

Seeking Dialectical Integration between Anthropocentrism and Biocentrism

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Summary

Establishing genuine communication, that is, saying what you really want to say and meantime fully understanding what others say, is unquestionably highly problematic. Dialogue between people of different cultural backgrounds is even more difficult so that barriers can arise which are so tough as to seem often impossible to overcome. This is the case with the kind of divisions which separate the world of science from that of the humanistic and set the different currents of environmental thinking one against another.¹ But despite these difficulties, we believe that there is ample room for a constructive exchange of views between even widely differing standpoints in environmental philosophy and that one can find common grounds for action. In what follows we identify two opposing standpoints, one broadly anthropocentric and the other biocentric. Thereafter we analyze what they consist of and establish, as far as they exist, what they have in common. Finally we shall endeavour to find, as far as we can, some degree of integration between the two patterns of thought. At all events we shall try to find a common line of action for the immediate future aimed at achieving a higher level of wellbeing both for mankind and for the environment. This common line of action must mediate between the different philosophical approaches to the environment and must not represent a mere compromise, i.e. an agreement to seek a common objective by dint of making reciprocal sacrifices of principle.

1 The Sphere in which We Operate

Let us first of all establish the parameters within which we operate, since many problems of understanding arise from the different meanings which we ascribe to our terms. We hold that a comparison between different standpoints is always desirable and possible, as long as we stay inside the realm of intelligence and rationality. Moreover, while we believe that feelings can assist the course of dialogue (always keeping subjectivity within proper limits), we do not take the same view with regard to dogmatism, which, by definition, is hostile to all forms of critical analysis and hence is not suitable for inclusion in the present discussion. We shall proceed with our task using a strict methodology, basing ourselves as far as possible on scientific data. But we are well aware that it would be improper to limit our treatment entirely to objective data, though when we cross the threshold of objectivity the ground becomes slippery and there is the risk of creating confusion.

Anthropocentrism and biocentrism are characterized by certain general lines of thought in terms of which we define them. However, inside both anthropocentrism and biocentrism there are a range of standpoints separated by nuances of outlook which belong to each individual thinker.² In this essay when we speak of an "anthropocentrist" we refer to someone who has a broadly anthropocentric outlook; whereas when we speak of "our anthropocentrist" we are referring to a specific anthropocentrist. Similarly, we shall speak of a "biocentrist" and of "our biocentrist".

Both our anthropocentrist and our biocentrist hold that things exist which do not admit of a scientific explanation. But while our biocentrist prefers not to make any statement in such circumstances, our anthropocentrist affirms that in certain cases it may be useful to make "choices". For example, it is clear that we cannot know whether anything exists after death. While our biocentrist asserts that "it is not important to have a reply to every question, since our choices should be independent of any reply", our anthropocentrist asserts that if we find ourselves faced with an insoluble problem we should make a given choice if that choice produces a better result. He argues, quoting Carse, that it is better to play an infinite game.³

2 Two Opposed Standpoints: Anthropocentric and Biocentric

Our viewpoint with regard to the relationship between man and his environment depends fundamentally on the "place" we think man occupies inside nature. In simple terms we can say that if man were a "superior" creature, then his status would allow him to do as he likes with nature; if on the other hand man were like other living creatures he would not enjoy a privileged status and he would not have the right to dispose of nature at will. We classify these two positions as anthropocentric and biocentric respectively.

To clarify the issue, let us take an example. Let us imagine taking a walk in the mountains. We see a flower with a sign which says "Leave the flower alone, so that others can enjoy it". People who have a certain sensitivity to ecological factors regard this sign as appropriate. Let us now think of one with something different written on it: "Leave this flower alone to live its own life". The difference between the two signs is quite obvious. The first is anthropocentric because the flower should be let live so that another person can enjoy its beauty and scent. The second is biocentric because no human being is involved and leaving the flower alone is for the benefit of the flower itself, regardless of whether someone else may or may not see it.

To think that the two signs are similar is a mistake. In the first case, in fact, if we knew that no other person could ever see that flower, we should be justified in picking it or even destroying it. In the second case the flower should stay where it is always and in whatever circumstances might arise. We call anthropocentrists those who agree with the first sign and biocentrists those who agree with the second sign.

3 Different Outlooks

The essential difference between anthropocentric thinking and biocentric thinking can be summed up by alluding to the fact that, according to the anthropocentrists, man is a superior being. The Australian philosopher John Passmore, a moderate anthropocentrist, supports this view and thinks that the task of overcoming nature does not simply derive from human arrogance. In his view, that is, only mankind can create.⁴

The biocentrists take quite a different stance. Even for them man has certain peculiarities which render him unique, but this is no reason for him to regard himself as superior. If man does certain things well, other living creatures also do their own thing well, and indeed better than man. Man can fly with a plane, but he will never fly as well as a seagull. If then, the biocentrists argue, every human being does its own thing well, why should we regard what man does as more important than what other living beings do? For example, Taylor, a biocentrist American philosopher, writes "The question [...] is: why should standards that are based on human values be assumed to be the only valid criteria of merit and hence the only true signs of superiority? This question is especially pressing when humans are being judges superior in merit to nonhumans. It is true that a human being may be a better mathematician than a monkey, but the

monkey may be a better tree climber than a human being. If we humans value mathematics more than tree climbing, that is because our conception of civilized life makes the development of mathematical ability more desirable than the ability to climb trees.”⁵

According to our anthropocentrist only man possesses the faculty of thinking, understood as the ability to observe nature, to deduce therefrom the laws which govern its workings and to discover possibilities on modifying them. Our anthropocentrist holds that other species are incapable of thinking, at least up to the human level. In particular only man is able to activate a process involving his ability to "pay attention", to "have intentions" and to "act". A man may have the intention to desire to "do something properly", to "fulfil a desire", "to benefit a certain person". In carrying this out, man proceeds to act via "attention" based on his "cognitive model". If we want to do something pleasing for a friend, for example, our cognitive model will translate our desire into a form of action appropriate to that friend's case. If in fact we please him, our cognitive model will have worked. If the action we take fails to please him, our intention was a good one in any case; what went wrong was our cognitive model. In the case of animals, according to our anthropocentrist, it is quite a different matter. They carry out simple acts in accordance with their simple minds. Rabbits only make burrows and sparrows only make nests; they will never make burrows. In simple terms: animals are not capable of "abstraction"; they merely carry out instinctive acts. Animals act and react according to an *a priori* code; they can adapt themselves to an environment, but a dog will always act like a dog and never like a cat. A lioness wishes to protect her cubs, but not to express ideas. She does not ask herself "Do I love them enough?". A lioness cannot "speak". To speak does not just mean to roar or to say "Come here"; to speak even means to express concepts and only man can do that. Three inter-related faculties exist: to feel, to want and to think. Animals can feel and want, but they do not think: think about something they have done, think about a concept, think about thinking about thinking, as philosophers do. Animals feel and act, nothing else. Man, on the other hand, can think first and then act in different ways. This briefly is how our anthropocentrist sees things.

Our biocentrist does not dispute the obvious difference between human beings and other organisms. What he maintains is that these differences do not justify human arrogance. Man can feel himself to be superior to other species only in certain fields and not in others.⁶ For instance, extremophile organisms can live in extreme conditions, such as very hot or very acid environments or ones with very high pressures. So can man, but in such cases he needs special apparatus. So the question arises: does the fact of managing to live in certain conditions justify extremophile organisms in feeling superior to man? If the answer is "no", then man cannot feel superior simply because of his special characteristics. To attribute "superiority" to oneself is a "self-evaluation": a clear case of arrogance.

Our biocentrist thinks that the problem is with the word "superior", since by defining ourselves as superior we fall into a state of conceptual confusion. This conceptual confusion reminds us of the one surrounding "best" which arose at the time of Darwin's theory. Initially, here and there in his writings, Darwin himself confused "best" with "best fitted".⁷ Even today many people confuse the two. In nature, there is no "best" and there never will be. Since the word "best" has no sense in nature, to speak of "superior" is a mistake, except in very limited contexts.

We may now ask: is there, then, some characteristic in man which renders him superior in a more general sense? Our anthropocentrist contends that man has a "hardware", his animal part, and a "software" called spirit. Possession of spirit confers on man a mission: that of respecting nature and modifying his surroundings so as to make them fruitful and prosperous. Seen in this light, human beings are animated and rendered intelligent by a human spirit. This spirit becomes corporeal at the moment of conception and does not die when the animal and psychic body dies, but returns to the spiritual world. For our anthropocentrist this way of thinking does not constitute a dogma, but is a choice we make

in order to increase our responsibility towards future generations. It is as though one were to think that the normal life of the human spirit takes place in the spiritual world, but every now and then that spirit returns to Earth as if to "go into training", since on Earth man can do either good or evil. If he does good he strengthens himself as a spiritual being; if he does evil (i.e. if he does not behave as a human being should) he dehumanizes himself, that is he falls back into animality and loses his spirituality. Our anthropocentrist is fully aware that this cannot be proved, but equally it cannot be disproved *a priori*.

On the other hand, our biocentrist does not believe that man is unlike other living creatures. If man has his own spirituality, he affirms, even other organisms can also have theirs. Nor can this affirmation be disproved *a priori*.

With regard to the discussion about spirituality, scientists think that the difference of outlook may have to do with language. Language, it is claimed by Odifreddi, an Italian mathematical logician, is a technology and as such it can be used or abused. For example, the same words which allow us to perceive the essence of the physical world can even give us the illusion of what we can perceive the presence of a metaphysical world to be.⁸ The word "spirit" in the classical languages has to do with "breathing". So long as we remain in the field of the physical or of literature, there is no problem. Problems begin to arise when we think that behind words there must always be something different: that a cosmic spirit and an individual spirit exist. Odifreddi says that, impossible as it seems, many religious thinkers and philosophers have studied the question of spirit for thousands of years, forgetting that "spirit" is a meaningless term.

According to our biocentrist, another problem arises from the fact that language is a trap. To think about thinking about thinking and so on, as many philosophers do, raises the question of intensionality. Some linguistic experts assert that it is not possible to understand a discourse that goes beyond a few levels of intensionality. Many people cannot understand a sentence like: I suspect that you are asking whether I realize how difficult it is for you to be sure that you understand me if I mean to say that you can recognize that I can believe that you wish to explain to me that most of us can only follow five or six levels of intensionality. This sentence contains eight levels of intensionality and needs to be read and re-read, not merely heard, in order for it to be understood.¹⁰ In brief: our biocentrist contends that it is easy for each one of us, overstepping objectivity and using verbal contorsions, to construct whichever reality he or she wants or finds comfortable. People arrive at convictions which have little to do with Reality.

4 Similar Opinions

Unfortunately, however, objectivity is not enough. Both our anthropocentrist and our biocentrist know that tangible reality is only part of reality. There are different realities which cannot be explained by means of science or with mathematical formulae. For example, human relations form part of the non-material sphere, as do love, respect, ethics and so on. If we go beyond the simple definition of the material world it is no longer an error to speak of spirituality. There are those who assert that through thought we can attain "truth", while with our five senses we can only attain an "opinion". Even so, it remains the case that we cannot manage without opinions. In practice, it is they which count most. So many unmeasurable factors turn out to be basic.

Our anthropocentrist and our biocentrist are in agreement: we need scientific data, but we also need speculation and sensitivity to enjoy consciousness of the world we live in and even to work out an environmental philosophy which allows us to live in harmony with nature.

Our anthropocentrist and our biocentrist are in agreement: whether he is superior or not man enjoys a special *status* because of his characteristics. If man is made, as in fact he is, of the same materials as the environment in which he lives (the chemical components which make up the human body are the same as those which we find in the rest of the

universe); if it is true (and it is) that the genetic basis of humanity, DNA, is the same as that of all the other living beings which inhabit planet Earth, then man can not avoid acting on the environment. He can operate well or badly, wisely or stupidly, but he must operate, he must modify the environment around him. Moreover, if man is nature, the outcome of his operations is also nature, human actions are nature. Man and nature are not separate entities, they are integrated one with the other. We have to accept, without hesitation, that human beings, from the moment that they exist, do things, move around and modify the environment.

All the same, unlike other living beings, man is extremely powerful. He has a speculative mind, a complex language and cunning hands which allow him to harness nature. In other words, he can exploit natural laws for his own ends. He can fly; he can plunge into the depths of the oceans; he can live in inhospitable places, he can even set out to explore and, at some future date, colonize distant worlds. He could, if he chose to do so, explode the current nuclear arsenal and destroy the entire Earth.

Furthermore man, unlike other beings, is endowed with consciousness (our anthropocentrist would speak of consciousness and conscience). Our biocentrist holds that even certain groups of higher animals may have a certain consciousness. However, the degree of human consciousness, if we can speak of degrees, is certainly higher than any other. It follows that man is the only living organism who can be a moral agent (the only one who can act with rational motives), all others being merely morally passive.

5 How to Act

Man is not, strictly speaking, "superior", but, as Passmore writes,¹¹ he can decide to kill or spare other species at will. That is beyond dispute. But as he has great power (the great power to modify the environment) and consciousness (the ability to understand the consequences of his actions), he also has a responsibility to nature, which, as the German philosopher Hans Jonas writes, extends into the future and involves even future generations.¹² Moreover his responsibility is in proportion to his consciousness. A newborn child, for example, is less responsible than an adult because his or her consciousness is undeveloped. In addition, we also know that consciousness goes hand in hand with knowledge. An ignorant person is less responsible for his actions. If he kills an animal from an endangered species, he is less responsible than someone who knows exactly what he is doing.

Our anthropocentrist and our biocentrist are in agreement: the greater the consciousness, the greater the responsibility; the more we know the more we love. This is the way to act. We need to extend our knowledge of the world we live in.

Anthropocentrists need to extend their knowledge of the non-human world and seek to achieve empathy with other living beings. At the same time they need to take care to avoid anthropomorphization and to understand them for what they are. Taylor writes: "We need not, for example, consider them to have consciousness. Some of them may be aware of the world around them and others may not. Nor need we deny that different kinds and levels of awareness are exemplified the consciousness in some form is present".¹³

On their part, the biocentrists need to recognize that human beings form part of nature and therefore cannot avoid acting on the environment. Biocentrists should resist misanthropy, since man can and should develop his knowledge in the fields of science and technology since he must fulfil himself. The man who loves nature must also love man, for he knows man to be the highest expression of evolution and cannot destroy himself, since to kill oneself would also be to impoverish nature.

In conclusion: the greater the knowledge, the better chance there is of making the right choices. This constitutes an objective basis for respecting nature. If we think that there is nothing after death, our respect for nature will be purely subjective and will depend on our feelings. For example, it could happen that someone who has a good environmental education will have an inner ecological impulse which will cause him to respect non-human organisms and future generations. If we realize that we need to extend our knowledge and thereby our consciousness, we shall explicitly declare ourselves to be ignorant. We know that nature exists, but we do not know what its value is. It is this objective awareness of our ignorance which should guide us in our choices: respect for nature derives from our awareness of the fact that we do not know the value of nature. As knowledge increases, our behaviour will automatically undergo change and we shall feel more responsible for our actions. On the other hand, as we made clear at the beginning of this essay with regard to choices, there may be someone who chooses to believe that the world has a teleological end, and that humanity forms part of a wider design. In that case, he may decide to make this particular choice because it will benefit mankind and the environment. But it will always be a personal and hence subjective choice in any case.

In brief: without knowledge everything is subjective; only knowledge carries with it real and objective responsibility.

Notes

- 1) Piergiacomo Pagano, "La filosofia ambientale come interazione dialettica tra scienze umane e scienze naturali," *Systema Naturae* 5 (2003): 193-217.
- 2) A summary is to be found in the paper: Pagano "Antropocentrismo, biocentrismo, ecocentrismo: una panoramica di filosofia ambientale," *Energia, Ambiente, Innovazione* 2 (2004): 72-86. And for a more detailed analysis see Pagano's book, *Filosofia ambientale* (Fidenza: Mattioli 1885 Editore, 2002).
- 3) James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (1986). Italian version: *Giochi finiti e infiniti* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1987).
- 4) John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (2nd ed., 1980). Italian version: *La nostra responsabilità per la natura* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1991), pp. 187-90.
- 5) Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," in: Michael E. Zimmerman et al. (eds.), *Environmental Philosophy* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, 1998), p. 80.
- 6) Pagano, "Parlare con gli animali," *Naturalmente* 5 (2000): 54-61.
- 7) Pagano, "Storia e drammi dell'eugenica; prima parte: le radici storiche e teoriche," *Naturalmente*, 12 (1999): p.15.
- 8) Piergiorgio Odifreddi, *Le menzogne di Ulisse* (Milano: Longanesi & C., 2004), p. 13.
- 9) Ibid., p. 14-5.
- 10) Daniel Dennett, "Intentional Systems in Cognitive Ethology: the «Panglossian Paradigm» Defended," *Behavioural and Brain Science* 6 (1983): 343-90. See also: P. Kinderman, R. Dunbar, R. Bental, "Theory of Mind Deficits, Causal Attributions and Paranoia: an Analogue Study," *British J. of Psychology*, cited in: Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996). Italian version: *Dalla nascita del linguaggio alla Babele delle lingue* (Milano, Longanesi & C., 1998), p. 107.
- 11) Passmore, *La nostra responsabilità per la natura*, p. 125.
- 12) Hans Jonas H., *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (Insel Verlag, 1979). Italian version: *Il principio di responsabilità*, (Torino, Einaudi Paperbacks Filosofia, 1993), pp. 117-8.

13) Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," p. 78.



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From: Piergiacomo Pagano, ENEA, Via Don Fiammelli 2, 40129, Bologna, Italy

To: Editor, ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS, Department of Philosophy, University of North Texas, P.O. Box 310980, Denton, TX 76203-0980

Dear Environmental Ethics Editor,

I submit you a paper for the "Environmental Ethics Journal", hoping you will find it interesting

Thank you in advance.

Bologna, Italy 3 May 2005

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