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Review

Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics

Paul W. Taylor. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.
360 pp.

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Paul Taylor's *Respect for Nature* was first published 1986 when environmental ethics was a relatively new field. In it he defended a deontological biocentric environmental ethic predicated on the idea that all living beings have inherent value. It was a groundbreaking work in non-anthropocentric ethics, and since then it has been frequently anthologized and used in ethics and environmental philosophy courses taught around the world. The Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition of *Respect for Nature* (2011) contains a two-page forward by Dale Jamieson, who notes the continued urgency for intellectuals to consider the meaning of "respect for nature." When *Respect for Nature* was first published, most professional ethicists were unclear on how to think about our moral duties to the non-human world. Taylor has provided us a unique way of thinking about such matters that is still relevant today.

There are three elements to the theory that Taylor develops in his *Respect for Nature*. Taylor maintains that just as "human ethics" has three components (an acceptance of a belief-system, an attitude of respect for persons, and a system of rules and standards [41–42]), his biocentric theory of environmental ethics similarly has three parts. The first part of his overall theory is a belief system that he dubs "the biocentric

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outlook on nature,” the second part is an attitude of “respect for nature,” and the third is a system of moral rules for moral agents who accept the biocentric outlook and possess the attitude of respect for nature (44–47).

Accordingly, there is a Kantian flavor to Taylor’s theory. For instance, Taylor argues that the idea of all persons (as persons) having inherent worth entails the anthropocentric moral principle of humanity as an end—i.e., persons always must be treated as ends-in-themselves, and must not be used merely as a means to an end (78). He argues that, similarly, the idea of all living things (plants, animals, etc.) having inherent worth entails the impermissibility of moral agents using living things merely as a means to human ends (78–79). For Taylor, all living beings are “teleological centers of life” with inherent worth, and all “teleological centers of life” with inherent worth are objects of respect.

Consequently, Taylor’s theory differs from utilitarian doctrines (like those of Bentham, Singer et al.) that maintain that moral duties to human and non-human animals are grounded in sentience. Since Taylor argues that only individual living beings (e.g., individual plants, and animals) are the bearers of inherent moral worth, his theory also differs from other non-anthropocentric theories like ecological holism (e.g., deep ecology) that attribute inherent value to other things like species, ecosystems, habitats, and ecological integrity. In this vein, Taylor’s theory is similar to the biocentrism recently defended by James Sterba, with the exception being that Sterba’s biocentrism is a form of *species*-egalitarianism (Sterba 2011: 167–69). While Taylor would presumably agree that no species has more worth than another, the locus of moral worth in his *Respect for Nature* is on the equal value of individual living beings (not entire species).

Whereas Taylor’s “respect for nature” is an attitude (i.e., the attitude a person has when she views all living beings as having inherent value), the biocentric outlook that Taylor advances is constituted by the following four beliefs:

- (a) The belief that humans are members of the Earth’s Community of Life in the same sense and on the same terms in which other living things are members of that Community.
- (b) The belief that the human species, along with all other species, are integral elements in a system of interdependence such that the survival of each living thing, as well as its chances of faring well

or poorly, is determined not only by the physical conditions of its environment but also by its relations to other living things.

- (c) The belief that all organisms are teleological centers of life in the sense that each is a unique individual pursuing its own good in its own way.
- (d) The belief that humans are not inherently superior to other living things (99).

The fundamental structure of Taylor's argument in *Respect for Nature* is that if there are good grounds for accepting the biocentric outlook, then there are good grounds for adopting the attitude of respect for nature (167–68). Accordingly, the core of Taylor's basic polemic is devoted to supporting the biocentric outlook. In particular, the last belief (d) is the important axiological claim of the biocentric outlook, and thus he devotes some effort to responding to views that deny it.

Taylor asks what it could *mean* to say that humans are superior to other living beings. We have different powers and capacities than other species, so it is unsurprising that we are superior at doing things that other species cannot do. But Taylor asks why should we think that our unique powers and capacities make us superior to other species instead of thinking that the special capacities of other species (e.g., the speed of the cheetah, the ability of spiders to spin webs, the power of photosynthesis in plants) show that they are superior to humans (129)? Perhaps the claim that humans are superior to other living beings means that we are *morally* superior to other species of plants and animals. However, Taylor argues that in order for one being to be judged as being morally better (or worse) than another being, both beings must be moral agents. Thus, since other species of plants and animals lack moral agency, they cannot be judged as being morally inferior to humans. Taylor says: "I conclude that it is not false but simply confused to assert that humans are the moral superiors to animals and plants" (133). Taylor accordingly submits that we must consider whether humans are superior to other beings in terms of *inherent worth*.

To defend (d) Taylor attacks four arguments for inherent human superiority. The first argument comes from classical Greek humanism. This line of reasoning claims that human nature is essentially rational (i.e., rationality is what separates humans from all the other species of plants and animals), thus giving us a greater nobility of character (135–39). Taylor contends, however, that this is not really an *argument* for inherent human

superiority. Rather it is a way of viewing humans as being superior (136). Taylor also submits that arguments claiming that intelligence and rationality lend evidence that humans are inherently superior to, say, eagles are just as defunct as arguments claiming that vision and flight provide evidence that eagles are inherently superior to humans (138).

The second argument for inherent human superiority is based upon the notion of the Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy 1936). This metaphysical and axiological doctrine claims that all beings are ranked highest to lowest on a hierarchy of beings—i.e., God, angels, humans, non-human animals, plants, rocks, etc. Taylor claims that since this order—in which humans are placed higher than plants and non-human animals—was supposedly decreed by God, one could attack this doctrine by attacking God's existence, or by showing that the belief in such a hierarchy lacks solid epistemological support. Taylor chooses not to do so. Instead, he argues that it either begs the question (if one says God placed humans higher than non-humans because humans have a higher inherent worth) or contradicts God's justice—i.e., from the perspective of the plants and animals made for our use, it would demonstrate an anthropocentric bias, and thus a lack of absolute perfection (140–43).

The third sort of argument for human superiority that Taylor attacks stems from Cartesian dualism. This argument claims that unlike humans, plants and non-human animals are only material bodies, and lack a non-physical soul (mind). Because of this, humans have more inherent worth than plants and non-human animals. Taylor gives three reasons for rejecting this sort of polemic (144–47). The first is the traditional problem of mind-body causal interaction. The second is that contemporary biology, genetics, and evolutionary theory show that the mental content of other primates is more similar to ours than previously thought. The third is that even if Cartesian dualism were true, it would require an additional anthropocentric premise to show that the addition of a soul/mind to a body makes humans inherently superior to non-human living beings.

The fourth argument for human superiority that Taylor takes issue with comes from Louis Lombardi, a contemporary philosopher who attacked an earlier version of Taylor's biocentrism in *Environmental Ethics*.¹ Lombardi argued that while all plants and animal have inherent worth, they have less inherent value than humans. So, while it is wrong to treat plants and non-human animals as though they have only instrumental value, in certain conflicting situations it is still permissible to allow the good of humans

to trump the good of plants and non-human animals. Lombardi argued that “The greater the range of an entity’s capacities, the higher the degree of inherent worth” (147). So, since human capacities have a greater range than plants and non-human animals, it follows that humans are inherently superior to plants and non-human animals. Taylor rejects that idea that having a wider range of capacities gives a being more inherent value. Instead, he notes that many species that possess a narrower range of capacities still can realize their good—e.g., develop their natural biological potential. For Taylor, the salient issue is how a being’s capacities are organized—i.e., functionally interrelated.

Whatever one thinks of these arguments, it must be admitted that these arguments constitute novel reasons for rejecting anthropocentrism. However, it is one thing to refute arguments given in support of human superiority, and another to give positive support for the thesis that humans are not superior to non-human living beings. What, then, could justify the claim that *a living being* has inherent worth? Taylor asks: what would justify the claim that *a human being* has inherent worth (79)? He contends that the only coherent way of viewing people as rational, valuing beings—as autonomous centers “of conscious life”—is to view a human being as possessing inherent worth (ibid.). He then claims that there is a similarity with justifying the claim that living beings have inherent worth. Taylor argues that the only way one could coherently accept the biocentric outlook on nature is to view all living beings as having inherent value (79–80).

In this vein, Taylor argues for (d) by showing that his biocentric outlook meets the following traditional criteria for what an acceptable theory looks like:

- (a) Comprehensiveness and completeness
- (b) Systematic order, coherence, and internal consistency
- (c) Freedom from obscurity, conceptual confusion, and semantic vacuity
- (d) Consistency with all known empirical truths (158–59).

Taylor admits that the biocentric outlook cannot be proven. Yet, since these criteria are what a rational, enlightened, “reality-aware,” competent agent would use in determining her world-view, Taylor contends that it follows that the biocentric outlook is “judged acceptable” (165–67). This is most likely the weak link in his argument as one could argue that many other moral doctrines—e.g., utilitarianism—could be judged acceptable on the same grounds.

Taylor thinks that the refutation of human superiority entails the idea of *species-impartiality*, which is that all living beings have the same inherent worth, and must be treated as such. But what system of principles would comport with such an idea? In this vein, the remaining deontological tenets of Taylor's system boil down to a system of four moral rules and five priority principles. The four "rules of duty" are nonmalaficence (i.e., do not harm living beings), noninterference (i.e., do not interfere with other living beings and ecosystems); fidelity (i.e., do not deceive animals); and restitutive justice (i.e., make proper restitution for damages to other living beings) (172–86). Taylor's five priority principles are to be employed when there is a conflict between human and non-human interests. These are the principles of self-defense (e.g., so that a moral agent can defend herself from other living beings), proportionality (i.e., non-basic interests are to be given lesser weight over basic interests, no matter the species), minimum wrong (i.e., moral agents must cause the minimum wrong when violating the interests of harmless living beings), as well as the principles of distributive and restitutive justice (263–307). One might wonder what justifies *these* principles. Taylor does not deduce these principles from his biocentric outlook. Are we to find them intuitive, given the earlier parts of his theory?

One might reject the logic of his overall polemic. Anthropocentric thinkers will certainly find the implications of Taylor's species-egalitarianism to be too extreme—e.g., the implication that a pine tree has the same inherent worth as a human being. Ecological feminists will complain that Taylor failed to make the connection between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of the natural environment. Still, others might complain that Taylor did not go far enough in addressing the ecological implications of human population growth. Nevertheless, Taylor's basic message—i.e., that humans are animals who are biologically interconnected with the rest of the living world, and that it is a form of "human chauvinism"² to think that we are the most superior creatures in the cosmos—is just as relevant today as it was twenty five years ago. Taylor's book will need to be footnoted for many more years to come.

NOTES

1. See Lombardi 1983. In this paper Lombardi attacks Taylor's theory at it was developed in Taylor 1981.
2. This term was coined in Routley and Routley 1979.

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