

**THE CHALLENGE OF A GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL
PHILOSOPHY TO HUMANISM: REEVALUATION OF COSMOPOLITAN
ETHICS**

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Introduction

This paper proposes that ecocentric cosmopolitanism is more in line with the notion implied and expressed by ‘cosmopolitan’ (world citizen). The world includes the biosphere taken as a whole, and being an ecocentric cosmopolitan is being a citizen of the whole world. We are residents in the world, which consists of several environments. Being a citizen of the world implies an allegiance to the world, not simply to one particular culture. Indeed, living in harmony with the environment is a standard by which to judge cultures. I will argue that an ecocentric ethics is the only universal ethic, and thus the only one that can meet the test of universality required for a rational ethic.

Adopting an ecocentric cosmopolitan ethic would dissolve the distinction of humanist ethics and environmental ethics.

Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is an ethic that emerged in Hellenic Greece when the intellectual and tribal barriers between the city-states were breaking down. The cross-fertilization of ideas, which followed the mixing of people and thinkers from different regions, precipitated a crisis in belief. Since different cities practiced different customs, which were best? Which of the varied customs of different city-state were 'right'? The problematic of human nature emerged from this reflection and in part as an answer to it. Human nature as *zoion ekhon logon*, the rational animal, was an abstraction from all cultures, which transcended the particular cities. Irrespective of individual varieties, language capacity and rationality as such distinguished all humans. While each city had its distinctive customs, at a higher-level, humans are alike in nature. Cosmopolitan ethics is also universal, for reason is a universal capacity of humans in all cultures.

Once such a nature had been abstracted, it became a standard by which philosophers could judge particular cultures and their practices as natural or unnatural.^[1] Since this standard was independent of any one culture, it led to a certain intellectual liberation from cultural and tribal ethics.^[2] The denouement was the birth of the cosmopolitan philosopher, the 'citizen of the world'.^[3] Cosmopolitan philosophers rejected identification with any narrow culture, since their allegiance was to human nature as a whole.

The cosmopolitan is at home everywhere in the world: a 'world-citizen', and also open to the world. Cultural exclusivity is closed to the world, since what is alien to the culture is excluded as foreign. Cultural ethics is not cosmopolitan in either the literal sense of being a citizen of the world, since all mores come from the tribe; nor in the sense connoted by the spirit of cosmopolitanism. Since they reject the closed-mindedness of tribal culture, cosmopolitans are open to practices of different cultures, from different parts of the world than their natal culture. Thus a cosmopolitan ethic includes living in the world and being part of that world. Another virtue is tolerance. The cosmopolitan tolerates ways of life and customs different than those s/he practices. Although the cosmopolitan may not personally endorse every cultural practice - for this would be impossible, if only because of variety - s/he recognizes that such variety is itself good, if basic, universal ethical norms are not violated. Cultural variety means more kinds of goods.

A tension emerged between the ethical standard of nature and the tolerance of cultural forms and varieties, which are the essence of humanistic cosmopolitanism. The nature-law (nature/custom) distinction at the basis of Cosmopolitan Ethics favors nature as the standard, not law. The cosmopolitan is more loyal to nature than culture. This tension resulted in a certain cynicism among the ancient cosmopolitans, e.g., Diogenes. Cosmopolitans became cynical of cultural practices not 'in accord with nature'. Thus, Diogenes went about "clothed in nature," lived in a tub not a house and acted as a gadfly toward his culture. The distinction of culture and nature and loyalty to nature is also at the root of the environmental movement. However, the emergence of the latter required an intervening historical sensibility.

Moral Progress

The idea of moral progress envisions the expansion of moral ‘considerability’ from a select few men to all humans, sexual minorities, future generations, animals and ultimately to all of non-human nature.^[4] The theoretical development of ethics from the tribe to those beyond has as its logical outcome the extension of moral ‘considerability’ to other species and the biosphere. The hope that humans can extend moral obligation from themselves to animals, other species and the biosphere as a whole, just as they once extended it to those outside the tribe, is the core of environmental ethics. The goal is a humane ethic: all other living things are worthy of being treated justly, with mutual recognition in accordance with the principle of reciprocity.

‘Brownlash’ opponents have attempted to label environmentalism and the ‘green movement’ as an ideology: simply one more political movement. However, it is anthropocentric ‘ethics’, which is ideological, not environmental ethics, as it represents the interests of one species as if it were universal. The interest of one species cannot be universal by definition. Anthropocentric ‘ethics’ is the rationale of totalitarian domination⁵ by one species and in the interests of one species. The ‘domination of nature’ means a world totally organized for human exploitation: here a logging area, there a farm, here a suburban ‘development’, there a ‘wilderness area’ (usually so designated because it is on marginal land). ‘Designated wilderness’, implies it is up to one species to decide what should be left as wilderness.

Human ethics up until the advent of ecocentrism and biocentrism has, like tribal ethics, excluded the great majority in favor of a select minority. By contrast stands

cosmopolitan ethics, the ethics of the 'world citizen' articulated by Diogenes against the notion of belonging to any narrow group. The extension of duty beyond the tribe has its logical outcome in universalization of duty, since moral principles should include all other cultures, which constitutes cosmopolitanism as an ethics. In this ethic, a universal inclusion is contrasted with a narrow exclusion. The word 'cosmopolitan' also connotes the rootedness of humans in the world (cosmos) as basic. As Chief Seattle remarked, humans 'belong to the earth, not the earth to man'. Humans are rooted in their environment in a world that includes other species.

Parallel with cosmopolitan ethics, environmental ethics has attempted to extend moral 'considerability' beyond the species to include animals, plants and the biosphere as a whole. Environmental ethics is the most inclusive ethics, since it includes even landscapes, and is cosmopolitan in the sense of viewing humans as rooted in the world. Environmental ethics combines cosmopolitan ethics of openness to the world and the universality of moral principles with the thesis of extension of 'considerability': moral progress.^[6] However, a change in what is cosmopolitan is connoted, since the logic of 'world-citizen' is taken to include the biosphere as a whole, that is, literally the whole world. Environmental ethics interprets the world to include the biosphere, and all the living things in the world.

The Challenge from Humanism

One of the main issues debated in environmental ethics has been the issue of anthropocentric rights and values as opposed to non-anthropocentric rights and values. Some have argued that only humans have rights or intrinsic value, and that the non-

human world has value only for humans.^[7] Others have argued for a more ecocentric view in which humans are just one species and the biosphere has a value of its own.^[8] Still others have argued for a combination of the two views, for example an extension of human rights to higher animals.^[9] Anthropocentrism is the latest incarnation of classical humanism, since it would make of humans the great exception in the chain of life. To argue that all value emanates from humans, that the entire world is merely of instrumental value for humans is a form of humanism. I am going to address this issue from its justifying ground, namely, the idea that humans are the great exception and thereby entitled to use the world however they desire.

The Hierarchy of Nature as Human Chauvinism

Humanism is any belief that involves the evaluation that humans are at the apex of creation or nature, the top of the hierarchy of beings. Humanists adopted the hierarchical structure and world-view from medieval theism and never questioned but only transformed it. The substitution of humans for God at the apex of creation began with the adaptation of Plato by humanistic Renaissance Neo-Platonists (e.g., Pico della Mirandola) and reached its culmination in atheistic humanism.^[10] In this view, humans are supreme over all other species. Humanism involves an abstraction of humans from the environment, a utopian model also adopted by anthropocentric value theories. It is utopian since in the actual world, humans depend on the environment, not vice versa.

The view of humans as the center of the universe is the worldview of medieval humans. Humanism is only thinkable if it is attached to the notion of the earth as the center of the universe and of humans at the apex of the center. Kopernik exploded this

part of the humanist viewpoint long ago. The discovery of a universe with the sun in a remote arm of a huge galaxy among millions of other galaxies should have demolished this anthropocentric view. Nevertheless, humanism survives. Humanistic thinking is an attempt to return to the archaic pre-modern perspective, a worldview of permanent hierarchy, with humans at the top of a pyramid of species. Humanism is anti-progressive, based on its refusal to extend moral ‘considerability’ to non-human nature. This perspective is ideological, since it takes an arbitrary species difference and attempts to derive a moral absolute from it. Ideology consists in the part masquerading as the whole, i.e. humans representing their ‘interests’ as the interest of the whole. Humanism places humans above the rest of nature and refuses to acknowledge the whole, other species and the environment out of a misplaced anthropocentrism.

The belief that humans are special, and animals, machines is a very recent view. The Greeks thought we were rational animals, a distinct species but a *zoion* nonetheless. For the medievals, God created nature along with humans. The exploitative form of humanism is also modern: that nature is a field for exploitation for humans. The humanists’ claim that humans are special is untenable, given modern scientific findings, viz. evolution. If humans evolved from other species, they cannot be distinguished biologically from other species as especial. Following Darwin modern biology conceives humans as one species among others. Humans evolved from other species and are nothing but fairly clever and successful primates.

Finally, some have argued that humans have ‘transcended’ their environment.^[11] However, humans have not so much “transcended” their environment as transported it. Every breath we take, every drink of water reminds us of our place in the world, if

‘transcend’ is taken to mean beyond the world. Humans still require housing and clothing in temperate and polar climates, for which they are ill suited. We bring our ordinary hot climate with us, by adapting to novel habitats. Humans have no more transcended their environment than the lowly cockroach, which inhabits human dwellings in the same habitats, and could not survive without them. Human flourishing still has environmental conditions. All the novel human values, marvelous though they may be, require an environment. Listening to Mozart, reading Shakespeare and religious practices all take place within an environment. Humans have not transcended their environment, and require one for the practice of such values. Transcendence is a humanist myth.

The view of humans as elevated has neither scientific nor moral warrant. A species that is as dependent upon the environment as any other cannot be privileged. Our need for myths is one source of ‘humanism’, the delusion that we are something more than, in Rorty’s words: ‘clever animals’. To be sure, humans differ from other species, just as any species differs in some respects. Horses also differ from elephants: that is precisely what it means to be a distinct species. Humans are also incapable of certain animal capacities, just as animals may be incapable of certain human ones. The question is, so what? Why is either of these facts morally relevant? What is at issue is whether the differences that characterize one species provide moral warrant. Why is a species difference a unique ethical warrant? It is ‘speciesist’ to count only humans as morally considerable, to speak nothing of violating the basic premise of ethics: the golden rule or some variant. More formally, ethics requires universality or it cannot be rational. Practical universality must include at least the majority of other species, or humans have put themselves in the position of the elite, an ideological stance. Since ethics must be

universal and reciprocal, a species difference cannot provide such a warrant. It is not universal as distinct and unique to a species; not reciprocal as confined to a species.

A Critical Evaluation of Anthropocentrism

Both the Western and Chinese traditions include a humane ethic.^[12] Humanistic ethics is specifically different, but also regulative for the rest of nature by extension, e.g., in mandates to be kind to animals. Humanist ethics, although an advance upon a narrowly tribal ethic, can itself be an exclusionary 'ethic', and thereby the latest form of tribalism when taken as the source of ethics, or where value is confined to humans. An ethic based on anthropocentric values is a species ethic - based on claimed specifically human capacity, whether 'reason', 'self-consciousness', 'language', or other purported capacities exclusive to humans. Usually such posits are not actually exclusive to humans; in any case, they are arbitrary and morally irrelevant. The exclusionary principle, the notion that moral norms apply only to humans is simply human chauvinism masquerading as value theory.

A corollary of humanism is that human supremacy allegedly creates a moral superiority, which entitles humans to dominate all other species. The anthropocentric formulation of this view is that humans alone have intrinsic value; other species are merely instruments of human good. Value theories that confine intrinsic value to humans are based on a hierarchy of value with humans at the apex. Since humans are at the apex of value, they are the highest good in the hierarchy of living things. Humans give value to subordinate species in this view but only if they have value to humans. The value of instruments is in relation to humans alone as intrinsically valuable, creating a hierarchy of

goods in relation to their degree of worth to humans. Thus, destruction of ‘worthless’ land (habitats) for cultivation is ‘justified’ because of its value to the ultimate, supreme end, subjective human states.

Such a hierarchy cannot be used as the basis for a universal ethic, however, without a fallacy in values. The values that differentiate humans are distinct, thus cannot be universal. Human value cannot be the universal value and thereby define value. The intrinsic value of human differences is confined to humans, not to all value. Otherwise, it could not be distinctly human. Humanism cannot thereby serve as a basis for a universal ethic. Human ethics is particular, as ‘speciesist’, and thus can never generate the universality required for rational duties. Specific differences are not universalizable by definition. Since they are not universal, such posits are therefore not necessary and cannot be obligatory.

Species differences are also morally arbitrary, just as tribal, racial and class differences are.^[13] The ‘reasoning’ in human chauvinism is parallel in form to the reasoning used by the racist who argues one race is unique and therefore entitled to subdue/exterminate the other races. The claim is false because humans are not as unique as stated: there are many analogues of human behavior in the animal world and humans are biologically one species among others. It is arbitrary since it is not morally relevant. Even if true, it cannot provide ethical warrant for extermination or subjugation of other species, since this would be immoral. Why should an alleged superiority create a privilege? Alleged human superiority is irrelevant.

Like racism, ‘speciesism’ argues from a dubious premise to an exclusive ethic. One argument for human ‘speciesism’ is that only humans can be moral agents.¹⁴

Humans may be capable of morality but it does not follow that they are essentially moral. Clearly moral capacity is not part of the essence of being human, a species difference, since humans are also capable of the evils of genocide - to speak nothing of crimes against the environment, and the horrendous treatment of animals. Thus moral capacity is not a specific difference on which privileges can be based. Since it is not part of the human essence it is only relevant and valid if some humans actually act morally to other species. The record suggests just the opposite: other species are resources to be used for human convenience. What is almost comic about such arguments is that the alleged exclusive moral agency of humans is argued by some as a warrant to treat animals immorally, i.e., as suitable subjects for experimentation!

It would be as much of a mistake to confuse moral capacity with moral 'considerability' as a moral capacity with an essence. Non-human nature should receive moral 'considerability', even if animals are incapable of certain human capacities. No special human capacity creates the privilege of raping nature but rather the responsibility not to, since it is a moral capacity. A moral capacity involves responsibilities, including a responsibility to treat non-human nature morally. If humans alone have a special moral capacity they should treat other species morally, not with violence or exploitation. Otherwise this so-called capacity is ideological. Humans can't have it both ways (privileged status). If we are moral agents, then mistreating animals is ruled out. For then we are contradicting the premise of moral difference and we cannot claim a special moral status. If on the other hand we are just another predator species, then we cannot make the claim of moral superiority on which human chauvinism rests. Otherwise we are morally hypocritical.

Moreover, proponents of exclusive human moral agency overlook the ‘ethic’ of other species. An ‘ethic’ is a way of life and of living together. All species have a way of life, and many live together, particularly herd animals. Moral agency by this definition is not confined to humans. Moreover, animal parents sometimes sacrifice themselves to preserve their offspring, altruistic behavior that Darwin noted.^[15]

Environmental Ethics as Ecocentric Cosmopolitanism

Ecocentric cosmopolitanism calls for a fuller understanding of human life in its environmental context. It is a platitude that humans require food, clothing, shelter, air and water in order to feel happiness, that is, the environment is the condition of other values. These are the conditions of all life including human life, thus practically necessary as conditions of life. Polluting our air and water, destroying our soil is opposed to our species interest, to speak nothing of other species. However, environmentalists do not think that the entire planet is a simply a field for human exploitation, or in economic terms of self-interest and enrichment. Basing our ethics on human greed does not bring out the best in us. Ecocentric cosmopolitan ethics recognizes the place of humans within a larger whole. Humans have as much value as any other species. A universal ethics includes humans and would attempt to harmonize human life with other life, without overly privileging humans. A specific environment gave rise to life including human life. Ecocentric cosmopolitanism is a revaluation involving the decentering of anthropocentric ethics. The extension of moral ‘considerability’ involved in moral progress expands the field of moral regard.

Ironically, the best of human ethics consists in a moral consciousness and a profound sense of the value of life. The lessons of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Genocide include the moral requirement for cosmopolitan tolerance of and respect for other cultures and ways of life. A merely tribal, anthropocentric reading of these events ignores its central lesson: that tolerance of different ways of life in the world ought to include ways of life of different species. Otherwise we are expanding the circle of moral 'considerability' only to close it: a contradictory, hypocritical movement. In the light of these events, our ethics should be cosmopolitan, and ought to be extended universally, even as we remain members of limited, overlapping communities, e.g., a nation, a family, a job, a religion, an ethnic tradition. Belonging does not exclude toleration; it demands it.

Cosmopolitanism acknowledges the value of distinct cultures while seeking a broader view. The obvious next step in moral development would acknowledge the place of humans in the larger world, just as one particular culture is a small part of a larger whole of all human cultures. An ecocentric cosmopolitanism involves the relation of humans as one part to other parts of the whole, that is, to other species, habitats and the biosphere.

Human domination of the environment has come at too high a price, namely the loss of too many species and habitat destruction. Like a death wish, destruction of our environment is a form of self-destruction, in which even human survival is threatened by the massive destruction of habitats. It could well end in the extinction of the human species through destruction of as yet barely understood processes of ecological dependence in the chain of life, or which results in alteration of the climate, global warming. On pragmatic grounds alone, then, it would be better to halt the rapacious

destruction of the environment. The environment including air, water, and soil are universally required for all life, including human life. What is required is practically necessary; what is universally required is obligatory.^[16] Thus, elements of the environment that are universally necessary to all of life should receive moral priority.

Humans cannot be both superior and dependent: this is the contradiction of anthropocentric ethics. It is not a devaluation of humans to recognize, with Aldo Leopold, that humans are not the ‘masters’ of the environment but plain ‘citizens’ within it. It is a change in perspective comparable in some ways to the Copernican Revolution. Ecocentric cosmopolitan ethics recognizes the value of life, of species and habitats beyond the narrowly human. The advent of ecological ethics marks a whole new orientation for philosophy.

The ultimate denouement of this movement must be that environmental ethics is ethics. Thus the separation of ethics and ecological ethics as genus and species is no longer tenable. Ecological ethics, the ethics of cosmopolitan membership in the world is the only universal ethics and therefore constitutes the new basic framework for ethics.^[17] Environmental ethics also includes social contact between species, not simply within human society. It covers social relations between different social types, humans, higher and lower animals, plants, and the biosphere as a whole. Again, this is not a devaluation of previous ethics, anthropocentrically based, but a fulfillment of the potentiality of ethics: its fullest realization. Ecocentric Cosmopolitanism is the ethics of the future.

Cosmopolitan also includes the principle that the world includes different communities, different cultures and species. Ecocentric stresses the dependence of humans on their environment as much as on technology and culture. Relations to other

species are cosmopolitan, taking the form of different relations to each species in the world, which recognizes the distinctive value of the species. We may avoid association with bears and lions when it is imprudent, just as we may avoid cultures that are hostile to outsiders. Valuing of all such modes of association involves a more cosmopolitan outlook in which tribal ethics is rejected as a norm. A citizen of the world recognizes pluralistic sources of value in the world and rejects subordination of all value to the good of the human tribe.

The foremost duty in an ecocentric revaluation is to the living world as a whole that is the condition of all values. All our values require the world as the place and condition for such human values. The revaluation of reciprocity means expansion of the other to include the whole, not just the human part. Our loyalty cannot simply be to our tribe or our species, but should include the environment, the source of the necessities of life. Moral principles, then, must be revalued in terms of consequences for the environment. We are obligated to consider other species and their requisite habitats in moral deliberation and act accordingly. The central issue of our time, the destruction of the environment must serve as a negative norm against which we act.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that humans are parts of a much larger whole and any attempt to make humans coextensive with the whole are ideological. Thus anthropocentric ethics has been revalued from the whole to the part. Ecological norms provide a value ranking in structure, independent of utility for humans. Wild flowers, insects, predators and other species are all given a place regardless of their utility for

humans. In the past, cosmopolitanism has been interpreted as a humanist view. But in the final analysis, cosmopolitanism implies a much larger whole of the world.

Cosmopolitanism should be revalued from anthropocentric to ecocentric. However, ecocentric cosmopolitanism can be viewed as a new way of describing humans, as part of a larger global whole.

Notes:

[1] Cf. Rep. I with Callicles arguments in Gorgias.

[2] Cultural ethics are tribal since a tribe shares a culture, which excludes the foreign as alien and includes those who share customs, a language, etc. Often it involves inclusive breeding, i.e. everyone is related by blood, and often a common tribal identity.

[3] Our best source on the Hellenic Cosmopolitans remains Diogenes Laertius' Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers.

[4] The extension of "moral considerability" to larger and larger numbers was first treated in Bentham, and later by Darwin, by Leopold and Callicott in the land ethic, by Singer and Regan for Animal Liberation, and by the Ehrlichs for endangered species.

[5] The phrase is Marcuse's. See *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964 & 1967). Cf. Ernst Junger's notion of "planetary mobilization").

[6] The first philosopher to combine a belief in moral progress and cosmopolitanism was Kant, who also used universality as a test for moral consistency and thus as a Categorical Imperative.

^[7] For example, Bryan Norton. See *Why Preserve Natural Variety?* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987) and Anthony Weston, “Beyond Intrinsic Value, Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics*, 7/4, 1985.

^[8] Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*; Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*; Paul Taylor and many others.

^[9] Regan, T., “The Case for Animal Rights,” in *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, ed. T. Regan and P. Singer (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976). See also his “The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic,” pp. 19-34.

^[10] Humanism is an ambiguous term, since there are many different meanings for it. Humanism as a literary movement, viz. an interest in human affairs as opposed to an otherworldly orientation, is distinct from philosophical humanism, which likewise views the study of man as central but differs in approach. Philosophical humanism is opposed to naturalism in philosophy, in that humans are placed at the apex of a hierarchy, replacing God.

^[11] For example Max Scheler in *Man’s Place in Nature*, New York: the Noonday Press, 1928/1961, trans. by Hans Meyerhoff, esp. ch. 2.

^[12] Including such figures as Plato, Cicero, Confucius, Mo-tse, Aristotle, the Stoics, Meng-tse, Kant, J. S. Mill, etc. Religious thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas also elevate humans, but of course place humans below the divine. Nevertheless, humans are flattered as at the center of creation.

^[13] The Ehrlichs have compiled a list of such arbitrary species differences that have been used to defend the indefensible. See *Betrayal of Science and Reason*, How

Anti-Environmental Rhetoric Threatens our Future (Washington/Covelo: Shearwater, 1996)

^[14] For example, in Carl Cohen, “The Case for the Use of Animals in Biomedical Research,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 315, pp. 78-80. Callicott discusses a number of similar claims in *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, chapter 8 et al.

^[15] My source on this point is Callicott in *In Defense of the Land Ethic*.

^[16] In turn, all theories of value require life as a condition, e.g., life as the condition of pleasurable states in hedonism or feelings of happiness in several theories. The conditions of life are required for any theory of value and are thus morally considerable.

^[17] The universality requirement is not confined to Kantian ethics, but is included in Dewey’s pragmatic consequentialism and Singer’s utilitarianism. For Dewey, see his *Ethics*, coauthored with J. Tufts (New York: Henry Holt, 1908 (1932 rev.)); for Singer’s see “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” reprinted in Cahn and Markie, eds., *Ethics, History, Theory and Contemporary Issues*.