

# BIOCENTRISM AS A PROPOSITION FOR NEW THINKING ABOUT THE BIOSPHERE

## [Professor Zdzisława Piatek](#)

Jagiellonian University of Krakow  
Poland

This paper focuses on the analysis of the biocentric attitude, which is an example of the new approach to Nature and to man's position in Nature. The analysis refers to Paul W. Taylor's biocentric environmental ethics<sup>1</sup> and shows the contrast between biocentrism and homocentrism; the latter underlying traditional ethics and homocentric versions of environmental ethics, such as the ethics advocated by John Passmore.<sup>2</sup>

### **Biocentrism versus homocentrism**

Since anthropocentrism has become a term endowed with numerous meanings and connotations it shall be used in this paper to denote the human way of experiencing the world, determined by phylogenetic cognitive structures. Besides anthropocentrism, the term homocentrism will also be used, in a context involving the following concepts: (a) only human beings value the world; (b) only human beings explore the world and have knowledge of the world; (c) only human beings have inherent value as only they have self-fulfilling goals; (d) man is the measure of all things; (e) man is above and beyond Nature; (f) man's right to use the natural resources and living space is unrestricted because nature was created or evolved for his benefit.

Anthropocentrism is not identical to homocentrism and it is possible to accept anthropocentrism and question homocentrism, which in fact is a form of species chauvinism. Biocentrism, in turn, as defined by Taylor,<sup>1</sup> consists of approving of the following beliefs:

- Humans belong to the "Earth's Community of Life," in the same sense and on the same terms that other living beings are members of that community.
- The human species, along with all other species, is an integral element in a system of interdependence, such that the survival of each living being, as well as its chance of faring well or poorly, is determined not only by the physical conditions of its environment but also by its relations to other living beings.
- All organisms are teleological centres of life, in the sense that each is a unique individual pursuing its own good in its own way.
- Humans are not inherently superior to other living beings.

To accept the above mentioned beliefs, in other words to assume the biocentric attitude, one must refute the homocentric attitude and revise one's ideas about man's position in Nature, which entails a radical reform of beliefs, what Leszek Koakowski defines as metanoia.<sup>3</sup>

It is not only possible to adopt a disinterested attitude toward Nature, which is postulated by biocentrism, but such an attitude is the expression of the very same critical approach realised in the philosophical quest, searching for the nature of being as such. What biocentrism postulates is to get rid of the species bias while discussing man's position in Nature. This does not mean that we are to shed our human skin and look at the world from an extra-human point of view, which is impossible, but that our human point of view must be self-critical. The biocentric attitude calls for the position of a disinterested observer, who fulfils the requirement for "species impartiality," a position analysed by Thomas Nagel in his book *The View from Nowhere*<sup>4</sup> and by Stephen L. Darwall in his book *Impartial Reason*.<sup>5</sup> Anthropocentrism, as a human way of experiencing the world, is inevitable and can easily be reconciled with biocentrism, but homocentrism, as species chauvinism, can be refuted by means of a rational, self-critical approach.

### **Biosphere and anthroposphere**

According to Taylor,<sup>1</sup> within the biosphere described as the "Earth's Community of Life," one can distinguish the natural ecosystems of the wilderness and the anthroposphere. The anthroposphere comprises all the direct or indirect creations of man. Thus, it includes the world of culture together with the "artificial ecosystems," that is the ecosystems that are completely regulated and even produced by humans, like farms, gardens, zoos, or the plantation forests of timber companies. We may call them "artificial ecosystems" since they are instruments created by humans and used for human ends. The anthroposphere is a distinct part of the biosphere, because its development is determined not only by biological evolution, but also by cultural evolution.

Taylor's environmental ethics, with its biocentric foundations, refers to the relationship between man and those living beings that live in natural ecosystems; i.e. it deals with the rest of the wilderness. Such biocentric environmental ethics is necessary in order to stop the degradation of the natural environment and the wilderness in particular. This can be achieved only by protecting all the living beings that live

in natural ecosystems. This is why one of the basic rules of conduct in Taylor's ethics is the rule of non-interference with respect to natural ecosystems.<sup>1</sup> The advocates of biocentrism are calling for such a transformation of human consciousness - metanoia in Kolakowski's sense<sup>3</sup> - that would enable both the anthroposphere and the biosphere to develop harmoniously.

I agree with Taylor that our duties and obligations towards artificial ecosystems are different from, and, independent of, our duties with regard to natural ecosystems. In some artificial ecosystems the very organisms themselves are a human product, created by hybridisation or genetic engineering for human benefit and consequently their natural instincts are so distorted that they would not survive in a natural ecosystem without human intervention.

Wilderness, as the domain of natural ecosystems, is understood as any collection of biologically interrelated living things that maintain their existence over some time without human intervention or control. The order and nature of living things in natural ecosystems is explained as the outcome of certain evolutionary processes, i.e. variability and natural selection. On the other hand, the order and nature of bred plants and animals is the outcome of artificial selection. In the anthroposphere man really is the Lord and Master of all the creatures, as it is described in the Book of Genesis.

### **Is there a need for a new ethics?**

On the grounds of environmental ethics, we can argue that quite independently of the duties to our fellow humans, we have duties and obligations to the biosphere. In spite of the substantial differences that can be observed in various versions of this new ethics, all its founders accept the basic aims of environmental ethics as:

- formulating ethical principles that define human behaviour in relation to non-human living beings and justify their status as moral subjects
- establishing what is good and what is evil in our actions, in relation to the environment
- motivating people to perform the good and not the evil actions when dealing with non-human living beings

Thus, environmental ethics is on the look-out for new value systems and rules determining human actions in the biosphere, that is in the area not covered by traditional ethics. In order to realise the three above mentioned functions, shaping the efficiency of the new ethics, one has to sort out numerous controversies concerning the question of how non human-living beings can become moral subjects, even though they cannot become moral agents, as they are not self-conscious, they have no sense of identity and cannot be responsible.

Some authors, like John Passmore<sup>2</sup> claim that there is no need for a new ethics - environmental ethics - as it would be sufficient to respect the moral norms that have always been present in traditional ethics and to protect nature for the sake of the good of man, with a view to the good of future generations. This type of homocentric ethics means de facto extension of the traditional ethics, so that it applies to non-human living beings and calls for their protection for the sake of their instrumental value, not only to present day humanity, but, also to the generations of the future. This homocentric orientation does not require any radical changes in the theoretical foundations, such as respect for the person and granting of inherent value to human beings exclusively. It is, however, caught up in difficult questions such as: Does it make any sense to discuss obligations towards future generations, that is, towards beings that do not yet exist? What will their needs be? Will they need what we want to protect for them? Will the values that we cherish not turn out to be useless to them?

### **Biocentrism: a condition for symbiosis of the anthroposphere and biosphere**

The above mentioned questions are irrelevant to the biocentric environmental ethics, like Taylor's ethics, which, by recognising the inherent value in non-human living beings, calls for the protection of nature for its own sake and claims that this is the best method of protecting the biosphere for the generations to come.<sup>1</sup>

Biocentric ethics, however, requires a radical revision of the views on the position of man in Nature, as it postulates to replace the homocentric attitude with the biocentric one, which entails the abolition of the metaphor of the "ladder of life" - so deeply rooted in Western European tradition - and replacing it with the metaphor of the "tree of life." The former asserted the distinguished position of man in Nature placing him beyond and above Nature, and thus made him the Master of Nature. The latter metaphor, which is rooted in the theory of evolution, represents man as one branch on the great tree of life, "as member of the great Earth's Community of Life."<sup>1</sup>

From the standpoint of biocentric environmental ethics, our duties to the biosphere do not stem from our duties to our fellow humans, including future generations, although many of the actions that are right, according to the homocentric theory, may also be right according to the biocentric theory. The motives that justify these actions, however, may be totally different, due to the fundamental differences in the underlying moral principles of both theories. From the biocentric point of view, obligations toward animals and plants in natural ecosystems are seen to arise from moral relations between ourselves and the natural world. Every living being has some unique inherent values. The natural world is not an object to be exploited by humans, nor are its living inhabitants to be regarded as a living resource for human use and consumption. In his book *Respect for Nature*, Taylor declares: "Our duties toward the Earth's non-human forms of life are grounded on their

status as entities possessing inherent worth. They have a kind of value that makes it wrong to treat them as if they existed as mere means to human ends. It is for their sake that their good should be promoted and protected. Just as humans should be treated with respect so should they."<sup>1</sup>

Biocentrically oriented environmental ethics states that all animals and plants in the biosphere are moral objects, and humans have such duties to them as they have to their fellow human beings. This means that we cannot harm them without any justification or retribution. This standpoint requires a radical transformation of our present beliefs and attitudes, regarding the natural world and the place of humans in it. It also requires a certain detachment from moral intuitions, shaped by homocentric views. As mentioned before, biocentrism does not entail the refutation of anthropocentrism as a human way of experiencing the world; that would be impossible. What it postulates is the refutation of the six homocentric concepts, mentioned in the beginning of this paper, which in fact are manifestations of species chauvinism.

In terms of this new biocentric outlook, one can identify oneself as a member of the Earth's Community of Life, which does not imply a denial of one's personality. We become aware that like all other living beings our existence depends on the fundamental soundness and integrity of the biological system of nature. Each individual organism is seen to be a teleological centre of life, pursuing its own good in its own unique way. This does not imply, however, a conscious end or purpose. The conscious element may not be present at all. A living being is conceived of as a unified system of organised activity with the constant tendency to preserve its existence by protecting its well-being. In biocentric environmental ethics, proposed by Taylor,<sup>1</sup> no living being will be considered inherently superior or inferior to any other; they are all deserving of moral concern.

## Conclusion

To solve environmental problems, it is necessary to employ not only technological and economic resources, but, above all, a new morality and new thinking about the biosphere. We would have to thoroughly reconsider human relations with Nature and refute homocentric ideas, that are deeply rooted in Western European culture and include: the idea of human superiority, presented as the ladder of beings; the conviction that the biosphere was created for man and therefore all non-human living beings are of instrumental value only; and, the conviction that man is the measure of all things. Refuting the above convictions would bring about a revolution in world view, that could only be compared with the denial of geocentricism.

## References

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Professor **Zdzisława Piątek** studied biology at the University of Warsaw and holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Jagiellonian University, Krakow. She specialises in the philosophy of science, biology and ecology, and has published extensively on the subject. From 1978 to 1984, she was Director of Postgraduate Studies at the Jagiellonian University Department of Philosophy and, from 1984 to 1986, Deputy Director of the Department of Philosophy. In 1986 she obtained her current position as Head of the Institute of Philosophy of Natural Science, Jagiellonian University Department of Philosophy.