

# The Biocultural Ethics and the Homogeneous Sustainable Society

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**Abstract:** It is obvious that the concept of sustainable development was traditionally thought in an anthropocentric framework. My aim in this paper is to challenge this traditional view and to try to offer some arguments for an attempt to incorporate into the theory of sustainable development, some strong environmentalist principles which are based on a biocentric perspective. The structure and the content of my argument run as follows: First of all, we may equally speak about respect for human beings and nature if we agree that we have the duty to respect human beings. Second, all living beings have to be considered from a moral standpoint because they have their own interests and dignity. Third, the environment as an ecosystem with its own equilibrium and diversity has also the status of a heritage. Therefore, the duty to preserve the nature as a patrimonial value becomes a part of our culture. The so-called Biocultural Ethics developed initially by Paul Taylor is an adequate philosophical framework in which we can talk about nature, wildlife and human practices, as a common heritage of our communities.

**Key words:** biocultural ethics, biotic community, sustainability, homogenization, Paul Taylor.

*To Negruța, the dog*

## I. THE EXTENSION OF MORALITY SPHERE: FROM SOCIAL TO BIOTIC COMMUNITY

The project of an extension of moral community was proposed by John Rawls in his book *A Theory of Justice*. In the chapter “The problem of justice between generations” he developed a theory of inter-generational justice which was used then both as a model for an extension of moral community and as a principle for the theoretical foundation of the sustainability ideas. The temporal dimension was introduced in the discussion about the moral relations between generations and it was then used to propose a new view about society, economic development and environment. First of all, the principle of inter-generational justice was interpreted as an equitable access to resources.

I think that one of the challenges in moral philosophy was to continue to expand the realm of morality beyond the point where Rawls stopped, so that to include in it all the entities which could have a moral standing. This theoretical task was amplified by the new developments in environmental ethics, a new domain of philosophical reflection which suggests a reconfiguration of the traditional boundaries of morality sphere. (See Stoenescu 2016, where I have developed this analysis. Some passages from that paper, especially the standardisation of some arguments, were used in this first part of this article.) Various ways to ensure this extension followed, either on the grounds of

normative principles or rules or starting from the traditional concepts like that of moral value. My aim here is just to sketch the mechanism of transition from human community to the biotic community and to reveal the tension between the inclusion principle and the need for a hierarchical order structured inside the biotic community.

The sphere of morality was traditionally demarcated starting from the human community. I think that the extension of it depends on the theoretical framework in which we are constrained to thought about the human beings. From Aristotle to the modern philosophers who supported the emancipation of society the extension of morality sphere was usually done by including into it some individuals which in fact belong to the human community but they were excluded on arbitrary reasons. It is enough to remember the Aristotelian theory about slavery and its modern practitioners and critics, then the movements for the recognition of citizen rights. As a result, the sphere of morality and the moral community were thought as coextensive with the human community: only human beings, as rational creatures, with a conscious and sensible life, able to use natural language in order to utter moral judgments, are members of the moral community. Some dilemmas regarding our common moral intuitions and the limited cases such as babies, dotards, and persons in a coma, who don't fulfil all the strong criteria, provided an opportunity for a theoretical debate which were then used in environmental ethics.

The question is whether the extension of moral community beyond the borders of human community may be justified starting from these limit cases which belong to the community of humans? May we use the same mechanisms of extension or do we have to consider seriously the objection that the inclusion of the mentioned limit cases is just a matter of degree while the extension beyond the borders of human community is a matter of nature? Shall we keep the criteria as strong as they were asserted in traditional ethics or we can overpass the dilemma if we follow the way to the weakening of criteria? Is logically and in principle equivalent the inclusion of all the members of human community into the moral community with the extension beyond the borders of human community?

I think that a strategy is proposed in a short commentary by John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* Here is the passage:

"A conception of justice is but one part of a moral view. While I have not maintained that the capacity for a sense of justice is necessary in order to be owed the duties of justice, it does seem that we are not required to give strict justice anyway to creatures lacking this capacity. But it does not follow that there are no requirements at all in regard to them, nor in our relations with the natural order. Certainly, it is wrong to be cruel to animals and the destruction of a whole species can be a great evil. The capacity for feelings of pleasure and pain and for the forms of life of which animals are capable clearly impose duties of compassion and humanity in their case. I shall not attempt to explain these considered beliefs. They are outside the scope of the theory of justice, and it does not seem possible to extend the contract doctrine so as to include them in a natural way.

A correct conception of our relations to animals and to nature would seem to depend upon a theory of the natural order and our place in it. One of the tasks of metaphysics is to work out a view of the world which is suited for this purpose; it should identify and systematize the truths decisive for these questions.” (Rawls 1999, 512)

First of all, we have to remark the tension between the traditional ethics and its metaphysical foundation and the new environmental ethics which implies some changes of our view about natural order.

His main claims are the following:

1. A theory of justice is limited to the community of human beings because the capacity to grasp a sense of justice is exclusively human.
2. But this doesn't mean that our relations with other beings didn't have a moral content. (It is wrong to be cruel to animals)
3. Therefore, we have some duties to those forms of life which have the capacity for feelings of pleasure and pain.
4. But we can't extend the contract to include the other beings in the moral community in a natural way.
5. It is the task of metaphysics to change our vision and to propose a new theory of natural order.

Environmental ethics is based on a paradigmatic change of our vision about the natural order so as to include entities other than humans into the moral community became possible and the agreement that these other beings have a moral standing was obtained. The extension was made in a few steps and was based on the so-called “naturalizing morality process” by which the realm of morality was drawn according to biological properties and criteria. For example, the inclusion of animals starts from the fact that the animals can suffer and this is the basis to infer that we have the moral duty to avoid suffering. The demarcation line between humans and other living beings which can feel pain becomes an arbitrary one and ceases to have a moral significance. “All the animals are equal”, is the famous assertion made by Singer. (1974; 2009) Moreover, it is possible to revise the contractualist theory and to accept that the living being that could be prejudiced have a moral status and can be a part in a contract. (Scanlon 1977)

Anyway, the environmentalist philosophers have continued to enlarge the moral community using the inclusion principle and the criterion of own good for every creature. An imaginary experiment proposed by Routley (1973) and mentioned again by Attfield (1981) is a good example for the new way of thinking. Let's suppose that on the Earth only one human being survives, the last human person, and that person cuts the last tree from a cedar species. It is obvious that this last person doesn't produce any prejudice to another person, but on the basis of our moral intuitions we are tempted to qualify this act as an immoral one. An environmentalist assigns some interest to the tree and agrees that it has a moral status even if it hasn't any of the psychological capacities proper to living beings.

This new enlarged moral community is the so-called biotic community. I will take over from Brennan (1986) his argument which express the hard core of environmentalist approach:

1. The biotic community consists of animals and plants in mutual relations, as would be the food chain.

2. Any biotic community is inevitably in relationship with other communities, so that we can extend the notion of community up to the entire biosphere.

3. Every community tends to get to a final state of equilibrium and diversity.

4. No biotic community can stand without abiotic resources because it needs to process some inorganic resources into organic components.

5. The global ecosystem can be conceived as a system composed from all the biotic communities and the abiotic environment.

6. The biosphere as a whole tends to stability, equilibrium and diversity.

Other environmentalists completed this extension and went much further to include the natural entities like forests, landscapes, islands, caves, rivers, rocks and so on. Others were focused on an extension based on the inclusion of collective entities and wholes, as would be the species, the ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole, and they have developed a theory about the duties to protect these species and about the responsibility to assure the biological diversity.

The application of an inclusiveness principle is supported by a metaphysical change in our view on natural order from an anthropocentric perspective to the so-called biocentrism as it was described by Paul Taylor (1986). The anthropocentric presuppositions are neutralized if they are captured into the theoretical framework of biocentrism.

It is easy to make a reasonable transition from anthropocentrism to biocentrism without an aggressive replacement of humans privileged position. This set of four claims is an acceptable description of this environmentalist accent:

1. All human beings, like all the other living beings, belong to the biotic community of terrestrial life.

2. The human species, like all the other species of living beings, is integrated in an ecosystem of interdependences in which the survival of every living being depends on the environment as a whole and on the relations with all the other members of the biotic community.

3. All the organisms are teleological vital centers following their own good, each in their own way.

4. The human beings aren't superior to all the other living beings, neither regarding their merits, nor their intrinsic value.

The next step is to derive the moral rules which govern the life inside the biotic community:

1. We have the duty not to harm the living beings.

2. We have the duty not to interfere in living beings' life. We have to let the nature follow its course.

3. The rule of loyalty. The moral agents have the duty to be loyal to the nature.

4. The rule of distributive justice. We have to assure the equilibrium of justice in the extended moral community.

The first rule has priority over the other three.

But if all the members of the biotic community pursue their own good, then how is biocentrism able to solve the conflicts between different interests? If the liberty of a living being consists in its possibility to do the best for its own good, it's easy to imagine situations in which different living beings have divergent interests. For example, in the case of current pandemic state of facts the virus Covid-19 fulfils its own good by invading the human bodies and this process can cause the death. How can we judge correctly in these situations? If the inherent worth hasn't grades then we can't make any difference between the welfare of different beings or entities. Taylor's answer is that we have to act in such a way that to minimize the infringement of our duties (1986, 238). This means that we can accept in some restrictive conditions, following the rule of the lesser evil, that some interests are more important than others, in this case the health of humans.

Therefore, we have to propose a hierarchical order based on acceptable principles which don't enter into conflict with the inclusion principle. Varner proposed a principle which expresses the so-called priority of desires view:

P1 "Generally speaking, the death of an entity that has desires is a worse thing than the death of an entity that does not." (1998, 78)

But if we accept this principle which gives priority to the entities that have desires, then we are able to derive another principle which gives priority to the human interests:

P2: "The satisfaction of the desires of humans is more important than the satisfaction of the desire of animals." (1998, 79)

It is obvious that we are ready to follow a theoretical "slippery slope", but it is avoided if we make some distinctions between some categories of interests and try to find a reasonable balance between inclusion and hierarchy. Robin Attfield (1987, 88-89) proposed a simplified theory of priorities:

1. The satisfaction of human basic needs takes priority over the satisfaction of all the other human needs.

2. The satisfaction of human needs takes priority over the satisfaction of all the other human preferences.

3. The lives of all creatures, actual and possible, are of equal value.

4. When the needs of a more complex creature are in conflict with the needs of a less complex creature, the first have priority.

5. When the needs of a sentient creature are in conflict with the secondary preferences of a more complex creature, the first have priority.

6. The good of insentient animals and plants have a slight moral significance if their welfare isn't in conflict with the basic needs of other more complex beings.

But this balance between inclusion and hierarchy is still enlightened by the anthropocentric presuppositions. The question is if biocentrism is able to offer us at least as much as anthropocentrism in order to find a solution to the tension between the inclusion principle and the preference for a hierarchical order of interests for a good life? I shall try to propose an answer based on the so called bioculture as a new framework in which we think.

## II. THE ETHICS OF BIO CULTURE AND ITS CHALLENGES

Although the above mentioned ethics of bioculture may seem somewhat odd from the traditional perspective, it will be better understood if we reveal the structural symmetry between human ethics and environmental ethics (Taylor 1986, 41). Even if some philosophers promoted the idea of a rupture between traditional ethics and environmental ethics this is, let's say so, just a shallow meta-theoretical accent because in the deep the two are symmetrical (Naess 1973). This symmetry is rooted in our unique rationality as a condition of logical correctness. This means that even if traditional ethics and environmental ethics are different in their content, they have in common the same formal structure. Together with Taylor we have to identify these three main components together with their formal relations:

- A belief system. Every moral agent conceives ethics in a certain way. The question is whether there are some moral principles common to all, or if a relativistic approach is a better way to understand the realm of ethics.

- An ethical attitude. Every moral agent respects others or has an attitude of respect for others. There is no ethical attitude without respect. The question in this case is whether our respect is equal for all the members of our moral community or we are ready to accept the differences?

- A system of rules and standards. Every moral agent has to respect a system of rules and standards which are accepted by the moral community to which he/she belongs. This normative structure guides the behaviour of moral agents and makes the difference between good and bad. Our moral assessments of facts are based on these pre-existing standards.

The starting point to build up a theoretical framework for the ethics of bioculture is the recognition of the scientific fact that humans are animals. We, humans, are a part of nature and we fit into a zoological taxonomy: we belong to the kingdom *Animalia*, the phylum *Chordata*, the class *Mammalia*, the family *Hominidae*, the species *Homo sapiens*. We depend on the stable order of a global ecosystem and we share this natural condition with all the other species and just like all the other beings we try to survive in a biological niche according to our own interests for a better life.

The difference is that *Homo sapiens* have the technological power to transform the natural order and the global ecosystem. Humans have the capacity to use all the other things or beings as instrument for their ends so that all of these acquire an instrumental

value. Traditional ethics takes for granted this instrumental relation between means and human ends, while environmental ethics and ethics of bioculture substantiates the ethical principle according to which the value of nonhumans does not depend on their instrumental value for human ends.

Taylor argues for a new approach of the relation between humans and natural order starting from the recognition of the fundamental duality between our biological nature and our moral autonomy. The decisive question is this: "Is our biological nature at all relevant to the choices we must make as moral agents, and if it is, in what way it is relevant?" (Taylor 1986, 48) It is obvious that humans, as biological beings, have the interest to survive and they try to adapt the natural order to this goal. Therefore, at least a part of the natural order is transformed and artificialized by us. As a result, our choices, according to our biological aim to survive, will have some effects on the natural order and on the members of biotic community, so that the legitimate question becomes: '*What is the ethical significance of our being members of the Earth's Community of Life?*' (Taylor 1986, 49)

The ethical significance of human conduct is a triple one as an effect of human different interactions, the first, inside society as a community, the second, with the natural order, and the third, with the anthropized nature. Taylor proposes a distinction between three kinds of ethical human commitments. He draws a distinction between interactions with human beings, with natural environment as such, and with the environment which was already changed by the human activity. The threefold distinction will be between *Human Ethics* which is focused on the moral relations among human beings, *Environmental Ethics* which is devoted to moral relations between humans and the natural world, and the *Ethics of Bioculture*, which is about "human treatment of artificially created environments that are completely under control." (Taylor 1986, 53)

Ethics of Bioculture is an aspect of human culture and it is an expression of human domination over nature. Humans use the environment in their own benefit, according to their own interests and goals. Bioculture includes all these activities regarding the management of environment, its exploitation and protection for the benefit of humans. This mean that the power belongs to humans and that the decisions taken by humans, their choices and preferences are crucial for the life of non-humans organisms. Bioculture is a system of social institutions and practices which were historically developed with the evolution of human society, from the initial stages of hunting and fishing to the contemporary roles of animals in leisure activities.

Taylor proposed a list of the main social institutions and practices which express a Bioculture:

Agriculture, grain, vegetable and fruit farming

Raising and slaughtering animal food and clothing (chicken farming, sheep raising, pig farming, and cattle ranching)

Cultivated forests for timber production

Plant nurseries for raising garden flowers, shrubs and trees

Breeding and training animals for various tasks (work horses, racing horses, hunting dogs, watchdogs, circus animals)

The pet trade and all activities involved in the private ownership of pets

Raising, collecting and using animals and plants for scientific experiments

Zoos, animal exhibition, parks, aquariums, and “marineland” establishments

Sports that depend on the use of animals (horse racing and dog racing, rodeos horseback riding, bullfighting and cockfighting.)

Some wildlife management practices aimed at the benefit of humans, not the good of the animals being “managed” (sport hunting and fishing) (Taylor 1986, 54).

These practices have in common two characteristics which were mentioned above:

- they depend on human dominance over nonhuman living things and their environment;

- they involve treating nonhumans as means to human ends.

This means that the nonhumans have just an instrumental value and that the social institutions and practices of the bioculture are exercises of absolute, unconditioned power, unfortunately, even in the aggressive form. The nature was conquered by the humans and they believe that they have the right to use it. Some humans agree that we may destroy nonhumans if it is necessary for our aims. The nonhumans may be benefited or harmed, just like in the natural ecosystems where the natural selection is the mechanism to survive. After all, humans are just like any other predators and we may say that *Homo sapiens* are the most invasive species on the Earth.

But is it moral to use our power arbitrarily? Do we have some responsibilities? The so called Bioculture contains the answers to these questions. Our social institutions and practices were developed having respectful relations toward nature, and in some humans are emotionally related with personal feelings of love or affections.

Finally, it is easy to conclude that traditional vision on natural order was based on two strong principles which are the sources of morality:

1. All social institutions and practices are aimed at benefiting humans;

2. Nonhumans have an instrumental value, like other artefacts, machines, buildings, tools.

The Ethics of Bioculture changes this vision: “Just as our *power* over other living things does not absolve us from all responsibilities regarding their welfare, so our lack of personal caring about them does not entail freedom from all moral constraints on how we treat them.” (Taylor 1986, 56) Therefore, the Ethics of Bioculture became an ethics based on duties and responsibilities in the moral space of biotic community.

### III. TOWARDS THE HOMOGENEOUS SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

But we have seen the Ethics of Bioculture preserves a vision on the natural order which is based on a balance between inclusion and hierarchy. How can we solve the tension between different interests? We accept that although we, all the living beings, are

members of the same biotic community, we are different in a crucial aspect regarding our own good. Our interest is to maintain the diversity and the equilibrium of ecosystems, but, at the same time, the realization of our own good, puts us on different and divergent positions. Is it possible to find a way out from all the dilemmas raised by this polarity of life as a biological process?

Let's consider the case of animals and our attitude towards them. It is obvious that their life can be made better or worse by us. Some people think that the core of our attitude towards animals has to be strictly guided by our interests to survive. If we take into account just our need for food, then it is inevitable to reduce the relation between humans and other animals to the fight for survival. But if we take into account the feelings towards the animals, we will put them in another position in the social network: the animals become our partners, they have social and emotional roles and they ensure the fulfilment of some soul needs. Therefore, they become a part of our moral community.

But what shall we have to do if a dog bites a human person or if a human person hurts a dog? Here is a case of a conflict of interests, and the animal liberation movement have recognised this polarity. Peter Singer, in his essay about animal liberation tried to find a biological unification criterion based on our nature as sensible creatures. Taylor, as we have mentioned, proposes respect for nature as the general criterion which is managed to adjust our biotic community in a sustainable way. If we respect nature and agree that every natural entity and the natural order as such have an inherent value, then the relation between society and nature have to be reconsidered in terms of Biocultural Ethics.

But how is it possible to harmonize this diversity of interests not only between humans and all the other animals but also between the animals? Has the Ethics of Bioculture enough resources to find the best answers to different challenges? Callicott (1980, 330) mentions the difference between domestic and wild animals. He claims that there is a strong difference regarding their condition and their rights, if we accept to talk about animal rights. Domestic animals are "living artefacts", they have a condition which is similar with that of the objects crafted by humans and, moreover, they serve to human purposes. Domestic animals aren't natural kinds, they have growth in culture, not in nature. A philosopher mentions a paradoxically situation: although the domestic animals have growth in culture, they can't enter into the culture which support them (Holmes 1988, 79). They are like some cultural objects, they can suffer, but they lack cultural subjectivity. Actually, their cultural condition altered their natural status. The wild animals are different because they are natural kinds and they entirely belong to nature. To put a cheetah in a cage is reprehensible, but to keep a calf in a pen is normal. Moreover, it is possible to find a friendly argument for industrial farms which would be based on the claim that the animals have a good life in the farms, according to their interests. The industrial farm is for domestic animals a better world than the others, a world of well-being, because a farm is their chance to have a life as such and to receive a lot of rights and liberties.

All the living beings, as members of the biotic community, have the same inherent value as subjects of their own life. Therefore, the natural order has to be ethically based on the co-existence of all forms of life, on their importance in the ecosystem as a whole. The biodiversity and the equilibrium have to be preserved in the benefit of all the members of the biotic community. We conclude that nature becomes a new kind of patrimonial values which have to be preserved in a sustainable way with respect of the different interests of the living beings. All of them, from a unicellular organism which looks after light to a human creative genius who contemplates a natural landscape, are teleologically oriented according to their own goals and are focused on their own welfare. The so-called Biocultural Homogenization, a concept proposed by Ricardo Rozzi (2019), is understood from a relational perspective as the vital link between *habits* of co-inhabitants who share specific *habitats*. From an ethical standpoint, homogenization is manifested as respect for all the other co-inhabitants and as recognition of their inherent worth as living beings. Biodiversity becomes a natural heritage and the relation between the patrimonial value of natural and cultural entities have to be reconsidered.

This Biocultural Homogenization have to be understood as a relational one, as a bridge between culture and nature. I think that this approach was already developed in literature, at least for the case of cultural landscapes. Taylor and Lennon (2011) described cultural landscapes as relationships amongst people, events and processes through time, a combined work of nature and culture. A cultural landscape becomes an interface between the two, nature and culture, between biological and cultural diversity, and a link between communities and their heritage, humankind and its natural environment (Eriksson 2018). Humans are builders of their own historical niche and this process is based also on biological transformation of culture. The so-called Bioculture became a necessary product of human evolution.

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