



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Eckersley, Robyn, "Beyond Human Racism."  
*Environmental Values* 7, no. 2, (1998): 165-182.  
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5745>

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# Beyond Human Racism

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**ABSTRACT:** In 'Non-Anthropocentrism? A Killing Objection', Tony Lynch and David Wells argue that any attempt to develop a non-anthropocentric morality must invariably slide back to either anthropocentrism (either weak or strong) or a highly repugnant misanthropy in cases of direct conflict between the survival needs of humans and nonhuman species. This reply argues that their attempt to expose the flaws in non-anthropocentrism deflects attention away from the crux of the ecocentric critique, which can best be understood if we replace the confusing terms anthropocentrism/non-anthropocentrism with 'human racism'/ecocentrism (understood as a more inclusive moral perspective which encompasses nonracist humanism). Human racism manifests when a reconciliation of human and nonhuman needs is possible but is nonetheless concealed and/or denied. That is, the best test for discerning prejudice against nonhuman nature is not when individual or social choice are severely circumscribed but rather when such choices are relatively *unconstrained*. Moreover, their concluding argument that human concern for nonhuman nature should be understood in terms of aesthetic values rather than moral values does not provide reliable grounds for the systematic protection of nonhuman nature.

**KEYWORDS:** Anthropocentrism, non-anthropocentrism, human racism, ecocentrism, hierarchy of needs, hierarchy of being, basic needs and non-basic needs, deep ecology, vital needs, aesthetic appreciation.

## INTRODUCTION

In 'Non-Anthropocentrism? A Killing Objection', Tony Lynch and David Wells seek to test non-anthropocentrism as a practical morality by confronting deep ecologists and other ecocentric theorists with a concrete and urgent moral situation in order to force their hand: should we rescue a human from a violent animal attack by shooting the animal?

Of course, the humanist response to this question is to save the human and kill the animal. (By 'humanist' I understand them to mean the post-Enlightenment commitment to the inherent value and dignity of each and every human and

to humankind generally as a morally significant community.) However, Lynch and Wells seek to show that this humanist response does not logically flow from their reading of the non-anthropocentric stream of environmental ethics. Rather, they argue that the deep ecology principle of 'biocentric equality' (that all beings have equal intrinsic value) along with the rider that it is legitimate for humans to harm or even kill other life forms to satisfy *their own* 'vital needs' (as distinct from the vital needs of other humans) provide a basis for defending a positive duty *not* to save the human, especially given growing human numbers on a finite planet. Indeed, the exemplary ethical choice according to Lynch and Wells' understanding of deep ecology would be to shoot the human and allow the animal attacker a decent meal, especially if it was known that the human was 'badly crippled' or 'particularly unintelligent' and the animal was an endangered 'prime specimen,' such as a wolf. Such a morally repugnant conclusion to this 'killing scenario' is intended to serve as a 'killing objection' to the entire case for a non-anthropocentric environmental morality.

Lynch and Wells argue that deep ecology and kindred environmental philosophies can only avoid such morally repugnant conclusions by resorting to a form of 'weak anthropocentrism' in cases of practical conflict. In effect, the practical moral choice will always boil down to either anthropocentrism (whether weak or strong) or misanthropy – there is simply no room left for a coherent non-anthropocentric perspective. They argue that this must necessarily follow if humanity is taken to be 'a fundamental modality of moral concern'. That is, it is the simple fact of our *humanness*, rather than any particular characteristics humans may possess, which ought to provide the basis of immediate individual duties of care towards other humans. In short, we must give our 'primary moral consideration to humans – simply because they *are* humans' (p. 9). Finally, to the extent to which we may respect the value of nonhuman nature, they maintain that it can only be understood as a form of aesthetic value or pleasure, not moral value. Moreover, they assert that immediate duties of care cannot be derived from our aesthetic appreciation of nonhuman nature. Such aesthetic appreciation is best understood as a 'second-order' motive for protective action that must give way in the face of overriding first-order motives (namely, our moral duties to other humans).

The 'killing scenario' presented by Lynch and Wells raises an important question: is it possible to defend a generalised non-anthropocentric perspective while also agreeing with the 'humanist' response to their particular killing scenario, or is this contradictory? Now if we accept their particular construction of the problem there does appear to be a contradiction. However, the argument advanced here is that Lynch and Wells offer a misleading construction of the environmental values debate which serves to deflect attention from where moral and political attention should be focused in development conflicts. To reduce the environmental debate (particularly the debate about habitat destruction and species extinction) to a problem of *individual* moral choice in a stark and urgent

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confrontation is to miss the main political and ideological issues in the ecological crisis and the environmental values debate. In other words, the political focus should be on the range of *social* choices which might be made to resolve practical conflicts.

One way of directing attention toward the appropriate political focus is to avoid (perhaps even abandon) the confusing terms anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism and draw a distinction instead between 'human racism' and ecocentrism, the latter taken to mean a more ecologically inclusive moral perspective which rejects human racism but not nonracist humanism. Once the meaning of human racism is made clear, we shall see that the ecocentric response to Lynch and Wells' 'killing scenario' is also to save the human. Now in the old vocabulary, this may be interpreted as 'weak anthropocentrism' and Lynch and Wells may well feel vindicated in their argument. However, it will be maintained that this new vocabulary more accurately expresses the gist of the critique of what has generally (and clumsily) been referred to as anthropocentrism, while also exposing some significant flaws and dangerous assumptions in their own position. The critique of human racism should primarily be understood as a critique of systematic social and political discrimination against nonhuman species – discrimination which is typically legitimated in terms which conceal the possibility of alternative options which might reconcile conflicting interests and needs (both between different human groups and communities and between particular human and nonhuman groups and communities).

In briefly sketching this argument, it should become apparent that the critique of 'human racism' is but a further development, rather than a rejection, of post-Enlightenment humanism. Ecocentrism, reformulated as encompassing *nonracist* humanism, will then be defended against the more totalising version of humanism defended by Lynch and Wells. In the course of developing this response to Lynch and Wells, it will be accepted that some form of hierarchy is needed to resolve cases of practical environmental conflict, but that such a hierarchy should be concerned with the relative importance of the *needs* of different beings, not the relative importance of *beings per se*, as Lynch and Wells seem to imply. In this respect, the deep ecology concept of 'vital needs' will be defended as continuing to perform 'vital work' in cases of environmental conflict.

## COMPARING INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL CHOICE

The scenario painted by Lynch and Wells would have us believe that each of us faces a limited individual moral choice between anthropocentrism or misanthropy in any head-to-head survival conflict between humans and nonhuman species. Under such circumstances, there is simply no room for a coherent in-between position called non-anthropocentrism.

There are several significant factors in the authors' scenario which literally drive us towards this conclusion. These factors relate to the immediacy and inflexibility of the situation, and the solitary circumstances of the rescuer as moral agent. That is, we have no time to reflect on our own or to deliberate with others, we have no alternative means to deal with the situation (all we have is a gun), and we have no forms of assistance from others. This is not a social or political problem; rather it is a matter of individual moral choice. Under such circumstances, we are morally compelled to shoot the animal (the nature of this moral compulsion is explored more fully below).<sup>1</sup>

Now it is possible to change the scenario in ways which may lead to very different conclusions. We might, for example, introduce more people into the scenario to provide assistance in dealing with the event, or we might even present the prospect of encountering the wild animal to a group or community of people to reflect upon, deliberate and develop a response plan. Now suppose that the people in this revised scenario care about the fate of other species, not simply as a source of aesthetic delight but also in terms of recognising that other species are entitled to 'a place in the sun', that they are centres of agency, moral subjects (as distinct from moral agents), and that they ought to be allowed to unfold in their own ways. It is then reasonable to surmise that the more people who are involved in anticipating and addressing the problem, the more resources that are devoted to the problem, the more concerted will be the effort, and the greater would be the likelihood that the attack might be minimised or avoided. For example, with help and with different technologies, the moral agent would be in a position to develop a range of different responses which would take away the 'either-or' character of the confrontation. They might find a way of trapping the animal and releasing it, or better still, they may be able to warn the potential victim of how to avoid an attack.

Clearly, possibilities expand when problems are approached collectively and democratically rather than individually – and especially so when the participants are motivated by a shared moral concern. When we transform individual problems into social and political problems, then there is invariably a much greater range of potential choices and strategies which may be made in response to any given environmental conflict. How great is that range is partly a function of the depth and strength of democracy in any given community along with the depth and strength of moral commitment towards inclusive responses to environmental conflicts. Indeed Robert Goodin has recently argued that discursive participatory democratic practices are most likely to evoke what he has called 'encapsulated interests', that is the vicarious incorporation and representation of the interests of nonhuman nature in political deliberations (Goodin 1996).

The point of playing with the scenario is to emphasise that there is not always a direct correspondence between the individual choices we might make under conditions of extreme urgency and inflexibility and the sort of social morality we might wish to cultivate if given the time and opportunity (although achieving a

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convergence between individual and social ethics is a desirable goal). In other words, the individual choices we might make in cases of stark moral conflict are not reliable indicators of any systematic discrimination or prejudice on our part (nor, as has been suggested, of the sort of political community we might care to cultivate).

For example, just because a man might choose to rescue his dearest male friend ahead of a woman who is a stranger does not necessarily mean that the man is sexist. He might well be actively engaged in political and educational campaigns against sexual discrimination. More generally, choosing to save one's nearest and dearest ahead of a stranger – someone with whom we are not familiar – does not necessarily mean that we are xenophobic. Likewise, just because we as individuals feel compelled to defend our own kind ahead of a nonhuman species in cases of direct, life-and-death conflict does not mean that we harbour systematic *prejudices* vis-à-vis that nonhuman species. The strong tendency of humans to save the more familiar or the more immediate – those with whom we most identify – is first and foremost an expression of our strongest attachments, but it is not necessarily an indicator of our social or ecological prejudices. Identifying who we happen to love the *most* says nothing about who or what else we might love, or who or what else we might be indifferent towards or despise. Human racism – understood as a systematic prejudice against nonhuman species – can only be revealed when the possibility of reconciliation of human and nonhuman interests and needs is available but is nonetheless resisted in the name of advancing human welfare.

What might be an appropriate ethic from the point of view of the individual in a stark life-and-death situation can become highly inappropriate when generalised and used to guide social choice. If destroying the habitat of wild species is necessary for the survival of a rural family, then it can hardly be condemned as the unethical thing to do from the point of view of that particular family. But to invoke humanism to support the destruction of old-growth forests (and hence the destruction of nonhuman species) for timber or woodchips when the uses to which those 'forest products' are put are either trivial or can just as well be provided by less environmentally destructive means is an altogether different moral proposition when approached as a question of social choice. What might appear to individuals and families as an environmental zero-sum game may be potentially transformed into a positive sum game when examined as a collective, political problem. Such a transformation may be achieved by developing new technologies, cultivating new social relations, creating new legal relations, critically re-examining human consumption patterns, needs, desires, and re-evaluating and enlarging what passes for human virtues. Again, it is the political refusal to acknowledge that there is 'room to manoeuvre' in so-called environment versus development conflicts which serves to transform what might be a legitimate expression of human survival needs into an illegitimate endorsement of narrow-mindedness, short-sightedness and prejudice. The

danger in Lynch and Well's argument is that it may serve as a more general justification for *always* putting humans first, and as means of legitimising a wide range of environmentally destruction activities – all in the name of the otherwise defensible inclination to 'look after our own'.

#### NON-ANTHROPOCENTRISM: REMOVING THE DROSS

In a recent critical examination of the anthropocentrism debate, Tim Hayward has suggested that the term anthropocentrism is something of a misnomer and that we need a more appropriate vocabulary to capture the main gist of the critique (Hayward 1997, 49). It is certainly true that the terms anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism have generated as much heat as light, and critics have continued to recycle a range of familiar arguments to show that non-anthropocentrism is impossible (how can we avoid being human-centred?), unnecessary (Human Welfare Ecology can perform all the necessary work [e.g. Wells 1993]) and undesirable (non-anthropocentrism is an insult to humanism [e.g. Bookchin 1995]).<sup>2</sup> Obviously, we cannot avoid being anthropocentric if all it is taken to mean is, without explanation and qualification, simply being 'human-centred' in the sense of perceiving and interpreting the world from a human vantage point. If it is accepted that we cannot break out of the 'hermeneutic circle', then it is naïve to expect that we can avoid being anthropocentric in this formal sense of the term. Thus, one might readily accept that humans are the source and centre of meaning in the world (that we are interpreting animals), while rejecting the proposition that this must necessarily mean that humans are the sole centre of value or agency. However, this argument about the impossibility of formal non-anthropocentrism misses the main point of the substantive, moral critique of anthropocentrism. Yet the confusion is perhaps understandable, since the core term anthropocentrism carries multiple meanings. For this reason alone (although there are other reasons as well) we should probably dispense with it and find another that reduces the considerable burden of explanation and qualification. The point, as Lynch himself has succinctly put it in another context, is 'to establish the possibility of a human point of view – a view of the world possible to creatures like us – which does not place anything objectionably human at the centre of concern' (Lynch 1996, 152). By 'objectionably human' I would suggest viewpoints which reveal human prejudices based on some form of invidious comparison. Such viewpoints can serve to legitimate the domination of both humans and nonhumans – a point which connects human emancipatory movements with the radical ecology movement. What is common to this broader emancipatory critique is a rejection of the view that the 'other' must in some way *be like us* before we accord him/her/them/it any recognition or respect.

'Human chauvinism' (coined by the Routleys [1979] and favoured by Hayward and many others) seems to come closest to describing the crux of the

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problem, although I am suggesting here that ‘human racism’ might possibly do better (at least descriptively – analytically they are the same) since the critique of human racism (and the defence of its corollary, nonracist humanism) is less likely to be misinterpreted as an attack on humanism per se. Moreover, the particular kind of prejudice that is revealed in racism, while structurally similar to (and often linked with) the hierarchical dualisms and logic of sexism, is often directed towards more radical forms of difference or ‘otherness’ (i.e. the differences between particular human races and cultures can be much greater than the differences between men and women in any given race or culture). This would seem to be more relevant to a discussion of the even more radical forms of difference which may be found between humans and nonhumans.

Whatever descriptive label we might choose to replace anthropocentrism – human chauvinism, human racism, human speciesism or perhaps even human colonialism – the analytical point is the same. That is, the excluded groups are excluded because they lack something that is possessed and deemed by the more powerful group to be the measure of worth (such as reason, civilisation, moral agency, or language). As Plumwood and many other ecofeminist philosophers have pointed out, these comparisons reveal a deep structure of mastery based on self/other dualisms ‘which create a web of incorporations and inclusions’ (Plumwood 1993, 143). And it is therefore a ‘fatal flaw’, as Evernden (1985, 10) calls it, for environmentalists to try to squeeze some of their moral constituency (say apes and some other mammals) into the dominant criteria, reckoning that saving some is better than saving none. Conforming to the requirements and modes of rationality of the dominant culture has rarely served the interests of diverse minority cultures. Such a strategy is even less likely to permit the flourishing of biological diversity.

Now it must be emphasised that there is nothing in the critique of human racism which demands that we cannot celebrate the dignity of each and every human, the achievements of humankind, and what is special about the human race, and we may (indeed ought) go to great lengths to help our own kind. But we ought not, as part of those celebrations of specialness, ‘belongingness’ and compassion for each other, thereby ignore the needs of other beings who are not like us when we have a choice, least of all persecute them, simply because they are not of our own kind. The line between patriotism and xenophobia is sometimes a fine one and it is likewise not always immediately obvious when the line between humanism and human racism is crossed. This is because nowadays it is not so common to find environmental destruction justified in terms of a Promethean model of human destiny, a hierarchy of creation or as a means of ‘enlarging human empire’ vis-à-vis the rest of nature. Just as racism has become more subtle (for example, wilful blindness or indifference towards the structural disadvantage that is suffered by some racial minorities has tended to replace the more outlandish expressions of racial superiority of the nineteenth century), so too has human racism become more subtle. These days, many unnecessary and environmentally destructive developments are more usually justified as *neces-*



sary to create employment or improve human welfare in some way, in which case critics of development are easily typecast as either indifferent or hostile to the needs of the unemployed or humans generally. (Here the problem of invidious comparison takes a different form. We no longer persecute the other because it is not like us. Instead, some of us are admonished for caring for nonhuman others because they are not like us.) Thus destructive development is justified as 'natural' and inescapable, since there are no 'viable' alternatives. It is under circumstances such as these, when otherwise worthy humanist sentiments are made to perform an ideological function (i.e., concealing and/or delegitimising alternatives) that humanism is transformed into human racism. That is, it is this refusal to make an effort to acknowledge or explore alternatives which might possibly enable the mutual fulfilment of human and nonhuman needs that should alert us to the prejudice of human racism.

#### IS IT HUMANS *PER SE* OR THEIR CHARACTERISTICS?

It is noteworthy that the form of reasoning employed by Lynch and Wells to undermine non-anthropocentrism (now read ecocentrism) is *exactly the reverse* of the form of reasoning that has been typically employed to undermine anthropocentrism (now read human racism). That is, critics of anthropocentrism or speciesism, such as the Singer (1975), Routleys (1979), Regan (1983), Rodman (1977), Evernden (1985), Noske (1989), Fox (1990), Eckersley (1992) and Plumwood (1993) have pointed to the self-serving way in which a human racist morality selects certain special human characteristics or traits (language, tool making, rationality, moral sensibility or whatever) as the basis of allocating moral considerability but nonetheless fails to systematically and consistently apply such criteria. That is, when it is shown that some members of the human community lack the requisite characteristics or that some members of the nonhuman community possess them, there appears to be no genuine attempt to adjust practices to live up to the moral criteria. In effect, the moral criteria is revealed to be an adroit attempt to disguise what is really a basic 'prejudice' in favour of humans simply because of the fact of their humanness. And as we have seen, Lynch and Wells openly and wholeheartedly embrace this so-called 'prejudice', this simple fact of humanness, as 'the fundamental modality of moral concern'. They also reject attempts to develop supposedly more 'objective' characteristics of moral considerability (such as sentience), because they wish to avoid making moral choices on the basis of the presence or absence of such characteristics. Indeed, they point out that to exclude certain humans from moral considerability simply because they lack particular characteristics is to introduce a hierarchy of moral worth among humans – something that most of us would find repugnant. It is the fact of humanness which should count.

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Of course, not all of the critiques of human racism mentioned above are necessarily also suggesting that we ought to rely on 'objective characteristics' and thereby introduce a hierarchy of moral worth (only Singer and Regan do this). Rather, the primary point of the exercise has been to expose the self-serving and inconsistent character of human racism. Nonetheless, defenders of ecocentrism face a real problem here, which has recently been noted by Tim Hayward in his critical examination of the anthropocentrism debate. 'The problem' as Hayward puts it, 'has to do with a lack of concern with nonhumans but the term anthropocentrism can all too plausibly be understood as meaning an excessive concern with humans' (Hayward 1997, 57). Despite repeated attempts by ecocentric theorists to emphasise that non-anthropocentrism should be understood as a more *inclusive* ethical orientation than humanism, critics have continued to interpret it as a perspective that is *opposed* to humanism and as necessarily antihumanist or misanthropic. Why has this message been so difficult to convey?

If there is a moral bedrock in western, post-Enlightenment political thought, it is the idea of the inherent dignity and value of each and every human being. This is fundamental to the democratic revolution and to the doctrine of human rights. As Agnes Heller explains, the very notion of 'humankind' raises the claim that there are some common or universal norms which should apply to all humans, something which links us in a moral, rather than merely species, sense. Indeed, the very idea of humankind is constituted by such norms; it is raising the claim that humankind *per se* should become a social cluster (Heller 1987, 37). For example, the idea of 'crimes against humanity' – central to the Nuremberg Trials – invokes the idea that there are certain rights or entitlements which *all* humans should be free to enjoy *qua* humans. The verdict in those trials was widely accepted not simply as a matter of revenge against the perpetrators but rather because it was considered just in some sublime sense – as a vindication and honouring of our commitment to the dignity and worthiness of the human subject and to our collective moral connectedness. As Heller put it: 'We feel it; we are aware of it; we are committed to it. But we cannot explain it' (Heller 1987, 37).

It is this moral commitment to the community of humankind, and each of its members, which lies behind the impulse to go to the aid of our own kind, and if necessary, save our own kind ahead of other species. It is the same commitment which often feels some resistance to the idea that we should care more for other species, as if caring is a zero-sum game. Caring more for other species – especially in situations of scarcity and conflict – is assumed to mean that we must care less for our own kind. It is the same commitment which lies behind the moral indignation that is so widely expressed in relation to the idea that the pets of the affluent may be growing fat while many less fortunate humans are starving. And it is the same commitment which informs the critique of deep ecology by social ecologists and many on the left. Bookchin's recent book *Reenchanting Human-*

*ity* is a typically fiesty and eloquent reiteration of the importance of our humanist heritage and a fierce tirade against any drift towards anything which might dilute this commitment.<sup>3</sup> To Bookchin and many others, humanism can never be 'arrogant', as David Ehrenfeld (1981) has suggested.

However, this commitment to humanism need not be an impasse for ecocentrism, if ecocentrism is understood as a moral perspective that is opposed to human racism rather than humanism per se. In any event, as Hayward (1997, 57) notes, in most cases of environmental conflict, the problem is not an excessive concern with humans but rather a *lack of concern* for some humans and the rest of the environment by a privileged minority of humans in positions of power – a point Bookchin and many on the left have laboured. Val Plumwood – one of the pioneers of the human chauvinist critique – has also rejected those critics of anthropocentrism who merely condemn a blanket humanity in ways which 'obscure the fact that the forces directing the destruction of nature and the wealth produced from it are owned and controlled overwhelmingly by an unaccountable, mainly white, mainly male, elite' (Plumwood 1993, 12). Seen in this light, the primary task of ecocentric ethics and politics should be to cast the critique of human racism in terms which expose these power relations while also exposing the limited moral horizons, or lack of moral inclusiveness, which informs the exercise (or to follow Foucault, the 'production') of power.

What should be at issue in any given case of environmental conflict is not which humans or which set of characteristics are more valuable, but rather which set of needs or interests are more deserving of protection relative to others in any given conflict situation. As I show below, this distinction between beings and their needs is not just a matter of semantics. After all, if humans are taken to be *more valuable beings* than other species, then it would always follow that *any* human need, want or desire must necessarily take priority over the needs or interests of nonhuman nature, no matter how critical or essential the latter needs may be. This is human racism writ large. Or, to adapt Lynch and Well's argument, if it is *humanity* which is to be taken as the 'fundamental modality of moral concern', then the needs of this moral community *qua* community must systematically trump the needs of the nonhuman community of beings. This flows from the claim that it is the very *humanness* of the need (whether for food, shelter, books, sport, microwaves, shopping centres, faster cars) which gives it a moral trumping quality, not *the importance of particular needs relative to others* (both human and nonhuman). Simply to accept humanity as the fundamental modality of moral concern (without qualification) would mean that we must continually postpone any effort to protect nonhuman nature (in the absence of instrumental justification) for so long as we face *any* kind of unmet human need. I doubt this is what Lynch and Wells intend, but such an argument can be taken as flowing from their defence of humanity as a fundamental modality of concern.

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## A HIERARCHY OF BEINGS OR A HIERARCHY OF NEEDS?

According to Lynch and Wells, the deep ecology in-principle commitment to biospheric equality, or the transpersonal ecology approach of cultivating the widest forms of identification with the nonhuman world, do not provide any acceptable practical guidance in cases of immediate conflict of interest between humans and nonhumans. In any event, they suggest that the 'vital needs' qualifier, which is intended to provide that practical moral guidance, can lead to very undesirable consequences unless it is further qualified with some kind of *hierarchy* among species, in which case it is inevitable that we smuggle in some version of 'soft anthropocentrism' in order to avoid morally repugnant conclusions. Even qualifiers such as 'capacity for richness of experience' are rejected as dubious since they could lead to the favouring of highly intelligent nonhuman mammals over intellectually impaired humans. According to Lynch and Wells, nothing short of restoring humans *qua humans* to the centre stage of moral value will do.

Yet to criticise the general commitment to 'biospherical egalitarianism' (along with kindred other ecocentric commitments to the intrinsic value of all beings) for providing no practical guidance in day-to-day environmental conflict is to ask too much of a primary value commitment. After all, the commitment to humanism as a primary value commitment provides no more practical guidance in human conflict situations than ecocentrism (since we can rarely satisfy every human claim, interest or need equally and simultaneously), but that is hardly a reason for rejecting humanism. Moreover, the fact that particular human conflicts may be practically resolved by favouring the claims of some humans over others does not necessarily mean that the primary value commitment to humanism is thereby contradicted or undermined (such that those who fared worse in any political dispute settlement were considered to be unworthy or substandard humans).<sup>4</sup> What the commitment to humanism does is set the stage or moral horizons in which practical conflicts are to be resolved. For example, it seeks inclusiveness; it aspires to ensure that no-one is excluded from consideration and, at a minimum, no-one is left seriously deprived.

Likewise, the ecocentric moral commitment to the intrinsic value of all beings does not always provide answers to concrete problems, but it does provide the impetus to search for more *inclusive* solutions to social and environmental conflict, solutions which seek, wherever possible, a mutual reconciliation of human and nonhuman needs. Without such a commitment, the moral horizons for decision making are narrowed from the start; the dice is already seriously loaded against any genuine attempt to reconcile human and nonhuman needs.<sup>5</sup> The principle of vital needs recognises the distinction between the value of beings and the value of their needs – not in the abstract, but relative to other needs in particular conflicts. When environmentalists favour the survival needs of an endangered species over the recreational or even employment needs of some

humans, this does not mean that they value the endangered species more than humans. It simply means that they judge the survival needs to be more urgent and important in the circumstances – especially if the species in question can only adapt to a limited range of habitats. Indeed, it is generally the case that most nonhuman species have a much less flexible response range to environmental changes and stresses than human communities.

It must be emphasised here that the principle of vital needs – which stipulates that humans may cause some interference and even killing of nonhuman species, if it is necessary to satisfy vital human needs – can only be understood in the context of the primary moral commitment to the worthiness of all beings.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one would be hard pressed to develop guidelines for practical action which are more respectful of the inherent worthiness of all beings unless one moved towards defending a principle of human sacrifice vis-à-vis others species. However, as we shall see, it is neither necessary nor desirable to take the matter to this extreme if it is accepted that humans are not only moral agents but also worthy moral subjects who are entitled to live and blossom.

The attempt to reconcile human and nonhuman conflict by means of a need hierarchy is not unique to deep ecology. James Sterba, for example, has developed a similar need hierarchy as a means of reconciling anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric ethics based on the distinction between basic and nonbasic needs.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the distinction between basic and nonbasic needs has been a recurring theme in many varieties of socialist thought and has reappeared in the more general case for ‘basic rights’ (e.g., Shue 1980). The fundamental intuitive idea is simple: that the more basic and essential human needs should be fulfilled before the more trivial, nonessential needs are met. Behind this idea is the more fundamental moral commitment to the inherent value and dignity of each and every human being.

Now Lynch and Wells might be prepared to concede at this point that a hierarchy of needs (as distinct from a hierarchy of being) is the best way to ‘operationalise’ ecocentrism and thereby resolve practical environmental conflicts. However, they might still want to insist that a hierarchy of needs is of no help when we face a direct clash of *like needs* – such as the survival needs of humans versus the survival needs of nonhumans. Indeed, their killing example takes the point one step further, since the vital needs of the moral agent are not in jeopardy. Accordingly, they might still want to argue that, at least in these limited circumstances, we can only resolve the conflict by making a judgment about the relative value of the beings *per se*, rather than their needs.

Now Sterba has responded to the more general problem of a clash of basic needs by arguing that since nonhuman species would put their own basic needs ahead of other species, there is no reason why humans should not be allowed to do the same. He also points out that if humans were to forego consistently their own survival needs for the needs of other species, they would eventually face extinction – hardly a viable long term strategy for realising an inclusive ethic of

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ecocentrism. But, as Steverson (1996) maintains by way of response, this is an argument based on reciprocity – something that is applicable to relationships between moral agents, but not between moral agents and moral subjects (or ‘patients’) who lack moral agency. It therefore is not justifiable to apply reciprocity arguments to human/nonhuman relationships.

However, it is not necessary to introduce a hierarchy of being to resolve the ‘killing scenario’ because implicit in the principle of vital needs, and central to the primary commitment to the intrinsic value of all beings, is a principle of common entitlement on the part of *all beings* to the earth’s bounty. The principle of common entitlement makes it clear that humans are not expected to subvert their own *basic* needs in order to enable other life-forms to flourish. This is because humans wear two moral hats: they are both moral agents *and* moral subjects. As moral agents, they have certain responsibilities (not to harm other beings unless necessary to satisfy vital human needs). This is not a responsibility shared by those beings who lack moral agency. However, as moral subjects, humans also have certain entitlements (to satisfy their own vital needs). This is something humans share with *all* other beings. To call for human sacrifice for the benefit of nonhuman species is to insist that humans should not be considered as moral subjects at all because they happen to possess moral agency. Such an argument is plainly contrary to the primary value commitment of ecocentrism.

In any event, I have already argued that the ecocentric response to Lynch and Wells’ ‘killing scenario’ is for the human moral agent to save the other human from the wild animal attack. This is an ecocentric (i.e., nonracist humanist) response and not a human racist response because human racism only manifests when *a choice to include both is available but is nonetheless denied*. As I argued above, saving those with whom we identify the most in a particular conflict is not necessarily an indicator of systematic prejudice against those who are less like us.

## THE UNRELIABILITY OF AESTHETICS

Even if one accepts Lynch and Wells’ argument that ecocentrists are really ‘closet anthropocentrists’ (albeit of the weak variety) and should own up to the fact, does this provide a sufficient basis for accepting their argument that the only coherent and defensible basis for protecting nonhuman nature is aesthetic, not moral?

It would seem that if we wish to resist a purely instrumental posture towards the nonhuman world (and I take Lynch and Wells to be part of this resistance) then there are actually three possible argumentative routes or approaches which may be pursued: aesthetic, spiritual or moral. While none of these paths are mutually exclusive (indeed, the aesthetic, the spiritual and the moral can often be mutually reinforcing in particular philosophies and particular cultural con-

texts), there are good reasons for concentrating on the moral line of argument from a *political* point of view – at least in secular Western societies. Given the historic separation of Church and state, and the spiritual diversity that goes with multicultural societies, it would seem more appropriate nowadays to find a secular (and scientifically informed), public justification for government action to protect the environment.<sup>8</sup> This is especially so when that public justification is broadly consonant with the general principle of ‘respect for difference’, which is both necessary and desirable for cultural pluralism.

The main problem with the aesthetic argument is that it fails to provide a reliable and systematic basis for the protection of nonhuman nature. This is because the western aesthetic of wilderness and wildlife (lofty mountain peaks, wild rivers, grand canyons, majestic elephants or cute koalas) does not always extend to those habitats or beings that are most in need of protection (roadside areas containing remnant native vegetation, wetlands – formerly known as ‘swamps’, rangelands, invertebrates). Moreover, aesthetics is primarily a visual value – the pleasure (or ‘stillness of the will’, as Lynch and Wells put it) derived from viewing something attentively. But it should not always be necessary that we actually view certain landscapes or ecosystems before we take action to protect them (Antarctica is a case in point, although perhaps we must give some credit here to the documentary film). So while aesthetic appreciation does indeed attend to the particularity and uniqueness of that which is being viewed, and may serve as an important motivation for the protection of *particular* landscapes, it cannot provide a basis for general environmental protection because the aesthetic appreciation of nature tends to be selective. Indeed, cynics might say that it is merely a matter of one’s ‘taste’ in scenery or wildlife. Such a characterisation does not provide any clear criteria for resolving environmental conflicts which involve a clash of human aesthetic values.

Nonetheless, in an earlier article Tony Lynch has argued that deep ecology is philosophically coherent and practically adequate *only* when it is interpreted as an aesthetic movement rather than a moral movement (Lynch 1996). Here Lynch explains at greater length the idea that the hallmark of the aesthetic experience is that ‘the object of the experience makes no *direct demands for action* on the spectator’ (p. 152, his emphasis). In contrast, moral experience engages the will – it asks that the moral agent answer the demands of the moral object by identifying with its interests, respecting its needs and desires and generally imagining what the world is like from the object’s perspective. The problem with this moral route, according to Lynch, is that it retains what he calls a ‘homocentric’ focus since the nature of human sympathy or empathy is ‘constrained by the requirement of relevant similarity’ (Lynch 1996, 153). It therefore cannot be stretched to the super, all-inclusive, impartial identification which transpersonal ecologists such as Fox (1990) defend. In effect, Lynch is saying that the bounds of human empathetic identification with nonhuman nature are necessarily limited to those creatures which, even in some rudimen-

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tary sense, are *like us*. The advantage of the aesthetic experience, argues Lynch, is that it contains no such strictures. Moreover, while it does not enlist the will directly, it does so indirectly by providing a ‘second-order motivation’ for protecting nature ‘which is concerned with protecting the possibility of this realm and fact of experience’ (Lynch 1996, 156).

We have already seen that the problem with aesthetic appreciation is that it is selective rather than general, and liable to be regarded simply as a matter of taste. But there is a further problem and that is that protective action is shifted towards the human experience, and only vicariously to the object itself. Thus, it is the human experience of wilderness, rather than wilderness per se, which may become the object of political campaigns. While there is no doubting the political potency of this motivation in the history of environmentalism, the privileged experience of bushwalkers, artists and picnickers should not be the sole reason we have for creating national parks and ecosystem reserves – nor can it provide a systematic basis for environmental protection generally. Moreover, by reducing the debate to a question of which human experience of nature is to be privileged, it is vulnerable to the charge of middle class elitism or green colonialism from those defending the experiences of the rural poor (in developed and developing countries) or indigenous peoples.

Finally, in framing human regard for nonhuman nature solely in aesthetic terms, Lynch and Wells make it plain that nonhuman nature has no moral value at all. According to the old vocabulary, this is strong anthropocentrism, not weak anthropocentrism, or what the Routleys called the Greater Value Thesis (the phrase used to describe that position which recognises value in all beings but argues that humans have more value than other beings). In other words, on closer inspection, Lynch and Wells are not reintroducing a moral hierarchy of being, since nonhuman nature is not recognised as having any moral value at all. To be sure, Lynch and Wells’ particular defence of aesthetic appreciation should not be rejected out of hand, since it defends a noninstrumental orientation towards nonhuman nature, one which regards ecosystems and wildlife attentively, in all their wonder and particularity. But when conflicts arise, aesthetic arguments will be systematically trumped by moral arguments whenever there is a conflict between our moral duties to other humans and our aesthetic appreciation of nonhuman nature.

When ecocentric philosophers talk about ‘the worth’ of nonhuman nature, they do not primarily mean aesthetic worth (although aesthetics appreciation is undoubtedly present); they are talking about bringing nonhuman nature into the ‘kingdom of ends’. From a political perspective, this requires not ‘silence or stillness of the will’, but practical ‘first-order’ duties of care – stemming from the recognition that humans are not the only centres of agency or being in the world. Whether the human capacity for *sympathetic* identification is as limited as Lynch suggests should not be determinative of the matter since the whole point of the debate about respecting difference is that ‘the other’ does not need to be ‘like us’



in any significant sense before we accord it any recognition and respect. If, as Todorov (1984, 168) asks in exploring the relationship between self and other, loving the other means projecting ourselves or our own ideals onto the other, then does the other really need our love? Indigenous peoples certainly did not need the 'love' of Christian missionaries. Indeed, the primary reason for the current backlash against policies of cultural assimilation for indigenous people in countries such as Australia is that they are tantamount to cultural annihilation. These sorts of arguments have been explored and developed at length in the context of the domination of nature by Val Plumwood in her wide-ranging and critical exploration of 'master consciousness' and its intolerance of difference. As Plumwood explains:

The other is recognised only to the extent that it is assimilated to the self, or incorporated into the self and its system of desires and needs: only as colonised by the self. The master consciousness cannot tolerate unassimilated otherness (p. 52).

To be 'constrained by the requirement of relevant similarity' when framing our moral relations with the nonhuman world seems to rule out the possibility that humans are capable of respecting 'unassimilated otherness'. Lynch seems to be accepting the inevitability of invidious comparison. In response, I would say that while we cannot break out of the hermeneutic circle, we can nonetheless aspire to incorporate and practice nonracist humanism by acknowledging and respecting other beings, no matter how different they may be, and irrespective of their aesthetic appeal.

## CONCLUSION

One of the main problems with Lynch and Well's case is that in their effort to defend the worthiness of humanism they leave nonhuman nature in a vulnerable position. And by devising the hardest possible test case for ecocentrism, they construct environmental value conflict as an individual moral problem and deflect attention from the political dimensions of environmental decision making. Yet it has been suggested in this reply that the best test for discerning prejudice against nonhuman nature is when the realm of choice is relatively *unconstrained* (and that political choice is invariably less constrained than individual choice). That is, unwarranted prejudice against nonhuman nature emerges when humans choose to harm nonhuman nature when it is not necessary for human survival, and when mutual need satisfaction is possible by other less environmentally damaging human practices. Politically, this is where the critique, debate and activism should be focused. The fact is that day-to-day environmental conflict rarely presents itself as something that is as stark, urgent and 'either-or' as the individual conflict scenario painted by the author. While decision makers may lead the public to believe that they are constrained, that

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there are no alternatives, more often than not such constraints may be found to be ideological and should not be allowed to pass unchallenged. Green political theorists can make a contribution here in critically exploring and articulating fundamental value orientations and defending principles which enable the mutual satisfaction of human and nonhuman needs. A more proactive task for green political theorists might be to explore how social institutions might be arranged to expand conventional boundaries of care in day to day practices, while also redressing the problems of wilful neglect and ignorance of ecosystems. Indeed, in the light of the history of discrimination against nonhuman species, it might even be said that there is now a case for 'affirmative action' for nonhuman nature.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The rescuer might, of course, choose to fire the gun in the air, in the hope that the wild animal will become frightened and retreat. However, let us assume, for the purposes of argument, that only two options are available: save the human, or let the animal kill the human.

<sup>2</sup> This list is not meant to be an exhaustive list of criticisms.

<sup>3</sup> See especially chapter 4 ('From Ecomysticism to Angelology').

<sup>4</sup> Lynch and Wells do in fact suggest a hierarchy of claims as distinct from beings. They concede towards the end of their discussion that sometimes morality should give way to aesthetics in suggesting that the aesthetic value of a national park should be upheld against the recreational 'needs' of four-wheel drive owners. But note that this qualification does not seek to pit the *value* of some human beings against others. Choosing aesthetic values over recreational ones does not mean that persons of a romantic sensibility are *more valuable beings* than those with a more rugged 'outback' sporting disposition. Rather, they are favouring the aesthetic values against recreational values.

<sup>5</sup> That is, it is not as if deep ecologists need to build the principle of vital needs into the ground floor of their biocentric theory instead of leaving it to serve as an escape hatch every time the ground floor collapses under the weight of real world conflict. This is because the ground floor provides the *basis* for the commitment to finding how best to reconcile conflicting needs among both humans and nonhumans. Take away the ground floor and there is no longer a commitment to be inclusive.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the vital needs principle is only applied to humans and that it is not necessary to draw a distinction between the vital and non-vital needs of nonhumans for the principle to operate. Indeed, it is often extremely difficult to make any meaningful distinction between basic and nonbasic needs in the case of nonhumans as compared to humans and that this may be seen as a testimony to the greater relative flexibility and response range of humans (both as individuals and as members of families, communities, etc.) in response to environmental stresses.

<sup>7</sup> Sterba (1996) has offered three principles for reconciling human and nonhuman needs: self-defence, human preservation and disproportionality – all of which rest on the distinction between basic and nonbasic needs. That is, humans are entitled to harm other humans (and nonhumans) where necessary for self-defence and humans are entitled to

harm other species for the preservation (or survival needs) of the human species as a whole. The disproportionality principle maintains that humans are not permitted to satisfy nonbasic needs where these aggress against the basic needs of nonhumans (and I would join Henry Shue [1980] in adding other humans as well).

<sup>8</sup>By 'scientifically informed' I do not mean to be understood as saying science should replace moral argument.

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