AN ALTERNATIVE TO ANTHROPOCENTRISM: DEEP ECOLOGY AND THE METAPHYSICAL TURN

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Deep ecology is a branch of philosophy which asks ‘deeper questions’ concerning our relationship to the environment. The ‘deepness’ is seen as analogous to discovering metaphysical foundations for a philosophy of ecology that might otherwise be subsumed under a branch of environmental ethics. Since environmental ethics depends on applying an existing moral theory to the non-human world and such theories are regarded as anthropocentric, deep ecologists argue that we need a non-anthropocentric philosophy of care to counter the view that human beings are ‘nature’s only morally considerable beings’.\(^\text{1}\) Even though moral theories, such as Bentham’s utilitarianism and Kant’s deontology have regarded non-human animals as worthy of moral consideration, they have done so from the position of setting normative guidelines. In contrast to a moral theory, however, deep ecology aims to show not why we ought to care for the non-human realm but how the concern we show towards those who are closest to us can be developed to include all beings, through realising that our nature is interrelated to all others.

Deep Ecology and Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism is regarded by deep ecologists not merely in its literal sense as ‘human centredness’ but as the view that humanity has been conditioned to regard itself as a superior species. Deep ecologists have sought to focus on criticising ‘the dominant worldview’ which sees human centredness as the underlying cause of the ecological crisis. As I have argued elsewhere, however, this position is too general, for not all humans play an equal part in the domination of the natural environment. Anthropocentrism represents the

human will to dominate and threatens the human world as much as the non-human world. This raises the question of how a change in attitude from one of domination to one of deep concern can be achieved, which shifts the focus from concentrating on the symptoms of the environmental crisis, such as pollution, urban expansion and global warming, to understanding why we see ourselves as separate and superior to both the natural environment and other human beings.

The historian Lynn White Jr. was one of the first environmentalists to link the root cause of the environmental crisis to the doctrine of anthropocentrism, which he saw as deeply rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition of domination. In this tradition, humans are seen as guardians of the Earth, superior to non-human beings who exist not for their own sake but for the sake of humanity. In this sense, ‘anthropocentrism’ denotes humanity’s superiority over the non-human world, on the basis that humans occupy a higher position on the Great Chain of Being.

Taking Lynn White Jr.’s thesis a step further, Bill Devall and George Sessions identified anthropocentrism as being the dominant worldview of technocratic-industrialised societies. Devall and Sessions argued that our understanding of human nature has been so conditioned by the paradigm of domination—a paradigm that regards humans as isolated and fundamentally separate and superior to the rest of nature—that it has come to include all aspects of domination, e.g. masculine over feminine, the powerful over the poor, Western cultures over non-Western cultures, and so on. If anthropocentrism covers all forms of domination, then it would seem that focusing on any one form of domination, for example, racism or sexism, would help to root out the underlying cause of domination in general. However, while the dominant worldview is to be rejected, any counter-movements or criticisms of this view are seen by deep ecologists to exist only as the result of the dominant paradigm, which, while worthy as causes in their own right, only help to reinforce the paradigm they are opposing. Deep ecologists thus object to focusing

