

Penultimate Draft

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Paul Warren Taylor¹

Paul Warren Taylor (1923-...) was born in Philadelphia, PA on November 19, 1923. He is emeritus professor of philosophy at Brooklyn College, City University of New York, where he specialized in normative and applied ethics. Author of several works in ethics, including *Normative Discourse* (1961) and *Principles of Ethics* (1975), Taylor is probably most well known for his book *Respect for Nature* (1986), in which he develops and defends a sophisticated biocentric (life-centered) environmental ethic.

Synthesizing elements of classical virtue ethics with Albert Schweitzer's *reverence for life* ethic, Peter Singer's egalitarianism, and Kenneth Goodpaster's account of moral considerability, Taylor (1986) develops an egalitarian biocentric ethic. Taylor contends that one who adopts the ultimate moral attitude of *respect for nature* will become an environmentally virtuous person in virtue of having adopted that attitude. He identifies environmentally-appropriate ethical conduct with the kind of conduct that an environmentally virtuous person—one motivated by respect for nature—would manifest. Such environmentally virtuous conduct would promote the flourishing of all living organisms. In Taylor's words: "[E]thical action and goodness of character naturally flow from the attitude [of respect for nature], and the attitude is made manifest in how one acts and in what sort of person one is" (1986, p. 81).

Taylor admits that "we cannot see the point of taking the attitude of respect" until we understand and accept *the biocentric outlook*, but he insists that "once we do grasp it and shape our world outlook in accordance with it, we immediately understand how and why a person should adopt that attitude [of respect] as the only appropriate one to have toward nature" (1986,

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p. 90). The biocentric outlook is a scientifically-grounded view of humanity's place in the natural order comprised of the following four theses:

1. The species *Homo sapiens*, like all other species, emerged as a result of random genetic drift and natural selection. As such, humans are members of the Earth's biotic community on a par with all other living organisms.
2. The Earth's biotic community forms a complex web of functionally interdependent organisms such that the survival of each organism is determined in part by its relations to other organisms.
3. Each individual living organism is a *teleological center of life* pursuing its own good in its own way.
4. Humans are not inherently superior to other living things. Their *inherent worth* is no greater than that of any other living organism. (1986, pp. 99-100)

Theses 1-3 are solidly supported by the sciences of biology and ecology. Taylor argues that those who accept 1-3 are rationally committed to 4, which, together with 1-3, "supports and makes intelligible the attitude [of respect for nature]" (1981, p. 206). From this outlook, living things are seen "as *the appropriate objects of the attitude of respect* and are accordingly regarded as entities possessing inherent worth" (1981, p. 206).

Taylor derives his *biocentric egalitarianism* as follows: First, he argues that all living organisms are biologically goal-directed teleological centers of life with *a good of their own*. Next, following Goodpaster, he argues that any being with a good of its own deserves moral consideration and concludes that all living organisms deserve moral consideration. Coupling the latter conclusion with Singer's egalitarianism, Taylor concludes that every living organism possesses *equal inherent worth* and deserves *equal moral consideration*.

Numerous objections have been raised against Taylor's biocentric ethic. Principal among them are challenges to (i) its account of moral considerability, (ii) its egalitarianism, (iii) its individualism, and (iv) its demandingness, along with a worry that (v) Taylor commits the naturalistic fallacy.

(i) Some critics maintain that only sentient beings have interests and that only beings with interests deserve moral consideration (See, e.g., Singer, 1975, pp. 8-9). Taylor argues that restricting the class of morally considerable beings to sentient beings is arbitrary. Since all living organisms can be harmed or benefited and what benefits them promotes their good, Taylor insists that there is no nonarbitrary reason not to extend moral consideration to all living organisms. Mary Anne Warren (1997, p. 48) rejects Taylor's reasoning on the grounds that since lower organisms don't care whether their biological interests are satisfied, neither should humans.

(ii) Some biocentrists (Goodpaster, 1978; and Varner, 2002) take issue with Taylor's egalitarianism. They agree that all living organisms deserve moral consideration, but deny that being morally considerable entails having *equal moral significance*. These critics reject Taylor's egalitarianism in favor of a hierarchical account of moral significance.

(iii) Other critics object to Taylor's stated view that "it is the good (well-being, welfare) of individual organisms . . . that determines our moral relations with the Earth's wild communities of life" (1981, p. 198). These critics contend that Taylor's focus on *individual welfare* fails to address the actual concerns of environmentalists. Most environmentalists are not concerned with the welfare of individual mosquitoes, dandelions, and microbes; rather, they are concerned with species preservation, ecological integrity, and pollution. These critics insist that holistic ethics are better able to address these environmental concerns.

(iv) The idea of extending equal moral consideration to every living organism, including every insect and plant, strikes most people as not only too demanding, but outright absurd. How

can people live their lives, if they must give plants and insects the same moral consideration owed humans? Taylor tries to mitigate this objection by formulating a complex set of principles [*self-defense, proportionality, minimum harm, distributive justice, and restitutive justice*] for fairly resolving the conflicts that will inevitably arise between humans and these equally considerable organisms. However, even with these principles in place, Taylor's biocentric ethic remains extremely demanding, since the principle of proportionality dictates that the basic interests of plants trump the nonbasic interests of humans.

(v) A final worry is that at some point Taylor must move from the purely descriptive aspects of the biocentric outlook to the moral attitude of respect for nature and that, in doing so, he must either commit the naturalistic fallacy or beg the question by smuggling a normative judgment (i.e., thesis 4) into the biocentric outlook. Taylor admits, however, that the biocentric outlook "is not wholly analyzable into empirically confirmable assertions" and is thus best viewed as "a philosophical worldview" (1981, p. 205). Moreover, he never attempts to *derive* an 'ought' from an 'is'; rather, he seeks to provide us with a rational coherent perspective on nature that will allow us to accurately perceive (not deduce) the inherent worth of all living beings.

Whether these objections to Taylor's biocentric egalitarianism prove insuperable remains to be seen. Regardless whether his ethic prevails in the end or ultimately forces us to look elsewhere for an adequate environmental ethic, Taylor's biocentric outlook helps those who accept it have a greater appreciation and respect for nature.

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