

A Critique of the Environmental Ethical Critique of Christian Anthropocentrism

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Abstract

The trends in environmental-ethical thinking that oppose anthropocentrism formulate criticism directed toward ideologies that have been defining the Western ethical mentality up to our days and that are, at the same time, paradigms that obstruct sustainability. Such criticism facilitates the development of an ethical system that is more likely to be able to generate a sustainable social-economic structure. With my research, I wish to contribute to this endeavour. However, there is another aspect that I consider to be of crucial importance, namely that numerous individuals in the Judeo-Christian, respectively in Antiquity-based Western civilizations are unable to identify with this type of criticism grounded in environment-ethical thinking. Consequently, the objective proposed for the ‘criticism of the criticism’ is to reveal new perspectives of interpretation which can reconcile ecologic sustainability and Western Christian ideologies that are, from certain points of view, rightfully criticized. What I propose in my essay is not to repudiate environment-ethical criticism, but to amend it in order to serve a common goal: ecologic sustainability.

Keywords

Anthropocentrism; christianism; cartesianism; panexperientialism; malthusianism; overpopulation; care.

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I. The background of the theses and the main critiques in opposition the anthropocentrism

Environmental philosophy emerged in the 1970s to reveal the spiritual and ideological foundations of the arrogant human behaviour which was and is inducing the environmental crisis. The movement was

relatively quick to arrive at the conclusion that traditional Western thought, particularly anthropocentrism, can be identified as the philosophical background that determined the behaviour leading to the death of Nature, that is, “the ideological culprit.” Literally, the term anthropocentrism refers to human-centred thinking and is based on the principle that Man is the only being that has moral value or intrinsic value, all other entities having only instrumental value, that is, it defines other entities as merely things [1].

Philosophers agree that the human being of moral status has intrinsic value. While environmental ethics also accepts this thesis, it also argues that Man is not the only being in possession of such value, other natural entities (animals, species, ecosystems) possess intrinsic value as well, thus secular environmental ethics is quick to occupy a non-anthropocentric position [2].

Some critics of traditional anthropocentrism wish to eliminate anthropocentrism from human thinking altogether (e.g. Lynn White, Jr.); while others consider anthropocentrism necessary, but in a renewed version and not in the traditional sense [3-4]. The latter call their views “anthropocentrism” in a weak sense or relative anthropocentrism (e.g. Jan Deckers). Both non-anthropocentric authors and those wishing to renew anthropocentrism generally agree that the traditional Western anthropocentrism is anthropocentrism in a strong sense.

II. The three main founts of anthropocentrism according to critics

This system of ideas goes back to three roots: classical Greek philosophy (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle), the Judeo-Christian tradition, and Modernism which started with Descartes [5] (p. 215).

- (i) The anthropocentrism of classical Greek philosophy is most concisely summarized by Aristotle in his *Politics* (1256 b): “If therefore nature makes nothing without purpose or in vain, it follows that nature has made all the animals for the sake of men.” [6]
- (ii) The emblematic Biblical quote on Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism appears in the 28th verse of the first Chapter in the book of Genesis (Gen. 1:28), in which God commands the first

couple: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

- (iii) The ontological basis for Cartesian anthropocentrism is Descartes’ assumption that there are two kinds of substances in the created world. One is *res cogitans*: consciousness unfolding through doubt, whose main attribute is the ability to think, to have free will, that is, the ability to have self-determination. This is the essence of the ego that the philosopher identifies with the immortal, eternal soul. The other substance is *res extensa*, the extended body the attributes which are nothing like the attributes of the conscious substance and that is just helplessly obeying the laws of mechanics. The *res cogitans*, possessing value in its own, exists only in Man, everything exterior to the human being is only *res extensa*.

In mainstream secular environment philosophy, these three intellectual sources share the attribution of exclusive importance to Man, thus leaving no moral space for the adequate consideration of non-human entities. In this view, Western anthropocentrism is a homogenous ideology that assigns intrinsic value exclusively to man and considers everything else to have only instrumental value, thus leading to the arrogance of today’s Western consumer society towards the environment.

III. A proposal for a different interpretation

As the conclusion of my research, I prove that these anthropocentric systems show significant differences.

- (i) While analysing the anthropocentrism of classical Greek philosophy, there is no way to avoid the term *kalokagathia*. The anthropocentrism of classical Greek philosophy is incompatible with the consumerism prevailing today and the related anthropocentrism.
- (ii) While the theoreticians of environmental ethics who are critical of the anthropocentrism of the Judeo-Christian tradition refer to the Book of Genesis 1:28, they ignore the fact the original Hebrew word used in the Bible is *רָדוּ*, meaning not only “to rule over,” but also “to cultivate with care.” Man has been created in the image of God (in Latin: *imago Dei*), who must assimilate God wanting the

beauty and harmony of the created world. The duty of being *imago Dei*, as formulated in the Old Testament, is expanded in the New Testament with the duty of following Jesus Christ (in Latin: *sequela Christi*), that is, to walk in Christ's footsteps, to follow Jesus Christ.

- (iii) The three types of anthropocentrism are actually only two. Even though there are substantial differences between classical Greek and Judeo-Christian worldviews, from the perspective of environmental ethics I put them both in the same group and I separate Cartesian anthropocentrism from the previous two concepts. To justify the classification, I argue that Cartesian anthropocentrism can be criticized based on arguments proposed by environmental ethics, but the critique is not applicable in the case of the other two concepts. I think that the environment philosophers who criticize anthropocentrism essentially misinterpret Christian anthropocentrism along with the classical Greek interpretation.

Simultaneously, I admit the possible causes for this misinterpretation, and I conclude that the environmental-ethical anthropocentrism-critique does have practical significance. These works reveal the practical errors that come from a distorted interpretation of Christianity. (Although non anthropocentric environmental philosophers think that these errors originate from Christianity itself, and not its distorted interpretation.) They accuse anthropocentrism of being responsible for ecologic unsustainability, which may motivate Christians to cleanse their understanding regarding religious doctrines, this way enabling them to separate ecologically harmful misinterpretations from the message of universal love that is the essence of Christianity and that can serve as a possible and efficient ethical foundation for ecologic sustainability.

IV. Concretes

The general outline of the problem is followed by the summary of the analysis of two specific trends.

A. Panexperientialism

Panexperientialism starts out from the process-philosophy developed by Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne [7-8]. They consider anthropocentrism to be derived from a dualist view, but if

such a dualistic interpretation of the world can be transcended, anthropocentric thinking can be transcended as well. The pursuit is present in the panexperientialist criticism of Christianity.

Panexperientialism repudiates the inherent value surplus in Man that is so evident in Christian thought, the foundation for the argument being that experience is the principle guiding line in the process (or the history) of the world. Experience is produced by living entities at different levels, but these differences do not generate any value-based hierarchy regarding these entities. The inherent values of each entity are present in all the other entities, the intrinsic values of entities form a common network of values. This mutual dependence and mutual experience-transit disregards not only the value-based differences among entities, but also the difference between the immanent and the transcendent. Therefore, within the world's experience network, neither Man's value surplus in the traditional sense proposed by Western ethics, nor its privileged position within the created world are acceptable [8] (p. 22, p. 215).

In my examination, I point out that the ontology of Christianity is not dualistic, therefore the privileged role of Man cannot originate in dualism either. The ontological non-duality of Christianity is corroborated by the doctrine of existence analogy that dominates Christian ontology. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes four levels of existence in the *De veritate*. [9] The first is the level of inorganic matter, the second is the level of vegetative organisms, while the third is the level of the sensitive animals. The fourth level of the spiritual/intellectual level, the level of Man. Christianity would be dualistic if the fourth level were separated from the other three in the same way as the Cartesian *res cogitans* is separated from *res extensa*. However, these levels of existence are not so rigidly delimited, they mutually presuppose and pervade each other. The intrinsic value of entities is to be interpreted based on this principle of gradation as well. Thus, the ontological context of Christianity cannot integrate any kind of ethics that would allow Man to ignore his duties to treat non-human entities respectfully.

B. Malthusian thinkers

Malthusian thinkers (Ehrlich, Hardin, Lovelock) combine their anti-democratic views – intended to convincingly introduce the necessity to

reduce global population – with catastrophic eco-pessimism. These thinkers consider that welfare states need to deny food aid and they also need to refuse to take climate refugees. Lovelock argues that due to the environmental crisis, the survival now takes priority over ethical justice [10-11].

In Lovelock's view, the solution to the demographic crisis can only come from the transformation of mankind into a social structure similar to the State of termites. He deems the arrival of a new Churchill in possession of total control and the appearance of the Earth First Battalion to maintain order as necessary [12]. Lovelock also deals with the embarrassing question of whom and how many people will inhabit the global, in a termites-state-like human society that he envisages. In the future, mankind will be reduced to a maximum of half a billion people who must all serve Gaia [13] (p. 270).

In Christian demographic thinking, there is no need for such adjustment of Man. Christian researchers point to declining population growth and to the fact that Europe and East Asia are affected by what is called natural population decrease – decrease without migration –, therefore the solution they suggest is conscious and responsible family planning. In their view, Earth has enormous capacities and resources, therefore the question that we need to elucidate is why our goods are so unfairly distributed within our global society – unfair distribution that allows the population of the United States to use 100 times more resources (ecological, biologic) than the population of the poorest continent of the South, Africa [14] (p. 16).

In my opinion, the principal cause of environmental pollution is not global overpopulation, but the profit-centred selfishness of some, and the continuous spreading of the worldview serving this profit-centred selfishness. If the self-realization of too many individuals leads to the accumulation and possession of material goods, the process will fundamentally undermine the cause of environment protection.

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