

ANTHROPOCENTRIC ETHICAL THEORIES: RELATIONS WITH NON-HUMAN BEINGS

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Summary

Anthropocentrism is an ethics completely centered on the interests of human beings. Non-anthropocentrists regard it as the source of the environmental crisis. Bryan G. Norton tries to argue for anthropocentrism by distinguishing strong anthropocentrism, which he believes should be dismissed, from weak anthropocentrism, which should be approved. William H. Murdy also believes that the interests of human beings are the basis of morality and they are above all other nonhuman natural objects. But in contrast to Norton, he agrees that all things in nature have intrinsic value.

Anthropocentrism is a theory that believes humans are the center of the universe. Its essence is that everything is centered on humans or evaluated by human measures and serves human interests, and starts from human interests. Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines anthropocentric as: "1. considering man to be the central or most significant fact of the universe; 2. assuming man to be the measure of all things; 3. interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experience."

1. Is Anthropocentrism the Cause of the Environmental Crisis?

In discussing the cause of the environmental crisis, many people believe that the anthropocentric view that humans dominate over and rule nature encouraged human exploitation of nature, and thus was the ideological cause of the environmental crisis.

The main criticisms of anthropocentrism are as follows:

- Anthropocentrism is not deep philosophically. It emphasizes the separation of and tension between humans and nature, and the comparative distinction between

humans and animals. The traditional mechanism and Descartes' dualism emphasize absolute subject-object distinction and the human subject and its dominion over natural objects. The subject-object distinction is only a partial truth. The unity and interaction between humans and nature are more fundamental. In his book *Humankind*, Peter Farb stated that scientists had now learned that the gap between humans and animals was no longer what we used to believe. Some animals had evolved a rich communication system; others were able to make and use tools, solve problems, educate offspring, and live in complicated social organizations and possessed esthetic consciousness, etc. Therefore, any distinction from humans was obviously a matter of degree.

- Anthropocentrism is not complete in terms of values. It believed that only humans had values, and living beings and nature did not have values. Because humans had goals, only humans had interests. This is also a partial truth. As a matter of fact, life and nature have not only values, but also interests (i.e. they live according to ecological rules). That is to say, living beings and nature are not only of value to humans as tools, but also have intrinsic value.
- Anthropocentrism is imperfect ethically. According to the above views, traditional ethics believed that only humans had goals; therefore, only humans received moral treatment and enjoyed moral rights. Anthropocentrism believed that human features, such as reason, self-consciousness, self-control, and the ability to communicate through symbols, were the basis for humans to be treated morally. Critics said that some humans, such as infants, the retarded, and Alzheimer patients, and vegetables did not have these abilities; and that intelligence, use of tools, and self-consciousness were characteristic of both humans and some animals. Therefore, the status of moral object should be expanded to include life and the nature.
- Practically, anthropocentrism had led humankind into a difficult situation. The above anthropocentric views directed human behavior and represented itself in practice as possessive utilitarian, selfishness, to be developed into economism, consumerism, and individualism. In economic development, economic growth was the only goal, often at the expense of the environment and resources, which led to environmental pollution and resource shortage on a global scale.

These criticisms led to modification of anthropocentrism and the birth of anthropocentric environmental ethics.

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Biographical Sketches

Mouchang Yu, born in 1935, got his bachelor's degree from Wuhan University in 1962 and his master's degree from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Since then, he has worked on natural dialectics in the Institute of Philosophy. Professor Yu is currently a professor, doctoral supervisor, and president of the Chinese Society for Environmental Ethics.

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