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Value, Metaphysics, and Anthropocentrism

BRUCE MORITO

*Department of Philosophy
University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1, Canada*

ABSTRACT: The lack of metaphysical grounding of environmental values, and impatience towards the enterprise of seeking such grounding, result in a superficial and wrongheaded view of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is best understood as a limiting condition, a point from which we can begin to reformulate an understanding of ourselves, our values, and our relation to the environment. It is not principally a starting point for the existence of values, as is assumed under traditional theories of anthropocentrism.

To demonstrate and elaborate on this position, the paper focuses on environmental values and how we traditionally assume them to be formed and legitimated. A critique of the analyses of two prominent figures in the field of environmental ethics, Bryan Norton and Eugene Hargrove, serves as the backdrop against which an alternative view is formed. This alternative is metaphysically grounded in an ecologically informed analysis of valuational activity. Against the tradition, the argument establishes two main points: 1) that attempts to ground environmental values on human preferences, agreements, traditions, or culturally driven commitments are liable to legitimate contrary values; and 2) that an ecologically driven analysis of values shows that valuations of the environment are not fundamentally conferred onto it by human beings.

Positively, the paper attempts to show that our inclusion as members of the ecological community makes our valuational activity an integral and transformational element within more comprehensive ecological processes. As such, our moral commitment to the environment must be radically reshaped in order adequately to incorporate this renewed understanding.

KEYWORDS: Ecology, legitimation, moral failure, preference, preservation, triangular value relation, value conferring

Environmentalism and its professional counterpart, environmental ethics, have come under some forceful criticism. Characterising the environmental movement as a community of reactionaries who share a common set of ill formulated and sentiment-based intuitions, for which they collectively set out to generate ad hoc defences, is not uncommon. Not only do those with vested interests in

exploiting the environment make such accusations, but academics, such as Daniel Holbrook,¹ are joining the attack. Holbrook, for example, has argued that, 'environmentalists evaluate the adequacy of philosophical theories by reference to the support given to the ends of environmentalism'.

The professional programme in environmental ethics, as represented in the journal *Environmental Ethics*, does not escape targeting, either. Holbrook cites Bryan Norton's well-received paper,² in which the decrying of toxic waste storage practices or the condemning of the wanton extermination of species is said to establish a person as an environmentalist. Norton takes what he considers to be a commonly condemned set of behaviours, and attempts to build a supporting set of principles around these condemnations. At the heart of these condemnations are 'considered preferences', which, while distinguished from merely 'felt preferences', are nevertheless determined relative to social opinion. Theory is an ad hoc addendum to opinion, designed to support pre-established proscriptive preferences. The movement's members are, Holbrook claims, 'more confident of the particulars than they are of a theory'.³

Norton's prescription for theory formulation also describes the approach one might find at gatherings of professional environmentalists. The prevalent attitude at such gatherings is that we should cease philosophical musings and get on with the business of protecting the environment.⁴

Underlying my concern for this lack of theoretical rigour is the danger that such ad hoc approaches to theoretical critique presents. As will be explained, failure to recognise the need for theoretical rigour can lead to a serious misunderstanding of moral responsibility. Central to this misunderstanding are the assumptions we make about environmental values and about the relation between the valuer, valued, and value (what I will call a 'triangular relation'). Assigned environmental values – those assigned by the environmentally sensitive – are, by virtue of this misunderstanding, distorted and misleading. As a result, actions based on these values can be destructive and self-defeating to environmentalism.⁵

The misunderstanding of the triangular relation is driven by a tendency to minimise and marginalise metaphysics as an ultimate legitimising ground. A metaphysical analysis of the triangular relation will be used, then, to show how the predominant approach in environmental ethics is misled. The approach of Bryan Norton, whose basic sensibilities are taken up and given further grounding by Eugene Hargrove,⁶ will serve as representative of the movement away from metaphysics. These authors hold central positions in the field of environmental ethics and have wielded considerable influence over its development. Their arguments are, therefore, especially important representations of predominant environmentalist strategies. If my previous observation is correct, their arguments also reflect predominant attitudes in professional environmentalist circles. My later focus on Hargrove is, therefore, not directed at a solely philosophi-

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cal audience. Since I propose to accept anthropocentrism as a starting point for environmentalism, and both Hargrove and Norton are principal proponents of this view, a critique of their views serves to initiate the critique of anthropocentric assumptions about the triangular relation.

I.

Hargrove shares Norton's attitude toward the grounding of environmental values. Rather than basing environmentalism on a strictly scientific or moral account, he says 'I am trying to develop an account that straightforwardly parallels our treatment of art objects.'⁷ Why?

The point of these arguments [his ontological argument] is not to provide a definitive proof of positive aesthetics and the existence of natural beauty but rather to show that these positions can be defended on very traditional grounds against the claims of philosophers such as Passmore who maintain that there is no basis from the standpoint of Western traditions for asserting that nature is beautiful.⁸

The point of theorising, for Hargrove, is not to refute contrary theories; it is to establish defensible environmental value ascriptions that align well with established views. This move marginalises whatever demand for metaphysical considerations that might arise. Moreover, it permits a rejection of the need for metaphysics.⁹

For Hargrove, an objective ground for protecting the environment can be established on a quite ordinary and accessible cultural/social basis. Following Hargrove for a while, we can see how this grounding strategy might work. Since we recognise beauty as a cultural value, and cultural values are not entirely subjective – they depend on the evolution of a culture – they can serve as an objective foundation for the values of individuals. These values are not 'subjective' in the sense that they are determined willy-nilly. To call them as much would be to misrepresent their substantive character.¹⁰ An obligation to respect and protect natural beauty can, therefore, be grounded in Western cultural tradition, which is in turn given its substance by evolutionary history.

It is not important to provide further detail of the argument for present purposes. Clearly, similar strategies could be employed to ground economic reasons for protecting the environment. Until the arrival of the Green Revolution, we had learned the value of rotating crops, using manure for fertiliser, and generally appreciating the limits of the land's carrying and productive capacities. Protection values associated with farming could be said to have evolved with farming traditions. These values could be said to be objective in the sense that they are not assigned arbitrarily, but are assigned in accordance with an evolved farming tradition.

It may seem, as a result, that to engage in metaphysics when grounding protection values is not even desirable, because all of the grounding needed already exists in our culture's tradition. At any rate, metaphysical arguments would probably serve only to confuse.¹¹ An intuition-based aesthetic or common sense economic calculation is, in contrast, clear, because it is so deeply ingrained in our psyches.

Even more seems to recommend a rejection of metaphysics. The general critique of metaphysics by philosophers such as Wittgenstein, the existentialists, and logical positivists, who were quite prepared to give over the job of legitimising to science, would seem to suggest that the path to metaphysical grounding has simply become a dead end. Metaphysics is predominantly characterised as the project to demonstrate the existence of an unshakable foundation; a project which few today would deem possible. Since seeking ultimate grounding for environmental protection appears futile, we think honestly when we begin with our intuitions and build an ad hoc theoretically convincing defence for them. The best our intellects have to offer are coherent theories that accord with basic intuitions and traditions.

Judging metaphysics in this way, however, exacts too great a price. Without a respect for the process of asking ultimate grounding questions about our values, and accepting the possibility that our basic intuitions might be wrong, we run the risk of entrenching an intolerance disguised by a facade of intellectual humility. Intellectual humility, when based on the prima facie futility of metaphysics, leads us to conclude that we can only attain a somewhat less than absolute 'objectivity'. But this type of acknowledgement has not proven to yield humility at all. How, might it be asked, is the objectivity of our traditional values recognised? Hargrove's answer, which is not atypical, is as follows: since the appreciation of natural beauty is an implicit part of our tradition and psyche, a process of clarification of this appreciation will be sufficient to evoke preservationist values. A type of 'natural force' theory seems to be at work here. In 'Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value',¹² Hargrove argues that preservationism would likely be accepted as a basis for environmental decision making, if only we could make its beauty-value clear to the decision-maker.

The same is true of those who take an economic point of view toward environmental protectionism.¹³ Once sufficient information about the economic value of protecting the environment can be made clear, we are more likely to adopt environmental values. We see evidence of this strategising as policy makers and legislators place increasing confidence in information dissemination to shape public opinion.

But what then should we think of a person who is not convinced by the clarification process? Failure to appreciate natural beauty would have to be considered a perversion of sorts. Hargrove¹⁴ asserts that those who disagree with or don't understand the tradition as most people do are simply wrong. He argues¹⁵ that tastes, when considered within this cultural tradition, much like the prefer-

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ences of Aristotle's 'good or ideal man', are not arbitrary. The 'good man' serves as an ideal against which we compare our own character and judgments in order to correct ourselves. Hence, the tastes of someone like the 'good man' serve as objective standards against which we compare the rightness and wrongness of our own tastes. Like the Greeks, then, we can come to recognise such authority on natural beauty. Those who do not are wrong. Note that 'objective' is very loosely defined here. It does not mean 'rationally demonstrable.' It seems to have a more general meaning, 'having constraining properties'. These constraining properties are treated as ethically significant grounding properties. 'Objectivity' refers to intrasocial aggregate preferences, which are comparable to preferences in economics. They are preferences that an individual within a society is constrained to recognise.

But, is it clear that those who are not convinced by historical critique are wrong? One might begin by observing that just as much a part of our aesthetic tradition (and all dominant traditions for that matter) is the recognition of the 'beauty' of dominance and the exercise of destructive power. The new forms of 'sport' such as 'monster truck' and 'gladiator' competitions are simply modern manifestations of age-old traditions that have evolutionary histories of millennial proportions. In fact, these and other manifestations of dominance values are growing in popularity, as witnessed by multi-million dollar wrestling and boxing extravaganzas.

These extravaganzas are built on aesthetic values no less than is our respect for natural beauty. If we examine the psychology of those who appreciate these forms of dominance and power, we find it to be nearly identical to that of the psychology of those who value natural beauty. Audiences scorn those who do not appreciate a powerfully built body, built precisely to destroy and domineer. Just as art audiences seem to experience a natural revulsion from ugliness in art, audiences of destructive sport seem to experience a natural revulsion from ugliness in a destroyer. And we know that much of this appreciation of the beautiful destroyer is directed toward those who destroy natural beauty. Paul Bunyan, after all, is a hero figure, who, being perfectly shaped and physically developed, is worshipped for his ability to level forests (the ability to destroy natural areas). Operators of large earth-moving equipment often describe the feeling associated with levelling a grove of trees as an aesthetic experience to be valued in itself quite apart from the financial values associated with it. These sorts of values cannot categorically be ruled non-aesthetic values.

Destruction values are no less subject to evolution and testing throughout history than are protection values. Their forms of appreciation have evolved with the war culture, e.g., spears and swords have been replaced by monster trucks and guns as aesthetic objects, the saw and axe by the chain saw. This evolution has occurred in the same cultural history as has the respect for natural beauty or art objects. For many, clarifying the rightness of these values and traditions may be just as generally convincing as clarifying the rightness of protecting natural

beauty. Certainly, clarification of protection values will not be convincing to those who have a propensity toward destruction values.

So, it would appear that judging those who would fail to hold protection values wrong rests on a dogmatic assertion. Appeal to the 'good man' model might be the basis for establishing an authority, but such an authority is legitimised through dismissing alternative traditions, not through showing that they are wrong.

It is worth examining Hargrove's analysis of how authority is established in order to see where the dogmatic dismissal of alternatives enters. Our reason for valuing the Mona Lisa is an example of how this recognition works.¹⁶ As individuals, we may have respect for art specialists who consider the Mona Lisa to be invaluable. As a culture, we thereby acknowledge the intrinsic value of the painting, even if we have no idea of the criteria by which these specialists judge the painting. We accept their authority, because we believe that they represent our underlying values.

Even if we suppose that all in Western society were prepared to accept the authority of art experts (though obviously this is not the case) what should we say about those of another culture, or even of a counter-culture, who see the painting as ugly?

For those of a different culture, generating respect for authority on our culture's sense of beauty or even our 'good man' may not be possible. To insist on it would be to dismiss the legitimacy of that culture, an act of cultural imperialism. The same can be said of condemning destruction values on aesthetic grounds. Authorities are authorities only within a narrowly defined community.

In the final analysis, environmental values based on cultural or societal traditions are to be supported not by a legitimisation process, but by a ground swell of intolerance. Appeal to authority is, with respect to alternative points of view which may be as coherent as the next, closed to legitimisation. The legitimisation process is insulated against critical inquiry, because it systematically avoids addressing ultimate foundational questions. 'What is a value?' 'Is there any way to determine how a correct value is constituted?' These are metaphysical questions, because they address the essential character of values. Without an openness to such questions, authority is quite compatible with autocracy in intra-cultural contexts, and with imperialism in inter-cultural contexts.

Intellectual humility, when inappropriately formulated, can just as easily engender normative arrogance as it can humility. The intolerance associated with this arrogance is typical of interest groups whose one-sided points of view define those who disagree with their agenda as enemies. As a result, insularity is more likely to result in a self-defeating escalation of deeply entrenched animosities than in sound environmental practice.

Holbrook's analysis of the environmentalist programme could be re-cast. It might now read something like this: an environmental protection programme

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under the direction of culturally and socially determined values, comes laden with non-negotiable assumptions that too readily allow proponents to place confidence in particular authorities rather than in rigorous thought. Consequently, there is nothing finally subjective or wrong with environmental degradation in a dominance oriented society. Hence, the *prima facie* rightness of the particulars masks the danger of the environmental movement becoming self-defeating.

Placing theoretical critique at the forefront of concern, in contrast, engenders an openness to legitimation. To do so does not mean that we resist acting until theoretical adequacy criteria are satisfied; but it does mean that our acting is always subject to re-interpretation and to criticisms of misdirection or short-sightedness. A presumed disjunction between disinterested theoretical rigour and action, prevalent among activists, is hasty and blinding. But, to be disinterested, in this sense, is to be open to the possibility that the ends of environmentalism are ill-conceived.

Undoubtedly, such a conclusion will be perceived as a threat to an environmentalist; and according to Norton's criteria, anyone holding such a view could not be an environmentalist. But obviously, someone could come to accept the same practices as Norton describes as environmental practices after careful theoretical consideration. Furthermore, there is no reason not to employ a principle of erring on the side of caution in setting temporary norms. Environmentalists, then, overreact to the threat that rigorous theoretical critique presents when reacting against theoretical, especially metaphysical, concerns.

Where the grounding of values is at issue, and dogmatic imposition of particular values is rejected, that grounding demands that we get our assumptions about values as right as possible. At some point, getting these assumptions right requires metaphysical analysis, because, at some point, we need to understand the nature of values in the widest possible context. For environmentalism, this is especially true, since it is the movement whose frame of reference is as wide as we can conceive. Unless we properly understand what values are and how they are related to value-bearers, we are bound to err somewhere down the line at normative levels.

Moreover, a movement to address metaphysical issues among environmentalists has already begun. In sections of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Canada, policy writers and planners are beginning to recognise the need for fundamental change in the way we conceive our relationship with the environment. Planners and policy makers are beginning to address the problem of understanding human values in light of what constitutes an ecosystem.¹⁷

Michael Hough,¹⁸ a landscape architect, introduced his plenary talk to a professional audience including engineers, foresters, and biologists with the problem of worldviews. He described an experiment conducted on four professional groups. When asked to draw representations of a waterway, members from each profession saw very different scenes. The engineer saw those features

most relevant to drainage and erosion ‘problems.’ The biologist saw habitats. The landscape architect saw very little of what was actually there, but drew a nice representation of what it could look like after landscaping. A technician saw more of what was empirically obvious representing the area more like a photograph would. Each drew what they were trained to perceive to exist or ought to exist. Each, therefore, imposed a particular ontology onto their perceptive mechanisms, which determined what they counted as existing.

This biased rendering of what exists is not merely a matter of missing other things that exist through oversight. It is a matter of systematically eliminating some features of what actually exists from what can be perceived as existing. It is based on an ontological commitment that determines what counts as an element of reality, which determines what is perceived and how it is valued. I count these cases, then, as evidence for the fact that fundamental metaphysical issues can be addressed by professionals in diverse areas, and as evidence for the need to begin addressing metaphysical questions.

II.

I turn to a discussion of the causal conditions that generate value in order to advance understanding of the triangular relation between valuer, value, and valued. Analysis of evolution and ecology can serve as a starting point.

Evolutionary theory tells us that we are intimately connected to our environment. Our constitution, both as biological and as valuing beings,¹⁹ has largely been determined by this dependency relation. It is important, then, first to understand what assumptions about values can and cannot be supported. For instance, under a Cartesian framework, we have assumed that the human intellectually competent agent’s values are essentially unaffected by natural processes. This assumption can no longer be supported, since evolutionary theory tells us that our valuational activity is as dependent on the evolution of ecosystems as anything else in our natures.²⁰

Norton’s approach also fails adequately to incorporate evolution and ecology into accounts of the triangular relation. In fact, the relation is treated as a valuational afterthought. To explain, Norton distinguishes between strong anthropocentrism (the value of non-human objects is explained entirely by references to satisfactions of felt preference of human individuals) and a weak version (the value of non-human objects is explained by the same reference as in strong anthropocentrism, or, by reference to its bearing upon the ideals which exist as elements in a world view essential to determinations of considered preferences).²¹ The ideals of today’s communities do take ecology into consideration. Norton says that emphasis must be placed ‘on the integrity and health of ongoing ecosystems as holistic entities’.²² Environmental values must, then, be informed by ecosystem analysis.

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Despite this emphasis, it is assumed that human beings individually and collectively confer value onto the environment. The environment acquires value, in other words, as human beings come to take an interest (economic, aesthetic, or otherwise) in it. Human beings are loci of value. This concept, 'locus', is interpreted to mean that value is generated by human activity of some sort. When we ask 'Where do values originate?', he answers 'In the human subject or community'. Hence, the inter-relation between valuer and valued is either ignored or a mere afterthought.

For Hargrove, value conferring activity is somewhat more complex, but not essentially different. As in the case of certain paintings which we deem intrinsically valuable (valuable despite any instrumental value they might have)²³ we assign intrinsic value to the beauty of the environment. The environment also acquires value through the value-conferring activity of some human agent(s) who take(s) an interest in it. Anthropocentrism is assumed to be the source of values.

Now, while I do not deny that we in fact engage in such value conferring activity, it is only part of the story. It is only part of the causal analysis of values. I do not deny that any property or condition we wish to pick out as valuable is anthropocentric, at least in the sense that it is formed by a concept or idea, itself a product of a human subject. Anthropocentrism, then, forms one of the pillars of value theory. But anthropocentrism does not imply that values are human generated.

If anthropocentrism implies only that values as we appreciate them and come to act on them necessarily make reference to human subjects, it is silent on the matter of generation. In fact, evolution suggests quite a different account.

Evolution of the human species is an evolution of human values. The values we hold are partly determined by environmental evolutionary processes in such a way as to make those processes ineluctably tied to the generating of human values. Values do not originate in the human subject, but in the interaction between evolutionary processes and the human organism through history. As human beings evolved, their constitutions changed, which in turn changed the values they held. Our constitutions changed largely as the result of having adapted to new environments, to new foodstuffs, and to new exigencies. They were shaped by geography, climate, the presence of predators etc. They were also shaped by the changing configurations of our physical constitutions, especially our brains. So, at minimum, our values originate quite independently of any preferences we consciously hold, because they are causally dependent on the relation between our particular constitutions and the environment.

Further, the values that our predecessors held determined the adaptive activity in which they engaged. These values then causally contributed to the determination of new environments or modes of behaviour, which in turn causally contributed to the determination of new valued objects. For example, the value of survival must have contributed to the activity that led our ancestors

to find new abodes, which would have offered new food sources and potential for development. By being able to adapt to these new abodes, our ancestors survived, but in doing so, changed some of their valuations. By adapting to environments where plenty of vegetation was available for sustenance, a previously meat-eating community would have changed its orientation and value-determinations regarding the environment. Hence, there can be no starting point for valuations under an evolutionary and ecological scheme, because the triangular relation is a mutually conditioning one.

We are better off in establishing an axiology, then, by abandoning assumptions that an ultimate ground or starting point of values can be found, and focus our legitimation attempts elsewhere. One way to begin getting the attempt right, is to cease treating values as fact-like objects. Typically, we treat values as individual items generated by a society or an individual. They can be accepted, rejected, held, sacrificed, and negotiated. Values are seen as objects or items that stand in relation to human beings as possessed to possessor. Their possessors act as repositories.

Further, human agents are seen not only as repositories but as agents who can freely choose to change particular values. This belief that different values can be possessed by different repositories at different times and in different cultures implies that values have no constitutive connection to their repositories. The connection between value and repository is entirely relative and contingent upon acts of choice. But evolution and ecology tell a different story.

Elsewhere²⁴ I argue for the assumptions I am about to make. My approach here will be argumentative only to the extent needed to make exposition clear. Values are not facts, if by 'fact' we mean the sort of item that can be discovered rather than formulated or mentally constructed. As members of an evolved species, our values have developed coevally with the development of our species. A frog and a cow belong to an evolutionary history that has caused them to take an interest in flies and hay as food sources. We find the former distasteful and the latter an inadequate food source. At a very basic level, that which we pick out as valuable to us is conditioned by our evolutionary history. We cannot simply choose what to value and how to value it, since causal determinants, at the very least, set the range and types of values we can recognise and appreciate.

The power of choice may be strong, but it is not sufficient to enable us to accept or reject basic positive and negative valuations concerning certain substances as food stuffs, as pleasurable items, or as important means of survival. Certain substances are naturally repulsive to us, some naturally unpleasurable, and others toxic. They may not be so to other species (certain bacteria, for example, can consume what is toxic to us). The relationship between valuer, value, and valued is far more tightly knit than the repository theory suggests. At a fundamental level, there can be no ultimate separating of the valuer and value, because the valuer is a product of prior valuational activity both of its predeces-

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sors and of its own developmental history. The repository theory, then, is a misrepresentation of the triangular relation.

How then should the relation be described? When we say that persons 'hold' something to be valuable we assume them to be alive. Cadavers do not hold or have values. To be a value is to be an aspect of a life, a property of a process of living. If life processes ceased altogether, values would cease to exist. The essential characteristics of value, then, must be described in accordance with the properties of life processes.

As such, values are better understood as processes arising in the more comprehensive organism-environment interactive process, not as quasi-facts or objects to be held or not held by the valuer. The locution 'she values...', rather than, 'she has the value ...,' is better for capturing the relation between the valuer and value, since its form indicates that values are fundamentally activities or processes of a living being.

Consider a race. A race is a process which can take place in the world, but has no strict spatial properties as such. It can be characterised as the fluctuating distance between two runners, three runners, or more. It can also be characterised as the relation between the time one runner takes to cross a line and the time another takes. The essential feature of what constitutes a race is process. We can use geometrical indicators (e.g., location in space, spatial relations) to describe and point out aspects of the process, but that which makes it a process is not exclusively its geometrical properties. The distance between one runner and another, for example, does not alone constitute the race. Otherwise, two runners standing motionless at a determinate distance from one another would constitute a race. The beginning of a race is not numerically different from its ending, since it cannot be separated from its ending without destroying the race itself. They must be considered a unit despite how different their geometric descriptions are at its beginning and end.

Values are similar to races in the sense that they cannot be separated from the more complete process of which they form a part. Their existence, as a result, cannot be picked out independently of the process of the agent's life. Values are part of more comprehensive processes we can call 'organism-environment interactions.' Evolution tells us that organisms are themselves part of a more comprehensive set of environmental processes. The constitution of their values is thereby inseparable from these more comprehensive evolutionary and ecological processes. As aspects of an interaction, values are better analysed as manifestations of an organism-environment relation, or manifestations of the nature of that relation. They are not essentially objects to be chosen or rejected.

I submit, then, that the received anthropocentric view on value theory gets the fundamental data about the nature of values and the value-bearer wrong. Human beings do not stand in a one-way relation as separate unique conferrers of value onto nature; neither do they primarily discover the values that have been

conferred onto nature. Where there is value conferring activity, it is derivative of a more fundamental valuational activity. Such activity is not generative but transformative activity. Human beings do not so much possess values as constitute value realising loci.

III.

Turning now to the re-directing of anthropocentrism, we can say that it is one of possibly many evolved types of loci of valuational activity. 'Anthro' marks out a type, while 'centrism' indicates the general characteristic of having a specific frame of reference. Being specific, this frame of reference is not comprehensive. Hence, epistemologically, anthropocentrism is primarily a limiting condition, not an authoritative source of knowledge about ends. Human beings, moral agents, must recognise that limitation in perspective and understanding forms part of the primary data to which their normative behaviour is a response. Limitation also becomes a central axiological condition. We can never be certain that our understanding about what constitutes our values and ends is complete. Neither can we be entirely certain about their conditions of satisfaction.

Limitation has a further impact on the moral decision-action process. Decision involves a determination of a means to fulfil an end. If the selecting of a means fails to accomplish its ends, that failure can constitute a moral failure. Suppose we get the facts about our relation to the environment wrong, such that we ignore critical components of value satisfaction. For instance, foresters have traditionally ignored the ways in which forests have contribute to spiritual, cultural and recreational values. By focusing on satisfying economic values through maximising revenues and using clear-cut logging methods as means for achieving social stability and wellbeing, just the opposite has arisen. Ignoring other value frameworks of logging communities has resulted in social dissatisfaction and insecurity. We now count the failures of past logging practices as moral failures, even if we consider the intent behind the use of clear cuts morally motivated. In effect, foresters have marginalised and treated other values as irrelevant to the end of social well-being, because of limitations in their perspective imposed by their training.

Similarly, ignoring the facts about the triangular relation can just as easily result in failure, since misunderstanding the relation distorts the frame of reference through which we attempt to satisfy our values. The difference between the forester's error and the metaphysical error is that the latter is more profound and subtle. So, knowing that our system of decision making is founded on a fundamentally distorted frame of reference invites deep level failure into our decision making schemes.

A basic fact of anthropocentrism is that it is never free of limitations that give rise to distortions. We can never ensure that our determinations of value

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incorporate an adequate understanding of the triangular relation. All valuations and norms must, therefore, always be treated as underdetermined.

Contrast this conclusion to Norton's confidence. He concludes from his analysis of anthropocentrism that, 'present humans may use up non-renewable resources provided they take steps to provide suitable substitutes', because there is nothing wrong with such exploitation provided future generations are left with a technology which could compensate.²⁵ The phrase 'nothing wrong' suggests that it is entirely justifiable (fully determined) to exploit, simply because no proscriptive principle would be violated by the act.

Citing Norton is primarily in the interest of showing how typical anthropocentric ethical decision-making seeks both closure and full determination. Both are attained by eliminating alternative frames of reference. Although evolution makes our ability to formulate decisions an ecologically well-suited ability, general suitability does not imply that any decision will enjoy complete adequacy. It implies only that the capacity to make decisions is in keeping with environmental processes. In the final analysis, trying to correct for uncertainty in some Cartesian-like effort to arrive at an unassailable position is pointless. Moral life is born in uncertainty of judgment and requires sensitivity to the values of others and to the larger context that supports those values, not certainty (complete justification).

What we take to be our normative enterprises will have to change in order to take account of this analysis of anthropocentrism. The entire programme of attempting to trump one form of justification (right) with another, for example, seems futile as an exercise in environmental ethics, since the dependency relation to the environment places us on a different playing field than those who compete in such arenas as, for example, biomedical or business ethics. Those who would protect the environment are not clearly in competition with those who would not protect it, as is the case in these other arenas. Protecting the environment not only protects fundamental interests of protectionists, it ironically protects those of non-protectionists. An approach different from the justificatory, rights-based approach to environmental ethics is needed.

What now becomes of our sense of moral responsibility? It begins with a search for understanding. The search is not a separate non-moral problem to be treated as a pre-condition of moral deliberation. It is an integral element in moral activity. Nothing short of understanding the full range of conditions that support the valuational activity of all species (since all are interconnected and causally contribute to our valuational activity) can be considered morally satisfactory. Preserving the full range of our freedoms depends on preserving the diversity of environmental factors, both known and unknown, not only because they contribute to the generation of our desire for freedom, but because they are all somehow involved in the satisfaction of the desire for freedom.

Couple this responsibility with the fact that our understanding of the value-satisfying conditions is underdetermined, and preservation of the environment,

as it has evolved, becomes a first-order moral concern. A preservation scheme also squares well with earlier concerns to err on the side of caution.

Preservationism, however, needs to be carefully formulated. Failure to appreciate the nature of anthropocentrism can be just as much a moral failure as ignoring the conditions of value satisfaction. Preserving the conditions necessary for the exercise of our values cannot simply mean that we passively preserve nature (leave nature alone) as it is. Our rationality impels us to plan, to make decisions, and to judge the best course of action overall. To exercise anthropocentric values is to engage nature in value satisfying activity, which is neither entirely passive nor entirely a matter of active imposition.

Awareness of our epistemic limitation and propensity to fail in judgment and understanding should be looked upon as learning or adaptational devices, as they are in educational circles. The environment stands to us as a teacher stands to students. Being a student does not entail passivity, since in order to learn from failure, we must actively engage the talents we possess.

Unlike the passive preservationist programme, leaving nature alone, preservation and epistemic responsibility require active engagement with the environment. Anthropocentrism implies that we preserve a certain type of relation with the environment, not necessarily the environment itself. By virtue of our rational natures, our relation must be active in order to take full account of the conditions that generate value. Sometimes, active engagement may require Baconian vexations of nature, especially where our survival requires such activity. We will want to understand abatement rates and recovery rates of ecosystems. Some testing of the limits of ecosystems, even of the kind of which environmentalists normally disapprove, might be mandatory. This activity cannot be ruled out as always wrong, even though it is never fully justified.

In the active mode, we do not intend to take our epistemic limitation as reason to cease inquiry; it is the very reason to initiate inquiry. However, we do have reason to abandon certain modes of inquiry. As I have tried to emphasise, inquiry must begin by disposing of metaphysical baggage that has distorted our understanding of the human-environment relation. The assumption that natural elements are essentially hostile to value satisfaction (as Hobbes would have us believe) defines the process of inquiry as an instrument directed toward how best to overcome nature. It helps foster the erroneous conception of human beings as lone, atomic individuals, fundamentally disconnected from the environment. It also helps foster the idea that we alone confer value onto an otherwise value-neutral environment, that our rationality marks a distinction of superiority, and that we enjoy a place of privilege within creation.

Environmental ethics should not fundamentally press for a balance of environmental rights. This frame of reference is so intimately tied to traditional ethics which asserted the right to protection against the environment (and one another) that the underlying insularity and antagonism of such values are more

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than likely to be retained. What we need to value is the view that the environment and others are integral parts of moral life.

Rather than grudgingly view anthropocentrism as a limiting condition which traps us between having to reason and knowing that our reasoning is inadequate, we should understand the relation between limit and rational power dialectically. In order to learn from error, we must appreciate our peculiar capacities as rational agents. To learn is to set agendas of inquiry which are systematic and goal-directed. It is also to adjust our agendas of inquiry to compensate for error. This, after all, is a process of adaptation.

A dialectical approach makes it impossible for normative decision-making to be uni-directional. Most of us want to believe that normatively governed behaviour begins with a principle that would enable us to justify particular actions. Applied ethics is replete with proponents of this view of ethical decision making.

Norton's approach, for example, is entirely non-dialectical and unidirectional. Since it is based on the assumption that applying mutually acknowledged proscriptive preferences fully determines the rightness of an action, he can confidently proclaim that there is nothing wrong with the present generation using up non-renewable resources.

The defence for exhausting present resources, however, is patently wrong under the present framework. These resources form part of the conditions that have generated our values and that are intimately connected to our exercising of the full range of our freedoms. By assuming that the products of evolution and geological development are merely resources for human consumption, not determinants of our values and identities as value-bearers, Norton continues to advance a linear way of thinking about the conditions of value-satisfaction.

Resources, say minerals, are treated in our political, ethical, and economic traditions as if their values were completely determinate. This is why we can believe that compensating for their exhaustion to future generations is justifiable. But if their valuational relation to the value-bearer is indeterminate, moves such as Norton makes must be judged as unsupportable.

A single-faceted linear exercise of our rational capacities to justify environmental activity ignores the epistemic responsibility of seeking a comprehensive understanding. Like the forester, it fails to appreciate the full range of valuational activities that contribute to the value of social well-being.

Lastly, end setting is not a non-negotiable item. In our tradition, treating human rational agents as ends-in-themselves has been taken as a self-evident starting point for normative deliberation. In a system where there is no starting point or absolutes, such a move is unsupportable.

Anthropocentrism, properly understood, is indeed a powerful support for preservation and protection values. Driving the analysis of it deeper is, however, an indispensable condition for appreciating just why and how this is the case.

NOTES

¹ Holbrook 1990. See especially p.131 (from which the quote is taken) and p.138 where he presents his analysis of the intuitive base for environmentalism.

² Norton 1984. Norton has since changed his view somewhat to embrace a notion of *transformative value*. This fact, however, does not alter the influence and predominance of Norton's early attitude toward grounding environmental values.

³ Holbrook, p.130.

⁴ Personal experience bears out Holbrook's claims. Having attended numerous sessions with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, the Society for Ecological Restoration, the Canadian United Students' Environmental Network, and other less formally structured meetings, I have found that concern for theoretical problems is at best tolerated. Indeed, impatience with theory, unless it supports pre-established views on particular projects, tends to be lauded.

⁵ I have in mind here cases in which environmentalists have rushed headlong into supporting Native land claims mistaking superficial similarities between environmental and Native values as identical values. Animal rights activists/environmentalists in Ontario, Canada, found that their initial support of Native values did not accord with the values they assigned to wildlife. Eliminating wolf populations while protecting deer populations is another infamous case of misunderstanding how the value of the deer is intimately connected to the wolf. It is the wolf who makes the deer swift of foot and keen of ear. It is the wolf who keeps the deer healthy and alive.

⁶ See Hargrove 1989, pp. 131-2 and 1992, p. 185.

⁷ Hargrove 1989, p. 168.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁹ In a letter to me (hereafter, 'Letter'), Hargrove distinguishes between rejecting metaphysics as such and rejecting the need for metaphysics. This view seems to be in line with most environmentalists' views that it is senseless to try to provide an ultimate defence for preservation and protection values. Aligning these values with democratic or survival values is usually seen as sufficient.

¹⁰ Hargrove 1992, p. 196.

¹¹ Hargrove (1989: 186) suggests this.

¹² Hargrove 1992, p. 186.

¹³ The sustainable development movement stemming from the Brundtland Report subscribes to this view (World Commission for Environment and Development 1987).

¹⁴ 'Letter'

¹⁵ 'Letter'. He has corrected some of my overstatements about his references to taste. The following discussion is owing to these corrections.

¹⁶ See 'Intrinsic Value,' 198.

¹⁷ On this matter, I cite the workshop, *Ideas for Changing Landscapes*, sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Here as in other meetings with researchers and policy writers, I have seen a growing recognition of the relevance of metaphysical issues, although not called as much. In an initial report to the Great Lakes Science Advisory Board (June 1993), the Ecological Committee unreservedly announced the need to engage decision-makers in conceptual analysis of what constitutes an ecosystem and how we should relate the notion of ecosystem to our values. This is recognised as a distinctly ethical (p. 10) and philosophical issue (p. 15).

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¹⁸ Hough 1992.

¹⁹ I develop this theme in greater detail in Morito 1993.

²⁰ Much more is involved in the demise of Cartesian dualism. The fact that mental activity is directly affected by brain activity can no longer be treated simply as an anomaly by the dualist. Coupled with evolutionary theory, neurophysiological research makes it intellectually impossible to hold traditional dualist positions on the mind-body problem.

²¹ Norton 1984: 134.

²² Norton 1984: 144.

²³ Hargrove, 'Intrinsic Value,' 127.

²⁴ Morito 1993.

²⁵ Norton 1984: 145.

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