Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem

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ABSTRACT: Anthropocentrism can intelligibly be criticised as an ontological error, but attempts to conceive of it as an ethical error are liable to conceptual and practical confusion. After noting the paradox that the clearest instances of overcoming anthropocentrism involve precisely the sort of objectivating knowledge which many ecological critics see as itself archetypically anthropocentric, the article presents the following arguments: there are some ways in which anthropocentrism is not objectionable; the defects associated with anthropocentrism in ethics are better understood as instances of speciesism and human chauvinism; it is unhelpful to call these defects anthropocentrism because there is an ineliminable element of anthropocentrism in any ethic at all; moreover, because the defects do not typically involve a concern with human interests as such, the rhetoric of anti-anthropocentrism is counterproductive in practice.

KEYWORDS: Anthropocentrism, human chauvinism, speciesism, environmental ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropocentrism, widely used as a term of criticism in environmental ethics and politics, is something of a misnomer: for while anthropocentrism can intelligibly be criticised as an ontological error, attempts to conceive of it as an ethical error often involve conceptual confusion. I point out that there is no need for this confusion because a more appropriate vocabulary to refer to the defects the ethical 'anti-anthropocentrists' have in mind already exists. My argument is not just about semantics, though, but engages directly with the politics of environmental concern: blanket condemnations of 'anthropocentrism' not only condemn some legitimate human concerns, they also allow ideological retorts to the effect that criticisms of anthropocentrism amount to misanthropy. My

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argument, therefore, is that a more nuanced understanding of the problem of anthropocentrism allows not only a more coherent conceptualisation of environmental ethics but also a more effective politics.

The article has five main sections. The first notes the paradox that the clearest instances of overcoming anthropocentrism involve precisely the sort of objectivating knowledge which many ecological critics see as itself archetypically anthropocentric. The second section then notes some ways in which anthropocentrism is not objectionable. In the third section, the defects associated with anthropocentrism in ethics are then examined: I argue, though, that these are better understood as instances of speciesism and human chauvinism. In order to explain why it is unhelpful to call these defects anthropocentrism, I note in section four that there is an ineliminable element of anthropocentrism in any ethic at all, and in the fifth section that the defects do not typically involve a concern with human interests as such anyway. Because of this last point, I also argue, the rhetoric of anti-anthropocentrism is not only conceptually unsatisfactory, it is counterproductive in practice.

I. THE PARADOX

Overcoming anthropocentrism has meant appreciating that 'Man' is not the centre of the universe or the measure of all things; that it is less tenable to think of humans as made in the image of God, as the purpose of creation, than as one of the products of natural evolution. Humans are just a part of the natural order. This cognitive displacement of human beings from centre stage in the greater scheme of things has been made possible, above all, by developments in modern science. This detached view of humans has been made possible by just that kind of objectivating knowledge which more recently has been held to lie at the root of an attitude toward the natural world to be condemned as anthropocentric. For what the rise of objectivating science has done is bring with it the idea that humans can in some ways stand apart from the rest of nature: the achievement of objectivity carries with it an enhanced view of the power and autonomy of subjectivity; and this is at the heart of a set of attitudes which privilege human faculties, capacities and interests over those of nonhuman entities.

There thus appears to be a paradox: the overcoming of anthropocentrism so far has been brought about by just those developments which are now seen by many as lying at the root of unacceptably anthropocentric attitudes and values.[1] If the overcoming of anthropocentrism is to be deemed a good thing, therefore, this paradox should alert us to how it is also a rather complex thing.

There are two senses in which anthropocentrism is usually criticised. One of these is ontological, the other is ethical. According to the ontological criticism, anthropocentrism is the mistake of seeing humans as the centre of the world in

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the sense of failing to see that 'the way things are in the world takes no particular account of how human beings are, or how they choose to represent them' (Bhaskar, 1989, p.154). According to the ethical criticism, anthropocentrism is the mistake of giving exclusive or arbitrarily preferential consideration to human interests as opposed to the interests of other beings. Now while the ontological assumption is consistent with, and may even seem to support, the ethical view that only humans are of ethical value, it does not strictly entail it; conversely, one could hold that ethical view without subscribing to an anthropocentric ontology. Therefore, the reasons there may be for refusing an anthropocentric ontology do not necessarily have any direct bearing on anthropocentrism in ethics. Criticism of the latter, therefore, cannot borrow force or credibility from criticisms of the former. An independent account is required of why anthropocentrism in ethics is wrong, and, indeed, what it *means* to overcome anthropocentrism in ethics. As I shall show, anthropocentrism in ethics is a problem not generally sufficiently clearly formulated, whose 'overcoming' is poorly understood, at best, and at worst misconceived.

This does not mean, however, that the problems identified under the heading of anthropocentrism in ethics cannot be explained and diagnosed in more appropriate terms.

II. WHAT IS NOT WRONG WITH ANTHROPOCENTRISM

The idea of anthropocentrism in ethics generally derives its negative normative force on analogy with egocentrism (Goodpaster, 1979): just as it is morally wrong to be self-centred in the individual case, it is wrong to be human-centred in the collective case. Nevertheless, anthropocentrism cannot simply be equated with human-centredness if it is to perform the critical function envisaged for it, since there are also respects in which human-centredness is unavoidable, unobjectionable or even desirable. It is important to recognize these if one is to attain a precise idea of what is wrong with anthropocentrism.

To begin with, there are some ways in which humans cannot help being human-centred. Anyone's view of the world is shaped and limited by their position and way of being within it: from the perspective of any particular being or species there are real respects in which they *are* at the centre of it. Thus, as Ferré for instance points out, to the extent that humans 'have no choice but to think as humans' what he calls 'perspectival anthropocentrism' would appear to be inescapable (Ferré, 1994, p.72). It would also appear to be unavoidable that we should be interested in ourselves and our own kind. There may indeed be respects in which human-centredness is unobjectionable – for humans, like any other beings, have legitimate interests which there is no reason for them not to pursue. As Mary Midgley (1994, p.111) observes, 'people do right, not wrong,

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to have a particular regard for their own kin and their own species'. She points out, moreover, that human-centredness may in some respects be positively desirable: for just as the term 'self-centred' has been used figuratively in the past to describe well-organised, balanced people, (Midgley, 1994, p.103) so being human-centred can mean having a well-balanced conception of what it means to be a human, and of how humans take their place in the world – the sort of conception bound up with normative ideas of 'humanity' and 'humaneness'. Furthermore, human-centredness may be positively desirable: if, as various philosophers and psychologists have pointed out, (Cf. Hayward, 1995, pp.54-62) self-love, properly understood, can be considered a precondition of loving others, so, by analogy, it could be maintained that only if humans know how to treat their fellow humans decently will they begin to be able to treat other species decently. In sum, a positive concern for human well-being need not automatically preclude a concern for the well-being of non-humans, and may even serve to promote it.

These considerations do not amount to a claim that anthropocentrism is not a problem at all; they do, however, indicate why one needs to spell out carefully what is supposed to be *wrong* with it.

III.WHAT IS WRONG WITH ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN ETHICS

What is objected to under the heading of anthropocentrism in environmental ethics and ecological politics is a concern with human interests to the exclusion, or at the expense, of interests of other species. In this section I shall suggest that the various illegitimate ways of giving preference to human interests are adequately captured by the terms 'speciesism' and 'human chauvinism'. Although these terms are sometimes treated as equivalents of anthropocentrism in the literature, it is important to distinguish between them since they are not equivocal and misleading in the ways I shall go on to show anthropocentrism to be.

Speciesism, a term coined on analogy with sexism and racism, means arbitrary discrimination on the basis of species. (Ryder, 1992, p.197) However, if it is possible to discriminate between human and non-human interests for non-arbitrary reasons, as I believe it must be, then it is possible to promote the former without being speciesist: that is, one can take a legitimate interest in other members of one's own species without this necessarily being to the detriment of members of other species; or, at least, if detriments do arise from any particular course of action they need not be distributed in speciesist ways.

Humans can appropriately be accused of speciesism when they give preference to interests of members of their own species over the interests of members of other species for morally arbitrary reasons. So, for instance, if it is wrong in

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the human case to inflict avoidable physical suffering because humans are sentient beings, then it would be morally arbitrary to allow the inflicting of suffering on other sentient beings. That is why cruel and degrading treatment of animals can be condemned as speciesist. More generally, the ignoring of the interests or the good of any being of whom its own good can be predicated can be criticised as speciesist. This is why the purely instrumental consideration of non-humans falls into this category: as long as they are considered in terms of their instrumental value to humans, they are not considered 'for their own sake' – that is, in terms of their own good or interests. It is worth noting here, though, that the problem lies not with the giving of instrumental consideration as such to non-human beings, but in according them *only* instrumental, and not intrinsic, value. In and of itself, instrumental consideration of other beings need not be opposed to their well-being. Consider, for example, in the human case, that a doctor may well need to give instrumental consideration to a patient's physiology in order to improve her well-being. This is not only not objectionable, it is necessary and positively desirable. What is also necessary, though, is that the doctor remember the patient is also a person, a being of dignity and worthy of respect, not simply an object to be manipulated. The question which follows, though, is whether (some, any or all) non-humans are also beings of dignity and worthy of respect. If they are, then denying them such consideration must be speciesist. However, the problem here is that the judgement that a being is 'of dignity and worthy of respect' is itself a value judgement, and not an independent fact to which one can appeal. Therefore to answer the question one has to move to the level of metaethics and explain what it is that constitutes a being's dignity and worthiness of respect. It is at this level that the problem of human chauvinism can be identified.

Human chauvinism is appropriately predicated of attempts to specify relevant differences in ways that invariably favour humans. (Routley and Routley, 1979) What counts as 'being worthy of respect', for instance, might be specified in terms which always favour humans: thus a human chauvinist could quite consistently accept that the moral arbitrariness of speciesism is always wrong and yet persist in denying claims of relevant similarities between humans and other species. For instance, other animals may not be deemed 'worthy of respect' because they allegedly lack certain features – typical candidates being rationality, language, subjectivity etc. – which define beings worthy of respect. Such denials, in themselves, need not be objectionable if the factual claims about the animals' capacities and the normative assumptions about worthiness of respect are well-supported. But if, when evidence is produced that tends to undermine these claims and assumptions, the response is to seek to refine the definition in such a way as to exclude nonhumans once more, then there is a case for thinking this is a human chauvinist response. The case, however, will not always, if ever, be watertight. Human chauvinism, then, is essentially a disposition, and as such

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requires a kind of hermeneutic to uncover. Thus whereas speciesism can be conceptualised as a clear cut form of injustice, human chauvinism involves a deeper and murkier set of attitudes.

Partly for this reason, I think, it is important to observe the distinction between speciesism and human chauvinism. It is inappropriate to label as speciesist a systematically developed argument to the effect, for instance, that animals lack a morally relevant feature necessary for worthiness of respect. For what is actually at issue here concerns precisely the criteria in terms of which discrimination might be claimed to be arbitrary or otherwise. Therefore to counter such an argument one must either show that the animal in fact does possess the relevant feature, or else provide reasons why the feature is not a necessary condition of worthiness of respect. Yet it may often be difficult to present a definitive and incontestable argument of either of these sorts. For this reason, suspicions of human chauvinism will be hard to prove conclusively. Ascriptions of human chauvinism depend on judgement, and are liable to be controversial. Nevertheless, they are appropriate when there is evidence that redefinitions of moral considerability do not simply make more precise the 'rules of the game', but actually involve a progressive shifting of goal posts in humans' favour. Although it is often likely to be difficult to distinguish between the two cases, evidence of bad conscience and spurious argumentation may sometimes make it less so. The main point I want to make here, though, is that confounding human chauvinism and anthropocentrism merely compounds the lack of certainty. Even if actual ascriptions of human chauvinism may often be contestable, the idea itself is quite clear, and it is not equivocal in the way that the idea of anthropocentrism is.

What is involved in overcoming the defects misleadingly associated with anthropocentrism, then, is the overcoming of speciesism in normative ethics and of the human chauvinist disposition which tends to reinforce speciesist reasoning.[2] What this means, at least in principle, can therefore be stated quite straightforwardly: overcoming human chauvinism requires primarily a degree of good faith and the development of a sympathetic moral disposition; overcoming speciesism requires a commitment to consistency and non-arbitrariness in moral judgement combined with the development of knowledge adequate to ascertaining what is and is not arbitrary in our consideration of nonhuman beings.

Nevertheless, if we know in principle what would be involved in overcoming human chauvinism and speciesism, in practice there are some limitations on how fully it can be achieved. It is important to be clear on what these limitations are if they are not to be confused with those aspects of anthropocentrism which are ineliminable, but unobjectionable.

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IV. AN INELIMINABLE ELEMENT OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN ETHICS

There is an ineliminable element of anthropocentrism in ethics as such which needs to be recognised, in order both to formulate goals accurately and to secure the advances made against external criticisms. To these ends, it will be useful first to explain why speciesism, by contrast, is *not* ineliminable in the way that anthropocentrism is. Afterwards I shall also explain why human chauvinism is not ineliminable either.

My claim that speciesism is avoidable can be made vivid by referring to the analogy with racism and sexism: thus while a white man cannot help seeing the world with the eyes of a white man, this does not mean that he cannot help being racist or sexist. There is the possibility, of course, that despite his best efforts he exhibits attitudes a black woman could criticise: but precisely because she could specify what makes these attitudes racist or sexist they are, in principle, corrigible. Speciesism, I am claiming, is likewise, in principle, corrigible. Nevertheless, there is in practice a significant disanalogy between speciesism and racism or sexism in that whereas black women can articulate their claims in a language which white men ought to be able to understand, there is scope for misunderstanding the interests of beings for whose interests humans, quite literally, do not have the ears to hear. Thus however good their intentions, humans can never be sure of being completely free of speciesist attitudes. What this consideration shows, however, is not that speciesism is completely unavoidable, but only that avoiding it is more difficult than is the case with sexism or racism. The practical difficulties with avoiding speciesism, I shall argue, can be differentiated from the *impossibility* of avoiding anthropocentrism.

The difficulties with avoiding speciesist arbitrariness in one's value judgements are due to the contingent limitations on the degree of knowledge available at any particular time – thus one might not yet know, for instance, whether a certain species of animal does or does not have a particular capacity which might be affected by a particular action, and so not know whether that action should be allowed or not. This sort of limitation, though, can progressively be overcome: for instance, if angling is claimed to be permissible because the fish do not suffer when caught, then to invalidate that claim it suffices to show that fish do in fact suffer. In practice, of course, the overcoming of speciesism can only be fully accomplished *within* the limits of currently available knowledge: and however consistent one is at a given time, it may subsequently prove that one was in error in one's judgements. Nevertheless, the progressive overcoming of speciesism is a clearly defined project, and there is no reason in principle why it should not be fully accomplished according to the standards of knowledge available at a given time.

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But if the project of overcoming speciesism can be pursued with some expectation of success, this is not the case with the overcoming of anthropocentrism. What makes anthropocentrism unavoidable is a limitation of a quite different sort, one which cannot be overcome even in principle because it involves a non-contingent limitation on moral thinking as such. While overcoming speciesism involves a commitment to the pursuit of knowledge of relevant similarities and differences between humans and other species, the criteria of *relevance* will always have an ineliminable element of anthropocentrism about them. Speciesism is the arbitrary refusal to extend moral consideration to relevantly similar cases; the ineliminable element of anthropocentrism is marked by the impossibility of giving meaningful moral consideration to cases which bear no similarity to any aspect of human cases. The emphasis is on the 'meaningful' here: for in the abstract one could of course declare that some feature of the nonhuman world was morally valuable, despite meeting no determinate criterion of value already recognised by any human, but because the new value is completely unrelated to any existing value it will remain radically indeterminate as a guide to action. If the ultimate point of an ethic is to yield a determinate guide to human action, then, the human reference is ineliminable even when extending moral concern to nonhumans. So my argument is that one cannot know if any judgement is speciesist if one has no benchmark against which to test arbitrariness; and, more specifically, if we are concerned to avoid speciesism of *humans* then one must have standards of comparison between them and others. Thus features of humans remain the benchmark. As long as the valuer is a human, the very selection of criteria of value will be limited by this fact. It is this fact which precludes the possibility of a *radically* nonanthropocentric value scheme, if by that is meant the adoption of a set of values which are supposed to be completely unrelated to any existing human values. Any attempt to construct a radically non-anthropocentric value scheme is liable not only to be arbitrary – because founded on no certain knowledge – but also to be more insidiously anthropocentric in projecting certain values, which as a matter of fact are selected by a human, onto nonhuman beings without certain warrant for doing so. This, of course, is the error of anthropomorphism, and will inevitably, I believe, be committed in any attempt to expunge anthropocentrism altogether.

But is admitting this unavoidable element of anthropocentrism not tantamount to admitting the unavoidability of human chauvinism? My claim is that it is not. What is unavoidable is that human valuers make use of anthropocentric benchmarks; yet in doing so, they may find that in all consistency they must, for instance, give priority to vital nonhuman interests over more trivial human interests. For the human chauvinist, by contrast, interests of humans must always take precedence over the interests of nonhumans. Human chauvinism does not take human values as a benchmark of comparison, since it admits no comparison between humans and nonhumans. Human chauvinism ultimately values humans

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because they are humans. While the human chauvinist may officially claim there are criteria which provide reasons for preferring humans – such as that they have language, rationality, sociality etc. – no amount of evidence that other beings fulfil these criteria would satisfy them that they should be afforded a similar moral concern. The bottom line for the human chauvinist is that being human is a necessary and sufficient condition of moral concern. What I am pointing out as the ineliminable element of anthropocentrism is an asymmetry between humans and other species which is *not* the product of chauvinist prejudice.

To sum up, then, what is unavoidable about anthropocentrism is precisely what makes ethics possible at all. It is a basic feature of the logic of obligation: if an ethic is a guide to action; and if a particular ethic requires an agent to make others' ends her ends, then they become just that – the agent's ends. This is a non-contingent but substantive limitation on any attempt to construct a completely nonanthropocentric ethic. Values are always the values *of* the valuer:[3] so as long as the class of valuers includes human beings, human values are ineliminable. Having argued that this is unavoidable, I also want to argue that it is no bad thing.

V. WHAT IS WRONG WITH 'OVERCOMING ANTHROPOCENTRISM'

The argument so far would suggest that the aim of completely overcoming anthropocentrism in ethics is at best of rhetorical value, since all it does is draw attention to problems which are in fact better conceptualised in narrower and more precise terms. I shall now argue, though, that even as rhetoric the critical employment of the term can be unhelpful, and even positively counterproductive.

Proposals for the 'rejection' of anthropocentrism are unhelpful because they cloud the real problem they think to address. The problem has to do with a lack of concern with nonhumans but the term anthropocentrism can all too plausibly be understood as meaning an excessive concern with humans.[4] The latter, however, is not the problem at all. On the contrary, a cursory glance around the world would confirm that humans show a lamentable lack of interest in the well-being of other humans. Moreover, even when it is not other humans whose interests are being harmed, but other species or the environment, it would generally be implausible to suggest that those doing the harm are being 'human-centred'. To see this, one only has to consider some typical practices which are appropriately criticised. Some examples would be: hunting a species to extinction; destroying a forest to build a road and factories; animal experimentation. In the case of hunting a species to extinction, this is not helpfully or appropriately seen as 'anthropocentrism' since it typically involves one group of humans who are actually condemned by (probably a majority of) other humans who see the practice not as serving human interests in general, but the interests of one quite

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narrowly-defined group, such as poachers or whalers. A similar point can be made regarding the destruction of the forest – for those who derive economic benefit from the destruction oppose not only the human interests of indigenous peoples whose environment is thereby destroyed, but also the interests of all humans who depend on the oxygen such forests produce. The case of animal experimentation, however, brings to the fore a feature which looks as if it could more plausibly be said to be anthropocentric: for if we suppose that the benefits of the experimentation are intended to accrue to any and all humans who might need the medicine or technique experimented, then there would seem to be a clear case of humans benefiting as a species from the use and abuse of other species. But the 'if' is important here. A reason why I am inclined to resist calling this anthropocentrism is that the benefits may in fact not be intended or destined for humans generally, but only for those who can afford to pay to keep the drug company in profit. As in the other two cases, it is unhelpful to cover over this fundamental point and criticise humanity in general for practices carried out by a limited number of humans when many others may in fact oppose them. There is in any case no need to describe the practice as anthropocentric when it is quite clearly *speciesist* – it is not the concern with human welfare per se that is the problem here, but the arbitrary privileging of that welfare over the welfare of members of other species. So a reason why critiques of anthropocentrism are unhelpful is that the problems the term is used to highlight do not arise out of a concern of humans with humans, but from a *lack* of concern for *non*-humans. I earlier explained why this lack of concern is not appropriately termed anthropocentrism; I now add the further consideration that practices manifesting a lack of concern for nonhumans very often go hand in hand with a lack of concern for other humans too.

Taking this line of argument a step further it becomes evident that anti-anthropocentric rhetoric is not only unhelpful, but positively counterproductive. It is not only conceptually mistaken, but also a practical and strategic mistake, to criticise humanity in general for practices of specific groups of humans. If the point of anti-anthropocentric rhetoric is to highlight problems, to make them vivid in order to get action, then misrepresenting the problem is liable to make solutions all the harder. Something particularly to emphasise is that when radical critics of anthropocentrism see themselves as opposed to defenders of human interests they are seriously in error. From what has just been said about the *specificity* of environmental, ecological or animal harms merely being disguised by putting the blame on humans in general, it should be evident that those who are concerned about such harms in fact make common cause with those concerned with issues of social justice. The real opponents of both sorts of concern are the ideologists who, in defending harmful practices in the name of 'humans in general', obscure the real causes of the harms as much as the real incidence of benefits: the harms seldom affect all and only nonhumans; the

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benefits seldom accrue to all humans.[5] Yet by appearing to accept the ideologists' own premises, anti-anthropocentric rhetoric plays right into their hands: by appearing to endorse the ideological view that 'humans in general' benefit from the exploitative activities of some, the anti-anthropocentrists are left vulnerable to ideological rejoinders to the effect that challenging those activities is merely misanthropic. The opposite is in fact nearer the truth, I believe, because it will more often be the case that challenging such practices is in the interests of humans more generally.

Having shown why criticisms of anthropocentrism can be counterproductive, I should briefly make explicit why criticisms of speciesism and human chauvinism are not. Criticisms of anthropocentrism can be counterproductive in failing to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate human interests; criticisms of speciesism, by contrast, apply precisely in those cases where species criteria are *illegitimately* deployed: there is, by definition, no legitimate form of speciesism to safeguard or defend. So while any particular speciesist attitude or practice might well promote a sectional interest rather than interests of the human species as a whole, this fact does not weaken the criticism: for given that the arbitrary deployment of species criteria is already illegitimate, the fact that it does not even serve the interests of the whole human species does not dilute the objection. Indeed, if anything, the criticism is strengthened by the consideration that the attitude or practice is doubly arbitrary. For similar reasons, criticisms of human chauvinism, too, are not counterproductive. Criticisms of speciesism and human chauvinism, then, focus on what is wrong with particular human attitudes to nonhumans without allowing in unhelpful and counterproductive doubts about humans' legitimate concerns for their own kind.

A further question, however, is whether criticism of speciesism and human chauvinism is adequate to capture all the respects in which humans' concerns for their own kind are illegitimate; for if this were not the case, there might appear to remain a role for more general criticisms of anthropocentrism. In reply to this question I shall show that for the same reason that criticisms of anthropocentrism are equivocal in relation to what is and is not legitimate in human-centredness, alleged alternatives to it are indeterminate.

A basic reason why criticisms of anthropocentrism are equivocal is that it is not self-evident what exactly it means to be human-*centred*: where or what *is* the 'centre'? The idea of anthropocentrism is typically understood as analogous to egocentrism (Goodpaster, 1979): but just as the latter is anything but unproblematic, if it implies a simple, unitary, centred ego, so too is anthropocentrism – for the human species is all too at odds with itself. If the project of bringing humanity to peace with itself, of constituting itself *as* a body which is sufficiently unified to be considered 'centred' is anthropocentric, though, it is anthropocentric in a sense I have suggested should be applauded rather than condemned. To be sure, what attitude such a body has towards non-

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humans cannot be predicted before the event, but there is good reason to think that such a unified and peaceful body is more likely to be considerate – or at least guided by a far-sighted and ecologically enlightened conception of its self-interest – than one which is riven by internal strife.

Posing the question of 'where and what is the centre' not only allows this constructive perspective on anthropocentrism, it also reveals the indeterminacy of alleged alternatives to it. One alternative often referred to in the literature is 'biocentrism'.[6] However, if biocentrism means giving moral consideration to all living beings, it is quite consistent with giving moral consideration to humans; biocentrism in this sense is actually presupposed by my own rejection of human chauvinism and speciesism, and thus appears to be a complement of rather than alternative to anthropocentrism. Another perspective, however, which purports to offer an alternative to either anthropocentrism or biocentrism, is ecocentrism.[7] For ecocentrism, not only living beings, but whole ecosystems, including the abiotic parts of nature, are deemed worthy of moral consideration too. The ecocentric claim is particularly significant in the present context in that it purports to stake out a role for the continued use of anthropocentrism as a term of criticism. From the perspective of ecocentrism, the critique of speciesism would not be adequate to capture all aspects of environmental concern, for while it serves to counter the arbitrary treatment of species and their members, ecocentrists would nevertheless argue that other sorts of entity, including abiotic parts of nature, are also worthy of concern. It is here, they claim, that a distinction between human-centredness and eco-centredness reveals its force: for in disregarding ecosystemic relations humans may not be disregarding the interests of any particular species, but they are nevertheless doing ecological harm. In reply to this claim I would argue that no harms can actually be identified without reference to species-interests of one sort or another. This is to return to the question of the lack of any determinate 'eco-centre', that is to say, to the problem of identifying the loci of ecological harms. One ecocentric response might be that whole ecosystemic balances, which can be upset by human interventions, should be preserved. But this response gives rise to a host of further questions, concerning, for instance: which balances should be preserved and why; whether unaided nature never 'upsets' ecological balances, and some human activities do not sometimes 'improve' them; whether humans should, *per impossibile*, seek simply not to influence ecosystems at all. In short, it leaves open the question of what criteria there are, for telling whether one balance is preferable to another, which do not refer back to anthropocentric or biocentric considerations. In fact, to my knowledge, the best, if not only, reason for preserving ecosystemic relations is precisely that they constitute the 'life-support system' for humans and other living species. Still, another ecocentric response might be to claim there is independent reason to take as morally considerable abiotic parts of nature – such as rocks, rivers, and mountains, for instance. But while one clear reason

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to value these is that they provide habitats for various living species, it is not so clear what reason there is to insist on their continued undisturbed existence for its own sake.[8] In fact, arguments in favour of these parts of the natural world almost invariably appeal to spiritual or aesthetic reasons, and while these may be good reasons, they cannot, it seems to me, be disentangled from specifically human-centred concerns – namely, those of spirituality or beauty. In short, it seems to me that the attempt to pursue a radically ecocentric line is more likely to reintroduce objectionably anthropocentric considerations – such as unrecognised prejudices about what is beautiful or spiritual – than a position that recognizes, on the one hand, that aspects of anthropocentrism are unavoidable, but, on the other, that speciesism is not. My claim, then, is that ecocentrism is radically indeterminate and therefore provides no basis from which to launch an all-encompassing critique of anthropocentrism.

VI. CONCLUSION

The aim of overcoming anthropocentrism is intelligible if it is understood in terms of improving knowledge about the place of humans in the world; and this includes improving our knowledge about what constitutes the good of nonhuman beings. This kind of knowledge is significantly added to by objectivating science. There may also be a role for other kinds of knowledge – for instance, kinds characterised by empathetic imagining of how it might be like to be a member of another species (Cassano,1989); but here one must always be cautious about unwittingly projecting human perceptions on to beings whose actual perceptions may be radically different, since this would be to reintroduce just the sort of error that characterises ontological anthropocentrism.

The need for caution is all the clearer when it comes to attempting to gain a non-anthropocentric perspective in ethics. Indeed, it may be that anthropocentrism in ethics, when properly understood, is actually less harmful than harbouring the aim of overcoming it. At any rate, a number of the considerations advanced in this article would tend to suggest this view. I have noted: that the ethical impulse which is expressed as the aim of overcoming anthropocentrism is very imperfectly expressed in such terms; that there are some things about 'anthropocentrism' which are unavoidable, and others even to be applauded; furthermore, the things which are to condemned are not appropriately called 'anthropocentrism' at all; that the mistaken rejection of anthropocentrism misrepresents the fact that harms to nonhumans, as well as harm to some groups of humans, are caused not by humanity in general but by specific humans with their own vested interests. For these reasons, I suggest that discussions of environmental values would be better conducted without reference to the equivocal notion of anthropocentrism.

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NOTES

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[1] For an analysis of this paradox see Hayward (1996).
[2] The possibility that there might be more problems to overcome than speciesism and human chauvinism is addressed in Section V below.
[3] I acknowledge that some ethicists might take issue with this claim by arguing that there are objective values which subsist independently of valuers. I shall not attempt to refute that sort of argument here, but only mention that the most plausible versions interpret 'objectivity' in terms of intersubjective agreement about what it is reasonable to suppose are values, and that such accounts of objective values do not undermine my claim. One other point that is particularly relevant in the present context is that I am not claiming that valuers have to be humans, only that some of them are.
[4] There may well be critics of anthropocentrism who personally intend the term to refer only to the *exclusion* of nonhumans rather than to imply any particular commitment regarding the consideration due to humans – that is, they think of anthropocentrism as meaning that *only* humans are morally considered, but not that *all* humans are considered or that all humans are considered *equally* – but they have chosen a term which is, I believe, peculiarly ill-suited to represent their meaning.
[5] Incidentally, some benefits can go to nonhumans too – as in veterinary medicine, for instance. While this is not a decisive consideration – especially as vets can sometimes participate in objectionably speciesist practices – it does reinforce the point that human and nonhuman interests are not always straightforwardly opposed.
[6] In the literature on biocentrism there does not appear to be a consensus on whether it is supposed to be an alternative to human-centred concerns, or an extension of them: as I show elsewhere (Hayward, 1995, chapter 2) some, like Paul Taylor (1981), tend to the former view while others, like Robin Attfield (1987), take the latter view.
[7] Ecocentrism is contrasted with anthropocentrism and this contrast used as an organising principle by Eckersley (1992).
[8] I am not ruling out the possibility of there being such a reason, or, indeed, the possibility of eventually supplementing the idea of speciesism. The basic rationale for focusing on the latter is that living species have enough in common with humans for the 'anthropocentric benchmarks' I mentioned to apply. This does not preclude the development of ever more subtle benchmarks. For the time being, however, it seems to me that whatever intrinsic capacities rocks may have that are worthy of independent consideration, these unfold on such scales of space and time that human actions can have little effect on them.

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