In Defense of Biocentrism

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Gene Spitler has raised certain objections to my views on the biocentric outlook: (1) that a factual error is involved in the assertion that organisms pursue their own good, (2) that there is an inconsistency in the biocentric outlook, (3) that it is impossible for anyone to adopt that outlook, and (4) that the outlook entails unacceptable moral judgments, for example, that killing insects and wildflowers is as morally reprehensible as killing humans. I reply to each of these points, showing that the biocentric outlook on nature is not only a possible, but also a reasonable world view.

In his paper “Justifying a Respect for Nature” Gene Spitler has presented some well-considered criticisms of my article “The Ethics of Respect for Nature.” I wish to reply to his main points and in so doing show how the biocentric outlook on nature, which underlies and supports the moral attitude of respect for wild living things, can be accepted as not only a possible, but also a reasonable world view.

(1) The first point I wish to consider is the idea, central to the biocentric outlook, that each animal and plant in the natural world pursues its own good in its own way and therefore is similar, in that respect, to a human. Spitler raises the objection that some animals and plants do not act primarily to preserve their own good, but rather to contribute to the good of the species by devoting most of their energy to reproduction. Such organisms do not have a strong tendency to defend themselves and do not live a long life. Many cases of this are found in nature. Humans, on the other hand, possess the capacity (according to the ethics of respect for nature) to have equal concern for the well-being of other creatures. So here we have to doubt the alleged similarity between humans and nonhumans as both being entities that pursue their own good in their own way.

In response to this objection it should first be noted that the concept of an organism pursuing its own good does not entail any particular conception of what that good is. Even ants and bees, which devote their lives to the preservation of their social communities, must be able to survive as individuals in order


to carry out their particular roles in those communities. Furthermore, they can perform their function well only when they have developed certain capacities and can exercise them in a favorable environment. A diseased or injured bee is not a good instrument for maintaining the hive’s existence in a healthy state. The fact that some animals and plants do not use much energy to defend their individual lives is not an indication that they do not have a good of their own which they are pursuing in their own way. It merely means that their particular good consists in their functioning well in the social whole, contributing their part to the good of the community. This is the way they realize their own biological potentialities at their highest level.

With regard to humans, the fact that we pursue our own good in our own way does not imply a form of egoism. Our own good is a matter of the fulfillment of our self-chosen value system (which we might call “pursuing the kind of life we judge to be most worth living”), and that value system can well include such other-regarding relations as love and friendship. In addition to pursuing our own good in this sense, we are also moral beings, capable of acting on principle. Here, of course, we differ from animals and plants. The relevant point, however, is that humans and nonhumans share a fundamental characteristic. We each have a good of our own, and each of us, human and nonhuman alike, can be helped or hindered in the realization of that good. This characteristic has great ethical significance because it makes it possible for us to take another living thing’s standpoint and judge how well or poorly it is being treated by moral agents. If we are biologically enlightened about what another’s good consists in, we can then act in ways that either help or hinder it in the pursuit of its good.

(2) Spitler suggests that the biocentric outlook may contain an inconsistency. On the one hand, that outlook includes the ecological principle that the Earth’s biosphere is one total system of interdependent parts, the good of each part being dependent on the integrity of the whole. On the other hand, it is a significant truth from the biocentric perspective that humans have no privileged place in this whole ecological scheme of things. Homo sapiens could become an extinct species without any serious detrimental effect on the good of other species. The problem here is that the good of wild animals and plants is being held to be realizable independently of humans realizing their good, and this appears to be inconsistent with the interdependence of all forms of life on our planet.

I think that everyone familiar with the basic ideas of ecology would believe that, as a general aspect of the Earth’s biosphere, the principle of interdependence holds true. However, I agree with Spitler’s contention that this principle does not mean that every single ecosystem is essential to the healthy functioning of the whole. Certainly it does not mean that the life of each organism is needed for the integrity of the whole. Yet, if each wild animal or plant is to achieve its good in its own way, it must fit into the ecosystem of which it is
a part. It must maintain certain relations with other organisms and with its physical environment. The same holds true of individual humans as biological entities. Unless we maintain sound ecological relations with other forms of life and with our physical environment, we cannot survive. And without our survival as animals we will be unable to exist as moral, aesthetic, intellectual, political, and religious beings. But the general principle of ecological interdependence does not mean that the whole system will collapse if any particular ecosystem, or even an entire species, is destroyed. The biocentric outlook should not be understood in this way, and I think Spitler is right in claiming that I overstated the interdependency idea. When correctly understood, ecological interdependence is a condition that obtains for human existence just as it does for nonhuman existence. It is the reality and universality of this condition throughout the whole realm of life on Earth, uniting humans and nonhumans in a single system of relationships, that constitutes a basic component of the biocentric outlook.

(3) Spitler questions whether it is really possible for humans to place themselves wholly outside an anthropocentric viewpoint and adopt a biocentric one. He argues that we are restricted to our own human interpretations of nature and can consider our treatment of the natural world only within the framework of human desires and needs. “At best,” he says (p. 256), “we can only come up with our human interpretation of a biocentric view, which inevitably will be constructed to meet some needs or desires of our own.” Toward the end of his paper he puts the point this way: “I question whether we are even capable of viewing life from any perspective other than a human one” (p. 260).

One thing that might be meant by these remarks is that any way of viewing the world is anthropocentric because it is humans who are viewing the world that way. If this is what Spitler means, then of course what he says is true. In fact, it is a logical truth,3 for whenever we speak of “a way of viewing the world” we implicitly assume that it is humans who are viewing the world that way. All beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, and values which humans adopt are, in this sense, anthropocentric, since they are the beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, and values of human beings.

But what is the significance of this logical point? It is important that we do not draw unwarranted conclusions from it. In particular, someone might think that because the biocentric outlook is an outlook accepted by humans it is somehow not genuinely biocentric but rather anthropocentric. Perhaps this is the way Spitler is considering the matter. Such an inference, however, cannot be validly drawn. It rests on a failure to keep in mind certain relevant distinctions.

I think there is a tendency here to confuse three things: (a) the content of the biocentric outlook, (b) the practical significance of adopting that outlook

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3 I owe this point to comments made by J. Baird Callicott as a referee for Environmental Ethics.
as our own way of looking at the natural world, and (c) the psychological explanation of why anyone would accept it with the given content and act accordingly (by taking the attitude of respect for nature and following the ethical system which embodies or expresses that attitude). Although the psychological explanation (c) must refer only to human needs and desires, since it is human beliefs, dispositions, and actions which are being explained, this does not entail that it is impossible for humans to accept an outlook on nature having a genuinely biocentric content (a) or to make the moral commitment (b) to abide by certain rules and standards out of respect for wild living things when they are viewed in the light of that outlook. To accept the outlook is to understand the place of humans in the domain of life on Earth as one of fundamental equality with other members of the animal kingdom, an equality that extends to all forms of life in our planet’s natural ecosystems. The moral commitment which is associated with that outlook is a disposition to ascribe to wild animals and plants the same inherent worth which we attribute to our fellow humans, and so regard them as deserving of equal consideration with ourselves. It is true that the belief system (a) which makes up the content of the biocentric outlook is a set of human beliefs. But what the beliefs are about (what is being asserted in them; their propositional meaning) is not a set of facts concerning human life alone, nor does adopting the outlook in practical life necessarily further human interests. We must realize that accepting the beliefs is accepting a human “interpretation” of the realm of life and nature on Earth, but the truth of the “interpretation” and the justifiability of adopting it in practice are not a matter of furthering human ends or values.

I pointed out in the original article that, as far as all assertions of empirical fact are concerned, the beliefs that make up the content of the biocentric outlook are scientifically established. It is important to my argument that any scientifically enlightened person would find the biocentric outlook acceptable, at least with regard to its empirical content, but there is nothing here that should lead us to think that those factual matters are concerned with what humans believe, with how they interpret the realm of nonhuman life, or with what they value in nature. The empirical truth of the beliefs is scientifically confirmable and the factual evidence confirming them need not refer to human concepts or interests.

What about element (b), the practical import of accepting the biocentric outlook? Are we here inescapably committed to an anthropocentric viewpoint? We are not. An anthropocentric viewpoint gives either exclusive or primary consideration to human interests above the good of other species. Now just as it is possible for human beings to be genuinely impartial between themselves and other humans, giving equal consideration to each person’s good, so it is possible for humans to be impartial between themselves and other forms of life, giving equal consideration to the good of a being regardless of its species membership. It is quite true that such impartiality is itself a human stance, or
more accurately, a moral stance that only humans are capable of, but the moral commitment involved requires humans to treat other creatures in such a way that there is no bias in favor of humans just because they are human.

The practical significance of accepting the biocentric outlook is that one comes to view wild animals and plants as having the same inherent worth as humans and therefore as being the appropriate objects of the moral attitude of respect. A rational human being will then take that attitude because it is seen to be the only justified or suitable one to take toward such creatures. The attitude is a uniquely human attitude in the sense that only humans are capable of having it, but it is not an anthropocentric attitude. On the contrary, it precludes the taking of any attitude in which the good of humans, just because it is human good, counts for more than the good of other creatures.

Now if we were to try to explain how it is possible for humans to accept the biocentric outlook and to take the attitude of respect for nature, our explanation would have to bring in psychological factors concerning human needs and desires. Doing such things is a way of satisfying certain needs and desires, and of course these are needs and desires of humans. This, however, is true of any human beliefs and attitudes. Consider belief in a transcendent God and the attitude of worship. The belief is about a nonhuman or superhuman Being, and the attitude is justified (to those who accept such a belief) as the only appropriate one to take toward such a Being. Neither the belief nor the attitude is human-centered. Nevertheless, if we were to try to explain (account for) the fact that humans have such a belief and take such an attitude, we would have to appeal to human needs and desires. This in no way transforms the religious belief or the attitude that goes along with it into an anthropocentric viewpoint. So it is with accepting the biocentric outlook and taking the attitude of respect that goes along with it.

(4) A final criticism made by Spitler is that, if we were to accept the biocentric outlook and accordingly hold to the view that animals and plants are equal in inherent worth to humans, the act of killing a human would be considered “... no more morally reprehensible than swatting a fly or stepping on a wildflower” (p. 260), a view which he finds “totally unacceptable.” This objection is perhaps the biggest obstacle on the part of many ethically sensitive people to accepting an egalitarian type of biocentrism. Yet, it can be answered quite simply. Almost all moral philosophers consider the wrongness of killing a human to be an other-things-being-equal wrongness. There are justified exceptions to the rule against killing, so that it is not always a wrong action all-things-considered. For example, killing another in self-defense, when nothing short of that kind of action will protect one’s own life or the lives of one’s family, is usually admitted as a case of a legitimate exception to the no-killing rule. Now if someone kills another in self-defense there is no implication that the aggressor has less inherent worth than the defender. True, the aggressor may morally be a worse person (that is, have less moral merit), but even this
is not necessary. He or she could be insane and so morally innocent. To take another example, if two persons are in a situation of conflict regarding their rights, it might be necessary to infringe (justifiably) upon one person’s rights to prevent the (unjustified) violation of others’ rights. An instance of this would be the curtailing of an individual’s free speech in order to avoid a riot. But this certainly does not entail an inequality of worth between the persons involved in the conflict. As persons they have the same inherent worth, though circumstances necessitate the infringement of the rights of one of them. Equality of inherent worth, in other words, does not mean that it is always wrong, all-things-considered, to kill, harm, or otherwise act contrary to the good of any being having such worth.

It can be said, however, that any such act is wrong insofar as it has this “wrong-making” property, namely, that it is the killing, harming, or doing what is detrimental to another’s good. As far as our duty goes, we must refrain from every such action unless there is an adequate moral reason to perform it. This is another way of saying that the action is wrong, other-things-being-equal.

These considerations hold for the human treatment of wild animals and plants. If we accept the biocentric outlook and regard such creatures as possessing inherent worth, it will indeed always be wrong, other-things-being-equal, to kill or harm any of them. It will be as much a wrong as killing or harming a human. But this in no way entails that humans must never kill or harm a wild animal or plant, must never swat a fly or step on a wildflower. What it does entail is that humans must not do such a thing without an adequate moral reason that outweighs the wrongness of the act. Exactly the same holds for killing or harming a human.

What justifies an act of killing an animal or plant may be a reason of quite a different kind from that which would justify the taking of a human life. This gives rise to the further problem of how conflicts between humans and wildlife can fairly be resolved. (I am at present working on a solution to this problem that is consistent with both respect for nature and respect for persons. I hope to have the results published eventually.) The principle of species impartiality no more precludes a fair resolution of conflicts between species than the principle of impartiality in human ethics precludes a fair resolution of conflicts among persons.

The killing of a wildflower, then, when taken in and of itself, is just as much a wrong, other-things-being-equal, as the killing of a human. Is it as serious a wrong? This depends on the circumstances. In some situations it is a greater wrong to kill a wildflower than it is, in another situation, to kill a human. Thus, it may be more reprehensible for someone to trample on a rare and endangered wildflower for no good reason (say, just because the person dislikes the owner of the property) than it is for one person to kill another in self-defense. As acts of killing, both are equally wrong. But as an act of wantonly destroying a wild
living thing, the first is more reprehensible than the second when understood as an act of self-defense.

One last note. It does not follow from an egalitarian type of biocentrism that humans have a duty to sacrifice themselves to other forms of life. The ethics of respect for nature does not dictate that we are to further the good of wild creatures at whatever cost to ourselves. It demands only that we give the same moral consideration to their good as we do to the good of humans. In cases of conflict between them and ourselves a fair resolution might require that some human conveniences, comforts, and other minor values be given up in order to preserve or protect something of great importance to their well-being. This is an issue of “interspecific justice” that needs detailed investigation, but which cannot adequately be carried out here. Respect for nature does impose upon us one supreme obligation: that we not approach the problem of resolving conflicts between ourselves and other species with an initial bias in our own favor. The impartiality demanded of us is no different from the impartiality we must exercise when we are trying to decide what is the fair thing to do when our personal interests are in conflict with those of our fellow humans.

Thus, what appears at first to be a shocking idea is not necessarily unacceptable to reflective persons who can free themselves from the anthropocentrism we were all brought up with. This anthropocentrism, in my view, is a cultural bias that prevents many people from taking biocentric egalitarianism seriously. But I hope I have indicated by the foregoing remarks that accepting a genuinely biocentric outlook on nature is a real possibility for humans, and that it is not an unreasonable outlook to adopt as a basis for environmental ethics.