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ECOCENTRISM: THE RESPONSIVE CHORD

J. Stan Rowe

University of Saskatchewan

About the Author: *J. Stan Rowe* is an Emeritus Professor of ecology from the University of Saskatchewan, and author of many books and articles. He now lives in New Denver, British Columbia. His most recent book is *Home Place: Essays on Ecology*, published by NeWest, Edmonton, Alberta, 1990.

Revealing my deepest thoughts to a visitor one evening, I was accused of being against civilization, against science, against humanity. Naturally I was flattered.... With his help I discovered that I was not opposed to mankind but only to man-centeredness, anthropocentricity, the opinion that the world exists solely for the sake of man. Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*.

Although Abbey did not directly attempt to counter the anthropocentric argument, logic points to the ecocentric proposition *that people exist solely for the sake of the world*. The Blue Planet, the global ecosystem, the ecosphere, is the creative entity that over its 4.6 billion years of evolution has brought *Homo sapiens* into being along with 20 million or so other species of creatures: miraculous emanations from improbable air, seas, rocks, sediments and soils. All these, together, are relational components of a consummated evolving whole.

The integrity and health of wholes require that their parts serve them. The human body's heart, arteries, veins and corpuscles either conduce to its well-being or to illness and their own demise. By analogy, corpuscular humanity's mission is to beautify and keep the Earth. Failing that — and our ability to contemplate different futures endows us with choice — people will be a crippling or death-dealing pox on the world.

The *ecocentric* argument is grounded in the belief that compared to the undoubted importance of the human part the whole ecosphere is even more significant and consequential: more inclusive, more complex, more integrated, more creative, more beautiful, more mysterious, and older than time. The "environment" that anthropocentrism misperceives as materials designed to be used exclusively by humans, to serve the needs of humanity, is in the profoundest sense humanity's source and support: its ingenious, inventive life-giving matrix. Ecocentrism goes beyond biocentrism with its fixation on organisms, for in the ecocentric view people are inseparable from the inorganic/organic nature that encapsulates them. They are particles and waves, body and spirit, in the context of Earth's ambient energy.

Ecology, the science of context, attempts to comprehend the systems that surround lesser systems. In so doing it has discovered landscape and waterscape ecosystems, volumes of gas- liquid-solid Earth-space consisting of air layer over water/land/rock layer with organisms clustered near the phase boundaries. Forest ecosystems, grassland ecosystems, desert ecosystems, lake and river ecosys-

tems, ocean ecosystems: these are the manifold sectors of the supra-organic *ecosphere*, the global ecosystem in which humankind is embedded.

From the inside, ecosystems are no more apparent to human eyes than is a lake to the fish that swim in it. Enveloped by ecosystems we seem to inhabit a world of fragments, of raw materials and natural resources. Further, because we have viewed our surroundings through the cultural glasses of competitive individualism, many of the fragments appear to be aggressive, hostile and cruel. The Darwinian biologist sees nature red in tooth and claw. Just as Adam Smith needed an "invisible hand" to rationalize competitive economics, so inside-the-system biologists have to invoke phantom fingers to explain ecosystem self-maintenance in the face of dysfunctional aggression and competition. How much more reasonable, taking the outside view, to perceive the ecosphere evolving in ways that encourage and constrain its parts and their functions to be inter-dependent contributors to the whole. The hand that shapes ecosystem phenomena, invisible from the inside, is the ecosphere and its sectoral ecosystems visible from extra-terrestrial and terrestrial space.

Because "environment" means that which encircles something more important, literal "environmentalists" are willy-nilly anthropocentric, placing less value on the surrounding world than on humanity and self. If that causes uneasiness, the central position of the self can be retained painlessly by redefining it as a broad field-of-care embracing Earth. But this is an ineffectual gesture if, when push comes to shove, humanity is always accorded top billing. The question of priorities is critical. Should our loyalty embrace the entire "field-of-care," or does sympathy fasten first and always on the starving family metaphorically ploughing the "field" into oblivion? The whole field should command our allegiance, say I. It is time to eschew human self-interest and recognize the *inherent worth* and surpassing values of Earth's miraculous ecosystems whose workings we do not understand. Anthropocentrism says we know how to control and manage them; ecocentrism says "not yet; maybe never".

"Objective science" leans heavily on cultural opinions. If inside-the-system biology finds its simplified world shot through and through with self-centeredness and self-interest, we do well to remind ourselves that individuality and self-ness are recent; human constructs, unknown to unself-conscious people, animals, plants, rocks, water and air. Western culture and the science that trails along with it can, if moved, embrace more meaningful concepts of symbiosis, altruism, relatedness and compliance, accepting the over-riding importance of worldly context. The kind of place we will inhabit depends on the answer to the question, "Who on Earth are you?" Are you and your kin the central fact of the universe? If not, what? By our answers we choose what our future "selves" will be.

As heirs to several centuries of rampant individualism — culminating today in the frenetic pursuit of self-esteem and personal authenticity — most of us will be burdened throughout our lives with an indissoluble kernel of egocentrism and,

by extension, anthropocentrism. This should not deter people of good will from proclaiming the truth that, relative to Earth, humanity is not the center. A few hundred years ago, with some reluctance, Western people admitted that the planets, sun and stars did not circle around their abode. In short, our thoughts and concepts though irreducibly *anthropomorphic* need not be anthropocentric.

Wherever our sense of greatest importance lies, there also will our ethics be. The attempt to build ethical concern for the ecosphere from the inside out, by add-ons starting with our selves and the human race, may soothe consciences for a little while, but it will be the kiss of death for wild nature. Aldo Leopold has been the influential exponent of ethics-by-extension, rationalized as an expedient for human survival. Unfortunately this approach only strengthens anthropocentrism, making it certain that land, air, water and other organisms will always in the crunch take second place to the welfare of self, family and friends. More sensible, but more difficult, is the ecocentric ethic that confers highest valuation on the *ecosphere* which, by proxy, bestows ethical merit and concern on its subsidiary contents *according to their compliance and cooperation*. The self finds its ecological values in the welfare of the non-self.

Ecological ethics — guidelines for human behavior here on Earth — are derivative, founded in Earth care. Blessed are those who make sacrifices to preserve and sustain the non-human, human-containing world. Cursed are those who wilfully destroy Earth's creativity and beauty. If religions cannot incorporate such ethics in their theologies, they too stand condemned.

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