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## On the Reconciliation of Anthropocentric and Nonanthropocentric Environmental Ethics

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**ABSTRACT:** I argue that James Sterba's recent attempt to show that, despite their foundational axiological differences regarding the relative value of humans and members of nonhuman species, anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists would accept the exact same principles of environmental justice fails. The failure to reconcile the two positions is a product of an underestimation of the divergence that occurs at the level of general principles and practical policy as a result of the initial value commitments which characterise each position. The upshot of this is that, contrary to those who argue that environmental ethicists ought to move beyond the traditional anthropocentric-nonanthropocentric debate, the foundational debate about interspecific egalitarianism will continue to issue in substantial debates about environmental policy formation.

**KEYWORDS:** Anthropocentrism, environmental justice, nonanthropocentrism, Sterba

James Sterba's recent essay in this journal, 'Reconciling Anthropocentric and Nonanthropocentric Environmental Ethics', represents the latest attempt to circumvent the decades old debate in environmental philosophy between the anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists, and to show that the axiological disagreement which has characterised the debate becomes moot as one proceeds to construct general normative principles and then to translate those principles into specific policy.<sup>1</sup> Sterba works to show that as regards principles of environmental justice, in their most morally defensible forms, both the anthropocentrist and nonanthropocentrist positions would ultimately concur on which such principles are acceptable. I have elsewhere argued that at least one such attempt to establish a convergence of anthropocentric and nonanthropocentric perspectives at the level of policy formation fails, and will here argue that Sterba's attempt at reconciling the two camps fails as well.<sup>2</sup> Though my critique of Sterba's argument is, of course, insufficient to show that no such reconciliation is possible, I think that it will provide grounds for recognising that such a

unification project faces great difficulties, and that despite the growing weariness with the anthropocentric-nonanthropocentric debate, the foundational axiological division represented by the debate will remain a crucial point of contention for some time to come.

Sterba's approach is to interpret the nonanthropocentric-anthropocentric debate as a debate about the equality of species. Traditionally understood, the anthropocentrist is taken to believe that there exists a morally relevant inequality between humans and other species, while the nonanthropocentrist denies the existence of such an inequality. Sterba's project is to show that, despite their differences regarding species equality, both positions would allow for the exact same range of preferential satisfaction of human needs over those of members of nonhuman species. His general tack is this. He argues that even though the nonanthropocentrist is committed to species egalitarianism, that commitment does not preclude the possibility that preferential treatment of humans is morally justified in certain cases.<sup>3</sup> From the other direction, he argues that despite the fact that the anthropocentrist holds to the belief in interspecific inequality, this general inequality does not license all forms of preferential treatment, since to do so would in effect translate the initial inequality into a right to domination, a move which Sterba argues is indefensible. The upshot is that when the most reasonable versions of both axiological positions are considered, agreement is reached as to which general principles of preferential treatment are acceptable. My argument is that Sterba overestimates the necessity of agreement between the two camps at this juncture. I will argue that the nonanthropocentrist has available good reasons for thinking that the kind of human preference embodied in the three principles Sterba defends is too broad, and that the anthropocentrist has good reasons for thinking that the restrictions on human preference found in those principles are too strict.

Sterba begins his reconciliation project with the nonanthropocentrist position. For Sterba, the important question to be addressed is whether such a commitment to species egalitarianism eliminates the possibility of justifiably preferring humans over nonhumans in situations of conflict. A first, and easy answer, is that in cases of self-defence, humans are justified in preferring their own lives or well-being over that of nonhumans when the latter pose a threat to humans. The principle runs this way:

*A Principle of Human Defence:* Actions that defend oneself and other human beings against harmful aggression are permissible even when they necessitate killing or harming animals and plants.

As Sterba notes, this principle is perfectly analogous to the accepted principle of self-defence found in human ethics. Though nonanthropocentrists might demand that the domain of the set of actions counting as 'harmful aggression' be rather limited, they would obviously be committed to this principle.

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A second type of justified preference occurs in cases where human preservation is at stake, though not due to the aggression of nonhumans. Sterba has in mind cases where the satisfaction of basic human needs requires the dissatisfaction of nonhuman basic needs, and sets out the following principle to cover such situations:

*A Principle of Human Preservation:* Actions that are necessary for meeting one's basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings are permissible even when they require aggressing against the basic needs of animals and plants.

Unlike the Principle of Human Defence, no such strictly analogous principle exists in human ethics. Sterba states that there is a principle which allows for the committing of acts which are necessary to satisfy basic needs even when doing so results in a failure to meet the basic needs of others, but that, in general, no such principle pertaining to aggressing against the basic needs of others exists. Nevertheless, Sterba takes the Principle of Human Preservation to be a requirement if the human species is to survive.

'Happily', as Sterba describes it, the kind of human preference found in the Principle of Human Preservation is consistent with the nonanthropocentric commitment to species equality. Sterba's argument for why it is consistent rests on an appeal to the notion of 'reciprocity'. According to him, we would only be obligated to sacrifice our own basic needs for the sake of nonhumans' basic needs if they were doing the same, or were willing to do the same. In the absence of such reciprocal treatment on their part, we are not so obligated.

What is one to make of such an argument? Surely, there are types of obligations which exist only in the context of reciprocity (e.g. contractual obligations). However, ethical contractarians to the contrary, many would argue that not all obligations are grounded on the presence of reciprocity on the part of the party to which the obligations are owed (e.g. parents' obligations to their children). Why should we believe that a potential obligation to avoid aggressing against the basic needs of nonhumans should be such a reciprocity-based obligation? It seems as if Sterba has something like a naturalistic argument working here. The absence of interspecific sacrificial behaviour in nature eliminates the moral necessity of humans acting in that fashion, since such sacrificial behaviour has an 'unnatural' character.<sup>4</sup> It is unnatural because, if pursued consistently, it would result in extinction. Sterba writes,

...if we were to prefer consistently the basic needs of members of other species whenever those needs conflicted with our own (or even if we do so half the time), given the characteristic behaviour of the members of other species, we would soon be facing extinction, and, fortunately, we have no reason to think that we are morally required to bring about our own extinction.

Assuming that Sterba is right to hold that there exists no reasonable justification for the view that humans have a moral obligation to bring about the extinction of the species (a safe assumption, no doubt), then it is permissible for humans to act so as to prevent their extinction, and the Principle of Human Preservation seems quite justified. Note, however, that all this line of reasoning, in itself, establishes is the *permissibility* of humans acting so as to prevent their own extinction. It does not establish the presence of an *obligation* on the part of humans to act so as to prevent their own extinction. Though an argument in support of such a view may be available (the beginnings of such an argument will be discussed later in connection with anthropocentrism and Sterba's Principle of Disproportionality), Sterba does not make such a claim. In the absence of such an obligation, acting so as to lead to our extinction remains, *prima facie*, permissible. An immediate implication of this possibility is that non-anthropocentrists, committed to species equality as they are, may consistently prefer the satisfaction of nonhuman basic needs over those of humans even if, following through with Sterba's logic, doing so entails the extinction of the human species.

Theoretically, Sterba's argument establishes very little regarding the nonanthropocentrists' commitment to the Principle of Human Preservation since its complement, the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation, is an equally valid option. Any preference in the context of competing basic needs is permissible given the nonanthropocentrists' initial commitment to species equality. If some species must suffer, the equality of species plays no role in selecting which species will suffer; a coin toss would suffice. Consequently, though it is true that the nonanthropocentrist could justifiably accept the permissibility of sacrificing nonhuman basic needs for those of humans, they are not required to. Since sacrificing human basic needs for those of nonhuman species is equally permissible, the nonanthropocentrist could opt for that approach as a rule, or they could simply make alternating choices between the competing basic needs of humans and nonhumans. What is absent are reasons for believing that the nonanthropocentrist *ought* to prefer the Principle of Human Preservation on a consistent basis. To settle the dilemma consistently in favour of humans requires some independent argument to show that our obligation to prevent our own extinction is stronger than our obligation to prevent the extinction of other species. It is not apparent how a nonanthropocentrist, as defined by Sterba, could come up with such an argument, since no matter which argument is produced, it will involve some claim about the superior value of humans. So, though nonanthropocentrists *can* accept the Principle of Human Preservation, it is not clear that they *must*, or even should prefer it. The impact on Sterba's reconciliation project is this. The most that can be said for the nonanthropocentrist is that the Principle of Human Preservation is an acceptable principle, though not in any way more acceptable than the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation. As will be shown later in this essay, the anthropocentrist position, as Sterba presents it,

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embodies a strong presumption in favour of the Principle of Human Preservation, though it may fall short of making commitment to that principle absolutely obligatory. If such a difference in strength of commitment exists between the two perspectives, one can seriously question the extent to which reconciliation has been achieved.

The third principle of justice to which Sterba argues both nonanthropocentrists and anthropocentrists would be committed is this:

*A Principle of Disproportionality:* Actions that meet nonbasic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of animals and plants.

Notice that this principle makes a stronger claim than the first two in that it declares a particular kind of action to be *prohibited*, and not simply *permissible*. The importance of this will surface when the principle is considered from the anthropocentric perspective. That the nonanthropocentrist would be committed to such a principle is uncontroversial since, as Sterba notes, if the claim of species equality is to have any substance, one cannot accept the view that the satisfaction of any human need takes precedent over the satisfaction of nonhuman basic needs. Minimally, species equality requires a distinction between basic and nonbasic needs, and a weighting of the former over the latter; hence, the Principle of Disproportionality.

Both the Principle of Human Preservation and the Principle of Disproportionality trade upon the distinction between basic and nonbasic needs, at least as regards human needs. Making out such a distinction with precision is no easy task, and to demand that Sterba's argument include a precise explication of the distinction is misplaced, inasmuch as the generality of the principles of environmental justice he is concerned with require only a rough conceptual demarcation between basic and nonbasic needs. In fact, Sterba provides a working distinction when he addresses the moral importance of need satisfaction.

Now needs, in general, if not satisfied, lead to lacks or deficiencies with respect to various standards. The basic needs of humans, if not satisfied, lead to lacks or deficiencies with respect to a standard of decent life. The basic needs of animals and plants, if not satisfied, lead to lacks or deficiencies with respect to a standard of healthy life. The means necessary for meeting the basic need of humans can vary widely from society to society. By contrast, the means necessary for meeting the basic need of particular species of animals and plants tend to be invariant.<sup>5</sup>

Since, for Sterba, the basic needs of humans are those connected with the maintenance of a 'decent life', it follows that nonbasic needs will be those not so connected. Likewise, nonhuman basic needs are those necessary for the maintenance of a 'healthy life', while nonhuman nonbasic needs (if there are any) will be those lacking such necessity.

Though this is not the place to critically assess Sterba's portrayal of the basic-nonbasic distinction, one comment pertinent to my critique is in order. In line with my earlier comment that in the context of agreeing to the Principle of Human Defence the nonanthropocentrist would undoubtedly opt for a narrow definition of 'harmful aggression', it is clear that as regards both the Principle of Human Preservation and the Principle of Disproportionality, the nonanthropocentrist would opt for an equally restrictive designation of which human needs count as basic, so as to guard against the potential for an overexpansion of the range of human aggression against nonhumans justified by the Principle of Human Preservation, as well as to guard against an undue shrinkage of the range of human aggression against nonhumans prohibited by the Principle of Disproportionality. Consequently, it is reasonable to presume that the nonanthropocentrist, at least, would require that both the Principle of Human Preservation and the Principle of Disproportionality be stated with greater precision than Sterba's current versions contain. It is interesting to note that Sterba employs different standards for qualifying basic needs. For humans, the standard is that of a *decent* life, whereas for nonhumans the standard is *healthy* life. Nonanthropocentrists might have reason to question such a 'double standard' in the light of their commitment to species equality, and wonder why the standard of *healthy* life is not sufficient for both human and nonhuman basic needs.

As regards nonanthropocentrism and Sterba's principles of justice, then, two general comments can be made. Though the nonanthropocentrist could accept the Principle of Human Preservation, they could just as easily accept the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation. The question is, which would the nonanthropocentrist most likely be committed to in practice? It is quite reasonable to presume that more often than not, the nonanthropocentrist would side with nonhuman species for various kinds of independent reasons, and that such a consistent preference for the basic needs of nonhumans over those of humans does not violate their commitment to species equality. As such, it is more reasonable to presume that the nonanthropocentrist would reject the Principle of Human Preservation, rather than accept it. As for the Principle of Disproportionality, Sterba is correct to believe that the nonanthropocentrist would be committed to it, but he fails to take into account that the version of that principle which the nonanthropocentrist would be committed to must be one which narrowly defines which human needs fall into the class of basic needs. Anticipating my treatment of the anthropocentric position, if the principle were expanded to include designations of basic and nonbasic needs, one would quickly discover that the nonanthropocentric version and the anthropocentric version have striking dissimilarities.

In addressing the anthropocentric side of his reconciliation project, Sterba's first step is to define what he takes to be its most defensible version. As a position

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on the equality of species, anthropocentrism is, of course, inequalitarian: humans possesses a superior value to that of nonhuman species. Nonetheless, Sterba's position is that this superiority in value cannot imply a total absence of intrinsic value on the part of members of nonhuman species. He gives two arguments for his view. The first is an analogy.

The claim that humans are superior to the members of other species, if it can be justified at all, is something like the claim that a person came in first in a race where others came in second, third, fourth, and so on. It would not imply that the members of other species are without intrinsic value. In fact it would imply just the opposite – that the members of other species are also intrinsically valuable, although not as intrinsically valuable as humans, just as the claim that a person came in first in a race implies that the persons who came in second, third, fourth, and so on are also meritorious, although not as meritorious as the person who came in first.<sup>6</sup>

His second argument is based on the requirement that in order to have 'moral force' the anthropocentric claim of human superiority must be based on nonquestion-begging grounds. That is, whatever traits are selected as the basis for granting humans value superiority, one must be able to explain why those traits are sufficient to ground such superiority. For Sterba, no such nonquestion-begging explanation is forthcoming since nonhuman species possess their own distinctive traits which are as equally valuable to them as our distinctive traits are to us. His conclusion is that, '[j]udged from a nonquestion-begging perspective, we would seemingly have to regard the members of all species as equal'.<sup>7</sup>

Both arguments are, of course, open to possible criticism. One could question the adequacy of the race analogy as a model for the 'most morally defensible' version of anthropocentrism, and one could also propose reasons for thinking that simply possessing distinctive traits which are 'good for oneself' is an insufficient ground for attributions of intrinsic value. In this context, I will not pursue either line of discussion, but, instead, grant Sterba the claim that the most morally defensible version of anthropocentrism is one which, though it affords value superiority to humans, must grant some intrinsic value to members of nonhuman species. One quick comment, however, about this version of anthropocentrism. Recently, in the context of showing that environmental ethics rests on a mistaken requirement for an axiological theory capable of according differential intrinsic value to nature, Tom Regan has (persuasively, I think) argued that, depending on which kind of object one has in mind when ascribing intrinsic value, the concept of intrinsic value is either a categorical one, or one for which there exists no nonarbitrary standard of comparison by which to hierarchically rank intrinsically valuable things.<sup>8</sup> If Regan is correct, then, since it is characterised by a commitment to a theory of differential intrinsic value, Sterba's 'most morally defensible version of anthropocentrism' may itself embody an axiological mistake. But, I will leave that for another discussion.



The question, then, is whether the anthropocentrist, as described by Sterba, would be committed to the same principles of environmental justice as the nonanthropocentrist. As Sterba notes, the anthropocentrist would, of course, be committed to the Principle of Human Defence, and, not surprisingly given the superior value which their position attaches to being human, the anthropocentrist would find the Principle of Human Preservation quite acceptable. However, the latter claim misrepresents the nature of the anthropocentrist's commitment to the Principle of Human Preservation. Unlike the situation regarding non-anthropocentrism, the anthropocentrist does not have a choice between equally acceptable alternatives (the Principle of Human Preservation and the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation). If, as Sterba argues, a consistent preference for either the basic needs of humans or those of nonhumans would result in the extinction of the other, the anthropocentrist's commitment to the value superiority of humans clearly creates a strong presumption in favour of the Principle of Human Preservation. The extent to which the anthropocentrist could opt for the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation is dependent upon the weight attached to the value difference between humans and nonhumans. The greater the gap between the degree of intrinsic value afforded nonhuman and that assigned to humans, the less likely it is that the anthropocentrist would find the Principle of Nonhuman Preservation acceptable. As such, to say that both positions would find the Principle of Human Preservation *acceptable* is, as it turns out, not very significant since the nonanthropocentrist has an equally acceptable alternative, while the anthropocentrist is committed to the Principle of Human Preservation, at least regarding consistent preferences.

For Sterba, the critical question is whether the anthropocentrist would be committed to the previously stated Principle of Disproportionality, to some different version of it, or to no such principle whatsoever. As Sterba recognises, at first glance it might appear that, given the assumption that humans are of greater value than nonhumans, the Principle of Disproportionality would be antithetical to the anthropocentric position. A characteristic criticism of Western society by environmental philosophers has been that it embodies a form of anthropocentrism which has historically licensed uninhibited exploitation of nature. If only humans are of intrinsic value, than human exploitation of nonhumans is restricted only by the potential for direct or indirect harm to fellow humans. In the absence of that, nonhuman nature can be used for any purpose. But, as Sterba holds, there exists no nonquestion-begging argument in support of this radical form of anthropocentrism, so that the most defensible version of anthropocentrism is one which attributes intrinsic value to the members of nonhuman species, albeit, lesser intrinsic value than that of members of the human species. Given this, exploitation of nonhuman species in order to satisfy human needs requires justification. Such exploitation, when necessary to satisfy the basic needs of humans, is allowable due to the Principle of Human Preservation. The remaining question to be addressed, as Sterba notes, is whether the

value superiority of humans justifies the exploitation of nonhumans in order to satisfy nonbasic human needs.

Sterba finds it important to distinguish between *aggressing against* the basic needs of members of nonhuman species and *failing to meet* those needs. In his opinion, this distinction does not carry any moral weight in the context of interhuman ethics where both aggressing against and failing to meet the basic needs of fellow humans in order to satisfy one's own nonbasic needs are deemed immoral. In the context of interspecific ethics, however, Sterba believes the distinction to be ethically important. His position is that, at least theoretically, there are legitimate grounds for favouring human nonbasic needs over the basic needs of nonhuman species when to do so involves only failing to meet their basic needs, but that no such grounds exist for justifying aggressing against the basic needs of members of nonhuman species in order to satisfy the nonbasic needs of humans. What legitimates the former? In Sterba's opinion, the fact that nonhuman species fail to meet the basic needs of humans when there is a conflict with their own needs (basic and nonbasic I presume) entails that humans are under no such obligation themselves. This is simply the reciprocity argument again. Since nonhumans fail to sacrifice their own needs in order to avoid failing to meet the needs of humans, we do not act wrongly when we do the same. We have already seen the weakness of this argument in regards to the Principle of Human Preservation, and it fares no better here. The fact that members of nonhuman species, who are not moral agents, consistently prefer their own needs over those of humans or members of other species in general, does not entail that humans, who are moral agents, are free from any obligation to avoid failing to meet the basic needs of nonhumans in order to satisfy their own nonbasic needs.

Sterba recognises that most of the conflicts between human nonbasic needs and the basic needs of nonhuman species involves aggressing against the latter. Consequently, even if the theoretical distinction between 'aggressing against' and 'failing to meet' were to have ethical importance in the context of interspecific relations, it would have little if any practical significance. The question, then, to be addressed is whether there exist justifiable reasons for favouring human nonbasic needs over nonhuman basic needs when doing so requires aggressing against the latter. In other words, can the anthropocentrist reasonably reject the necessity of the Principle of Disproportionality? Sterba's position is that they cannot. They cannot because, given the version of anthropocentrism Sterba is working with, to allow that the needs of the members of nonhuman species can be aggressed against in order to satisfy any human needs, which would be the result of a denial of the Principle of Disproportionality combined with an acceptance of the Principle of Human Preservation, is, in effect, to deny that members of nonhuman species have any intrinsic value, a denial the anthropocentrist cannot make. Consequently, in order to respect the intrinsic value of members of nonhuman species, a line must be drawn. For Sterba, the Principle of Disproportionality represents that line.

Is it the case that the Principle of Disproportionality represents the absolute minimum which the anthropocentrist can consistently accept? Or, can the anthropocentrist consistently subscribe to a less restrictive principle which would allow for some human preference of their own nonbasic needs over the basic needs of members of nonhuman species? In Sterba's argument, there are two inequalities at work: humans are of greater intrinsic value than nonhumans, and the satisfaction of basic needs is of greater value than the satisfaction of nonbasic needs. All else being equal, one is justified in opting for the satisfaction of basic needs over that of nonbasic needs, and the satisfaction of human needs over nonhuman needs. The key to Sterba's argument is that the latter preference is insufficient to trump the former. But, is it? As Sterba recognises, the failure to satisfy any need results in a lack or deficiency. These lacks or deficiencies can be of various kinds (e.g. poor health, lack of psychological development, etc.), but they nonetheless represent a worsening of the being's condition in some shape or form. Even though, considered in themselves, the failure to satisfy basic needs may result in a greater, even much greater, harm than the failure to satisfy nonbasic needs, the failure to satisfy nonbasic needs can be construed as a harm. What the Principle of Disproportionality represents is a preference for avoiding the harms attendant upon the failure to satisfy the basic needs of lesser intrinsically valuable entities over the harm resulting from a failure to satisfy the nonbasic needs of beings of greater intrinsic value. The question is, what grounds are there for this preference?

Reading between the lines, Sterba's reasoning seems to be this. Differences in the intrinsic value of beings has no effect on the magnitude of the harm produced by the failure to satisfy basic needs as opposed to the magnitude of harm produced by the failure to satisfy nonbasic needs. The former is categorically larger and morally more important than the latter; hence, the categorical prohibition found in the Principle of Disproportionality. However plausible this reasoning might be, it simply is not the case that the anthropocentrist must be committed to it. The anthropocentrist could offer plausible arguments for holding the view that in certain kinds of cases it is worse to avoid aggressing against the basic needs of members of nonhuman species in order to satisfy nonbasic human needs than it is to satisfy the latter. Consider the utilitarian perspective. If humans are presumed to be of greater intrinsic value, then the enhancement of their condition, even if such enhancement is, in itself relatively small, might be of sufficient value as to outweigh the harm caused a being of much less intrinsic value, especially in cases where the benefits to the more intrinsically valuable entities are distributed over a larger number while the harm to the lesser intrinsically valuable entities is restricted to a small number of them. The general question is this: Should one always opt for a state of affairs in which one seeks to maximise the satisfaction of the basic needs of all intrinsically valuable entities, at the expense of the satisfaction of other needs of the more intrinsically valuable beings? Or, is it possible that an arrangement in which a

portion of the basic needs of the lesser intrinsically valuable entities is not met in order to meet some nonbasic needs of more intrinsically valuable beings could produce a greater overall maximisation of intrinsic value? Put another way, are there any *a priori* reasons for believing that a world filled with a larger number of intrinsically valuable entities, the more intrinsically valuable of which are 'dissatisfied' in a number of ways, is of greater overall value than a world filled with a smaller number of intrinsically valuable entities, but one in which the more intrinsically valuable entities are more satisfied, have fewer lacks and deficiencies? There does not appear to be, and Mill's position on the relative value of a dissatisfied human life and the life of a satisfied pig could be offered up as a philosophical defence of the view that the alternate situation is morally preferable.

Sterba's version of anthropocentrism itself provides plausible grounds for denying the categorical prohibition present in the Principle of Disproportionality. If humans are deemed to be more intrinsically valuable, more 'meritorious', than nonhumans, that must be because they possess certain morally relevant traits, such as the capacity for rational, autonomous behaviour, self-consciousness, and a sense of psychophysical identity over time, which nonhumans either do not possess or possess to a much lesser degree. If the possession of interests is a function of the presence of capacities like these, and one attaches moral significance to the possession of interests, then one could argue that taxonomic differences create differences in the kinds of interests at stake, and that sufficiently large differences in those interests has moral importance. So, one could reasonably argue that the interests of humans should be afforded greater moral weight than those of nonhuman species, how much greater weight depending on the phylogenetic differences present. Such a moral difference could easily be taken to outweigh any theoretical difference between basic and nonbasic needs, and in this way justify aggressing against the basic needs of members of some nonhuman species in order to satisfy the nonbasic needs of humans and perhaps other species. This recognition of morally relevant differences in the interests that can be ascribed to members of different species has, ironically, been recognised even by advocates of animal liberation/rights such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan.

What these considerations show is that the anthropocentrists have at their disposal the philosophical means by which to reject the categorical prohibition present in Sterba's Principle of Disproportionality in favour of a less restrictive principle which allows for, in certain well-defined cases, aggressing against the basic needs of members of nonhuman species in order to satisfy human nonbasic needs. As Sterba himself notes, 'To recognise something as having intrinsic value does not preclude destroying it to preserve other things that also have intrinsic value when there is good reason to do so.' If we substitute 'make better off' for 'preserve', and allow that the maximisation of the welfare of the most intrinsically valuable entities is a good reason, or that the inherent moral

superiority of the interests of more intrinsically valuable beings demands our attention, then it does not appear that the anthropocentrist, upon pains of inconsistency, is committed to the Principle of Disproportionality. What we are left with is the reverse of the situation regarding the Principle of Human Preservation. There the anthropocentrist is strongly committed to the principle of justice under consideration, while the nonanthropocentrist is not. Here, the nonanthropocentrist is strongly committed to the principle, while the anthropocentrist is at best weakly committed to it. Again, if reconciliation is achieved, it is not very significant.

As mentioned at the outset, reconciliation projects such as those of Sterba and Norton are fuelled by the belief that when one moves beyond abstract, axiological debates about the value status of nonhuman nature relative to that of humans, one will discover that such debates have little or no effect on the formation of general principles by which to shape environmental policy. It would be quite nice, and quite philosophically convenient, if this were true. If it were true, then environmental ethicists could turn their attention to the admittedly more pressing issues of policy formation and environmental management, and, with great hope, reach some consensus as to how to proceed. However, the hope that foundational axiological differences might 'disappear' at the level of policy formation, or even at the level of general principles to guide policy formation, seems to me to be just that, a *hope*. The kind of theoretical 'reconciliation' or 'convergence' argued for by Sterba is too easily purchased. All it requires is an underestimation of the seriousness with which the nonanthropocentrist may hold to the belief in species equality, and a corresponding underestimation of the self-interested latitude which the notion of differential intrinsic value affords the anthropocentrist. Though for practical reasons, the differentially motivated environmental groups, organisations, and movements which now crowd the scene may have to make concessions to one another in order to achieve a politically effective level of cooperative activity, that is far from amounting to either a philosophical or operational 'reconciliation'.

#### NOTES

I would like to thank James Sterba, the journal referees, and the Editor for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> Sterba 1994. Norton 1991 is the most developed effort at showing that as regards substantive policy issues, the axiological debate between nonanthropocentrists and anthropocentrists becomes quite insignificant.

<sup>2</sup> Steverson 1995.

<sup>3</sup> On this point, Sterba is entering the debate regarding speciesism which dates back to the mid-1970s. Sterba's position, a view very similar to what James Rachels has labelled 'mild speciesism', has been criticised by Rachels and others. For example, see Rachels 1990. Rachels' point is to show that even mild speciesism is unacceptable from the

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standpoint of interspecific equality. If Rachels' assessment is correct, then Sterba is mistaken in the first place to believe that the nonanthropocentrist can accept a principle which shows preference for human interests. My approach will be to allow Sterba his view that preference for human interests is permissible, even for the nonanthropocentrist, but then to show that the claim of permissibility is too weak to support an effort of *reconciliation* of nonanthropocentrism and anthropocentrism.

<sup>4</sup> As far back as 1979, Peter Singer, in the context of responding to objections to his argument for 'animal liberation', critically discussed the inadequacies of a naturalistic-contractarian approach such as this. See Singer 1979, pp. 68-71.

<sup>5</sup> Sterba 1994, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>8</sup> See Regan 1992.

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