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Reconciliation Reaffirmed: A Reply to Steverson

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ABSTRACT: In this reply to Brian Steverson's objections to my reconciliationist argument, I have clarified the requirements that follow from my principles of environmental justice. I have also clarified the notion of intrinsic value that I am endorsing and the grounds on which my claim of greater intrinsic value for humans rests.

KEYWORDS: Justice, reciprocity, intrinsic value, utilitarianism

In 'On the Reconciliation of Anthropocentric and Nonanthropocentric Environmental Ethics,' Brian Steverson raises a number of important objections to my attempt to show that when a nonanthropocentric perspective and an anthropocentric perspective, are each given its most morally defensible interpretation, they both support the following principles of environmental justice:

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

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 animals and plants.

A Principle of Human Disproportionality: Actions that meet nonbasic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of animals and plants. (Steverson, 1996)

Against my attempt to show that a nonanthropocentric perspective requires these principles, Steverson

- i) criticises my appeal to reciprocal altruism to justify the human preference permitted by the Principle of Human Preservation; and
- ii) claims that while it is reasonable from a nonanthropocentric perspective to

select the Principle of Human Preservation, one could just as well select a Principle of Nonhuman Preservation from that perspective.

Against my attempt to show that an anthropocentric perspective requires these principles, Steverson

- i) questions whether intrinsic value can come in degrees as required to support the Principle of Disproportionality from an anthropocentric perspective,
- ii) questions whether we are always prohibited from satisfying our nonbasic needs by aggressing against the basic needs of nonhuman nature as required by the Principle of Disproportionality, even assuming that nonhuman nature has intrinsic value. (Sterba, 1994, 1995)

These are very serious objections to my reconciliationist argument that go right to the heart of the matter. Unless there are adequate replies to these objections, there would be no point to pursuing my reconciliationist project further. So let me consider each of these objections in turn.

With respect to my appeal to reciprocal altruism to justify preferential treatment for humans, that is, my claim that the degree of human preference sanctioned by the Principle of Human Preservation is justified by the degree of reciprocal altruism that humans can reasonably expect from other humans, Steverson contends that it would be a mistake to ground all of our moral obligations in such reciprocity.¹

Actually, I agree with Steverson here. I agree, that is, that not *all* of our moral obligations can be given a foundation in reciprocal altruism. What I have argued, however, is only that some of our obligations can be so grounded in the reciprocal altruism that we can reasonably expect of other humans, and Steverson offers no objection to this more limited appeal to reciprocal altruism.

With respect to my claim that it is reasonable to select the Principle of Human Preservation from a nonanthropocentric perspective, Steverson contends that it is equally reasonable from that perspective to select a Principle of Nonhuman Preservation, which maintains that actions that are necessary for meeting the basic needs of nonhumans are permissible even when they require aggressing against the basic needs of humans.

Here I doubt that Steverson is interpreting 'permissible' in the same sense or applying the notion in the same way in both of these principles. This is because as I interpret the Principle of Human Preservation, when it maintains that it is permissible to meet one's own basic needs or the basic needs of other humans even when this requires aggressing against the basic needs of animals and plants, it implies that other humans should not interfere with that aggression. Let us call this strong permissibility. Now, if we similarly interpret 'permissible' in the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation, it would imply that other humans should not interfere with any aggression that is directed against humans for the preservation of nonhumans, *even when that aggression happens to be directed*

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against themselves. Surely, this would be a very demanding requirement to impose on humans even from a nonanthropocentric perspective, and I doubt that Steverson wants to endorse it.

Alternatively, Steverson may want to interpret 'permissible' in the same way in both principles, but in such a way that it imposes almost no practical requirements on anyone. According to this interpretation, let us call it weak permissibility, its being permissible to meet one's own basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings by aggressing against the basic needs of nonhumans would be consistent with its being permissible for other humans to resist that aggression. And the same would hold true for the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation. Thus, its being permissible to meet the basic needs of nonhumans by aggressing against the basic needs of humans would be consistent with its being permissible for other humans to resist that aggression. On this interpretation of the two principles, since nothing is morally required or prohibited by them, what gets done obviously depends on the comparative power relations of the contending parties. Nevertheless, the problem with this interpretation is that it is certainly odd to think that morality imposes no prohibitions or requirements at all in such an area of severe conflicts of interest, given that it is in just such areas that we would expect morality to provide some sort of a resolution.

Another possibility is that Steverson may want to interpret 'permissible' as strong permissibility in both principles, but then limit the scope of application of the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation so that it would be permissible for humans to aggress against their own basic needs, (i.e., sacrifice them) in order to meet the basic needs of nonhumans, but not permissible for humans to aggress against the basic needs of other humans for that purpose. Yet while this limitation on the scope of the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation seems defensible from a nonanthropocentric perspective, it also seems defensible from an anthropocentric perspective, which, of course, is just what Steverson wanted to deny. Thus, it would seem that the only defensible interpretations of the Principle of Human Preservation and the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation turn out to support rather than oppose my reconciliationist argument.

In objecting to my claim that intrinsic value can come in degrees, Steverson cites Tom Regan as having shown that such a claim makes a category mistake, like claiming that two persons can be half-married to each other (Regan, 1992). Yet whether or not a category mistake is involved here depends on the particular notion of intrinsic value that one is using. In this context, there are at least two notions of intrinsic value that need to be distinguished. According to one notion of intrinsic value, which we can call agent-centred intrinsic value, to say that *X has intrinsic value* is to say that *X is good as an end for some agent Y* as opposed to saying that *X has instrumental value*, which is to say that *X is good as a means for some agent Y*. Now, according to this notion, intrinsic value does not come in degrees; one can't have more or less of it.² But there is another notion of intrinsic value, which we can call recipient-centred intrinsic value, according to

which to say that *X has intrinsic value* is to say that *the good of X ought to constrain the way that others use X in pursuing their own interests*. Now it seems to me that recipient-centred intrinsic value, unlike recipient-centred intrinsic value, does allow for the possibility of different degrees of intrinsic value, provided that we can show that the good of some Xs should constrain others more than the good of other Xs. In fact, however, this is just what I have argued – that there *are* good reasons why the good of humans should constrain other humans more than the good of nonhumans. Specifically, they are the reasons of reciprocal altruism and what constitutes permissible defence and preservation as captured by the Principle of Human Defence and the Principle of Human Preservation. These reasons require a degree of preference for humans over nonhumans when the relevant needs of humans are at stake. Assuming, then, that it is possible to show in this way that humans are legitimately constrained more for the good of humans than by the good of nonhumans, it is possible to claim that humans have a greater degree of intrinsic value than nonhumans.³

Steverson further argues that those who accept an anthropocentric perspective would still have plausible grounds for rejecting the constraint of the Principle of Disproportionality, even assuming that nonhumans have intrinsic value, although less intrinsic value than humans. Specifically, Steverson denies that humans are always prohibited from satisfying their nonbasic needs by aggressing against the basic needs of nonhumans, despite the intrinsic value of nonhumans. But the only reason that Steverson offers for rejecting this prohibition is that the satisfaction of *many* nonbasic needs of humans may turn out in some utilitarian calculation to outweigh the frustration of a *few* basic needs of nonhumans.⁴ Yet when this sort of reasoning is applied to humans, many utilitarians have been reluctant to embrace it (Hare, 1981). This is because it would seem to justify such practices as the sacrifice of the lives of Roman gladiators for the sake of the pleasures of the large crowds who witnessed those gladiator contests. Instead of defending the morality of such gladiator contests, utilitarians have been inclined to favour alternative social practices that preserve the lives of the few while still securing comparable pleasures for the many. It is also understandable why utilitarians have been reluctant to allow such trade-offs of the few for the many. The idea that a person's basic needs can be aggressed against to meet nonbasic needs of others seems opposed to the fundamental respect that we think is reasonably due to each and every person. So while utilitarians admit the theoretical possibility of such trade-offs, they tend to argue that, practically speaking, such trade-offs are unattainable, and so, even from a utilitarian perspective, the principles that we need to appeal to in order to carry on our affairs should not take such trade-offs into account (Hare, 1981).

Moreover, in considering such trade-offs with respect to our human/nonhuman cases, it is difficult to see how the numbers could turn out to be the way that they must turn out in order to be justified – with the satisfaction of nonbasic needs of *many* humans weighed against aggression against the basic needs of only a *few*

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nonhumans. Usually the numbers seem to be the other way round, with aggression against the basic needs of many nonhumans weighed against the satisfaction of the nonbasic needs of only a few humans. Nevertheless, just as in the analogous case involving only humans, we may not be able to theoretically rule out the possibility of trade-offs involving aggression against the basic needs of a few nonhumans for the sake of the satisfaction of the nonbasic needs of many humans. Nevertheless, even from a utilitarian perspective, we can rule them out practically speaking, excluding them, as I have done, from the principles of environmental justice.

In formulating these answers to Brian Steverson's objections to my reconciliationist argument, I have been led to develop my argument further than I had previously done. Specifically, I have clarified the requirements for others that follow from the actions that are permitted by the Principle of Human Defence and the Principle of Human Preservation. I have also clarified the notion of intrinsic value that I am endorsing and the grounds on which my claim of greater intrinsic value for humans rests. So I obviously owe Steverson a debt of gratitude for eliciting these clarifications. My hope is that now that I have put the argument, with his help, in its present improved form, he and others will find the argument worthy of further development.

NOTES

¹ For support here, Steverson cites Singer (1979: 68-71). Singer, however, is arguing against an attempt to base *all* of our moral obligations on reciprocity.

² Under this interpretation, however, it is possible for something to have both intrinsic value and instrumental value, to be both an end and a means.

³ Given this notion of intrinsic value, I don't see how there is any category mistake in affirming degrees of intrinsic value. In 'Does Environmental Ethics Rest on a Mistake?' Tom Regan argues that the various notions of intrinsic value that do not allow for degrees of intrinsic value do not serve the goals of an environmental ethics very well. I think that he may be right about this, which may be a good reason in favour of my proposed notion of intrinsic value which does allow for degrees of intrinsic value.

⁴ Steverson also thinks that John Stuart Mill's claim in *Utilitarianism* that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied also somehow supports a preference for nonbasic needs of humans over basic needs of nonhumans. But it isn't clear just how Mill's claim could provide this support. Mill makes his claim in the context of setting out his test of higher and lower pleasures:

Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference ... that is the more desirable pleasure.

Yet has any human ever really experienced what it is like being a pig? Mill considers cases in which humans actually do prefer lower to high pleasures and claims that the reason why they do so is because they have 'become incapable of the other.' But isn't that just what pigs are – animals that are incapable of our so-called higher pleasures. In order then to interpret Mill's claim so that his test of higher and lower pleasures applies to it, we must

interpret it as claiming that it is better for people who are capable of both higher and lower pleasures to experience the higher pleasures (the Socrates-like pleasures) even if that leaves them somewhat discontent than it is for them to experience only lower pleasures (the pig-like pleasures) even if that leaves them perfectly content.

Unfortunately, the trade-offs that we are considering in the context of an environmental ethics are quite different. They are between at least two different entities, not one entity that is capable of being in one of two ways. In fact, aggressing against the basic needs of nonhumans to satisfy the nonbasic needs of humans will frequently involve killing off nonhumans to satisfy the nonbasic needs of humans. So we don't have a common entity that is capable of existing in one of two ways as we do in Mill's case. Accordingly, Mill's claim about the preferability of higher to lower pleasures cannot be used to support the satisfaction of nonbasic needs of humans by aggressing against basic needs of nonhumans.

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