

Anthropocentrism

1. People, Not Penguins: Consider the following statement.

Our use of DDT in food production is harming the penguin population.

How should we react? A common reaction is that, clearly, we ought to STOP using DDT! (...As if this just FOLLOWS automatically from the fact that DDT is harming penguins.)

But, William Baxter points out, this does NOT follow automatically. Some other moral assumptions are required. Here are some moral assumptions that he makes:

- (1) **We Should Not Treat Others as Mere Means:** Following Kant, every human being deserves to be treated as an end in themselves, with dignity and respect, rather than as a mere means.

(Like Kant, Baxter has in mind ONLY human beings here. For, a big part of what grounds our inherent worth, deserving of respect, is that we are autonomous, moral beings—i.e., beings capable of making moral decisions, and being morally responsible for our own behavior. Animals do not fit this description, and so Kant's maxim does not apply to them.)

- (2) **Individual Autonomy:** Every person should be free to do whatever they want, so long as they are not harming others (i.e., other human beings).

(Because YOU are an autonomous moral being, others owe it to you to not interfere with you. But, because OTHERS are ALSO autonomous moral beings, you owe it to them to not interfere with them. Sometimes it is said, "My freedom to swing my fist ends where your nose begins.")¹

What would THESE principles entail that we ought to do in response to the news that DDT is harming penguins? Answer: No.

¹ He makes two more assumptions as follows, though they seem less relevant to his conclusion:

(3) **Waste is a Bad Thing:** Resources, labor, skill, etc., should be employed so as to yield maximum (human) satisfaction.

(4) **Opportunity & Incentive:** Baxter thinks this follows from the "waste is bad" claim. In effect, we should try to optimize productivity. To do this, there needs to be equal OPPORTUNITY for everyone to improve their own well-being, as well as an INCENTIVE for doing so.

(For this reason, Baxter opposes imposing absolute equality by, say, taking everyone's excess wealth and perfectly re-distributing it so that everyone has equal wealth. Though, he admits, we might need SOME re-distribution to prevent total deprivation and loss of opportunity. A starving person has no ability to be productive, so we should save them.)

2. Against Widening the Scope of Morality: Baxter's initial moral proposal explicitly extends ONLY to human beings. Now, we MIGHT suggest that our moral consideration ought to be widened, or extended to include other living things, like animals, or even trees and plants. Baxter opposes such a move. He gives a number of reasons why, and those reasons seem to fall into one of three categories; namely, doing so would be:

- (i) Inconsistent / hypocritical
- (ii) Absurd / incoherent, or
- (iii) Too costly

Let's look at each of these in turn.

(i) Extending moral consideration beyond humans would be hypocritical.

Let's be honest: This is not how people *actually think and behave*. Most people do not live their lives as if their moral obligations extend to animals or plants. And even those who CLAIM to believe this often behave in ways that are inconsistent with such a claim. For instance, those who think it is wrong to use pesticides that harm penguins will have factory-farmed meat for dinner. Or, those who think it's wrong for a factory to emit fumes that harm some nearby forest then purchase a home where a forest is destroyed in order to build it. And so on.

(But, how people DO in fact behave has no bearing on the question of how they OUGHT to behave. To suggest otherwise is to commit the 'is-ought' fallacy. Put differently, the fact that people DO eat factory-farmed meat doesn't entail that it is morally PERMISSIBLE to do so. It might be the case that we really SHOULD stop using DDT – and the people who say this while contributing to animal suffering elsewhere might just be hypocrites.)

(ii) Extending moral consideration beyond humans would be incoherent.

Morality simply does not apply to non-humans. There is no right or wrong in nature. It is not "wrong" for an avalanche to destroy a forest, or for a lion to eat a gazelle, and so on. Morality is a HUMAN matter. It would be absurd to extend it to non-humans.

Also, if non-human organisms have moral standing, then impossible questions arise: Like, How much do their interests count? i.e., how should their interests be weighed against our own? How can we know what their interests even ARE? After all, they can't *communicate* them to us. So, perhaps someone should DECIDE what their interests are? If so, who? Should we ELECT some people to represent the interests of animals, and trees, etc.? All of this sounds absurd.

Furthermore, to pre-suppose that we ought to protect 'nature' is to pre-suppose that there is a "right" way for nature to be (and a wrong way). But, is there a morally "right" state of the Earth? If so, was it "wrong" for plants to alter the Earth's atmosphere to make it contain more Oxygen? If we should restore the atmosphere to its FORMER or NATURAL state, which state does this refer to? Its state before the industrial revolution? Or, the state which lacked Oxygen, before plants changed this?

Even concerning pollution: Is there some "right" amount of particulates in the air, or some "correct" chemical composition of it? That's absurd. Furthermore, air, water, etc., is always going to have SOME level of pollutants in it—so, the real question is, what is the OPTIMAL level of pollution?

(The clearest answer, according to Baxter, is: Whatever benefits US most. Sure, we have an interest in breathing and drinking without being poisoned, but we ALSO have an interest in doing things that release contaminants. These conflict. So, we should simply strive for whichever level of pollutants optimally serves human interests.)

(iii) Extending moral consideration beyond humans would be too costly.

Any reduction in the level of pollution will COST us something—some money, or resource, etc., which we'll have to forego, sacrificing some of our other interests in order to achieve it. For instance, should we spend \$1million to save the penguins over here rather than \$1 million to help uninsured children get health care over there? There has to be some balance between these two goals (i.e., where our desired goal is one where the air/water is polluted to some extent).

We NEED shelter, food, and education. But, building homes and schools, or growing crops—these all require money, and resources, and bulldozing trees, and so on. So, ultimately, it's all a trade-off. We're going to inevitably destroy SOME of nature and SOME non-human organisms in the pursuit of our own goods. The question, then, simply becomes, what is the OPTIMAL amount of destruction of nature in order to fulfill these needs? Baxter's answer, once again: Whatever maximizes the fulfillment of human interests.

3. Anthropocentric Environmentalism?: As you can see, Baxter's position is a very **anthropocentric** one. We ought to promote human interests in all that we do, and the interests of other organisms are of no concern, morally. As Baxter puts it, he has "no interest in preserving penguins for their own sake." For, on his view, non-human animals (not to mention plants, geological formations, etc.) have no moral standing, no intrinsic value; what happens to them is morally irrelevant.

...But, wait. Baxter DOES actually conclude that we DO have some moral reasons to act in ways that would benefit non-humans. How in the heck is this consistent with his view?

Consider: A thing needn't have INHERENT worth in order for you to have a moral reason not to destroy it. For instance, I have a moral reason not to destroy your family heirloom (say, a pocketwatch)—not because of the effects that destroying it would have on the WATCH, but because of effects that this would have on YOU, the human being.

In short, your heirloom has **instrumental** value even if it lacks **intrinsic** value.

Baxter says something similar of penguins: What happens to them is morally relevant only insofar as it affects HUMANS. They are **instrumentally** valuable to human beings. Baxter puts it simple: "penguins are important because people enjoy seeing them walk about rocks." So, it follows that we should stop using DDT and save penguins only if WE want to—but not for THEIR sake.

You might think that this proposal is thoroughly antithetical to environmentalism. But is it? As Baxter notes, "what is good for humans is, in many respects, good for penguins and pine trees—clean air for example." The idea is that, if we adopt policies and behave in ways that are best for human beings, we'll inadvertently be doing what's generally best for the environment too.

For instance, you might have moral reasons to save a dog because we love it (and its existence gives you joy), or preserve a tree because it is providing shade to your yard (which you enjoy), or protect the Amazon because scientists suspect it harbors the cure for cancer (which would benefit millions of human beings).

Fewer contaminants in the air, or water, would promote HUMAN health—but this would be good for plants and animals too. HUMANS would benefit if we put a halt to climate change—but this would be good for most plants and animals too. We should protect the fish populations of the ocean because we want to keep eating them. And so on.

(Note: This is Bryan Norton's 'Convergence Hypothesis'; i.e., the hypothesis that a moral system which says that only human interests matter will entail just as much conservation of the environment as a more inclusive moral system. Whether we should preserve a forest so humans can use it, or preserve a forest "for its own sake", what's the difference?)

Do you agree? Will ALL human-centric behaviors also automatically benefit non-humans? Factory-farming? Animal experimentation? Logging? Strip-mining? And so on?)

[Final Thoughts: What do you think? Are there any moral reasons to protect the interests of animals, or to promote the flourishing of plants or ecosystems, or to preserve wild or natural landscapes, etc., independent of the desires or interests of human beings? Baxter has given us some HUMAN-centric reasons to care about penguins. But, are there any PENGUIN-centric reasons to care about penguins? If so, what sorts of reasons could they be? What form would these reasons or duties take, and why?

*Here's a thought: Penguins are capable of being made better off, or worse off (i.e., their lives can be made more good, or less good). For example, they are capable of **suffering**, and suffering seems to make them worse off. Does that matter, morally?*

*Here's a proposal: Suffering is bad, and we have moral reasons to prevent the bad, **wherever it occurs** – not ONLY when it is occurring in a human being, but in ANY organism. Is that plausible? Think about it, because we'll be studying this proposal very soon, when we read an essay by Peter Singer.]*