

Theory, Proposition and Place

Manchester School of Architecture

MA Landscape Architecture

Group Work

A research blog set up by students to share relevant data and interesting articles on the subject of obsolescence.

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Group Members

- Scott Badham
- Dominic Chouler
- Parm Bahia

Thursday, 20 October 2011

Paul Taylor - Biocentric Egalitarianism

Biocentric Outlook on Nature: A biologically-informed, philosophical worldview about humans, nature, and the place of human civilization in the natural world. It's four components are:

- **One: Humans are nonprivileged members of the earth's community of life.** (This perspective, acknowledge differences, but focuses on similarities.)
 - **Humans as contingent, biological beings:** Humans share with other organisms biological requirements for life that are not completely under our control. We, as they, are vulnerable. We share with them an inability to guarantee the fundamental conditions of our existence. In many respects, humans are importantly creatures of forces we do not control.
 - **Kinship:** We share the same origin as other creatures and so have ties of kinship with them. The earth's life processes (evolution) brought all of us into existence; knowing how they came to be is knowing how we came to exist as well.
 - **Newcomers:** One difference is that we are recent arrivals. The earth was "teeming with life" long before we arrived and when we did, we entered a place others had resided for hundreds of millions of years.
 - **Humans are not the ultimate purpose:** The idea that humans are the final goal of the evolutionary process is absurd; as if the rest of nature was waiting on our arrival and applauded when we finally appeared.
 - **We depend on them:** Humans are absolutely dependent on other forms of life; without them we would cease to exist. We are needy dependents on the fabric of life around us. (E.O. Wilson thinks that without invertebrates, humans--and other vertebrates--have a couple of months to live.)
 - **They don't depend on us:** Life on this planet is not dependent on us; in fact, it would do much better without us.
- **Two: The natural world is an interdependent system**--the basic insight of the science of ecology (Barry Commoner's first "law" of ecology--"everything is connected to everything else").
- **Three: All organisms (and only organisms) are teleological** (=goal-directed) **centers of life** (think of plants seeking light) that have goods of their own (=welfare interests) that we can morally consider for their own sake. Organisms have a (non-subjective) "point of view" we can adopt by judging events as good or bad depending on whether the organisms are benefitted or harmed. (Crushing the roots of trees with bulldozers or carving drive-through sequoias harms--not hurts--these organisms.)
 - Having **preference interests** (conscious desires or wants) is not necessary for being morally considerable. Thus insentient organisms (plants, fungi,

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microbes, and many invertebrate animals) aren't ruled out of the moral arena.

- In contrast, sentience-centered philosophers argue that if organisms don't care about what happens to them, why should we? They ask: If nothing matters to a plant, how can we harm it? The biocentrist's reply is: We can harm its welfare interests, whether or not it has preference interests.
- Having **welfare interests** is a necessary condition (a prerequisite) for being morally considerable. If a being doesn't have a good of its own, then there is nothing to morally consider; no "point of view" to adopt. It can't be benefitted or harmed; it has no welfare we could protect.
 - **Thus stones or piles of sand aren't morally considerable**--their value is purely instrumental to organisms.
 - **Nonliving natural entities** including species, ecosystems, and biological/geological entities and processes are also **not morally considerable**, since they too have no good of their own (no genetic program that specifies what that good is). (Here Taylor rejects Leopold's holism.) "Their good" is reducible to the average or total good of the individual organisms that comprise them.
 - **Machines also don't have welfare interests** and hence aren't morally considerable either (not even teleological machines like guided missiles). "My car's need" for oil is not its own, but rather my need. (This is a response to the objection that if nonconscious plants have interests based on their needs and welfare, then so do some human created artifacts, which is absurd)
- **Four: The belief in human superiority is an unjustified bias**; we should be species impartial and egalitarian.
 - To argue that **humans are superior because we have capacities nonhumans lack** (e.g., we are moral agents), ignores that they have capacities we lack (e.g., the ability to photosynthesize, to live 10,000 years, to produce 20 million offspring, or regenerate oneself after being put in a blender).
 - To argue that **humans are superior because our capacities are more valuable** (e.g., that the human ability to do mathematics is of greater value than the monkey's ability to climb a tree) is to illegitimately judge the value of capacities from the perspective of what is good for human life. From the perspective of what is good in a monkey's life, tree climbing ability is of greater value.
 - *Is there a species independent criterion of the value of a capacity?*
 - To judge that **humans are superior not because of some quality or capacity we have (merit), but simply because we were born human** (a more noble species with greater inherent worth) is an arbitrary prejudice analogous to noblemen (in the Middle Ages) thinking they are more valuable than peasants simply in virtue of their birthright.

Posted by Group Work at 03:03



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