

Care for the Natural Environment as A *Prima Facie* Duty: The Confluence of the Anthropocentric and Non-Anthropocentric Frameworks

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Abstract

The paper proposes that care for the natural environment be treated as a prima facie duty in order to resolve the conflict between the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric frameworks in environmental ethics. In light of William David Ross' conditional deontology, prima facie duty is a conditional duty whose actuality is determined by what is properly demanded in a conflict situation. While Ross conceptualized such duty for the benefit of humans as sources and recipients of moral actions, the same duty can be extended to the natural environment as a "moral subject." On the one hand, the anthropocentric framework posits that the environment has instrumental value; thus, humans have the duty to care for it because it is instrumental for their flourishing. On the other hand, the non-anthropocentric framework posits that the environment has an inherent value; thus, humans have the duty to care for it because it is valuable in its own right. I argue that treating care for the natural environment as a prima facie duty remedies the conflict between these opposing frameworks. The conditional status of the said duty is a means to determine and thereby prioritize the more incumbent duty in concrete conflict situations between the opposing frameworks.

Keywords: prima facie duty, William David Ross, anthropocentric framework, non-anthropocentric framework, environmental ethics, natural environment, conflict situation

Introduction

The decade of 1970s saw the development of environmental philosophy propelled by the emergence of environmental crisis. This crisis — that began unobtrusively since the industrial revolution — is essentially caused by human beings' insatiable hunger for development, their ever-increasing dependence on technology for productivity, global economic expansions, and rapid population growth. These excesses were profoundly articulated by the two equally important works on environmental degradation in the 1960s: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* published in 1962 and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* published in 1968.¹ J. Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman claim that "[t]he manhandling of nature turned the attention of a small group of philosophers to questions concerning human obligations to (or for) nature—that is, to environmental ethics."²

The philosophers' unceasing investigation of the crisis gave birth to environmental ethics. "[E]nvironmental ethics," writes Joseph R. Desjardins, "is a systematic account of the moral relations between human beings and their natural environment. Environmental ethics assumes that ethical norms can and do govern human behavior toward the natural world."³ Presumed in Desjardins' definition is that the natural environment itself is a non-human moral person and therefore has moral status. F. J. Evangelista and N. Mabaquiao Jr. claim that "[n]on-human moral persons...refer to those possessing the defining features of being a moral person but not of being a human being."⁴ By this, they mean that "non-human moral persons" may include "animals, aliens, [the environment] and artificial entities like corporations and intelligent machines."⁵ In relation to human agency, the environment is a moral subject or moral patient, that is, it acts as a recipient of "morally evaluable actions" of human moral persons.⁶

¹ Alasdair Cochrane, "Environmental Ethics," in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; available from <https://iep.utm.edu/envi-eth/>; accessed 04 September 2020.

² J. Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, Volume 1 (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2009), xv.

³ Joseph R. Desjardins, *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*, 5th Edition (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2013), 17.

⁴ Francis Julius N. Evangelista and Napoleon M. Mabaquiao, Jr., *Ethics: Theories and Applications* (Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2020), 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, additions are mine.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Like the other branches of applied ethics, environmental ethics is enlivened by the tension among its different frameworks. While it is unquestionably clear today that care for the environment is human beings' moral duty, the anthropocentric and the non-anthropocentric frameworks completely oppose each other as regards the motivation of performing such duty. The former's motivation for care is driven by its instrumental understanding of the value of the natural environment; while the latter is driven by its inherent value.

By instrumental understanding of the value of the natural environment, I mean to say that the environment is taken care of because it is treated as a means to an end. An example of which is the taking care of the trees up the mountains (means) in view of cutting them down to be made lumbers for structural purposes (end). By recognizing the inherent value of the natural environment, I mean to say that the environment is taken care of because it is good in itself. An example of which is the preservation of rain forests for the maintenance of earth's water cycle and biodiversity.

To remedy this polarity, I propose that care for the environment has to be treated as a prima facie duty. Following Ross' conditional deontology, conflict situations between the two frameworks can be solved once the more incumbent duty is identified in concrete circumstances. I accordingly divide the discussion into three parts: the first part deals with Ross' concept of prima facie duty; the second deals with the contentions of the two opposing frameworks and the conflict situations in which the frameworks are involved; the third part deals with the application of care for the environment as a prima facie duty in the said conflict situations.

I. William David Ross' Concept of Prima Facie Duty

Ross' Critique of I. Kant's Deontology and G. E. Moore's Ideal Utilitarianism

Ross recognizes the two important ethical theories "that offer a solution of such cases of conscience": one is Kant's deontology; the other is G. E. Moore's ideal utilitarianism.⁷ While he recognizes the importance of these two ethical systems, Ross notes that these systems are problematic. Kant's categorical imperative and Moore's ideal utilitarianism must "fit the facts" in order to solve cases of

⁷ William David Ross, *The Right and The Good*, Philip Stratton-Lake, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 18-19.

conscience. The following paragraphs will now show what Ross means by saying the ethical theories must fit the facts.⁸

As regards Kant's deontology, his main objection is its abstract and absolutist character. Ross claims that

The whole method of abstraction, if relied upon, when used alone, to answer the question 'What ought I to do?', is a mistake. For the acts we have to choose between, say the telling of the truth or the saying of what is untrue, in some particular circumstances, or the keeping or the breaking of a promise, are completely individual acts, and their rightness or their wrongness will spring from their whole nature, and no element in their nature can safely be abstracted from. To abstract is to shut our eyes to the detail of the moral situation and to deprive ourselves of the data for a true judgment about it. . . . The only safe way of applying Kant's test of universalizability is to envisage the act in its whole concrete particularity, and then ask 'Could I wish that everyone, when in exactly similar circumstances, should tell a lie exactly similar to that which I am thinking of telling?' But then universalizability, as a short cut to knowing what is right, has failed us. For it is just as hard to see whether a similar act by someone else, with all its concrete particularity, would be right, as it is to see whether our own proposed act would be right.⁹

Ross points out that Kant's universal and absolute categorical imperative—represented by the question "What ought I to do?"—that is duty which "is objectively necessary, without regard to any end"¹⁰—is essentially impractical in dealing with "completely individual acts." He furthers that the moral quality of these acts "spring from their whole nature" that can never be abstracted from. For him, abstraction is to ignore the concreteness of moral situation and to let go of the chance to make a true judgment about it. Thus, Ross contends that "our duty is to do certain things, not to do them from the sense of

⁸ See *ibid.*, 19.

⁹ William David Ross, *Kant's Ethical Theory: A Commentary on the grundlegung zur metaphysik der sitten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 33-34.

¹⁰ Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1972), 710.

duty.”¹¹ Meaning, the moral duty of the person in a concrete moral situation is to do things according to the demands of the said situation, not to think about *a priori* duty that would serve as a moral compass in doing what is right in the same situation. Although he heavily criticized Kant’s categorical imperative, he nonetheless recognized it is a “necessary part of the true method.”

As regards Moore’s ideal utilitarianism, Ross has three main objections against it: 1) its reduction of “morally significant relations,”¹² 2) its “ignorance of the highly personal character of duty,”¹³ and 3) the connection between what is optimific and right—“any act that is optimific is right and any act that is right is optimific”¹⁴— is not self-evident.¹⁵

Regarding objection 1, Ross writes:

[Utilitarianism] says, in effect, that the only morally significant relation in which my neighbors stand to me is that of being possible beneficiaries of my action. They do stand in this relation to me, and this relation is morally significant. But they may also stand to me in the relation of promisee to promiser, of creditor to debtor, of wife to husband, of child to parent, of friend to friend, of fellow countryman to fellow countryman, and the like; and each of these relationships is the foundation of a *prima facie* duty, which is more or less incumbent upon me according to the circumstances of the case.¹⁶

Ross points out that utilitarianism simplifies and thereby reduces one’s “morally significant relation” with the other. While treating others as “possible beneficiaries of my action” is significant, such theoretical designation overlooks one’s concrete relation to the other as “promisee to promiser, of creditor to debtor, of wife to husband, of child to parent” and the like. Utilitarianism’s simplification and reduction of one’s morally significant relations with the other dissolves the uniqueness of different relationships that is “the foundation of a *prima facie* duty.” Ignoring these grades of

¹¹ Ross, *The Right and The Good*, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

relationships ambiguates the incumbency of a certain duty relevant to a particular circumstance, especially in times of conflict situation.

Regarding objection 2, Ross writes:

The essential defect of the 'ideal utilitarian' theory is that it ignores, or at least does not do full justice to, the highly personal character of duty. If the only duty is to produce the maximum of good, the question of who is to have the good – whether it is myself, or my benefactor, or a person to whom I have made a promise to confer that good on him, or a mere fellow man to whom I stand in no such special relationship – should make no difference to my having a duty to produce that good. But we are all in fact sure that it makes a vast difference.¹⁷

Ross points out that utilitarianism disregards the “highly personal character of duty.” If the only duty “is to produce the maximum good,” the unique personality of the agent and the recipient of the action disappears into the foliage of aspiring to produce such good. Ross insists that such proclivity makes every moral action too abstract and general. For him, the highly personal character of duty “makes a vast difference.”

Regarding objection 3, referring to Moore’s view that that the “coextensiveness of ‘right’ and ‘optimific’ is apprehended immediately”—and thus, Moore “rejects the possibility of any proof of it”—Ross writes:

It might seem absurd to suggest that it could be right for any one to do an act which would produce consequences less good than those which would be produced by some other act in his power. Yet a little thought will convince us that this is not absurd. The type of case in which it is easiest to see that this is so is, perhaps, that in which one has made a promise. In such a case we all think that *prima facie* it is our duty to fulfil the promise irrespective of the precise goodness of the total consequences. And though we do not think it is necessarily our actual or absolute duty to do so, we are far from thinking that any, even the slightest, gain in

¹⁷ Ibid., 22.

the value of the total consequences will necessarily justify us in doing some- thing else instead.¹⁸

Ross argues that the optimality of the consequence of the act is not an absolute criterion for its rightness. In order to prove this, he examines the act of fulfilling a promise. He notes that it is “our duty to fulfil the promise irrespective of the precise goodness of the total consequences.” Whether fulfilling it is an actual duty or not, what essentially matters is that it is our duty to fulfill the promise. Ross further argues that “[a]fter all, a promise is a promise, and is not to be treated so lightly as the theory we are examining would imply [ideal utilitarianism]. What, exactly, a promise is, is not so easy to determine, but we are surely agreed that it constitutes a serious moral limitation to our freedom of action.”¹⁹

After pointing out the theoretical and practical flaws of the ethical systems of Kant [the impracticality of the universal and absolutist categorical imperative in dealing with “completely individual acts”] and Moore [the reduction of “morally significant relations,” its “ignorance of the highly personal character of duty,” and the not self-evident connection between what is optimific and right], Ross proposes the theory of prima facie duties. Evangelista and Mabaquiao Jr. write that “[t]his ethical theory belongs to the deontological kind because it maintains the idea that what primarily determines the morality of the actions is the performance of the moral duties.”²⁰ However, unlike Kant’s deontology, Ross’ deontology is conditional because it accepts exceptions. These exceptions “may sometimes be a result of considering the consequences of an action (thereby accommodating utilitarian considerations) or some other morally relevant factors.”²¹

Prima Facie Duty

Ross defines prima facie duty as “a brief way of referring to the characteristic (quite distinct from that of being a duty proper) which an act has, in virtue of being of a certain kind (e.g., the keeping of a promise), of being an act which would be a duty proper if it were not at the same time of another kind which is morally significant. Whether

¹⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹⁹ Ibid., 35.

²⁰ Evangelista and Mabaquiao, Jr., *Ethics*, 83.

²¹ Ibid.

an act is a duty proper or actual duty depends on all the morally significant kinds it is an instance of.”²² The term “prima facie duty,” Ross clarifies, is not an actual duty but “something related in a special way to duty.”²³ Furthermore, he insists that the term “prima facie” pertains to “an objective fact involved in the nature of the situation, or more strictly in an element of its nature, though not, as duty proper does, arising from its whole nature.” A prima facie duty “rests on a definite circumstance which cannot seriously be held to be without moral significance.”²⁴

Ross’ definition of prima facie duty as a “way of referring to the characteristic of a certain kind of act” means that it is not an actual duty but a conditional duty. It is conditional because the actuality of its performance depends on the “nature of the situation.” The prima facie duty that “we have recognized in a given situation is not necessarily the action that we should actually do in that situation. Our prima facie duty is merely our tentative duty...”²⁵ In fact, conditional duty is “something related to [an actual] duty” in the sense that it serves as a guide to doing what is demanded by a “definite circumstance.”

Presumed in Ross’ understanding of prima facie duty is that it is self-evident. It is self-evident “in the sense that when we have reached sufficient mental maturity and have given sufficient attention to the proposition it is evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself.”²⁶ Thus, by intuition—aided by “sufficient mental maturity”—we know what our prima facie duty is in concrete situations. By intuition, we know very well that it is our prima facie duty to make up for our wrongful acts. Presuming that this prima facie duty is what is demanded by the specific context we find ourselves in, then this prima facie duty for reparation becomes our actual duty.

However, when prima facie duties are in conflict with each other, Ross writes:

When I am in a situation, as perhaps I always am, in which more than one of these prima facie duties is incumbent on me, what I have to do is to study the situation as fully as I can until I form the considered opinion (it is never more) that in the circumstances one of them is more incumbent

²² Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 19-20.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Evangelista and Mabaquiao, Jr., *Ethics*, 85-86.

²⁶ Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 29.

than any other; then I am bound to think that to do this prima facie duty is my duty...in the situation.²⁷

Here, Ross indicates that when there are conflicting prima facie duties, the first thing to do is to study the situation fully. After which, one can now determine that “one of them is more incumbent than any other.” That which is more incumbent is the actual duty. Suppose that one promised to buy his/her son an expensive toy [prima facie duty X: duty to fulfill the promise made]. Now, after making such promise, he/she realized that his/her money would no longer be enough to buy it because he/she still had to pay for his/her son’s tuition fee [prima facie duty Y: duty to pay the tuition fee]. Clearly, prima facie duty Y overrides prima facie duty X; the former becomes the actual duty. However, Ross clarifies that just because X is the less incumbent duty does not mean it ceases to be a prima facie duty. X becomes conditional because that is not demanded by the concrete situation above.²⁸ At some point, prima facie duty X may override prima facie duty Y provided that there would be enough money to buy the same expensive toy.

Ross’s concept of prima facie duty should not be confused with situation/situational ethics developed by the American Anglican theologian Joseph F. Fletcher although both of them underscore the importance of a particular circumstance as a determining factor for the morality of an act. They differ on two grounds: first, Fletcher’s situation ethics presupposes the existence of God which is “alien” in Ross’ system; second, his situation ethics makes “love” as the only determining factor for the morality of an act while Ross recognizes both the importance of the performance of duty and the possible exceptions for the performance of which in concrete conflict situations.

In his attempt to synthesize legalism and what he calls “unprincipled” antinomianism, Fletcher advances situation ethics. This system proposes that one “enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside in the situation if love seems better served by doing so.”²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

²⁸ See Evangelista and Mabaquiao, Jr., *Ethics*, 85.

²⁹ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 26.

Unlike Ross, Fletcher recognizes the importance of the “ethical maxims”—commands and rules—only as “illuminators.” This means that laws or precepts only occupy a “subservient place” in the performance of a moral action “so that only love and reason really count when the chips are down!”³⁰ Situationist ethics “follows a moral law or violates it according to love's need.”³¹ Here “love” should be understood in the context of the command “to love God in the neighbor.”³² This contention presupposes the existence of God and His role as the lawgiver in decision making which could not be found in Ross’ ethical system. Furthermore, “only the commandment to love is categorically good.”³³ “Reason” should be understood here as “the instrument of moral judgment, while rejecting the notion that the good is ‘given’ in the nature of things, objectively.”³⁴

II. The Conflict Between the Anthropocentric and Non-Anthropocentric Frameworks

The Anthropocentric Framework

J. Desjardins claims that “[t]he Western philosophical tradition denies that any direct moral relationship exists between humans and the natural environment.”³⁵ Such denial roots from the assumption of its theories that only humans have moral standing because of their rationality—rationality is the only basis for moral standing. Since only humans are rational, then only humans have moral standing. As a corollary, care for the natural environment is a duty only because it is a means for human flourishing. This instrumental approach is justified by no less than Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Aristotle claims that “[n]ature has made all things specifically for the sake of man.”³⁶ In his refutation against those who claim that “it is a sin for man to kill brute animals,” Thomas Aquinas argues that “animals are ordered to man’s use in the natural course of things, according to divine providence.

³⁰ Ibid., 31.

³¹ Ibid., 26.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Desjardins, *Environmental Ethics*, 98.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, E. Barker, tr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), Bk. 1, Ch. 8.

Consequently, man uses them without any injustice, either by killing them or employing them in any other way.”³⁷

Mike W. Martin enumerates the “purely” instrumental values of the natural environment presumed by the anthropocentric framework: economic, aesthetic, recreational, scientific, and for human survival. The economic instrumental value pertains to the “management and conservation of resources essential for a productive economy.”³⁸ The aesthetic instrumental value refers to “the enjoyment of natural beauty and sublime vistas, waterfalls, and mountain ranges.” The recreational instrumental value refers to the use and abuse of the environment for human recreational purposes. The scientific instrumental value refers to “the on-going study of the ‘natural laboratories’ of wilderness areas.” The instrumental value for the sake of human survival refers to the environmental conservation and preservation for the good of humanity.

By and large, all these instrumental values indicate that human beings’ care for the environment is indirect. This means that “[e]nvironmental responsibility is, at bottom, a matter of prudence: We protect the environment for our own interests.”³⁹ This anthropocentrically self-serving duty emanates from the presumption that rationality bestows one moral standing. Rationality-based bestowal of moral status is what justifies the reduction of the natural environment as a means to an end.

The Non-Anthropocentric Framework

Proponents of the non-anthropocentric framework argue that the natural environment has an inherent or intrinsic value. “To say that an object is intrinsically valuable is to say that it has a good of its own and that what is good for it does not depend on outside factors.”⁴⁰ This means that the environment’s value is not bestowed by humans because it is instrumental for them but because the environment’s value is “found or recognized [in them] rather than given.” Therefore, humans, have the duty to care for the environment because it is inherently good. Implied in this statement is the recognition that the

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, English Dominican Friars, eds. (London: Burns and Oates, 1924), Bk. 4, Pt. 4, Pt. 2.

³⁸ Mike W. Martin, *Everyday Morality: An Introduction to Applied Ethics*, 2nd Edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995), 345.

³⁹ Desjardins, *Environmental Ethics*, 98.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

natural environment has a moral standing—that it is a moral subject. Paul W. Taylor defines moral subject as “any being that can be treated rightly or wrongly and toward whom moral agents can have duties and responsibilities.”⁴¹ This definition categorizes natural environment as a moral subject on the basis of its inherent value.

Under the non-anthropocentric framework, three theories are popularly known: sentientism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism. While they differ in scope as regards the recipients of the actions of moral agents, they nonetheless operate on the same proposition that non-human beings have moral standing because they are inherently valuable. This inherent value demands that humans must have the duty to care for them as they are. While non-humans can never be moral agents, their status as moral subjects should be “judged to be equally deserving of moral concern and consideration.”⁴²

First, unlike most of the western ethical frameworks, sentientism “grounds moral status not on an individual’s rationality, but on the individual’s sentience.”⁴³ Peter Singer, one of the prominent advocates of sentientism, argues that what bestows moral standing to an individual is not one’s rationality but one’s sentience: the capacity to feel pain and pleasure. This criterion for moral standing, while necessarily includes humans, clearly shows that animals have moral standing because they can feel pain or pleasure. Singer argues that “[a]nimals can feel pain...[T]here can be no moral justification for regarding the pain (or pleasure) that animals feel as less important than the same amount of pain (or pleasure) felt by humans.”⁴⁴ Second, biocentrism expands moral standing not only to animals but also to life itself. “Philosophers supporting biocentrism would grant membership in the moral community not on the basis of being rational or being sentient, but rather on the basis of being alive.”⁴⁵ Thus, every being that has life has a moral standing. Third, closely related to biocentrism is ecocentrism. Expanding the scope of biocentrism, ecocentrism “recognizes intrinsic value in all life forms and ecosystems themselves, including their abiotic components.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 17.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴³ Evangelista and Mabaquiao, Jr., *Ethics*, 201.

⁴⁴ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Revised Edition (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 15.

⁴⁵ Evangelista and Mabaquiao, Jr., *Ethics*, 203.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

The Conflict Situations between the Two Frameworks

While the anthropocentric framework “bestows” instrumental value in the natural environment, the non-anthropocentric framework “recognizes” its inherent value. This epistemic and axiological differences determine the kind of motivation that propels humans’ duty to care for the natural environment. On the one hand, the anthropocentric framework propounds that humans have the duty to care for the natural environment because it is instrumental for their flourishing. On the other hand, the non-anthropocentric framework propounds that humans have the duty to care for the natural environment because it is inherently valuable. This difference in motivation is the source of conflict between the two frameworks. The following three conflict situations correspond to the objections raised by sentientism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism against the anthropocentric framework. Conflict situations in interrogative form enumerated in each section will later be analyzed and resolved in part III using Ross’ prima facie duty.

a. The Conflict between Sentientism and the Anthropocentric Framework

The use of animals for scientific research, for food and for leisure is a very contentious topic in environmental ethics. The anthropocentric framework’s insistence that animals only have instrumental value justifies its reduction of them as a means to an end, that is, human flourishing. However, Singer argues that such reduction of animals is driven by speciesism— “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species.”⁴⁷ He pointed out that in order to overcome this prejudice, rationality—the distinguishing mark of the human species—must not be seen as the criterion that bestows moral standing. Following Jeremy Bentham, Singer notes that it is the capacity to feel pain and pleasure that bestows moral standing. “[T]he principle of equality requires that its [animals’] suffering be counted equally with the like suffering-insofar as rough comparisons can be made-of any other being.”⁴⁸ Following Bentham’s utilitarian ethics, “we ought to maximize pleasure and pain, and since animals are

⁴⁷ Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

capable of feeling pleasure and pain as humans, we should give weight to animals' experience in our calculation of right and wrong."⁴⁹

Now, having considered Singer's view, an advocate of the anthropocentric framework may ask the following questions: [1] The use of animals for scientific research in order to develop drugs and medical procedures to treat diseases has been beneficial for both humans and animals. Since it is unethical to use humans for scientific research, must not science use them because the methods may be too painful or harmful and even deadly for them? [2] Is it morally wrong to hunt animals for leisure?

b. The Conflict between Biocentrism and the Anthropocentric Framework

For Taylor, these core beliefs summarize the biocentric outlook: 1) humans and other living things "are members of Earth's community of life"⁵⁰; 2) all living species are "integral elements in a system of interdependence"⁵¹; 3) "all organisms are teleological centers of life in the sense that each is a unique individual pursuing its own good in its own way"⁵²; and 4) "humans are not inherently superior to other living things."⁵³ For him, moral agents who are rational, can accept this biocentric outlook. The concrete manifestation of such acceptance is respect. By respect, Taylor means "attitude of respect for nature." If all living things are seen as having value in themselves, "we might not take a purely exploitative attitude toward them, since we might still grant that they have some degree of inherent worth and so are not to be used in any way humans wish."⁵⁴ From this outlook, it is unethical to treat a living thing as a means to an end.

Now, having considered Taylor's view, an advocate of the anthropocentric framework may ask the question: [3] Does killing cockroaches mean that we have a "purely exploitative attitude toward them"? [4] Is it "purely exploitative" to kill an animal to protect one's property?

⁴⁹ Evangelista and Mabaquiao, Jr., *Ethics*, 202.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 99.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

c. The Conflict between Ecocentrism and the Anthropocentric Framework

Expanding the aforesaid theories, ecocentric outlook recognizes the inherent value not only of humans and other living organisms but also ecosystems themselves and their non-living elements. From this perspective, not only living things have moral standing but also land, oceans, mountains and the like. Aldo Leopold, an ecologist, exemplifies such expansion:

The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals [...] A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these 'resources,' but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.⁵⁵

Enlargement or expansion of the "boundaries of community" include the abiotic components. While Leopold recognizes that we cannot stop the use and abuse of these resources, the "land ethic" affirm their right to exist... "in a natural state." By using the word "land ethic," Leopold implies that the whole ecosystem has a moral standing. "[A] land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."⁵⁶ The imperative "to respect" the ecosystem as such shows that humans' relationship with the community of biotic and abiotic things must be based on the recognition of their inherent value. Without which, abuse, alteration, and degradation of nature as whole would still persist.

Now, having considered Leopold's view, an advocate of the anthropocentric framework may ask these questions: [5] Is government-approved mining morally wrong? [6] Is it a gross disrespect to natural environment when it is converted into something commercially useful?

⁵⁵ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 203-204.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

III. The Application of Care for the Environment as a Prima Facie Duty

Now that the opposing frameworks and their conflicts have already been laid down, I will now analyze the six questions raised above using Ross' concept prima facie duty. It has been emphasized by Ross that in order to determine which prima facie duty is more incumbent—the actual duty— than the other, the performance of duty totally immersed in the concreteness of the situation: 1) must be concrete and specific [against Kant's absolute and abstract deontology] and 2) must be attentive to the morally significant relations and to the highly personal character of duty [against Moore's ideal utilitarianism]. In order to properly contextualize Ross' prima facie duty as regards humans' relationship with the natural environment, this work assumes that the natural environment is a non-human moral person and therefore has a status as a moral subject or patient.⁵⁷ To make the questions made above more realistic according to Ross' general requirements of concreteness and significance of relations, I will now rephrase the questions according to the context of the following six conflict situations.

Concrete Conflict Situation between Sentientism and Anthropocentrism

Situation 1: "In 2015 the Ebola vaccine VSV-EBOV was proven to be 100% safe in 7,500 people. The vaccine, which was initially tested safe and effective in primates, subsequently showed extremely promising results in humans."⁵⁸

Contextualized question 1: Since it is unethical to use humans for scientific research, must not scientists in testing the efficacy of VSV-EBOV vaccine use the primates because the methods may be too painful or harmful and even deadly for them?

Solution 1: Two conflicting prima facie duties are involved here: first, the duty to protect and preserve human life [anthropocentric duty] and second, the duty not to harm the primates [sentientic duty]. Based on the given situation, the more incumbent duty is the duty to

⁵⁷ See Evangelista and Mabaquiao, Jr., *Ethics*, 20-30.

⁵⁸ Understanding Animal Research, *Why are animals used in scientific research?*; available from <https://www.understandinganimalresearch.org.uk/files/2114/6425/>; accessed 12 September 2020.

protect and preserve human life. The duty not to harm the primates still remains a prima facie duty and it may become an actual duty in a completely different situation for example, hunting primates for recreational purposes.

Situation 2: “Even today, acquiring trophy animals is a way of displaying power, Kalof noted. In some African countries, where big-game hunting and trophy display are expensive forms of entertainment practiced predominantly by white men, hunting recalls ideologies that are deeply rooted in colonialism and patriarchy, Kalof said.”⁵⁹

Contextualized question 2: Must not the white men acquire trophy animals by hunting in some African countries to “display power” and entertainment?

Solution 2: Two conflicting prima facie duties come to the fore: the duty to care for the animals [sentientic duty] and the duty [right] to pleasure [anthropocentric duty]. Based on the given situation, the more incumbent duty is the duty to care for the animals. There are too many ways to display power and find leisure. For example, in order to relieve stress, one may paint an image of an animal or participate in a paintball game.

Concrete Conflict Situation between Biocentrism and Anthropocentrism

Situation 3: “[C]ockroaches trapped from the toilets of houses with pit latrines had mean microbial counts of 12.3×10^{10} bacteria/ml and 98 parasites/ml, with the microorganisms representing a wide range of faecal-oral pathogens...[Cockroaches] can, therefore, enhance the faecal-oral transmission of pathogens by providing additional pathways from excreta to food and/or kitchen utensils.”⁶⁰

Contextualized question 3: Does killing cockroaches mean that we have a “purely exploitative attitude toward them” provided that they can “enhance the faecal-oral transmission of pathogens by providing additional pathways from excreta to food and/or kitchen utensils”?

⁵⁹ Mindy Weisberger, Hunting big game: Why people kill animals for fun, in *LiveScience*; available from <https://www.livescience.com/59229-why-hunt-for-sport.html>; accessed 12 September 2020.

⁶⁰ World Health Organization, *Guidelines on Sanitation and Health*; available from <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/274939/9789241514705-eng.pdf?ua=1>; accessed 12 September 2020.

Solution 3: Two conflicting prima facie duties are involved here: first, the duty to protect and preserve human life [anthropocentric duty] and second, the duty not to kill or exploit the said insects [biocentric duty]. Based on the given situation, the more incumbent duty is the duty to protect and preserve human life. The duty not to kill or exploit the cockroaches still remains a prima facie duty and it may become an actual duty in a completely different situation; for example, killing them for the sake of killing them.

Situation 4: “Many states [in the US] also have laws that make it legal for farmers or others to kill dogs that are chasing, harassing, or injuring their livestock or domestic animals—which may or may not include pets.”⁶¹

Contextualized question 4: Is it “purely exploitative” for some states in the US to legalize killing dogs “that are chasing, harassing, or injuring their livestock or domestic animals?”

Solution 4: There are two conflicting prima facie duties in the situation: the duty to protect one’s property, that is, one’s livestock or domestic animals [anthropocentric duty] and the duty not to harm or kill dogs [biocentric duty]. The more incumbent duty here is the duty not to harm or kill dogs. There are many ways to protect one’s livestock from stray or trespassing dogs: build walls around the poultry/farm, regular patrolling of one’s property and the like.

Concrete Conflict Situation between Ecocentrism and Anthropocentrism

Situation 5: “Last month, a government panel cleared 23 of those mines for complying with state regulations. There are 50 operating mines in the Philippines, 30 of which extract nickel ore which is mostly shipped to China. But the industry contributes less than 1 percent to the gross domestic product with only 3 percent of 9 million hectares identified by the state as having high mineral reserves.”⁶²

Contextualized question 5: Are the 23 government-approved mining corporations morally right in extracting nickel—that is

⁶¹ E.A Gjelten, When it’s legal to kill a dog, in *Nolo* available from <https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/free-books/dog-book/chapter9-2.html>; accessed 12 September 2020.

⁶² Manolo Serapio Jr., Philippines’ Duterte says to end mining ‘one of these days,’ in *Reuters*; available from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-mining/philippines-duterte-says-to-end-mining-one-of-these-days-idUSKBN1JS1BX>; accessed 12 September 2020.

environmentally destructive— for profit that “contributes less than 1 percent to gross domestic product with only 3 percent of 9 million hectares identified by the state as having high mineral reserves”?

Solution 5: Four conflicting prima facie duties are involved here: first, the duty to protect human life from the catastrophic effects of mining [anthropocentric duty, ecocentric duty]; second, the duty to care for the natural environment because it is inherently valuable [ecocentric duty]; third, the government’s duty to provide jobs for its citizens [anthropocentric duty]; and fourth, the duty of individuals to make a living for them and for their family [anthropocentric duty]. Based on the given situation, the more incumbent duty is the duty to care for the natural environment because it is inherently valuable. Fulfilling this duty also means that human lives will be protected from the catastrophic effects of nickel mining. The government’s duty to provide jobs for its citizens and the duty of individuals to make a living for them and for their family still remain a prima facie duty and can be actualized in different circumstances. For example, these duties may become actual in the context of teaching, managing, care services and other jobs that are not environmentally destructive.

Situation 6: “It is...undeniable that Senator Cynthia and her husband, former Senator Manny Villar, are the owners of the Vista Land & Lifescapes, one of the biggest land developers in the country. Vista Land, including its arms Camella Homes and Lumina Homes, has turned vast farm lands across the country into sprawling subdivisions and huge malls.”⁶³

Contextualized question 6: Are the Villars grossly disrespecting the vast farm lands across the country when they are converting them into “sprawling subdivisions and huge malls”?

Solution 6: While there are more than two conflicting prima facie duties in the given situation, I will only focus on the following: the duty to care for the vast farm lands (ecocentric duty) and the duty to help others [job opportunities provided by Vista Land & Lifescapes, sprawling subdivision and huge malls mean profit for the place and its people] (anthropocentric duty). Here, the more incumbent prima facie duty is the duty to care for the vast farmlands. Corollary to fulfilling this duty is the welfare of the people living or owning the same farm lands. Furthermore, cultivating these farmlands well increases the

⁶³ Kaisahan, Conflict of interest with Villar committee leadership?, in *Kaisahan: Solidarity towards agrarian reform and rural development*; available from <https://kaisahan.com.ph/posts/conflict-interest-villar-committee-leadership>; accessed 12 September 2020.

people's profits. Fulfilling the said ecocentric duty means hitting three birds in one shot.

Conclusion

In light of Ross' ethical theory of prima facie duty—a conditional duty whose actuality is determined by what is properly demanded by a situation and/or conflict situation—the concrete conflicting duties between the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric frameworks have already been resolved operating under the assumption that the natural environment is a moral subject. Although the tension between the two frameworks are still far from over since their completely opposite understanding of the value of natural environment will never change, the actual duties have nonetheless been identified in the six conflict situations. While the six conflict situations do not exhaust all the possible conflicts between the two frameworks, Ross' concept of prima facie duty is a practical tool in identifying humans' actual duty to the natural environment. Equipped with the Rossian ethical framework, humans—regardless of the frameworks they espouse—can now commit themselves more to one of the timeliest imperatives in human history: to take care of the natural environment.

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