

First author:

Helen Kopnina (\*), The Hague University of Applied Sciences, h.kopnina@hhs.nl

Word Count

3590

Abstract

*Anthropocentrism* is the belief that value is focused on human beings and that all other beings are means to human ends. Related to anthropocentrism, *humanism* privileges the aim of improvement of human welfare. Humanism has underwritten efforts to expose social injustices and improve the welfare of all human beings. In relation to the environment, *post-humanism* can be defined by a number of characteristics. First, post-humanism exposes anthropocentrism as an attempt to ignore the behavior in which humans focus on themselves at the expense of all other species. Second, post-humanism critiques exclusive moral focus on human inequalities in relation to environmental protection, emphasizing that inequality between species should remain within the scope of ethical consideration. Third, post-humanism exposes anthropocentrism as an inadequate basis for environmental action as it criticizes anthropocentrism as ethically wrong as well as pragmatically ineffective.

Keywords

Anthropocentrism; biodiversity loss; environmental ethics; human chauvinism; speciesism

Main text

**Defining terms: anthropocentrism, humanism, post-humanism**

Etymologically derived from the Greek words: *ἄνθρωπος*, *Anthropos* or "human being"; and *κέντρον*, *Kentron* or "center", the term *anthropocentrism* is a worldview, which privileges the aim of improvement of human welfare over other aspirations. The commonly held meaning of anthropocentrism is "regarding humankind as the central or most important element of existence" (The Oxford English Dictionary). While anthropocentrism literally it means human-centeredness, the term is used in different ways. According to the environmental philosopher Baird Callicott (2006:119), anthropocentrism presupposes that "only humans are worthy of

ethical considerations” and “other things are mere means to human ends”. The terms “*human chauvinism*” and “*speciesism*” are closely related to anthropocentrism.

*Humanism*, the cultural movement that gained prominence in the Renaissance, refers to the perceived duty to promote human welfare above other objectives. The humanistic orientation is particularly concerned with the personal, ethical, and political choices facing humans. Humanism includes social altruism and social justice. Social justice in relation to the environment is typically associated with the so-called “*environmental justice*” or concern with unequal exposure of different human groups to environmental risks and benefits. Environmental justice is associated with shallow ecology, concerned with the fair distribution of natural resources in order to address intergenerational justice (justice between the present and future generations of humans) and eradication of poverty (Naess 1973). Following from this, humanism and anthropocentrism can be seen as close associates.

Humanism has long been a tenet of socio-cultural anthropology and has underwritten aims to expose social inequalities, colonialism, racism, sexism and the like (Sodikoff 2011). In anthropology, the idea of humanism is promoted, among others, by the Society for Humanistic Anthropology within the American Anthropological Association. The roots of humanistic anthropology go back to the earlier anthropologists, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, who has advocated a role for anthropologists as policy advisers to African colonial administrators. Humanist anthropology explicitly focuses on criticism of colonization, racism, and sexism, combining community-level interactions through participant observation with involvement with or on behalf of marginalized or poor people in the developing world (Lewis 2005).

*Post-humanism* or *posthumanism* (literally meaning "after humanism" or "beyond humanism") refers to any worldview, belief, or ideology that is critical of traditional humanism and associated theories about the superiority of humanity. Post-humanism has its roots and draws its inspiration in the ecocentric (ecology- or nature-centered) environmental ethics (e.g. Katz 1999), deep ecology (e.g. Naess 1973), and animal rights literature (e.g. Borràs 2016). Philosopher Francesca Ferrando (2012) discussed post-humanism as a type of “mediation philosophy” which addresses non-human species as well as technology and ecology.

Post-humanism in anthropology is often associated with the notions of social change, responsibility, and multispecies coexistence (Haraway 2008). *Post-humanist anthropology* has also addressed the hierarchical relationship between humans and nonhumans. In their book, *Posthumanism: Anthropological Insights* (2017), Alan and Josephine Smart revive “traditional” ethnographies where cattle, pigs, yams, and sorcerers were central to the anthropological narratives, but they also extend their discussion to more contemporary topics such as microbiomes that inhabit human bodies and nano-machines. The focus on a study of "more than human", including animals, plants, bacteria, and other organisms, is on inter-relatedness of human and nonhuman domains (Abram et al 2016). More ecocentric scholars in *environmental*

*anthropology* have embraced post-humanism that recognizes *deep ecology* (Naess 1973), and/or *animal rights/welfare* (Singer 1977; Peters 2016), and/or *ecological justice* (Baxter 2005) perspectives. More recent ethnographies started emphasizing the value of nonhuman life (e.g. Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2016).

From the point of view of post-humanism, there is no reason to *a priori* limit certain rights to some communities, indigenous or not, and no part of humanity should be ‘exempt’ from responsibility to non-humans. Post-humanism may recognize that a degree of human activism is a necessary part of environmental protection precisely because humanity possesses the consciousness to recognize the morality of rights. In a more radical interpretation, post-humanism questions the central tenants of humanism, condemning speciesism, human chauvinism, and human supremacy.

### **Different types of anthropocentrism**

An anthropologist David Kidner (2014) has argued that it is not anthropocentrism but rather ‘*industrocentrism*’, or focus on industrial neoliberalism, which subordinates both people and nature to the economic system. Kidner argues that the use of the term anthropocentrism is far from culturally universal as this perspective may well be unique to industrial societies. As part of the definition of anthropocentrism is “legitimate” care for humanity, the term blinds us to the systemic character of industrialism’s colonization of the world. While *industrocentrism* supports the assumption that human interests have to be ‘balanced’ *against* those of the natural order, it actively camouflages colonization of the planet and people as mere “resources” or “capital” under the pretense that it is of benefit to humanity.

Tim Hayward (1997) interpreted anthropocentrism as meaning two things: first, anthropocentrism as the love of one’s own species, and second, as discrimination against other species. This position is similar to the distinction between “strong” (a belief that non-humans only have value if they are valuable for humans) and “weak” anthropocentrism (a belief that is seen as inevitable and even benevolent as it underscores self-interest motivation to preserve the environment) developed by Bryan Norton (1984).

In the first case, a legitimate concern for human welfare can be seen as “natural” and even noble as care for one’s own species acknowledges that a balanced, healthy, and naturally plentiful environment is necessary for humans to prosper. Indeed, all species are selfish to the extent that they need to sustain and nourish themselves and reproduce, and thus by evolutionary default, are concerned about own welfare (Kopnina et al 2018b). It is also assumed that while anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric differ, all people will strive to preserve the environment on which they (or the subjects of their concern) are dependent. This *convergence theory* or “environmental pragmatism” assumes that practically, in the case of environmental protection,

anthropocentric or ecocentric motivations achieve the same ends (e.g. Norton 1984; Grey 1993). Thus, pragmatic environmentalists such as Norton (1984, 1992) and Weston (1985) typically reject the intrinsic value of the environment in favor of instrumental values. Norton (1984:131) argued that *weak anthropocentrism* provides a basis for criticizing unsustainable practices, thereby providing an adequate basis for environmental protection without what he found to be the “questionable ontological commitments made by non-anthropocentrists in attributing intrinsic value to nature”.

In the second case, anthropocentrism is a “concern with human interests to the exclusion, or at the expense, of interests of other species” (Hayward 1997:52). This strong anthropocentrism has been implicated in a number of environmental problems, from the destruction of wild habitats to abuse of animals used for consumption and medical research (Norton 1984). In his book *The Arrogance of Humanism* (1978), an American biologist David Ehrenfeld describes the consequences of this exclusion.

### **Critique of anthropocentrism**

The rejection of intrinsic value is often justified by the arguments that humans cannot know what the needs of other species are as we can only perceive the world and morality with our own senses (Norton 1984; Grey 1993). Yet, as the concept of ‘anthropocentric fallacy’ explains, while we can only perceive the environment and its elements by our human senses, this does not mean that we cannot grant nature intrinsic value (Eckersley 1992; Washington 2015). By way of comparison, white men are capable of developing a consciousness that recognizes the rights of women or other ethnic groups (Kopnina et al 2018b). They do not have to be sexist or racist just because they are white males. Consequently, ecocentrism is not anti-humanist but rather directed “against an uncaring, economic, narrow-minded humanism rather than against humanism itself” (Barry 1999: 31). Critics have argued that since it embraces instrumental valuation of resources, anthropocentrism does not protect nonhuman beings without economic value (Katz 1999; Crist 2015; Piccolo et al 2018; Kopnina 2018a; Washington et al 2018), nor safeguard animal welfare (Singer 1977; Regan 1986). The anthropocentric motivation was shown to be inadequate for biodiversity protection outside of instances when both people and environment are negatively affected, basically abandoning species that are not instrumental to human welfare (Cafaro & Primack 2014; Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2016).

### **Cross-cultural environmental ethics**

While some cultures worship trees and “sacred” natural places (Knudtson and Suzuki 1992; Sponsel 2014; Kopnina 2015), other communities can be indifferent to environmental concerns

or cruel to animals (Taylor 2010). While anthropocentrically motivated anthropology morally privileges indigenous rights and traditions, it simultaneously disregards ecological justice and animal rights.

For example, as anthropologist Veronica Strang (2017) asks whether the Aboriginals of Australia have the “right” to continue hunting wallabies to the point that the once plentiful population has dwindled to critical levels. The complexities of the moral dilemma associated with “rights” have surfaced at a meeting between Aboriginal elders and representatives of the Queensland National Parks service that promoted legislation to prevent hunting vulnerable or threatened species in national parks. One of the Aboriginal elders, Colin Lawrence, referred to the local history of colonial settlement. In the early 1900s, a European settler had shot a number of Aboriginal people until being speared by one of their leaders, now regarded as a local hero. The settler, according to Lawrence, had shot Aboriginal people ‘like dogs’, ‘and now you want to tell us we can’t even shoot a wallaby!’ (field notes 1991 in Strang 2017:275).

The case described above necessitates a few ethical questions. Do the Aboriginals have a “right” to mistreat animals the way they were themselves mistreated by colonial rulers? Who gives this right to the people and simultaneously takes it away from wallabies? Is respect for non-humans something that colonial power holders brought with them (as part of Western post-material values) or has it been part of the indigenous societies (as part of traditional ecocentrism)?

While there is robust ethnographic evidence that many indigenous societies used to live relatively sustainably and could have been considered ecocentric or at least zoocentric (e.g. Sponsel 2014), the example above illustrates that anthropocentrism might be taking over indigenous worldviews. One might hypothesize that indigenous anthropocentrism could have emerged under the influence of colonial oppression, substituting for traditional post-humanist values. However, while the (arguably also Western) concept of human rights seems to be readily adapted in the rhetoric opposing national park authorities, post-humanism seems to have a long way to go. The assumption that nonhuman species should be “treated like dogs” (not meaning like pampered pets) seems morally defensible because their moral significance is simply left out of consideration (e.g. Cafaro and Primack 2014; Doak et al 2015; Kopnina 2016).

### **Connecting the dots: Post-humanism in theory and its practical implications**

Post-humanists do not deny the destructive reach of the rich and the immorality of colonialism. Yet, while the rich consume more, the influence of the poor on the environment is more localized, involving for example overhunting leading to the “empty forest syndrome” (Crist & Cafaro 2012). Without a strategy to voluntarily reduce the human population, and to redistribute resources away from the rich to the poor without bloody revolution, the total “economic pie” will

be still consumed either way. In fact, it appears that while meat consumption in rich countries is declining, it is increasing in poor ones (The Economist 2018). In this sense, anthropocentrism is not just about the over-consuming elites, but also a supporting ideology of global human entitlement to natural resources (Crist 2012).

Yet, as generations of cultural change show, ideology is not fixed. Respect for nonhuman rights has been recently enshrined in some governments' legal systems (Sykes 2016). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has served to inspire initiatives such as the Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth (<http://therightsofnature.org/>), initiated by the Bolivian government, the Wildlands Project Land Conservation (Noss 1992), the rights of rivers in New Zealand, Australia and India (O'Donnell and Talbot-Jones 2018), or Lake Erie in the US. Also recently, more Western consumers have turned to veganism (The Economist 2018).

Still, the practical manifestation of post-humanism exposes ethical dilemmas. In one of the interpretations of post-humanism, humanist legitimate grievances, ranging from colonialism to racism and sexism are translated into human relationships with other species. However, in anthropology, this translation tends to be allegorical rather than political and legal. For example, drawing on the tradition of multi-species ethnography, Salazar Parreñas' (2015:1) describes a captured orangutan:

"The orangutan herself was subjected to constraints of space rooted in colonial and postcolonial histories of making territories. And those constraints were, for her, gendered insofar that her sex affected her relationship to space. For instance, whenever managers thought she should get pregnant, she would be forced into captivity with a male orangutan for the purpose of procreation".

Thus focus on the human groups' suffering from colonialism and gender overwrite the simple fact that the orangutan was caged and forced to mate. Typically, such multispecies investigations fall short of recognizing animal rights or even animal welfare.

Another example of this is a well-known supporter of post-humanism Donna Haraway's reflection on her exchange with her friend, who inquired regarding animal experimentation:

"So if you were going to abandon humanism, in favor of the post-humanism, ahumanism, non-humanism of the process philosophers, of the phenomenologists, of Derrida and Whitehead, I still want to know how specifically laboratory experimental practices get done and get justified.... I want to know what you would say when someone buttonholes you and says: I challenge you to defend the slaughter of lab animals in biomedical experiments" (Ghamari-Tabrizi in Haraway 2008:86-87).

Haraway responded:

"Yes, I will defend animal killing for reasons and in detailed material-semiotic conditions that I judge tolerable because of a greater good calculation. And no, that is never enough. I refuse the choice of "inviolable animal rights" versus "human good is more important." Both of those proceeds as if calculation solved the dilemma, and all I or we have to do is choose. I have never regarded that as enough in abortion politics either. Because we did

not learn how to shape the public discourse well enough, in legal and popular battles feminists have had little choice but to use the language of rationalist choice as to if that settled *our* prolife politics, but it does not and we know it... We feminists who protect access to abortion, we who kill that way, need to learn to revoice life and death in our terms and not accept the rationalist dichotomy that rules most ethical dispute” (Haraway 2008:87).

From this fragment (discussed in more detail in Kopnina 2017) it is unclear how the ‘material-semiotic conditions’ apply to the case of abortion. A human embryo is not ‘killed’ for the ‘greater good’. Abortion is normally a mother’s choice, which cannot be said of laboratory animals who are intentionally exposed to diseases, subjected to experimental treatments and then killed, pregnant or not. Even our beloved pets have their lives and reproductive choices fully determined by their owners (euthanasia, sterilization, and castration are common practice). Thus, though Haraway promoted multispecies ethnography, post-humanism is only accepted as a discursive practice.

The implications of post-humanism *in practice* can be profound. Recognition of the post-humanist ethics may necessitate the need to designate large nature areas as protected reserves in accordance with the species' various needs (Mathews 2016). Mass-scale use of non-humans for consumption and medical experimentation may become unthinkable (Bisgould 2008). The emerging fields of animal law (Borràs 2016), ecological justice (Baxter 2005), earth jurisprudence (Burdon 2011) or earth justice (Higgins 2010) offer bolder ways of thinking – and more importantly, acting – upon post-humanism.

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