Taking Nonhuman Perspectives Seriously: The Importance of Non-Anthropocentrism for Nonhuman Animals

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--INTRODUCTION--

The inclusion of others' perspectives is important to morality and ethical theory. For realizing that how we see the world is not only not the only perspective, but also that it is not automatically the best view or the view that we should adopt, is one of the foundational elements of morality and social interaction. Many areas, Feminism/anti-ethnocentric positions, etc., have stressed this, and many important ideas within morality and social interaction involve taking others' perspectives into consideration and weighting them as equal, or at least as serious, as our own. For example, including others' perspectives is important for rejecting selfishness, social/cultural biases, imperialism, fairness, and opposing domination and oppression of the Other. Etc.

Despite this, I will argue that humans, even those who seek to aid nonhumans, are guilty of taking only one perspective when it comes to nonhumans, that of humans. This I shall argue causes problems for NA that cannot adequately be seen or addressed without highlighting this perspective-bias first. I shall argue that this anthropocentrism is problematic and by including nonhuman perspectives equally with human perspectives, nonhumans will be better off.

--ANTHROPOCENTRISM--

Before I can make this claim I must first clarify what I mean by anthropocentrism.

Although the term quite literally means 'human-centred' there is surprisingly little consensus within the literature as to exactly this means. There are three broad meanings for anthropocentrism that cover all of the uses within the literature: (i) benign (i.e. we cannot help but see things from a human-centred position as we are human), (ii) perspective (i.e.

approaching the world from a human perspective via human norms, values, experiences, etc.), and (iii) valuational (i.e. that humans are more valuable/important/central). It is important to note that within the literature, anthropocentrism is used either with only one of these meanings or by shifting between meanings equivocally, with no clear signposting given.

What I shall propose is that anthropocentrism should be defined as both the perspective and valuational aspects, rather than as any one meaning. This I shall argue not only is a more clear and correct definition, but also illustrates previously unseen difficulties for nonhumans, as well as linking the term – as Ecofeminism suggests – with other relevantly similar centrisms. Thus what I shall mean by anthropocentrism can be outlined as:

(i)   Interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values, experiences, or thoughts, and

(ii)   Considering humans as the most important, significant, superior, or central entity that exists.

While either is sufficient for something to be anthropocentric it is both that I shall refer to when I use the term 'anthropocentrism'. What I do not mean by anthropocentrism is the 'benign' kind, this is because within the literature, the intended use of anthropocentrism is rarely, if ever, this type. Further, the valuational and perspective elements share a connection not possessed by the benign kind. Finally, other relevantly-similar centrisms, such as egocentrism, ethnocentrism, and androcentrism refer only to these two elements. Looking at these terms will clarify anthropocentrism beyond this definition then.

For instance, androcentrism is defined as:

"…Androcentrism occurs when theories take males, men's lives, or "masculinity" to set the norm for humans or animals generally, with female differences either ignored or represented as deviant; when phenomena are viewed from the perspective of men's lives, without regard to how women see them differently; and when male activities or predicaments are represented as the primary causes or sites of important changes, without regard to the roles of females in initiating or facilitating changes or the ways the situation of females has been crucial to determining structural constraints and potentials for

change…[or] in describing or defining phenomena from the perspective of men or typically male lives, without paying attention to how they would be described differently if examined from the point of view of women's lives." (Anderson, 1995:pp.57-58)

Simply put, androcentrism is when one intentionally or unintentionally views something or everything in a way that assumes the male (or a male viewpoint) as default, superior, common sense, the evaluative norm (or as how things should be seen), or with an attitude of dismissiveness towards anything non-male. This definition clearly mirrors the perspective and a valuational elements in the anthropocentrism definition, yet nowhere is it claimed that every male is necessarily androcentric by virtue of their being male.

Similarly, there is no 'benign' ethnocentrism or egocentrism, nor is this what is intended when either term is used. While we are necessarily and inescapably 'stuck' in our own minds, for instance, it does not follow that we must necessarily and inescapably interpret and see the world in our own way.

Using androcentrism as an analogy then, anthropocentrism means humans intentionally or unintentionally viewing something or everything in a way that assumes the human (or a human viewpoint) as default, superior, common sense, the evaluative norm (or as how things should be seen), with an attitude of dismissiveness towards anything nonhuman, and with no attention given to the importance of how nonhumans and nature have shaped our thoughts.

This clarification of anthropocentrism is plausible, given that it covers all of the instances in the literature and fits with the other centrism definitions. While this may seem unremarkable, this clarified definition reveals important points that are otherwise missed on other definitions.

First, anthropocentrism, like androcentrism, can now be seen as a possessed perspective that we have or take that colours our views and reasonings. Like androcentrism, this perspective is generally not intentional, but is rather ingrained via culture, and as a result all of our reasonings are at least subject to a possible human bias.

Second, clarifying the term via androcentrism reveals how both the perspective and valuational elements are related rather than distinct. That the latter involves, or at least

implies, the former is fairly obvious, for it seems difficult to conceive how humans are conceived as superior or more valuable without also either taking a human perspective or using human norms/values to make this judgement. This is borne out by the literature, such as when one posits moral value by looking at what humans possess, deciding that this is what makes something morally considerable, and then extending this outwards to those beings that are those like us. This argument is familiarly shown in feminist critiques of rationality as the basis for moral value and ethical theory.

The analogy also shows that there is reason to believe that the perspective element of leads to the valuational. For instance, Rob Boddice points out that "the process of acquiring these world perspectives is to us invisible, and we therefore operate with and within them, unaware that we overlay cosmology with ideology at every step" (Boddice, in Boddice, 2011:p.7). In other words, by interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values, etc., we then begin to apply this interpretation to the world. An identical explanation is given for androcentrism within feminist literature (Bem, 1993:pp.2-3). This interpreting of the world, or seeing the world with males as the norm, by being applied to the world, then leads to anything that differs from that norm being considered 'other', 'deviant' or 'inferior' (Ibid). As androcentrism is analogous with anthropocentrism it is reasonable to extrapolate that the same connection occurs with anthropocentrism.

--WHAT THIS MEANS--

This definition of anthropocentrism and the implications outlined, reveal problematic consequences for nonhumans and for those who wish to aid them

For instance, anthropocentrism shows that problems facing nonhumans cannot simply be resolved by addressing human chauvinism. Some feminists have argued, for example, that removing inequality will not solve all of the problems that women face in a patriarchal society. Challenging only the valuational aspects of these biases leaves unchallenged the underlying norms, views, perspectives, systems of belief, and assumptions about those 'Others'. Individually or together, such arguments have shown how these norms and perspectives not only lead to problems for women (say, by how women are defined, what is natural for a woman, how women should be, what women should value, etc.), but also lead to

biases even amongst those who truly aim to be fair and reject sexism. Similar arguments have been given in regard to ethnocentrism also. For example, opponents to both andro- and ethnocentrism have argued that a policy of 'separate but equal' still involves many incorrect beliefs that limit the group that is not part of the 'centre' and can easily lead to political, social, moral, and economic situations that hamper the 'Other' group.

Similarly then, considering human chauvinism would not address all problems that nonhumans face. Nonhumans could still be considered as living less valuable lives, as Singer thinks, their 'place' in the world or what their nature is can still be taken for granted, just as with women, their preferences could still be seen as less than what 'higher' beings would prefer, or not given as much serious consideration for the well-being of their lives. This latter has often been put forward as a reason for why nonhumans can be kept in zoos and that freedom, or the capacity to engage in their natural activities, is not necessary for their 'good life' (DeGrazia, 1996:294-295). Finally, humans and domestic nonhumans may morally require protection, yet 'wild' nonhumans because of 'what they are' ought not.

A related consequence is that anthropocentrism perpetuates false views of nonhumans. For instance, eating nonhumans is often justified by arguing that 'that is what those animals are for', or that 'it is natural'. Such reasons involve ideas of what nonhumans are, what they are for, what their place is in the world, and what nature is. All of these depend not on the valuational element of anthropocentrism (or at least not entirely), but on human views about the world. Similarly, issues concerning how we should treat 'wild' and 'domestic' nonhumans differently, what laws should apply to which nonhumans and why, and whether we should intervene in nature, all involve not only human conceptions of what it is to be 'wild' or 'domestic', but also human ideas of how nature ought to be, and only take into consideration what humans think ought to be done. For instance, some object to preventing predation by claiming that we should leave 'wild' nonhumans alone. This not only involves the idea that what is 'wild nature' is what is not human, but also considers what humans think ought to be done rather than what the 'hunter' and 'prey' nonhumans may prefer.

Anthropocentrism also reveals problems with theories aiming to help nonhumans. For instance, some moral theories, such as Regan, consider why humans are morally considerable and then argue that some nonhumans fulfil these criteria. This however involves including or excluding nonhumans based on their similarity to, and via derived criteria that favours,

humans; this of course biases the outcome of who is included from the outset. This is illustrated by considering that such theories would be suspect if applied to sex or 'race'. This method of reasoning, however, is only problematic when considering anthropocentrism.

Current political theories are similarly anthropocentric. These theories – such as Citizenship Theory – are based on human societies and human ideas of nature; i.e. that there are countries, that humans rule vast areas of the environment. Further, these theories take human organization as the blueprint, they do not leave areas of the world outside of human ownership, or recognize that designating an area 'human' separates out humans from nonhumans. More importantly, such positions still exhibit implicit anthropocentrism, via – for example – how the term 'citizen' is defined (i.e. via rationality), how there remains an 'us/them' dichotomy in how nonhumans within and without human-defined areas are considered and treated, how borders of countries and what is considered areas that nonhumans are given leave to live – that were human defined – are still used, and how human transportation is permissible through nonhuman-defined areas without consent yet the opposite is not. Other political theories attempt to define political agency by what makes humans political agents, rather than including how nonhumans operate socio-politically.

Even Singer's theory judges human interests and preferences as more valuable than nonhuman preferences and interests. Further, Singer also but also uses a Rawlsian thought experiment as his 'only defence' to judge which lives have more value. Singer claims that we remove all bias, imagine living the best possible nonhuman animal, and then human, life, then in an intersubjective state that is neutral and free of all species-preference one impartially judges which life one prefers living (Ibid:pp.106-107). Given the definition of anthropocentrism, it is doubtful that our ability to deliberate is free from bias and thus whether one could enter this intersubjective 'neutral' state, as all deliberations involve some perspective/bias. Similarly, it is highly doubtful that humans can truly imagine what a nonhuman's life is from their perspective, and value life as they value it, and thus whether one could be unbiased. As Singer uses this thought experiment as the only defence of his valuing human life more than nonhuman life his theory is clearly anthropocentric. Regan similarly values human life more than nonhuman life due to capacities seen as more valuable to a being, but again judged solely from a human perspective.

Anthropocentrism, then is problematic for nonhuman animals, and thus for those who aim to fairly and unbiasedly aid nonhumans. Consequently it is important to rectify, or at least acknowledge and reduce, this bias a much as possible.

--TAKING NONHUMAN PERSPECTIVES SERIOUSLY--

To this end, while I do not have adequate time to outline a robust theory, I would like to propose some suggestions by which anthropocentrism could be reduced.

First, we can reconceive what it is to be human: for example, we are just another animal, with similarities and differences with other beings, that shares the biotic community and is embedded in interdependent relationships that not only make us who we are but also are necessary for our existence. This change would have a dramatic impact on the perspective we take towards nonhuman animals, the theories we posit, and our relations to other parts of nature, as well as how important we take our preferences and values to be in comparison to theirs.

Second, as anthropocentrism has been defined in relation to other centrisms, the methods we use to confront these may also be adapted to help with anthropocentrism.

For instance, we can be aware of anthropocentrism and how it is implicit within most, perhaps all, of our views. How our society has been constructed to build up the human and Other the nonhuman. We can begin to take these perspectives as equally valuable and equally valid perspectives, norms, values, preferences, and lifestyles, as we do with other cultures, genders, and even other individuals. From this we can begin to challenge aspects of the anthropocentric norm, such as by changing our ideas of each being's value and nature. Some may object that this would involve anthropocentrism, however even if this is so it would arguably involve less than the current system. More importantly, however, nonhumans offer many ways of expressing their preferences or desires to those that pay attention – such as via ethology, and common experience. Moreover, evolution can provide some guide to some judgements, and we make similar judgements with certain humans. Furthermore we can err on the side of caution when considering whether nonhumans have perspectives or what their preferences may be, rather than waiting until 'some perspective, preference, or characteristic has been proven to be possessed'. While this would not be perfect, putting equal weight and

validity onto these perspectives and including them with our own when making deliberations would be fairer than the current anthropocentric perspectives.

Similarly, when proposing ethical or political theories we can look at nonhuman societies and see what norms, structures, or values they use, how these crossover with ours, and so on. Such perspectives could introduce new ideas/norms, provide understanding into the 'natures' and preferences of nonhumans, strengthen, change, or enhance our own values, or even provide support for some of our already held beliefs (such as if moral rules are similar across different groups). All of this could help us formulate theories that are not so anthropocentric.

Both of these suggestions would have a large impact on proposed theories of moral value, on what entities ought to be considered, what criteria ought to be used, and how we ought to interact with the resultant morally considerable nonhumans.

We can also be aware that just as with androcentrism and ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism homogenizes the 'Other', and thus we can recognize that nonhumans are unique individuals. As such we would have to reject the traditional view that nonhumans are interchangeable or replaceable and adopt a new view that recognizes that each nonhuman has its own quirks, preferences, and perspective. That each nonhuman is a unique part of a number of interdependent, interrelated relationships, just as each human, that recognize each other as individuals and often miss or mourn those that go missing or die. This would clearly impact debates on meat-eating, experimentation, and hunting.

While these suggestions are not exhaustive, nor without difficulties, they do provide insight into how anthropocentrism can be at least reduced. As a result, including nonhumans as nonhumans, and taking their perspectives as equal to our own, would provide fairer world.

--CONCLUSION--

Just as with other moral issues then, taking the perspectives of other beings seriously is important for moral and social theorising and action.

While I do not claim the suggestions I have made are free of all anthropocentrism, simple to enact, or free of difficulties, my aim has only been to show why nonhuman

perspectives are important, why anthropocentrism is problematic, and present food for thought for how this may be resolved. The impact of rejecting anthropocentrism, and through it the anthroparchy, cannot I believe be understated.