

Biocentrism (Taylor)

1. Biocentrism: So far, we have said that various organisms have degrees of 'welfare', or 'well-being'. That is, their lives can go better or worse for them. They are capable of being harmed or benefitted. But, what are the requirements for having 'well-being'?

Our assumption so far is that, only the sorts of things that have INTERESTS have well-being, and the only sorts of things that have interests are SENTIENT organisms. Earlier in the semester, we saw Mary Anne Warren say:

In answer to the question, "Why not extend this line of argument and speak of the rights of trees, mountains, oceans, ... ?" she replies that "moral rights can meaningfully be ascribed only to entities which have some capacity for sentience. This is because moral rights are protections designed to protect rights holders from harms or to provide them with benefits which matter *to them*. Only beings capable of sentience can be harmed or benefitted in ways which matter to them, for only such beings can like or dislike what happens to them or prefer some conditions to others." (Warren, 351)

But, let's take a step back. The "well-being" of a thing is improved, or increased, when it obtains a GOOD; or when something GOOD happens to it. What does this MEAN? Taylor's answer to the question of what is "good" for an organism is that it:

"realizes the full development of its biological powers"; e.g., it is GOOD for an organism to be "strong and healthy ... possess[ing] whatever capacities it needs for successfully coping with its environment and so preserving its existence throughout the various stages of the normal life cycle of its species."

But, if THAT is right, then even PLANTS have "well-being"! The sentientist pre-supposes that LIKING or DISLIKING what happens, or PREFERRING some states to others, etc., is REQUIRED in order to have a level of well-being. Taylor disagrees, writing,

"The idea of a being having a good of its own, as I understand it, does not entail that the being must have interests or take an interest in what affects its life for better or for worse. We can act in a being's interest or contrary to its interest without its being interested in what we are doing to it in the sense of wanting or not wanting us to do it. It may, indeed, be wholly unaware that favorable and unfavorable events are taking place in its life. I take it that trees, for example, have no knowledge or desires or feelings. Yet it is undoubtedly the case that trees can be harmed or benefited by our actions. We can crush their roots by running a bulldozer too close to them. We can see to it that they get adequate nourishment and moisture by fertilizing and watering the soil around them. Thus we can help or hinder them in the realization of their good. It is the good of trees themselves that is thereby affected. ... When construed in this way, the concept of a being's good is not coextensive with sentience or the capacity for feeling pain."

According to Taylor, all it takes to have well-being is to be “teleological center of life”:

Teleological Center of Life (TCL): As Taylor puts it, “a unified system of goal-oriented activities directed toward their preservation and well-being.”

[From the Greek word, *telos*, meaning ‘purpose, design, aim/end toward which a thing is directed’, Taylor’s line of thought seems to descend from Aristotle: Roughly, each living thing has GOODS—i.e., states of being in which that thing would rightly be said to FLOURISH—and the purpose of each thing is to SEEK or ACHIEVE those goods, and the natural behaviors of each living thing will be DIRECTED toward them. According to Aristotle, plants had ‘nutritive’ ends only (nutrition and growth), while animals also had ‘appetitive’ ends (i.e., desires), while humans had these two as well as ‘rational’ ends (e.g., wisdom, understanding, temperance of the appetites, etc.)]

Intrinsic Value: If a thing can be made better or worse off (i.e., can obtain GOODS), then it follows that ACHIEVING that good is **inherently valuable**; i.e., the world contains more VALUE—gets BETTER—not because of what it LEADS to, but because the flourishing of an individual is just inherently valuable. It then follows that we have **moral reasons to promote those goods**, and not hinder them.

This line of reasoning is pretty uncontroversial in an anthropocentric context:

“When we adopt the attitude of respect for persons as the proper (fitting, appropriate) attitude to take toward all persons as persons, we consider the fulfillment of the basic interests of each individual to have intrinsic value. We thereby make a moral commitment to live a certain kind of life in relation to other persons.”

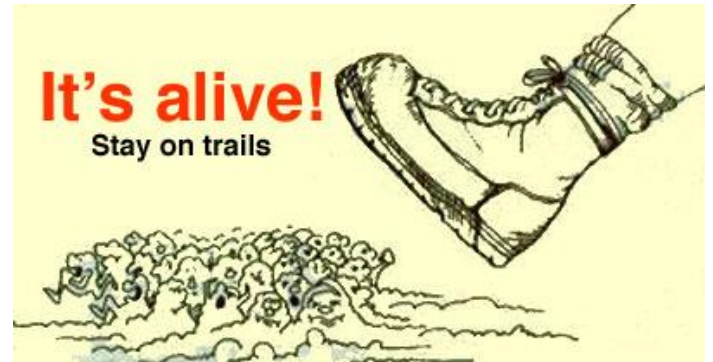
Well, Taylor’s view is just like that—except our commitment extends to **all TCL’s**.

2. WHY Include Non-Sentient Beings?: It may not be immediately obvious WHY Taylor includes all TCL’s, even non-sentient ones. Let me try to motivate it, in two ways:

First, recall the case that I called The Happy Life of Deception—where, unbeknownst to you, all of your loved ones hate you, your achievements are a sham, etc., but you are happy, and, from your perspective, your life is qualitatively indistinguishable from a life where your friends and achievements ARE genuine. To most of us, it seems that the deceived life is WORSE than the undeceived life. But, note: Once we admit this, we have already admitted that a life can be made better or worse WITHOUT THE SUBJECT BEING AWARE OF THIS. If you agree that an individual can be made better or worse off without any change whatsoever to that individual’s mental states, then you are a step closer to agreeing with Taylor.

Second, note that we DO often TALK this way. For instance: “Wow, your house plant isn’t doing so well”; or, “The grass in your yard is really thriving!”; and so on. Or, have you ever seen someone needlessly destroying a shrub or flower or something, and felt moral indignation? That intuition may be an indication that, morally, all life deserves respect.

[I recall, as a boy, we were hiking in Canyonlands National Park in Utah (absolutely beautiful, btw). There were these patches of soil everywhere which “crunched” very satisfyingly when you stepped on them—similar to the satisfaction of popping bubble wrap. Many years later, I found out that these patches of soil were actually ALIVE; known as “[biological soil crust](#)”, they’re colonies of cyanobacteria which take decades to create the crusty scaffolding that I was wrecking gleefully everywhere I found it. When I learned this, I was absolutely horrified, and appalled by my past behavior. Every time I think of it to this day, I am deeply saddened. Do you share this sentiment? If so, does it follow that non-sentient life forms are deserving of our respect?]



Objection: But, aren’t OUR traits the ones that really matter? Surely, things like *intelligence*, capacity for *reason*, and *moral agency*—or at least pleasure and absence of pain (*sentience*)—are the real “goods”! How can mere growth and nutrition be “goods”?

Reply: Good for WHOM? Sure, these things are good for US. Without them, OUR well-being would be diminished. But, the same goes for a **cheetah’s speed** for ITS well-being, or an **eagle’s vision** for ITS well-being, or a **plant’s health** for ITS well-being! We feel as if OUR, uniquely HUMAN talents are somehow “superior”, but that’s a thoroughly narrow-minded and human-centric way of thinking. Taylor writes,

“There is the speed of a cheetah, the vision of an eagle, the agility of a monkey. Why should not these be taken as signs of *their* superiority over humans? One answer that comes immediately to mind is that these capacities are not as *valuable* as the human capacities that are claimed to make us superior. Such uniquely human characteristics as rational thought, aesthetic creativity, autonomy and self-determination, and moral freedom, it might be held, have a higher value than the capacities found in other species. Yet we must ask: **valuable to whom, and on what grounds?** ... If all living things have a good of their own, it at least makes sense to judge the merits of nonhumans by standards derived from *their* good. To use only standards based on human values is already to commit oneself to holding that humans are superior to nonhumans, which is the point in question.”

In short, to say that HUMAN goods are the only goods that matter, morally, is to presuppose an anthropocentric stance (which begs the very question at hand). Instead, Taylor says, when judging whether something is a good for an individual, we must judge it from the standpoint OF THAT INDIVIDUAL (not from OUR standpoint).

[*Just imagine the absurdity of a cheetah, if it could speak, looking at us and saying, "Look how slow they are! Their lives must not be any good; must not have any value."*]

Our ability to reason is merely an *instrumental* good *for us*. Speed is an *instrumental* good *for a cheetah*. But, what is INHERENTLY GOOD is simply for a being (ANY being) to flourish, to thrive—and different organisms flourish and thrive best via different abilities.

Let's Recognize Our Place: Another route to understanding Taylor's view is to question our tendency to feel superior to all other living things. It can help to recognize that:

(1) We're newcomers. Life on this planet has existed for nearly 4 billion years. But, consider even JUST the amount of time that the animal kingdom has existed. (The first animals appeared around 600 million years ago, at the brink of the Cambrian Explosion, when most of the phyla within today's animal kingdom first appeared). If we shoved that length of time into a football field: Sharks (3/4 length of field), reptiles (halfway), mammals (1/3rd length of field), hominids (2 feet from end zone), humans (6 inches!).

We look down on the dinosaurs as being the failed former rulers of the Earth. But even if we survive another MILLION years, we as a species still won't have lived 1% of the length of time that the dinosaurs did! In terms of flourishing, which species is superior?

(2) Asymmetry. We subjugate plants and animals as if they are inferior, but realize this: OUR species' well-being DEPENDS on them. Meanwhile, THEY do not depend on US at all! In fact, they'd all be much better off, were we to disappear immediately. But, if they disappeared suddenly, mass suffering and death would ensue, and likely even extinction. In terms of self-sufficiency and needs, then, which species hold the REAL power?

But... I'm Praiseworthy! You might STILL have a lingering suspicion that human beings have greater inherent worth than other living things because we have MORAL AGENCY. We, among all living things, have the unique ability to consider moral reasons, and can be held morally accountable (blameworthy or praiseworthy) for our actions—we are, perhaps, the only species that fits this description.

Reply: But, why would this bestow greater inherent WORTH? These days, our intuitions are inclined toward a "meritocracy"—those who MERIT more DESERVE more. (*Those who merit more will receive higher grades in this course, for instance.*) But, meriting praise or reward in certain contexts does entail greater INHERENT WORTH. On the contrary, the common sentiment is that even someone who merits nothing—perhaps even has done many terrible things, *meriting punishment*—is still of EQUAL WORTH as other human beings. In short, merit—even the merits that come from exercising our moral agency to do praiseworthy deeds—has nothing to do with inherent value.

3. Conclusion: In argument form:

Argument for Biocentric Egalitarianism

1. If something has an objective good of its own, then it should be given moral consideration (i.e., morally, its ends deserve some degree of respect).
2. Each living thing (or “teleological center of life”) has an objective good of its own.
3. Therefore, we should treat all living things (TCL’s) with respect.*

* But, notice that (a) ALL TCL’s have the trait of being a TCL *equally*, (b) The objective good of a living thing is determined from ITS standpoint; i.e., there is no privileged standpoint, such that the good of one organism is “better” than the good of some other organism. For these reasons, Taylor concludes that all TCL deserve **EQUAL respect**.

Effectively, Taylor takes a Kantian view—where we should never treat others (humans) as mere means to an end, but rather treat them with respect, as ends in themselves—but extends it to all living organisms. Thus, we have a duty to respect ALL life, and avoid treating ANY living thing as a mere means.

[Note: This does not mean that we have a duty to LOVE nature. For instance, even if you do not LOVE a human being, you are still, nevertheless, morally obligated not to kill them, harm them, or enslave them, for this would diminish their well-being, as well as their ability to achieve the ends that are good for them. Similarly, it does not matter whether or not you love or hate nature. You nevertheless have a duty to act in such a way that you do not diminish living organism’s ability to achieve the ends that are good for them.]

[Brainstorm: Taylor speaks of a plant “**striving** to preserve itself and to realize its own good ... Conscious or not ... each is a unified system of goal-oriented activities directed toward their preservation and well-being.”

But, consider: Is a **salt crystal** “directed toward” producing box-shaped crystals? Does it “flourish” if it has lots of sodium and chlorine to keep doing so? Does an **oxygen atom** (with a charge of -2) “want” to bond to 2 hydrogens (each having +1 charge) to reach a “stable” neutral charge? Does oxygen “flourish” when it is supplied with hydrogen in order to produce water? Or, do **magnets** “want” two of their oppositely-charged poles to come together, but NOT “want” their samely-charged poles to come together? Do I violate their “interests” or diminish their well-being when I try to shove the samely-charged ends of two magnets together? We often say things like, “Your car isn’t doing so well. It needs a tune-up.” Does my car have INTERESTS? Are these things engaging in “goal-oriented activities”? Are their actions “directed toward” their own well-being? In short, why stop at LIVING things? Can’t Taylor’s logic be extended farther?

Taylor would probably say that we are mistakenly personifying these things, but why then wouldn’t this same reply apply to his conclusion about plants?]

Objections to Biocentrism (Schmidtz)

1. Against Equal Moral Standing for All Life: Here is a question: If all species have equal inherent value, and therefore all deserve equal treatment, then are we morally justified in killing another individual (e.g., a potato plant) in order to save our own lives? Does biocentrism entail that eating a potato is WRONG!?

Reply: Consider: Someone is coming at you with a gun. Is it morally permissible to kill them in self-defense? Most would say yes. But, this does not entail that you have more inherent worth than your attacker. It only entails that it is permissible to kill another individual (despite their inherent worth) in a kill-or-be-killed situation, regardless of the inherent worth of the other individual. Therefore, eating plants to survive is permissible.

[My objection: But, the potato isn't coming at me with a knife! Eating vegetables is NOT an act of self-defense, and so cannot be justified on these grounds.]

Rebuttal: But, even granting that killing a potato is justified on grounds of something like self-defense: Even so, even if it IS permissible to kill in a kill-or-be-killed situation, if ALL species have EQUAL inherent worth (as Taylor claims), then it is NO WORSE to kill a pig for food than it is to kill a potato. There is no reason to prefer using MICE in an experiment rather than chimpanzees, or even humans. This seems counter-intuitive.

Imagine someone who cared for all living things equally—caring for the well-being of, say, a malaria-carrying mosquito equally to that of a human being. “We would regard the person’s caring as a **parody** of respect for nature.” (emphasis mine)

The Source of the Problem: It seems that Taylor is saying something like this:

1. All living things have property X (where X = teleological centers of life).
2. Property X is morally important.
3. Therefore, all living things have equal moral importance.

This conclusion does not follow, even if the premises are true. For, it might turn out that there are some species that have ADDITIONAL properties (call them Y and Z), which are ALSO morally important. For instance, it might be that:

Vegetative species = X (teleological centers of life)

Animal species = X+Y (teleological centers of life AND capable of suffering)

Rational species = X+Y+Z (teleological centers of life AND capable of suffering AND capable of reason, understanding and exercising moral claims, worthy of moral praise and blame, etc.)

If Y and Z are also morally important (as they seem to be), then species do not all have equal moral value. A healthy potato, a pig, and a person may all have equal value insofar as they are all LIVING things that have achieved a good. But, pigs and people are MORE than that (for instance, a pig can take PLEASURE in its health, whereas a tree cannot).

“swine can take pleasure in its health but trees cannot. Animals have a plant’s capacities, plus more. In turn, humans ... have an animal’s capacities plus more.”

Reply: Taylor would say: Yes, there are additional things that are good FOR animals or FOR humans. But, insofar as an organism achieves all of its goods, that is of equal worth compared to any other organism achieving all its goods. A plant achieving health and long life is EXACTLY AS GOOD as a human achieving health, long life, happiness, lack of suffering, rationality, virtue, and so on. [*Do you agree?*]

Rebuttal: We’re not necessarily assuming that human ends are SUPERIOR, but rather just that we have MORE of them. WE TOO flourish when we grow, and are healthy, and produce offspring, and so on... AND MORE than that. To assume that X amount of good PLUS MORE goods (Y+Z) doesn’t entail MORE VALUE than X alone is just as question-begging as Taylor accuses anthropocentrism of being.

2. Against Inherent Worth of All Life: But, furthermore, it’s not even clear that merely being alive is inherently valuable or morally significant in the first place! After all, a tree doesn’t CARE if we chop it down. From the tree’s perspective, it makes no difference to it whether it lives or dies—simply because it HAS NO perspective. As Schmidtz writes of trees, “It is literally true that they could not care less” what happens to them.

We may have the intuition that someone who chops down a tree for no reason is bad, or acting wrongly. But, there are other explanations for this besides Taylor’s:

- (a) It is **instrumentally valuable** to preserve some trees, since doing so will provide us with shade, or oxygen, or fruit, or a flourishing habitat to live in.
- (b) Schmidtz suggests that a fully developed, self-aware, introspective, empathetic human being WILL automatically care about plants, or even inanimate objects—insofar as those things exhibit properties or inspire sentiments that we value. For instance, when you see a redwood tree, it may inspire awe, and we may appreciate it because of its impressive size or age, or beauty. Senseless destruction **betrays something about YOU, the destroyer**. Namely, that you lack an attitude of respect for the world around you, in the same way that a vandal does. Schmidtz writes, “Destroying something for no good reason is (at best) the moral equivalent of vandalism.”

Note that neither of these explanations entail that the TREE has inherent value, or is deserving of our respect or moral consideration.

For, these are the same sorts of reasons that would explain our disgust if someone senselessly destroyed, say, the Roman Coliseum, or Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, or a good bottle of wine, or a television, and so on. These things are all inanimate, but are (a) instrumentally valuable to us, and (b) the sorts of things that anyone with a developed sense of empathy and respect would refrain from destroying. Schmidtz writes, "For a human being, to lack a broad respect for living things and beautiful things and well-functioning things is to be stunted in a way."

But, none of this entails that these things have INHERENT VALUE. As Schmidtz puts it, "Being able to marvel at living things is not the same as thinking all species have moral standing." (*Note: Some would reject this claim.*) Ultimately, our moral duties to not destroy these things boil down to our duty to not senselessly vandalize. THIS, Schmidtz says, is why we ought to respect nature, and NOT because all species have equal worth.

[Taylor's argument is self-refuting? At one point Schmidtz seems to suggest that the very existence of Taylor's argument—the mere fact that someone like Taylor could SUGGEST that all species are equal—proves that not all species are equal. He writes, "our capacity to see ourselves as equal may be one of the things that makes us superior." ...Wait, what?]