Biocentrism (Taylor)

So far, we’ve had a subjective conception of well-being, consisting of having certain mental states (e.g., happiness, desire satisfaction). But, one might have an objective conception of well-being (i.e., consisting of anything other than mental states). The biocentrist defines well-being in terms of an organism’s “flourishing”.

**1. Well-Being:** Is it possible that well-being is not completely dependent upon certain mental states? Consider, which of the following two lives would be “better”?

(a) A normal, happy life where everything you believe is true.
(b) An equally happy life, but one where your “friends” actually hate you, your significant other cheats on you constantly, etc., but you never find out.

In both of these lives, assume that your mental states and beliefs are the same in both instances. If we think life (a) is BETTER, then this implies that it is possible to lead a “worse” life without any change in your mental states; i.e., this implies that well-being is not MERELY grounded in mental states.

This is consistent with Taylor’s conception of well-being. He writes, “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.”

Taylor suggests that 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. It possesses 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, then, even plants have “well-being” that can be promoted or harmed. He writes: “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.”

Note that this does, in part, capture the way we often talk; e.g., of house plants (“Wow, that house plant isn’t doing so well”), or even bacteria (“This bacteria is really thriving!”). Indeed, Taylor intends to include ALL living things (all “teleological centers of life”):

**Teleological Center of Life (TCL):** Any being that we can harm or benefit in such a way that either diminishes or enhances its ability to flourish.
2. **Inherent Worth**: Taylor believes this view of well-being to indicate that all living organisms (all TCL’s) have inherent worth. If some organism is capable of having a “good” life, then that life is inherently valuable for that organism as an “end in itself”. That is, it is good for that organism to flourish, not because of what it LEADS TO, but because its flourishing is itself valuable.

3. **The Moral Duty to Respect Nature**: Taylor then draws the conclusion that, if an organism has a well-being that can be promoted or diminished—which in turn entails that the organism has inherent worth—then this gives us a moral reason to take that inherently valuable well-being into consideration when deciding how we ought to act. Furthermore, we should never treat that organism as merely instrumentally good; a thing to be used however we want for our own ends, or purposes.

This is exactly like the Kantian way of looking at things, but expanded to all living organisms. For instance, Kant said that we should never treat others (humans) as a mere means to an end. Rather, we should respect the fact that others each have their OWN ends, and when we use others as mere means, we fail to respect this.

But, if ALL organisms have their own ends, then it stands to reason that we should respect the ends of ALL organisms (or, TCL’s).

This is somewhat in accordance with our ordinary intuitions. For instance, haven’t you ever had a friend who destroyed a bush or shrub or something, and you felt moral indignation? That intuition may be an indication that, morally, all life deserves respect.

Note that this does not mean that we have 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, because this would diminish their well-being, and would diminish that persons’ 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.

4. **Equal Respect for All TCL’s**: Taylor furthermore believes that we have a moral duty to respect all life EQUALLY. He asks, why should we think human beings are so special? We’ve ALL evolved on this planet, and so we’re ALL just organisms with our own individual goods. What’s more, human beings are LATECOMERS to the scene. Our species (homo sapiens) has only been here for about a million years, give or take. But, life has been here on Earth several thousand times longer than that (BILLIONS of years!).
We tend to “look down” on other species, but why? We think of dinosaurs as biological failures, but they reigned the Earth for 65 MILLION YEARS!

Value of Intelligence? Yet, there is a lingering sentiment that human beings ARE more special or important that all other creatures. Why? Because we have something that they do not? For instance, greater intelligence? But, cheetahs have greater speed; eagles have greater vision; and monkeys have greater agility. Is intelligence somehow more VALUABLE? Taylor asks, “Valuable to whom, and on what grounds?” Certainly, intelligence is valuable TO US, since we use it to create civilizations and so on. He accuses humans of taking what is the greatest good FOR HUMANS and generalizing to the world and saying that intelligence is the greatest good FOR THE WORLD. But, that is a mistake. (One could imagine that a cheetah, for instance, if it could talk, would take one look at humans and say, “Them? They think THEY’RE the best? But, they are so SLOW!”)

Intelligence is an INSTRUMENTAL good (for us), while speed is an INSTRUMENTAL good (for a cheetah). What is truly INHERENTLY GOOD for a being is that it flourish—and different organisms flourish best given different abilities. A fast but mentally disabled human would probably not flourish very well; meanwhile, an intelligent, but physically disabled cheetah would probably not flourish very well either.

Value of Moral Agency? Another common sentiment is that human beings are more valuable than other animals because of our moral AGENCY. We have the 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.

But, Taylor asks, why would this be? Is it because human beings can have moral merit? If other species are not moral agents (but are only moral PATIENTS), then this does not make them deficient in moral merit. It just makes them a DIFFERENT sort of being—one which is neither blameworthy nor praiseworthy for its actions.

Superiority Based on Merit is Discrimination: If we were to claim that one human being was superior to another based on some property (e.g., intelligence, speed, etc.; or worse, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, income, and so on), we would call this DISCRIMINATION. We typically think that all human beings have the same degree of inherent worth—we believe in “universal human rights”—and whenever others have thought otherwise in the past, it has resulted in terrible racism, sexism, and so on.
But, Taylor claims, this anti-discriminatory stance should then be applied to ALL life. If humans are not superior or inferior to one another based on their various merits, properties, and so on, then neither should plants and animals be thought of as inferior due to differences in these sorts of traits.

5. Conclusion: The following argument sums up Taylor’s stance:

1. Each living thing (or “teleological center of life”) has an objective good of its own.
2. 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).
3. The objective good of one living thing is of no more inherent moral worth than that of any other living thing (to think otherwise is a kind of prejudice).
4. Therefore, we should treat all living things (TCL’s) with equal respect.

6. Objection: Do plants really act in GOAL-directed ways (e.g., he speaks of a plant “striving to preserve itself and to realize its own good”)? Science might say that they act merely out of chemical reaction, etc. So, are we somehow personifying the “desires, goals, etc.” of plants? Taylor states that, “Conceiving of it [i.e., a TCL] as a center of life, one is able to look at the world from its perspective.” But, what is a plant’s perspective of the world? Arguably, it does not have ANY perspective. Doesn’t one require mental states in order to even HAVE a perspective? By attributing a perspective to, say, a carrot, we may in fact be mistakenly putting some of our own emotion and belief into the inanimate organisms.

Reply: Taylor denies this accusation, saying, “Conscious or not ... each is a unified system of goal-oriented activities directed toward their preservation and well-being.”

Rebuttal: But, consider, say, a salt crystal. It seems to be “directed toward” producing box-shaped crystals, and might be said to “flourish” if it has lots of sodium and chlorine to keep doing so. Or, consider an oxygen atom, which has a charge of -2. It seems to “want” to bond to 2 hydrogens (each having a charge of +1) in order to reach a “stable” neutral charge. So, does oxygen “flourish” best when it is supplied with hydrogen in order to produce water? Similarly, magnets “want” two of their oppositely-charged poles to come together, but do NOT “want” their samely-charged poles to come together. So, do I violate their “interests” when I try to shove the samely-charged ends of two magnets together, or in some sense diminish their well-being? It seems that many things in nature have TENDENCIES, but this does not make them “goal-oriented” nor does it make the fulfillment of those tendencies in some sense “good” for that thing. To think otherwise is to personify that thing.
Reply: Might the same thing be said of humans? Someday we could probably reduce our talk of human beings to physics, chemistry, etc. But, surely this would not entail that human beings have no moral standing.

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?

One might initially think that such an action is NOT morally justified on the biocentric view. But, consider: Someone is coming at you with a gun. Is it morally permissible to kill them in self-defense? Most would say yes. But, admitting that it is permissible to kill another human being in a kill-or-be-killed situation does not entail that you have more inherent worth than your attacker. It only entails that it is permissible to kill another individual in a kill-or-be-killed situation, regardless of the inherent worth of the other individual.

But, perhaps you are worried that the attacker is an EVIL attacker (or one that is attempting to do something morally WRONG). If so, consider:

• Falling Down A Well: You are working at the bottom of a narrow well. Suddenly, another person is pushed by a gust of wind from the top of the well. This person is large enough that they will crush you if they fall on you (but, they will live, since your body will break their fall). As it happens, you have a ray gun which could atomize the falling person (annihilate them into atomic dust). If you shoot them with the ray gun as they are falling toward you, you will remain unharmed.

Is it morally permissible to zap this person with your ray gun? Most would say yes. This indicates that it is permissible to kill another person in a kill-or-be-killed situation EVEN IF THEY ARE INNOCENT.

But, now, here is another problem: Even if it IS permissible to kill in a kill-or-be-killed situation, and we MUST kill other species in order to survive (e.g., fruits, vegetables, animals, etc.), if biocentrism is true (such that ALL species have inherent worth), it turns out that it is NO WORSE to kill a pig for food than it is to kill a potato. This seems counter-intuitive.
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.

The conclusion does not follow, even if the premises are true. For, it might turn out that there are some species that have properties Y and Z, and these are ALSO morally important. For instance, it might be that:

- (X) Vegetative species are teleological centers of life.
- (X+Y) Animal species are teleological centers of life AND more (e.g., capable of suffering)
- (X+Y+Z) Rational species are teleological centers of life AND capable of suffering AND more (e.g., capable of reason, understanding and exercising moral claims, worthy of moral praise and blame, etc.)

And it may turn out that Y and Z are also morally important; in which case, not all species have equal moral importance. While it is true that, insofar as a pig and a tree are both LIVING (or, both flourish when HEALTHY), they may have equal moral standing. But, a pig is capable of so much MORE than that (for instance, a pig can take PLEASURE in its health, whereas a tree cannot).

2. Against Inherent Worth of All Life: But, is merely “being alive” a property that deserves respect at all? 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. Sure, it could obviously be instrumentally valuable to preserve trees, since doing so will provide us with shade, or oxygen, or fruit, or a flourishing habitat to live in. But, is there anything intrinsically valuable about trees? Does anything intrinsically bad occur if I destroy a plant?

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. Insofar as we respect these properties of trees, if we destroy them anyway, we fail to act in accordance with that respect.
In short, someone who carelessly chops down a redwood tree without a thought either:

- Respects the tree, but fails to act in accordance with this respect
- Does not respect the tree, and so fails to exhibit fully human characteristics

The same could be said of, say, ancient Greek buildings or ancient manuscripts. These things are inanimate, but still seem worthy of some degree of respect. Destroying them either contradicts this respect, or reveals that the destroyer is not very conscientious, or does not fully appreciate the world around them the way a human being should. He 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, the fact that human virtue demands that we respect living, beautiful, well-functioning things does not entail that all of these things should be given EQUAL MORAL CONSIDERATION. Or, as Schmidtz puts it, “Being able to marvel at living things is not the same as thinking all species have moral standing.” So, he concludes that, “Destroying something for no good reason is (at best) the moral equivalent of vandalism.” So, our moral duties to nature simply boil down to our duty to not needlessly vandalize it. THIS, Schmidtz says, is why we ought to have “respect for nature”, and NOT because all species have equal worth.