

## **LESZEK PYRA**

### **The Anthropocentric Theory of John Passmore versus Biocentric Views of Paul Taylor**

The study is an attempt to analyse the man-nature relation, especially in its ethical dimension. I will try to compare two different, divergent views concerning this subject which accordingly appear in Australian and American contemporary philosophy. The comparison refers to two different environmental theories and concerns both the anthropocentric (man-centered) views of John Passmore, the philosopher from Australia, and the biocentric (nature-centered) views of the American philosopher, Paul Taylor.

#### **The Anthropocentric Views of John Passmore.**

John Passmore, the philosopher from Australia, notices that he writes out of a sense of alarm, that men cannot go on living as predators on the biosphere. If contemporary civilization is to survive, it must, in important respects, change its ways. The Western tradition is generally man-centered and nature is treated mainly as a system of resources, therefore it tends to encourage man's ecological destructiveness. Within the Western philosophy prevails a metaphysics in which man is the sole finite agent and therefore he can treat nature as he pleases. This metaphysics cannot be accepted by ecologists, notices Passmore. The Australian philosopher calls such tradition "Man as Despot" tradition and points to its sources, limitations and weaknesses.<sup>1</sup> He thinks that this trend prevails, so far at least, in the West, but it will have to be changed soon, the sooner the better.

But there is also Western mystical tradition which insists on the unifying links between human life and the life of nature. The author calls it "Stewardship and Co-operation with Nature" tradition and notices that it is weaker than the previous tradition, but there are "seeds" of reform in it which "the reformer can hope to bring into full flower."<sup>2</sup> Such trend has been represented by numerous thinkers, e.g. Wordsworth, Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, who insisted on dependencies between men and nature, and pointed to the latter as the source of human life.<sup>3</sup> In this context the author doubts whether it is possible to construct a new ethic without reference to the Western philosophical tradition. Therefore he writes: "A 'new ethic' will arise out of existing attitudes, or not at all."<sup>4</sup> It seems very difficult to disagree with such an opinion.

Passmore wonders whether Western civilization can solve its ecological problems within its own assumptions. He distinguishes between ecological problems and problems in ecology. A problem in ecology is a strictly scientific problem (for example: finding the answer to the question

how DDT finds its way into the fat of Antarctic birds). An ecological problem is a kind of social problem (like alcoholism, crime, road accidents), a problem without which a society would be better off. Personally, I think, the suggested distinction seems misleading, perhaps Passmore should use the notion “environmental problems” in such a context.

*Pollution* is the first problem analysed by Passmore. The Australian thinker, defining pollution, uses a rather trite idea, I think. He writes: “pollution is simply the process of putting matter in the wrong place in quantities that are too large”<sup>5</sup> ( it is worthy of notice that nowadays radiation and noise are also pollutants). A place may be “wrong” in one of the following meanings: a) aesthetically (oil in an estuary; plastic bottles, bags or beer cans in a park); b) dangerous to human health; c) destroying wildlife, plants and/or animals.

Some people claim that pollution is a price which has to be paid for the maintenance of a high standard of life; there are however limits to such attitude. Solving the problem of pollution means reducing the flow of substances or processes into places which are “wrong” in one of the above mentioned meanings. Inter-disciplinary investigations are necessary in this respect. Technologists alone cannot solve the problem, because they only introduce new devices, and so Passmore writes: “calling upon the technologist to save us is so often equated with calling in the devil as an exorcist”.<sup>6</sup> In this context the author of *Responsibility for Nature* points to the perverted Western attitude to life, expressing itself in overemphasis on quantity rather than quality (the size of a bridge, the magnitude of a city), whereas qualitative factors are, unfortunately, often ignored.<sup>7</sup>

As it has already been mentioned, according to the Australian thinker ecological problems are *de facto* social problems, therefore to solve them one should solve a subset of problems: technological, scientific, economic, moral, political, administrative. The author reminds that political action against pollution has sometimes been surprisingly successful, notice: the return of clear skies to London and the fish to the Thames.

John Passmore writes that the main obstacles to reform derive from established habits and expectations. They are as follows: 1) the belief prevails that air and water are practically infinite and self-repairing; 2) no additional costs connected with pollution are considered; 3) there is a constant flow of “improved” commodities, replacing the “old-fashioned” ones.

The next ecological problem, *conservation*, in Passmore’s understanding means the saving of natural resources for later consumption. In this context conservation seems to be identified with ‘careful husbandary’<sup>8</sup>. (74) But, quite reasonably, one can ask the question in this context, whether one should really pay any attention to the needs of posterity? There are usually two kinds of different, in fact divergent answers offered by the representatives of different sciences. Economists and nuclear physicists are optimists. According to them in future man, thanks especially to nuclear

fusion, will get access to virtually unlimited source of industrial power, with the oceans serving as a boundless reservoir of fuel. But especially biologists take the opposite view, estimating when particular resources will be exhausted. Some claim that we should spare resources because of love of future generation. But love, writes the author: "...extends only for a limited distance in time. Men do not love their grand-children's grand-children. They cannot love what they do not know."<sup>9</sup> Summing up the problem of obligations to posterity Passmore writes: "our obligations are to *immediate* posterity, we ought to try to improve the world so that we shall be able to hand it over to our immediate successors in a better condition, and that is all."<sup>10</sup> The author seems to be too optimistic, however. Looking at what man has been doing to nature up till now<sup>11</sup>, I am convinced that the formulation "not in a worse condition than it is" is more realistic (notice that it still sounds optimistic!) than Passmore's formulation.

In addition to what has been written so far, one should notice that conservation, as compared to pollution, has not the same popular appeal, because it involves genuine sacrifice. One is usually unwilling to reduce the level of winter heating below the level he is accustomed to. Afforestation and the control of soil erosion have been sometimes successfully implemented as conservationist programs, but they involve much less sacrifice.

**Preservation**, according to Passmore, means "the attempt to maintain in their present condition such areas of the earth's surface as do not yet bear the obvious marks of man's handiwork and to protect from the risk of extinction those species of living beings which man has not yet destroyed."<sup>12</sup> The author excludes therefore artifacts from his considerations.

One can think of wilderness and species as either having instrumental value or intrinsic value. In the first case they should be preserved because of their usefulness, factual or potential only, to humans. In case of possessing intrinsic value they should be preserved even if they are harmful to human interests. The notion "usefulness" should not be too narrowly interpreted in the first case. Something may be useful because it allows the pursuit of science, is good for recreation and retreat, constitutes a source of moral renewal and aesthetic delight.<sup>13</sup>

**Population (multiplication)** is the fourth problem. Some arrogant ecologists claim that "people are pollution". Paul Ehrlich compares humans to cancer cells, because they reproduce in too great numbers.<sup>14</sup> In this context it is worthy to notice that Barry Commoner argues that the switch to synthetics, rather than population growth as such, is responsible for the radical post-war increase of pollution.<sup>15</sup> The concept of the optimum population is quite different from maximum population idea. It is obvious that world population cannot increase *ad infinitum*, as it is doing all the time, because humans will be overcrowded, they would have neither room nor resources. As much should be done as possible not to increase largely the population of the world, but certainly

only within the democratic society's limits. Concluding Passmore writes: "To surrender our freedom, to abandon all respects for persons, in the name of control over population growth is to make sacrifices which our proper concern for posterity cannot justify."<sup>16</sup>

Referring to the European philosophical tradition of the past the author seems to agree with the Stoics: "if men were ever to decide that they ought to treat plants, animals, landscapes precisely as if they were persons, if they were to think of them as forming with man a moral community in a strict sense, that would make it impossible to civilise the world – or, one might add, to act at all or even to continue living."<sup>17</sup> Despite the above opinion we shall see that there are contemporary philosophers who think otherwise and construct theories propagating a moral community with nature precisely in a strict sense. One of them is Paul Taylor.

### **The Biocentric Egalitarian Individualistic Ethics of Paul Taylor**

The American philosopher, Paul Taylor, is the advocate of constructing quite new ethics. In his most known book *Respect for Nature*, proposes the following definition of environmental ethics: "Environmental ethics is concerned with the moral relations that hold between humans and the natural world. The ethical principles governing those relations determine our duties, obligations, and responsibilities with regard to the Earth's natural environment and all animals and plants that inhabit it."<sup>18</sup> The author distinguishes two types of natural ecosystems: those that have never been exploited by humans (free of human intervention) and those influenced by human labor.<sup>19</sup> He argues that human beings are obliged to work out a suitable environmental ethics, which is independent from the ethics obligating within individual and social life of human beings. The author points to the difference between a human-centered theory of environmental ethics and life-centered (biocentric) ethics, of which he himself is an adherent. Analysing human centered and life-centered theories Taylor introduces two notions closely connected with them: of **a moral agent** and **a moral subject**. He writes: "A moral agent, for both types of ethics, is any being that possesses those capacities by virtue of which it can act morally or immorally, can have duties and responsibilities, and can be held accountable for what it does."<sup>20</sup> Defining moral subjects he writes: "Moral subjects must be entities that can be harmed or benefited."<sup>21</sup> Constructing his theory the author begins with the distinction between material and formal conditions which obligate both in traditional human ethics and environmental, biocentric ethics.

The material condition for anthropocentric ethics is "respect for persons", whereas the environmental, biocentric ethics begins with the notion of "respect for nature". Of course one can notice at first glance that the material conditions differ in the two kinds of ethics. Contrary to this

the formal conditions are the same for both kinds of ethics. The rules and standards constituting a valid normative ethical system must be: 1) general in form; 2) universally applicable to all moral agents; 3) intended to be applied disinterestedly; 4) advocated as normative principles for all to adopt; 5) be taken as overriding all nonmoral norms. Both human ethics and environmental ethics are governed by rules and standards that satisfy all formal conditions. But in spite of the similarity between them in this respect there is of course the difference between the two, which lies in the content of their respective system of norms.

Taylor repeats again and again that from the biological point of view human beings are animals and, like all other species, they have evolved from earlier forms of life. He writes: "It is a basic fact of the human condition that we are biologically dependent upon a sound, stable order in the Earth's natural ecosystems. We share this aspect of reality with all nonhuman species."<sup>22</sup> In connection with this the author notices that similarly to other species humans face the possibility of total extinction. In this context he expresses the following opinion: "It seems quite clear that in the contemporary world the extinction of the species *Homo Sapiens* would be beneficial to the Earth's Community of Life as a whole."<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, Taylor's supposition that the world without humans would be a better place may seem to be odd and repellent to many of the readers.

The American author analyses very deeply the moral attitude of respect for nature considered as an ultimate moral attitude. In order to understand it fully one must first understand the concept of *good of a being*. In this context the author notices that the idea of furthering the good of a child is an intelligible notion, whereas the pile of sand has no good of its own.

Taylor claims that it is possible for a human being *to take an animal's standpoint* without the slightest trace of anthropomorfizm. I cannot agree with such an opinion; although it is possible for man to make rather informed, objective judgements what is desirable and undesirable for a nonhuman living being, the problem is that a human being can only vaguely, I think, approach the animal's standpoint.<sup>24</sup> The author, unfortunately, goes even further when he claims the same to be true about plants.

Here also appears the problem of *the good of species*. Unlike the representatives of holism, however, Taylor notices that a man has no direct duties to species as such.<sup>25</sup> The concept of the being's good refers directly to individual organisms, and only statistically to populations, claims the author.

When environmental ethics is considered one should regard all wild animals and plants as having inherent worth due to the fact that they are members of the biotic community of a natural ecosystem, and therefore they are moral subjects to which duties are owed by moral agents. At this point Taylor expresses a somewhat controversial opinion: "Whatever its species may be, none is

thought to be superior to another and all are held to be deserving of equal consideration”.<sup>26</sup> Such egalitarian, biocentric position should be generally accepted, insists the author.

According to Taylor *respect for nature attitude is an ultimate attitude*, which means that it is the most fundamental kind of moral commitment that one can take. Apart from respect for nature a man may take some other kinds of attitudes, e.g. aesthetic, hedonistic, scientific. Sometimes they are compatible and sometimes incompatible with respect for nature. There is one attitude that is always incompatible with respect for nature attitude, namely exploitative attitude. The author writes: “Thus the conception of wild creatures as possessors of inherent worth, which is at the heart of the attitude of respect, is in its very essence contrary to the exploitative attitude.”<sup>27</sup>

Then Taylor presents *the biocentric outlook on nature*, which is the basis of the attitude of respect for nature. He is certainly right to notice that we, humans, tend to treat morally the natural world depending on the way we look at the whole system of nature and humans’ role in it. The author distinguishes four beliefs which constitute the biocentric outlook. They are as follows: 1) humans are members of the Earth’s Community of Life on the same terms as other living things; 2) the human species, together with numerous other species, are integral elements in a system of interdependence guaranting their survival; 3) all organisms are teleological centers of life; 4) men are not superior to other living beings. One should notice that it is definitely the last condition which seems to be most questionable. The author also claims that as a species humans are a recent arrival on Earth, an addition to the order of life that had been established for hundreds of millions of years and, in addition to this, while humans cannot do without other species, the latter can easily do without humans. People often think that their appearance on Earth was the final goal of the evolutionary process. Such opinion, claims the philosopher, is the expression of human *hybris*, human arrogance.<sup>28</sup>

Next the American author defines the rules obligating within his environmental ethics. These are the rules of: 1) *nonmalificence*, which expresses the duty not to do any harm to any entity in the natural environment that has a good of its own; 2) *noninterference*, which consists of two sorts of negative duties: one requires us to refrain from placing restrictions on the freedom of an individual, whereas the other requires a general “hands off” policy with regards to whole ecosystems and biotic communities; 3) *fidelity*, which is the duty not to break the trust that a wild animal places in us (as often done in hunting, trapping and fishing); 4) *restitutive justice*, which means the duty to restore the balance of justice between a moral agent and a moral subject when the subject has been wronged.

Sometimes there arise moral dilemmas when human rights and values conflict with the good of nonhumans. Therefore Taylor proposes a set of priority principles that cut across both the domain of environmental ethics and of human ethics. *Fairness* is their material condition (all parties to the conflict are treated fairly). There are five such principles: 1) The principle of **self defence** states that it is

permissible for moral agents to protect themselves against dangerous or harmful organisms by destroying them (if there is no other way of avoiding danger!); 2) The principle of **proportionality** means that greater weight is to be given to basic than to nonbasic interests, no matter what species, human or other, the competing claims arise from; 3) The principle of **minimum wrong** means that when humans feel they must violate nonhuman interests, they should act in the way which causes least harm; 4) The principle of **distributive justice** requires that when the interests of the parties are all basic ones and there exists a natural source of good, each party must be allotted an equal share; 5) The principle of **restitutive justice** means that some form of reparation and/or compensation is called for. The general practice of wilderness preservation is a matter of fairness to wild animals and plants.

When the principles are observed we can achieve the ethical ideal of harmony between human civilization and nature. We can achieve “the best possible world” preserving a balance between human values and the well-being of animals and plants in natural ecosystems. A thoroughly anthropocentric culture in which the inherent superiority of humans over other species has been taken for granted should be changed in such way as to allow us to look in a new way at nonhuman animals and plants. Such change, although not an easy matter, is within the realm of human possibility, claims Paul Taylor.

### Conclusions

The basic difference between the two ethics is such that within anthropocentric ethics all human duties with respect to the natural world are ultimately derived from the duties humans owe to one another as human beings, whereas within a biocentric ethics the duties obligate humans straightly in regard to wild living beings. It should be strongly emphasised that, according to Taylor, environmental ethics is not a subdivision of human ethics. It is an independent ethics within which wild communities of life deserve moral concern and consideration because they have a kind of value that belongs to them inherently. Unlike Taylor, the Australian thinker notices that a ‘new ethic’ is not required, meaning, most obviously, a new environmental ethic.<sup>29</sup>

Taylor repeats again and again that human ethics embodies the attitude of respect for persons, whereas environmental ethics embodies the attitude of respect for nature; in result the material conditions are obviously quite different in both kinds of ethics. Passmore develops his theory within traditional ethics (a kind of extensionism), whereas Taylor constructs quite new environmental ethics; as it has already been mentioned the formal conditions are the same in both kinds of ethics.

All ecological problems in Passmore’s philosophy stem partly from the metaphysical beliefs, that nature exists to serve humans: such position expresses the essence of the anthropocentric

attitude to nature. There is no such attitude in the strictly biocentric philosophy, nevertheless it may seem odd to some people, at least at first sight. Such views include in the class of moral subjects all animals and plants, therefore one may wonder whether it is meaningful to treat trees or daffodils rightly or wrongly... The biocentric hierarchical philosophy, as developed for example by the Polish philosopher, Henryk Skolimowski, is much more easy to accept in this respect.<sup>30</sup>

Constructing his environmental theory Taylor expresses his opinion on the ethics of the bioculture, which is concerned with the human treatment of animals and plants in artificially created environments totally controlled by human beings. A man using hybridization, different breeding programs, etc., is able to produce the kinds of animals and plants that best serve his human needs. Although Taylor does not pay attention within his theory to such living beings he is inclined to treat them well. Contrary to this Passmore does not seem to pay attention to animals and plants living in such conditions.

Both authors agree that if nothing is done as regards the relation man-nature, if man continues to destroy biosphere as he has been doing for the last centuries, human species may face the possibility of total extinction.

And, last but not least, it should be stressed that Passmore's environmental problem of preservation generally overlaps with Taylor's views concerning wildlife.

*The Pedagogical University of Cracow*

### Notes

1. Compare the chapter entitled just like this, in: John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature. Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*, Gerald Duckworth and Co., Ltd., London 1974, pp. 3-27.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
3. Compare my book: Leszek S. Pyra, *Environment and Values. Holmes Rolston III's Environmental Philosophy*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Rolniczej, Kraków 2003, pp. 38-48.
4. John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for...*, p. 56.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
7. Compare a very interesting book on this: Schumacher Ernst Friedrich, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, Harper and Row, New York 1973.
8. John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for...*, p. 74.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
11. This text is written in the year 2007.
12. John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for...*, p. 101.
13. It is certainly worthy of notice that the first national parks were founded for the benefit and enjoyment of the people. The Yosemite National Park, founded in the year 1890, was the first American preserve designed, first of all, to protect wilderness as such.
14. Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*, Ballantine, New York 1968, p. 166.
15. Barry D. Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*, Alfred. A. Knopf, New York 1971.
16. John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for...*, p. 170.
17. Quoted in: John Passmore, *op. cit.*, p. 126. Compare also on this: R. D. Guthrie: "Ethics and Non-human Organisms", in: *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, (Autumn, 1967), pp. 52-62.
18. Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature. A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, Princeton University Press, New York 1986, p. 3.
19. Some theoreticians claim that there is no wild nature as such any more. Compare for example: Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, Random House, New York 1989.
20. Paul Taylor, *Respect for...*, p. 14.
21. *Ibid.* p. 17.
22. *Ibid.* p. 48.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
24. The Polish philosopher, Zdzisława Piątek, seems to accept, partly at least, Taylor's views in this respect. Compare: Zdzisława Piątek, *Etyka środowiskowa. Nowe spojrzenie na miejsce człowieka w przyrodzie*, Wydawnictwo UJ, Kraków 1998, p. 104.
25. The representatives of holism, e.g. Holmes Rolston III, think otherwise and propagate the theory according to which species are definitely more important than individual organisms. Compare: Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics. Duties to and Values in the Natural World*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1988.
26. Paul Taylor, *Respect for...*, p. 79.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
28. The Christian tradition, as represented for example by Reinhold Niebuhr, thinks egoism, and *hybris* in particular, to be the greatest evil. See my book: Leszek Pyra, *Antropologiczno-etyczna teoria Reinholda Niebuhra*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 1999, pp. 56-57.

29. John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for...*, pp. 56, 187.
30. Henryk Skolimowski, *Eco-Philosophy. Designing New Tactics for Living*, Marion Boyars, New York 1981.

### **Abstract**

#### The Anthropocentric Theory of John Passmore versus Biocentric Views of Paul Taylor

The paper is of a comparative character. Within it I try to oppose two different theories concerning the relation man-nature, the theories which in different versions appear within the contemporary philosophy of environment.

In the first part I try to examine some ecological (environmental) problems as understood by the Australian philosopher, John Passmore. Passmore's ecological problems are approached from the anthropological point of view. Pollution, preservation, conservation and population are basic problems which humans face today. They are ultimately humans' responsibility.

In the second part I present and discuss the biocentric, egalitarian outlook on nature, as developed by the American philosopher, Paul Taylor. His views refer mainly to wild nature as such and the American ethicist proposes some very interesting solutions of the problems caused by humans.

In the third part I point out the similarities and differences between the two kinds of theories presented and try to evaluate them in respect of their usefulness to the practical activity of man.

**My adress:**

Leszek Pyra  
 Ul. Rozrywka 20/69  
 31-419 Kraków  
 Poland

**E-mail:** Lepyra@op.pl