole biotic community. Obviously, it is difficult to know when our interventions will have this effect, but when we can be reasonably sure that they will, such interventions (e.g., culling elk herds in wolf-free ranges or preserving the habitat of endangered species) are morally permissible, and maybe even morally required.\textsuperscript{43} In this way, it is possible to agree with individualists when the basic needs of human beings are at stake, and to agree with holists when they are not.

Although this combination of individualism and holism appears to conflict with the equality of all living beings by imposing greater sacrifices on the members of nonhuman species than it does on the members of the human species, appearances are deceiving. Even though the proposed resolution only justifies imposing holism when people’s basic needs are not at stake, it does not

\textsuperscript{39} Aldo Leopold’s view is usually interpreted as holistic in this sense. Leopold wrote: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” Aldo Leopold, \textit{A Sand County Almanac} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 240.

\textsuperscript{40} Taylor has always been considered a defender of the individualist view.

\textsuperscript{41} I am assuming that in these cases of conflict the good of \textit{other} human beings is not at issue. Otherwise, as we have already noted, other considerations apply.

\textsuperscript{42} For example, it is now quite clear that our war with Iraq could have been avoided if early on we had refused to support the military buildup of Saddam Hassein.

\textsuperscript{43} Where it most likely would be morally required is where our negligent actions have caused the environmental problem in the first place.
justify imposing individualism at all. Rather it simply permits individualism when people’s basic needs are at stake. Of course, we could impose holism under all conditions, but doing so would, in effect, involve going to war against people who are simply striving to meet their own basic needs in the only way they can, as permitted by the principle of human preservation. As a result, intervention in such cases is not justified.

Nevertheless, this combination of individualism and holism may leave animal liberationists wondering about the further implications of this resolution for the treatment of animals, particularly domesticated animals, and this issue is particularly relevant given that Taylor’s theory has been criticized for failing to deal with our relationship to domesticated animals.

Obviously, a good deal of work has already been done on this topic. Initially, philosophers thought that humanism could be extended to include animal liberation and eventually environmental concern. Then Callicott argued that animal liberation and environmental concern were as opposed to each other as they were to humanism. Callicott called the resulting conflict “a triangular affair.” Agreeing with Callicott, Mark Sagoff contended that any attempt to link together animal liberation and environmental concern would lead to “a bad marriage and a quick divorce.” Yet, more recently, such philosophers as Mary Ann Warren have tended to play down the opposition between animal liberation and environmental concern, and even Callicott now thinks he can bring the two back together again. There are good reasons for thinking that such a reconciliation is possible.

First, it would be good for the environment if people generally, especially people in the First World, adopted a more vegetarian diet of the sort that animal liberationists are recommending, since a good portion of livestock production today consumes grains that could be more effectively used for direct human consumption. For example, 90 percent of the protein, 99 percent of the carbohydrate, and 100 percent of the fiber value of grain is wasted by cycling it through livestock, and currently 64 percent of the U.S. grain crop is fed to livestock. Thus, by adopting a more vegetarian diet, people generally, and especially people in the First World, could significantly reduce the amount of farmland that has to be keep in production to feed the human population. This change, in turn, could have beneficial effects on the whole biotic community by eliminating the amount of soil erosion and environmental pollutants that are

48 Realities for the 90’s (Santa Cruz, 1991), p. 4.
a result of the raising of livestock. For example, it has been estimated that 85 percent of U.S. topsoil lost from cropland, pasture, range land, and forest land is directly associated with raising livestock.\footnote{Ibid., p. 5.}

But even though a more vegetarian diet seems in order, it is not clear that the interests of farm animals would be well served if all of us became complete vegetarians. Although Sagoff assumes that in a completely vegetarian human world people would continue to feed farm animals as before,\footnote{Sagoff, “Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics,” pp. 301–05.} it is not clear that we would have any obligation to do so. Moreover, in a completely vegetarian human world, we would probably need about half of the grain we now feed livestock to meet people’s nutritional needs, particularly in Second and Third World countries. As a result, there simply would not be enough grain to go around. In addition, there would be the need to conserve cropland for future generations. Thus, in a completely vegetarian human world, it seems likely that the population of farm animals would be decimated, relegating to zoos many of the farm animals that remain. On this account, it would seem to be more in the interest of farm animals generally that they be maintained under healthy conditions, and then killed relatively painlessly and eaten, rather than that they not be maintained at all.\footnote{I think there is an analogous story to tell here about “domesticated” plants.} If this line of reasoning is correct, a completely vegetarian human world will not serve the interest of farm animals.\footnote{Of course, if we permitted farmland and grazing land to return to its natural state, certain wild animals will surely benefit as a result, but why should we be required to favor the interests of these wild animals over the interests of farm animals, especially when favoring the latter serves our own interests as well? For further discussion, see Bart Gruzalski, “The Case against Raising and Killing Animals for Food,” in H. Miller and W. Williams, eds., Ethics and Animals (Clifton: Humana Press, 1983), pp. 251–63.}

Nor, it seems, is it in the interest of wild species who no longer have their natural predators not to be hunted by humans. Of course, where possible, it may be preferable to reintroduce natural predators. However, such introductions may not always be possible because of the proximity of farm animals and human populations. Yet, if action is not taken to control the populations of wild species, disaster could result for the species and their environments. For example, deer, rabbits, squirrels, quails, and ducks reproduce rapidly, and in the absence of predators can quickly exceed the carrying capacity of their environments.\footnote{G. Tyler Miller Jr., Living in the Environment, 6th ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1990), p. 337.} For this reason, it is in the interest of certain wild species and their environments that humans intervene periodically to maintain a balance. Of course, there will be many natural environments where it is in the interest of the environment and the wild animals that inhabit it to be simply left alone. But here too animal liberation and environmental concerns are not necessarily
in conflict. For these reasons, animal liberationists have little reason to object to the proposed combination of individualism and holism within biocentric pluralism.

It might be objected that for all that has been said so far, my defense of biocentric pluralism still faces an unresolvable dilemma. Either biocentric pluralism holds to its claim that all species are equal or it compromises that claim. If it holds to the claim that all species are equal, it imposes an unreasonable sacrifice on humans. If it compromises that claim to avoid imposing an unreasonable sacrifice on humans, it is committed to an indefensible anthropocentrism. Either way, it can be argued, biocentric pluralism should be rejected. Actually, to the contrary, I think that it is possible to grasp both horns of this dilemma, but in this paper I have only been concerned to grasp the first.54

My argument has been that to grasp the first horn of the dilemma, we need to understand the equality of species by analogy with the equality of humans. We need to see that just as we claim that humans are equal but treat them differently, so too can we claim that all species are equal but treat them differently. In human ethics, there are various interpretations given to human equality that allow for different treatment of humans. In ethical egoism, even though everyone is equally at liberty to pursue his or her own interests, this right allows us always to prefer ourselves to others, who are understood to be like opponents in a competitive game. In libertarianism, everyone has an equal right to liberty; nevertheless, while this right imposes some limits on the pursuit of self-interest, it seemingly allows us to refrain from helping others in severe need. In welfare liberalism, everyone has an equal right to welfare and opportunity, but this right need not commit us to providing everyone with exactly the same resources. In socialism, everyone has an equal right to self-development, and although this right may commit us to providing everyone with the same resources, it still sanctions a bit of self-preference. Just as there are these various ways to interpret human equality that still allow us to treat humans differently, there are various ways that we can interpret species equality that allow us to treat species differently.

Although those who would object to biocentric pluralism appear to be interpreting species equality in a very strong sense, analogous to the interpretation of equality found in socialism, the kind of species equality that I have defended is more akin to the equality found in welfare liberalism or in libertarianism than it is to the equality found in socialism. In brief, this form of equality requires that we not aggress against the basic needs of the members of other species for the sake of the nonbasic needs of the members of our own

54 For an argument for rejecting the second horn of this dilemma, see my paper “Reconciling Anthropocentric and Nonanthropocentric Environmental Ethics” Environmental Values, forthcoming.
species (the principle of disproportionality), but it permits us to aggress against the basic needs of the members of other species for the sake of the basic needs of the members of our own species (the principle of human preservation), and also permits us to defend the basic and even the nonbasic needs of the members of our own species against harmful aggression by members of other species (the principle of human defense). In this way, I have argued that we can accept the claim of species equality without imposing an unreasonable sacrifice on the members of our own species, and thereby grasp the first horn of the dilemma raised against biocentric pluralism.

RIVAL THEORIES

Biocentric pluralism, as I have formulated it, has certain advantages over rival theories. It has advantages over theories that claim to be able to compare the intrinsic value of various individuals, species, or ecosystems and determine what would produce the most intrinsic value (or goodness) overall.\textsuperscript{55} Such theories are obviously forms of utilitarianism in which what is to be maximized is intrinsic value or goodness. Unfortunately, such theories inherit the same problems that anthropocentric or less biocentric utilitarian theories have. For example, when I justifiably defend myself against aggression, I don’t have to show, nor need it be the case, that my action maximizes good consequences overall. In fact, I may even know that my defense does not maximize good consequences overall, as would be the case if I had to kill five attackers to save myself from an unjust assault against my life. Accordingly, the same should hold true when I defend myself against a rabid dog or a pack of rabid dogs. I don’t have to justify these actions; nor need they be justified, on grounds of maximizing intrinsic value overall.

Another problem with biocentric utilitarianism is that there doesn’t appear to be any non-question-begging standpoint from which to specify a universal conception of intrinsic value or goodness. What is good is what is good from various standpoints—good from different human standpoints, good from different nonhuman standpoints. Although what is good from these standpoints overlaps in certain respects, creating certain common goods, they do not overlap in all respects. We are aware of such difficulties trying to come up with a conception of what is good for humans. The task of coming up with a conception of what is good for all living things seems even more daunting. Fortunately, biocentric pluralism does not require that we be able to do so. To meet the basic requirements of morality, all we need to know, according to biocentric pluralism, is what counts as legitimate defense (given by the

\textsuperscript{55}For example, see Donald VanDeVeer “Interspecific Justice,” \textit{Inquiry} 22 (1979): 55–70, and his more biocentric view, “Designing a Biodiverse Planet,” presented at the Central Division American Philosophical Association Meeting in 1993.
principle of human defense), what counts as legitimate preservation (given by the principle of human preservation), and what counts as illegitimate sacrifices imposed on others (given by the principle of disproportionality).

Biocentric pluralism also has other advantages over various forms of concentric circle theories that have been proposed. The general idea of concentric circle theories is that closeness is related positively to the number and strength of obligations one has. This type of theory does make some sense if we focus on our positive obligations—the obligations that we have to do good things for others. Certainly, in human ethics, the number and strength of our positive obligations does seem to be a function of the closeness to the person involved. Thus, we have more and stronger positive obligations to family members and friends than we have to the members of our local communities, and more and stronger positive obligations to the members of our society than to the members of other societies. It also seems that we would have few positive obligations to nonhumans except with respect to members of domesticated species or when the principle of restitution comes into the picture. Accordingly, each of us can at least roughly represent his or her positive obligations to other living beings by a system of concentric circles with oneself at the center.

Unfortunately, nothing similar is the case with respect to our negative obligations—the obligations that we have not to interfere with or aggress against other living beings. For example, our obligation not to cause unnecessary suffering applies to all living beings capable of suffering irrespective of their closeness to us. Our negative obligations even constrain what positive obligations we can acquire. For example, I cannot acquire a positive obligation to provide for some nonbasic or luxury need of my child if doing so requires aggressing against the basic needs of other living beings. Moreover, as is clear from the four priority principles of biocentric pluralism, the nature of our negative obligations to nonhuman living beings virtually determines all our obligations to them except with regard to members of domesticated species and where the principle of restitution applies. For these reasons, biocentric pluralism is more successful than concentric circle theories in capturing our ethical obligations to other living beings.

As we have seen, biocentric pluralism has been formulated so as to meet the major criticisms that have been directed at Taylor’s theory. By allowing species and ecosystems to count as moral subjects and by indicating how holistic obligations can arise in accordance with the theory, biocentric pluralism avoids the criticism of being too individualistic. By imposing reasonable limits on the sacrifices that can be demanded from humans for the good of other

livings beings, biocentric pluralism avoids the criticism of being too demanding. By substituting the principle of disproportionality for Taylor’s problematic principles of proportionality and minimal harm, biocentric pluralism avoids the criticism of having principles that are inconsistent with the theory. By working out practical implications for domesticated animals, biocentric pluralism avoids the criticism of failing to deal with our relationship to these animals. Beyond meeting these major criticisms directed at Taylor’s theory, I have also shown that biocentric pluralism has certain advantages over biocentric utilitarianism and concentric circle theories. Hopefully, the theory will also fare as well when faced with future tests to its theoretical or practical adequacy.