

BIOCENTRIC ETHICAL THEORIES

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Summary

Biocentrism refers to all environmental ethics that extend the status of moral object from human beings to all other living things in nature. In a narrow sense, it emphasizes the value and rights of organic individuals, believing that moral priority should be given to the survival of individual living beings. Thus, it is a kind of ethics of individualism. The environmental ethics advocating holism, such as “land ethics,” is often known as ecocentrism, which holds species and ecosystems to be more important, so that moral priority should be given to them.

Despite their having different theoretical bases, in the long run it is possible and necessary for environmental morals to converge so as to establish an ethics with the harmonious development of humans and nature as its moral aim. Since they all agree that it is necessary to extend the human moral sense, that is, to extend the status of moral object from humans and society to all other living beings and nature, it is possible to establish a universal environmental ethics by combining their reasonable ideas.

Biocentric ethics, as an environmental ethic, considers that all living things have their own “good” and therefore proposes expanding the status of moral object to nonhuman living things. It includes Schweitzer’s ethic of reverence for life, Singer’s ethics of animal liberation and Taylor’s ethics of bioegalitarianism. Its main points are three in number. (1) All living things have an instinct to resist the process of increasing entropy, for keeping their own organization, maintaining their own survival and the wholeness of life. (2) Maintaining their own survival is a central aim for all living things, that is an intrinsic value and “good.” (3) Although different living things have their own ways of

organization and survival (different ways of self-organization and maintaining survival with different organisms), their values are intrinsically the same, and therefore they should have equal rights in morality, which means they should be given moral acknowledgement, concern, and protection.

1. Albert Schweitzer: Reverence for Life

In his book *Philosophy of Civilization: Culture and Ethics*, published in 1923, Albert Schweitzer advanced the ethics of respecting life, that is, reverence for life, which laid a foundation for contemporary Western ecological ethics. His main ideas can be analyzed as follows:

- The nature of the ethic of reverence for life.

Conventional ethics was concerned only with human beings, that is to say, morality was merely used to talk about the behavior of human beings, so it was an ethics of interpersonal relationships. This ethics concerning only human beings is incomplete. Schweitzer considered that people are ethical only when they obey the compulsion to help all life they are able to assist, and to the degree it is capable of feeling. Although the ethics concerning humans was very profound and vibrant, it was incomplete. An integrated ethics calls for kindness (benevolence) to all living things, which is in accordance with thinking people's natural reverence for life. Thus, the integrated ethics essentially has a depth, energy, and function that differ from the ethics that merely involved humans. It urges everyone to care for all people as well as all living things, to lend a hand to those who need it, and to give moral care to all other living things. Schweitzer said that, in nature, what reverence for life demands accords with the ethical principle of love. Reverence for life *per se* includes order and a foundation of love, and appeals to feeling for all living beings. So the ethics of reverence for life is a new ethics, because it is not only an extension of ethics, but also a transformation of the nature of ethics.

- The function of the ethic of reverence for life.

In order to resolve cultural crisis, it is necessary to merge life and morality into a single whole. The goal is to make progress and create all kinds of values beneficial to individuals or human development in terms of the material, spiritual, and ethical. Therefore, the function of the ethic of reverence for life is above all to establish a positive worldview and to abandon negative worldviews. The former demonstrates that all living things in the world exist significantly. The latter demonstrates a loathing of the world, and distances itself from all things. However, ethics essentially affirm the world, and play a role in the sense of "good." It is obvious that a positive worldview can be profitable for the development of ethics. Conversely, negative worldviews will confound. In the former case, a corresponding ethic can be developed, but in the latter case an ethic becomes abnormal.

Our natural sensitivity conforms to this positive worldview that makes us see the world as our "home" in which we act. But a negative worldview finds us living in the world as strangers; it denies the significance of action in the world. This idea obviously conflicts

with our natural sensitivity. It is the ethics of reverence for life that allows us to avoid such a contradiction. We build up a civilized relationship with the universe through our ethical behavior to all living things.

- Expanding the principle of love to animals is a revolution in ethics.

In Schweitzer's eyes, if we acknowledge only the ethic of loving people, we may disregard the fact that ethic cannot be regularization due to the acceptance of ethical principles. But if we expand the principle of love to all animals, we admit that the ethic is limitless. People can be convinced that the ethic is limitless and this makes us assume limitless responsibility and obligation.

However, generally speaking it is quite easy to expand such ethics, while it is very difficult to develop specific behavior rules, let alone to carry them out. Thus, the ethic of reverence for life or loving all life forms must make us realize that we can not avoid destroying and harming life. If we are not callous, we will experience considerable mental conflict. To avoid such conflict, we should be fully aware that life is sacred and all lives are an inseparable whole and have the desire to survive, which we should respect. This is the basis of the ethic of reverence for life. The protection, flourishing, and increase of the value of life should be regarded as the basis of morality, and as the starting point of the ethic of reverence for life as well. Schweitzer once said that people are truly ethical only when they regard the life of plants and animals as being as important as their own lives. This is a revolution in ethics.

- Principles of the ethic of reverence for life.

Schweitzer first advanced the ethical principle of reverence for life in 1919, when he maintained that life is good, whereas destroying and obstructing life is bad. In 1963, he expanded on this, saying: "There we have given us that basic principle of the morality which is a necessity of thought. It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or obstruct it." The basic ethical principles of reverence for life are absolute.

- All life forms are sacred without distinction between high or low, rich or poor.

The ethic of reverence for life denies distinguishing between high and low, valuable and less valuable life forms. Such a distinction is extremely subjective, for it is merely based on people's feelings. Such a distinction seems to suggest that there exist lives of no value that can be injured or harmed casually. This view is wrong indeed. A truly virtuous person believes that all life forms are sacred. This includes lives that from the person's point of view are of a much lower level.

The ethic of reverence for life is a new positive worldview. According to Schweitzer, only this worldview has the power to make humans give up ego interests in their actions and encourage humans to regard realizing spiritual and moral perfection as the ultimate aim of civilization. By the same token, to ponder a positive world, life, and ethics is to ponder real and integrated cultural ideals and make them come true.

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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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