

Beyond Anthropocentrism: From Moral Expansion to Relational Environmental Ethics

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of environmental ethics from human-focused frameworks toward broader, relationship-oriented perspectives. Earlier theories such as sentiocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism sought to expand moral consideration beyond humans to include animals, all living beings, and even entire ecosystems. Thinkers like Kenneth Goodpaster and Paul Taylor promoted a life-centered ethical view, while Aldo Leopold and J. Baird Callicott highlighted the significance of ecological systems and the worth of biotic communities. However, despite their importance, these perspectives often face difficulties in addressing real-world value conflicts and in providing a consistent basis for intrinsic value, as critics such as Harley Cahen and Alan Carter have pointed out.

In response to these challenges, the paper explores relational environmental ethics, which moves away from abstract value theories and instead emphasizes the nature of relationships between humans and the natural environment. Drawing on the philosophy of Arne Naess, as well as insights from Confucian and Daoist traditions, particularly Confucius and Zhuangzi—and contemporary scholars like Nel Noddings and Allan Holland— it advocates for an ethical approach grounded in care, interdependence, and meaningful interaction. Ultimately, the paper argues that this relational framework offers a more adaptable and holistic way to understand and address the complex environmental issues of today.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Relational Environmental Ethics, Biocentrism, Ecocentrism, Care Ethics; Human–Nature Relationships, Ecological Interdependence, Deep Ecology, Confucian Environmental Ethics, Daoist Environmental Ethics.

Introduction

Environmental ethics has gradually emerged as an independent and dynamic area of philosophical inquiry, shaped by changing understandings of the human relationship

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with nature. In its earlier phases, ethical thinking was largely grounded in an anthropocentric framework, where human beings were regarded as the sole bearers of moral worth. Within this perspective, the natural world animals, plants, and entire ecosystems was evaluated primarily in terms of its usefulness to human life. Nature, therefore, was treated as a resource, valued only insofar as it served human needs, interests, or advancement.

Over time, however, this human-centered outlook has been subjected to sustained criticism. The intensification of ecological crises such as environmental degradation, rapid loss of biodiversity, and climate change has revealed not only the practical shortcomings of anthropocentrism but also its deeper ethical limitations. These developments have compelled philosophers to reconsider the narrow boundaries of moral concern and to question the assumption that moral value is exclusive to human beings. As a result, environmental ethics has progressively expanded its scope, seeking to include nonhuman entities within the domain of moral consideration.

One of the earliest challenges to anthropocentrism emerged in the field of animal ethics. Thinkers like Peter Singer and Tom Regan played a crucial role in exposing the moral inconsistency of excluding animals from ethical concern. Singer, drawing from utilitarian principles, argued that the ability to experience suffering is the key criterion for moral consideration, thereby demanding equal regard for the interests of all sentient beings. Regan, on the other hand, rejected utilitarian calculations and proposed a rights-based approach, maintaining that animals, as “subjects-of-a-life,” possess inherent value and moral rights that cannot be sacrificed for broader utility. Together, these perspectives highlighted the contradictions in human behavior, where compassion toward certain animals coexists with the systematic exploitation of others. The critique of anthropocentrism was further deepened by philosophers such as Kenneth Goodpaster and Paul Taylor, who extended moral consideration beyond sentient beings to all living organisms. This biocentric position rests on the idea that life itself is morally significant. Taylor, in particular, argued that every organism can be understood as a “teleological center of life,” pursuing its own good in its own way. On this view, all living beings deserve respect, thereby challenging hierarchical assumptions that privilege human life over other forms of existence.

Moving beyond the level of individual organisms, ecocentric theories shift attention to larger ecological wholes. Philosophers like Aldo Leopold and J. Baird Callicott argue that ethical concern should encompass ecosystems, species, and the biosphere as integrated systems. Leopold’s land ethic is especially significant in this regard, as it redefines the human role within nature—not as a dominant force, but as a member of a broader ecological community. According to this view, moral responsibility involves preserving the integrity, stability, and beauty of the natural world. At the same time, such holistic approaches have attracted criticism, particularly for the possibility that they may override the interests of individual beings in favor of collective ecological goals, and for the conceptual challenges involved in assigning moral status to non-individual entities.

In response to these debates, recent developments in environmental ethics have moved toward more relational and context-sensitive approaches. Rather than focusing solely on intrinsic value or expanding moral boundaries, these perspectives emphasize the interconnectedness of life and the significance of relationships. Arne Naess, for

instance, highlights the idea of an expanded self, where one's identity is understood as interwoven with other forms of life. Similarly, philosophical traditions associated with Confucian and Daoist thought present the self as fundamentally relational, shaped through ongoing interactions with others and the natural environment. Such views challenge the individualism characteristic of much Western ethical theory and offer alternative ways of understanding moral responsibility.

Relational thinking is further developed in the ethics of care, particularly in the work of Nel Noddings, who emphasizes empathy, responsiveness, and the importance of caring relationships. In a related vein, Allan Holland proposes shifting attention away from abstract notions of intrinsic value toward what he calls the "value-space of meaningful relations." This approach underscores the role of human experience, attachment, and engagement in shaping environmental values.

Against this broader intellectual backdrop, the present study examines the transition from anthropocentrism to its major critiques sentient-centered ethics, biocentrism, ecocentrism, and relational approaches. It argues that expanding moral concern is not simply a matter of including more entities within an existing framework. Rather, it requires a deeper rethinking of how humans understand their moral relationship with the nonhuman world. Such a shift is essential for developing an ethical perspective that is more inclusive, contextually grounded, and responsive to ecological realities.

Literature Review

The trajectory of environmental ethics can be understood as a gradual rethinking of the boundaries of moral concern. Earlier ethical frameworks were largely centered on human beings, treating the nonhuman world as valuable only in relation to human needs. Over time, however, this assumption has been increasingly questioned, leading to a series of theoretical developments that attempt to include nonhuman entities within the moral domain.

A significant shift begins with animal ethics, where philosophers such as Peter Singer argue that the capacity to suffer is the most relevant criterion for moral consideration. From this perspective, privileging human interests simply on the basis of species membership appears unjustified. In contrast, Tom Regan challenges the utilitarian framework itself by insisting that animals possess inherent worth as individuals who experience their own lives. This difference marks an important division between approaches that focus on outcomes and those that emphasize moral rights.

The expansion of moral concern does not stop at sentient beings. Thinkers such as Kenneth Goodpaster and Paul Taylor argue that life itself provides a sufficient basis for moral standing. From this standpoint, all living organisms are understood as striving toward their own form of flourishing, which calls for an attitude of respect. While this view offers a more inclusive ethical outlook, it also raises practical questions about how to respond when the interests of different living beings come into conflict.

Further developments in environmental philosophy extend moral consideration to larger ecological systems. Aldo Leopold introduces the idea that ethical responsibility should encompass the biotic community as a whole, emphasizing the importance of maintaining ecological balance. Building on this, J. Baird Callicott interprets ecological interdependence as a basis for valuing systems rather than just individuals. However, this shift has been met with criticism. For instance, Harley Cahen questions

whether ecosystems can meaningfully be said to have interests, while others argue that prioritizing wholes over individuals risks overlooking the moral significance of particular beings.

In response to these tensions, more recent approaches move away from attempts to ground ethics solely in intrinsic value. Instead, they emphasize the importance of relationships in shaping moral responsibility. Arne Naess, for example, highlights the idea of identification with other forms of life, suggesting that ethical concern arises from recognizing interconnectedness. Similarly, traditions associated with Confucius and Zhuangzi understand the self as fundamentally relational, formed through ongoing interaction with others and the environment. Contemporary thinkers such as Nel Noddings and Alan Holland further develop this perspective by focusing on care, attachment, and meaningful engagement with the natural world.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal both the strengths and the limitations of extending moral consideration outward. While each approach contributes to challenging anthropocentrism, none fully resolves the tensions between different kinds of value and competing moral claims. This suggests the need for a more integrated framework, one that not only broadens moral concern but also rethinks the role of relationships in environmental ethics.

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative** and **analytical approach** based on conceptual and **critical** examination of environmental ethics. It engages with key thinkers such as **Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Paul Taylor, and Aldo Leopold** to trace the shift from anthropocentric to non-anthropocentric frameworks. A comparative method is used to analyze sentiocentric, biocentric, ecocentric, and relational approaches, along with their strengths and limitations. The study also evaluates relational perspectives through **Arne Naess** and classical traditions to assess their relevance in addressing contemporary environmental concerns.

Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism can be understood as an ethical perspective in which human beings occupy the central position in moral reasoning. Within this view, what matters morally is determined primarily by its relevance to human interests, needs, and experiences. Nature, in such a framework, is typically approached as a resource, something that holds value because it serves human purposes. As a result, animals, plants, and ecosystems are not usually seen as possessing value in their own right; instead, their importance is derived from how they contribute to human well-being.

This human-centered orientation has deeply influenced the development of ethical thought across history. It has often reinforced a clear division between humans and the rest of the natural world, placing humans at the top of a moral hierarchy. For instance, the philosophical outlook of René Descartes treated animals as mechanistic entities devoid of consciousness, which justified their use without moral concern. Although contemporary science has challenged such views, many present-day practices still reflect anthropocentric assumptions, particularly where economic growth or human convenience is prioritized over ecological sustainability.

It is important to note that anthropocentrism is not a single, uniform position. A useful distinction can be drawn between strong and weak forms of anthropocentrism. Strong anthropocentrism limits intrinsic value strictly to human beings, whereas weak

anthropocentrism allows for environmental protection but ultimately grounds it in human interests, often in terms of long-term survival or benefit. Despite appearing more flexible, weak anthropocentrism does not fully move beyond a human-centered moral framework.

Philosophical critiques of anthropocentrism highlight its limitations, particularly its tendency to exclude nonhuman beings that possess morally relevant features. Thinkers such as Peter Singer question the legitimacy of privileging humans simply on the basis of species membership, while Paul Taylor argues for recognizing the inherent worth of all living beings. These critiques reveal that anthropocentrism rests on assumptions that may be difficult to justify when examined closely.

In environmental ethics, challenging anthropocentrism is essential for rethinking how humans relate to the natural world. Moving beyond a strictly human-centered outlook allows for the development of alternative perspectives such as sentiocentrism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, and relational approaches that attempt to extend moral consideration more broadly. In this sense, anthropocentrism functions both as the starting point of traditional ethical thinking and as a key position that must be critically reassessed in order to expand the boundaries of moral concern.

Moral Considerability

At the heart of ethical inquiry lies a crucial question: which beings deserve moral attention, and why? The concept of moral considerability seeks to answer this by identifying the conditions under which an entity becomes morally relevant. To regard something as morally considerable is to acknowledge that it cannot be ignored in ethical decision-making; its existence, well-being, or interests must be taken seriously. For a long time, moral consideration was largely confined to human beings. This limitation was often justified by appealing to traits such as rationality, linguistic ability, or moral agency. However, these criteria have come under increasing scrutiny. Critics argue that grounding moral status in such specific human characteristics is problematic because it not only excludes nonhuman beings but may also marginalize certain humans who do not fully possess these traits. As a result, philosophers have sought broader and less exclusionary ways of defining moral relevance.

One major shift in this direction comes from focusing on sentience, understood as the capacity to feel pain or experience pleasure. From this standpoint, what matters ethically is not how intelligent or rational a being is, but whether it can suffer or enjoy its existence. Peter Singer strongly supports this position, maintaining that any being capable of suffering has interests that deserve equal moral consideration. To disregard such interests solely on the basis of species membership, he argues, reflects an unjustifiable form of bias.

Despite its inclusiveness, the sentience-based approach has been questioned for still drawing limits that may appear arbitrary. Expanding the discussion further, Kenneth Goodpaster proposes that life itself should be the fundamental criterion for moral considerability. In his view, all living organisms, regardless of their level of consciousness, are organized systems that actively maintain themselves and pursue their own forms of flourishing. This self-directed activity suggests that they possess a kind of intrinsic “good,” which merits moral acknowledgement.

The debate does not stop at individual living beings. Some philosophers extend the inquiry to larger entities such as ecosystems, species, and the biosphere. This raises

challenging questions: can such complex wholes have interests, or be said to matter morally in their own right? Harley Cahen, for instance, rejects this possibility by arguing that ecosystems lack the kind of goal-directed organization necessary for having interests. Others, however, dispute whether having interests is the only valid basis for moral consideration. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that moral considerability is not a settled concept but an evolving one. Its scope depends on how we define what is morally significant, whether in terms of sentience, life, or broader relational and ecological contexts. As environmental ethics continues to develop, rethinking moral considerability becomes essential for expanding ethical concern beyond its traditionally human-centered boundaries.

Critique of Anthropocentrism

Although anthropocentrism has long shaped ethical thinking, it becomes increasingly problematic when examined through a critical lens. At its foundation lies the belief that only human beings possess inherent moral worth, while the rest of the natural world is valued primarily for its usefulness to humans. However, this assumption appears difficult to defend once we consider broader ethical insights and scientific developments that highlight the continuity between human and nonhuman life.

One of the most significant objections to anthropocentrism is that it draws a questionable and seemingly arbitrary line between humans and other beings. If moral status is based on capacities such as reasoning or language, it is unclear why all humans are included equally, while all nonhuman beings are excluded altogether. Philosophers such as Peter Singer interpret this exclusion as a form of species-based bias. From this perspective, what should matter ethically is the capacity to suffer or experience well-being, rather than mere membership in a particular species. When similar forms of suffering are treated differently depending on whether they occur in humans or animals, it exposes a tension within anthropocentric thinking.

Another difficulty lies in the inconsistency of human behavior toward animals. In everyday life, people often display care and concern for certain animals, such as pets, while simultaneously supporting practices that involve significant harm to others, like those used in industrial farming. This uneven treatment suggests that moral judgments are not guided by a consistent ethical principle but are instead shaped by habit, culture, or convenience. Such contradictions weaken the credibility of anthropocentrism as a coherent moral framework.

Criticism also arises from perspectives that question the narrow basis on which anthropocentrism assigns value. Kenneth Goodpaster, for instance, argues that moral consideration should not depend solely on advanced capacities like sentience or rationality, but rather on the more fundamental condition of being alive. In a similar vein, Paul Taylor emphasizes that every living organism pursues its own form of flourishing and therefore possesses its own kind of worth. These views challenge the assumption that human life is uniquely valuable and instead point toward a more inclusive ethical outlook.

Moreover, anthropocentrism struggles to address large-scale environmental issues. Problems such as ecosystem degradation, loss of biodiversity, and climate change cannot be fully understood if nature is regarded only as a tool for human use. The destruction of forests, oceans, or other ecological systems raises concerns that go

beyond immediate human interests, suggesting that these systems may have significance that is not reducible to their utility.

Taken together, these criticisms reveal that anthropocentrism is both theoretically limited and practically inadequate. It lacks consistency, rests on debatable assumptions, and fails to capture the complexity of human relationships with the natural world. As a result, many environmental philosophers have turned toward alternative approaches that attempt to widen the scope of moral concern and offer more comprehensive ways of understanding ethics further by recognizing hoiresponsibility.

Expansion of Moral Concern: Sentiocentrism, Biocentrism, and Ecocentrism

One of the most significant shifts in environmental ethics has been the gradual movement away from a strictly human-centered outlook toward a broader understanding of moral responsibility. As dissatisfaction with anthropocentric thinking has grown, philosophers have increasingly questioned why moral concern should be limited to human beings alone. This has led to the development of alternative perspectives that progressively extend ethical consideration to nonhuman entities. Importantly, this expansion is not abrupt but unfolds in stages, each based on a different way of identifying what deserves moral attention.

An early and influential step in this process is sentiocentrism, which extends moral concern to all beings capable of experiencing pain or pleasure. This approach is closely linked with Peter Singer, who argues that the ability to suffer is the most relevant criterion for moral consideration. From this standpoint, giving priority to human interests while disregarding similar experiences in animals cannot be ethically justified. Singer introduces the concept of speciesism to describe this bias, comparing it to other forms of unjust discrimination. By insisting that similar interests deserve equal weight regardless of species, sentiocentrism significantly enlarges the moral community to include animals.

Despite its importance, sentiocentrism does not fully resolve the issue, as it still excludes forms of life that may not be sentient. This limitation gives rise to biocentrism, which broadens the scope further by recognizing all living beings as morally significant. Philosophers such as Kenneth Goodpaster argue that life itself is a sufficient basis for moral consideration, rather than specific capacities like sentience. From this perspective, traits such as the ability to feel pain are understood as supporting life, rather than defining moral worth. In a similar vein, Paul Taylor describes each organism as pursuing its own good in its own way, emphasizing that all living beings have their own form of value. This view challenges the assumption of human superiority and promotes a more inclusive and respectful attitude toward the living world.

However, even biocentrism remains focused on individual organisms, which raises questions about how to account for the value of larger ecological systems. This concern leads to ecocentrism, which shifts attention from individual life forms to broader ecological wholes such as ecosystems, species, and the biosphere. In this framework, the health and stability of entire systems become central ethical concerns. The work of Aldo Leopold is especially important here, particularly his idea that moral responsibility should extend to the “biotic community.” According to his view, actions should be evaluated in terms of whether they preserve the balance and integrity of the natural system as a whole.

At the same time, ecocentrism introduces its own set of difficulties. Critics like Harley Cahen question whether ecosystems can truly be considered morally relevant, arguing that they lack the kind of unified, goal-directed structure needed to possess interests. Others express concern that focusing on the well-being of ecological wholes might justify harming individual organisms, creating tension with animal-centered ethical approaches. In response, thinkers such as J. Baird Callicott and Holmes Rolston III defend ecocentrism by highlighting the distinctive kinds of value found in ecological systems, including their capacity to generate and sustain diverse forms of life.

Overall, these perspectives demonstrate a clear pattern: the gradual expansion of the moral circle. Sentiocentrism includes all beings capable of suffering, biocentrism embraces all living organisms, and ecocentrism recognizes the importance of ecological systems as a whole. Each stage responds to the limitations of the previous one, while also raising new philosophical challenges. This ongoing development reflects both the complexity and the richness of efforts to construct an environmental ethic that does justice to the full range of life and the systems that sustain it.

Limits of Sentiocentrism, Biocentrism, and Ecocentrism

Although sentiocentric, biocentric, and ecocentric perspectives have played a crucial role in expanding the moral boundaries of environmental ethics, they are not free from significant challenges. Each of these approaches attempts to move beyond anthropocentrism, yet in doing so, they generate new theoretical tensions and practical difficulties that cannot be ignored.

A central problem arises from conflicts between competing ethical priorities. In practice, different frameworks often lead to opposing conclusions. For instance, environmental strategies designed to preserve ecological balance such as reducing populations of certain species to protect habitats may appear justified from an ecocentric standpoint. However, such actions are frequently criticized within animal-centered ethics, which emphasize the moral importance of individual sentient beings. This clash reveals a deeper issue: while some theories prioritize ecosystems as wholes, others focus on the welfare of individual organisms, and there is no universally accepted method for reconciling these perspectives.

Another difficulty concerns the widespread reliance on the concept of intrinsic value. Many non-anthropocentric theories argue that animals, plants, or even ecosystems possess value in and of themselves, independent of human use. While this idea is philosophically appealing, it raises complex questions. It is often unclear how intrinsic value should be understood, measured, or compared across different forms of life. For example, how should one decide between protecting a single animal and preserving an entire ecological system? Without a clear basis for such comparisons, these theories risk remaining abstract and difficult to translate into concrete ethical decisions.

In addition, these approaches encounter problems when dealing with real-world moral choices that involve trade-offs. As noted by Alan Carter, the claim that all living beings or all sentient beings possess equal inherent worth becomes difficult to sustain in situations where competing interests must be prioritized. Everyday environmental decisions often require choosing between conflicting goods, yet many of these theories do not provide a consistent framework for making such choices. When supplementary

principles are introduced to resolve these conflicts, they can appear somewhat arbitrary, as they are not always clearly grounded in the original ethical theory.

Ecocentrism, in particular, has been subject to criticism for its potential to privilege collective entities over individuals. By emphasizing the integrity, stability, or beauty of ecosystems, some ecocentric views risk overlooking the moral significance of individual beings. Critics have argued that this could, in extreme cases, justify sacrificing individuals for the sake of the larger whole. Even though proponents of ecocentrism attempt to respond to this concern, the tension between valuing individuals and valuing ecological systems remains unresolved.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that no single extensionist framework is sufficient to address the full complexity of environmental ethics. Instead, they point toward the need for more flexible and integrative approaches that can accommodate multiple values simultaneously. This recognition has encouraged a shift toward alternative perspectives, including value pluralism and relational ethics, which seek to move beyond rigid theoretical boundaries and engage more directly with the dynamic relationships between humans and the natural world.

Rethinking Moral Concern Beyond Value Attribution

Earlier approaches in environmental ethics, whether anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric, have largely concentrated on determining which beings deserve moral consideration and why. In contrast, the relational perspective reorients this discussion by shifting attention away from isolated entities and toward the networks of relationships that connect all forms of life. From this standpoint, ethical reflection does not begin with assigning intrinsic value to individuals or systems; instead, it emerges from understanding how humans are situated within, and interact with, the broader ecological context. Morality, therefore, becomes less about ranking entities and more about examining patterns of engagement, coexistence, and responsibility.

An important influence on this line of thought is Arne Naess, whose idea of deep ecology challenges the conventional notion of the self as separate and self-contained. Naess proposes that genuine ethical change occurs when individuals expand their sense of identity to include other living beings. This process of identification is not merely theoretical; it involves a felt recognition that the well-being of other life forms is intertwined with one's own. As this broader awareness develops, concern for the environment arises organically, not as an external obligation but as an extension of one's own being. In this way, ecological responsibility becomes closely tied to self-realization.

A similar emphasis on relational identity can be found in the thought of Confucius. Within the Confucian tradition, the self is understood not as an independent unit but as something formed and sustained through relationships. Moral life is rooted in *ren*, often translated as humaneness, which involves empathy, care, and attentiveness to others. Although Confucian ethics traditionally centers on human relationships, its relational framework can be extended to include the natural world. If individuals are fundamentally shaped by their connections, then nonhuman entities also become part of the moral landscape that informs ethical responsibility.

This perspective is further deepened by the philosophy of Zhuangzi, who questions rigid distinctions between humans and the rest of nature. Through imaginative narratives and shifting viewpoints, Zhuangzi encourages a more flexible and open way

of perceiving the world. His concept of *wu-wei*, or effortless action, suggests that ethical living involves aligning oneself with the natural flow of things rather than attempting to dominate or control them. Such an approach promotes sensitivity, humility, and a deeper appreciation of the diversity and uniqueness of all forms of life. The relational model is also supported by contemporary care ethics, especially in the work of Nel Noddings. Noddings argues that moral responsibility arises from lived relationships rather than abstract rules. By placing care at the center of ethical life, she highlights the importance of emotional engagement, context, and responsiveness. Although her theory originates in interpersonal contexts, its insights can be extended to environmental ethics, encouraging a more attentive and compassionate relationship with the natural world.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that debates about intrinsic value alone are insufficient for capturing the richness of environmental ethics. The central issue is not simply whether nature possesses value, but how humans relate to it in concrete terms. Ethical life involves cultivating attitudes such as respect, care, and attentiveness qualities that cannot be fully explained through formal theories of value.

In addition, a relational framework offers a way to overcome some of the limitations associated with earlier approaches. By emphasizing context and interaction, it allows for more nuanced responses to moral conflicts. It also avoids reducing ethical life to a single guiding principle, instead recognizing the diversity of relationships that shape human engagement with the environment. This makes it a more flexible and realistic approach to addressing ecological concerns.

Ultimately, the relational perspective marks an important development in environmental ethics. It redirects attention from abstract questions about value to the lived reality of human–nature relationships. By foregrounding interconnectedness and experiential understanding, it provides a richer and more practical foundation for thinking about moral responsibility in an ecological age.

Is Expanding Moral Concern Enough? Toward a Relational Shift

The evolution of environmental ethics can be seen as a sustained effort to move beyond the limitations of anthropocentrism by widening the boundaries of moral concern. Early criticisms questioned the assumption that only human beings deserve ethical consideration and gradually opened the door to including nonhuman life. This process unfolds in stages: first, sentiocentrism extends moral regard to animals capable of suffering; next, biocentrism recognizes all living beings as morally significant; and finally, ecocentrism shifts attention to larger ecological systems such as species, habitats, and biodiversity.

At first, this gradual expansion appears to resolve the problem of human-centered thinking. By enlarging the moral community, these approaches seem to correct earlier exclusions. However, on closer inspection, simply adding more entities to the circle of concern does not fully address the deeper issues. Despite their differences, these theories rely on a similar strategy: they try to determine moral outcomes by identifying which beings possess value. While this is an important step, it leaves several critical questions unanswered.

One of the most pressing challenges is the emergence of conflicting ethical demands. In practical situations, different frameworks can point in opposite directions. For instance, maintaining ecological balance may involve reducing certain animal

populations, which can be justified from an ecosystem-focused perspective. Yet, from the standpoint of animal-centered ethics, harming individual creatures may appear morally problematic. Rather than resolving ethical tensions, expanding moral concern often brings multiple values into conflict, making decision-making more complex.

Another difficulty lies in the heavy reliance on the concept of intrinsic value. Many environmental theories argue that animals, plants, or ecosystems are valuable in themselves. However, this raises the question of how such value should be weighed when interests collide. Real-world situations frequently require choosing between competing priorities, but expansion-based approaches offer limited guidance on how to make these choices. As a result, they risk remaining philosophically compelling while lacking practical clarity.

In addition, even the most inclusive theories retain an assumption inherited from anthropocentric thinking: that ethics begins with assigning value to separate, individual entities. What is often overlooked is the relational dimension of human interaction with the natural world. This suggests that the central issue is not only about inclusion, who matters, but also about how moral life itself is understood.

For this reason, many contemporary perspectives argue that environmental ethics needs more than expansion; it requires a shift in orientation. Instead of focusing solely on value, the relational approach emphasizes interconnectedness, engagement, and lived experience. From this perspective, humans are not detached judges assigning worth to the world around them. Rather, they are embedded within a network of relationships that shape both their identities and their responsibilities.

This shift changes the nature of ethical inquiry. Instead of asking whether something possesses intrinsic value, the focus turns to the kind of relationship we have with it and the responsibilities that arise from that relationship. Such an approach allows for greater sensitivity to context. For example, human obligations toward domesticated animals may differ from those toward wild animals not because one group is more valuable, but because the nature of the relationship itself differs.

The relational framework also helps address the shortcomings of earlier theories by allowing for diversity and flexibility. It does not attempt to reduce all moral decisions to a single rule or hierarchy. Instead, it highlights qualities such as care, attentiveness, empathy, and responsiveness elements that are often missing in strictly value-based approaches but are essential for real ethical engagement.

Seen in this light, the expansion of moral concern represents a significant but incomplete development in environmental ethics. While it successfully challenges the narrowness of anthropocentrism, it does not fully resolve the complexities of human–nature interactions. A relational perspective builds on this progress while moving beyond it, offering a richer and more grounded way of understanding ethical responsibility.

Ultimately, the future direction of environmental ethics lies not just in deciding who deserves moral consideration, but in recognizing the web of connections that bind humans to the natural world. The shift from extending moral boundaries to rethinking relationships marks a deeper transformation in how ethical life is conceived and practiced.

Conclusion

Environmental ethics has evolved through a continuous effort to move beyond a narrowly human-centered way of thinking and to reconsider how humans relate morally to the natural world. Initially grounded in anthropocentrism, ethical reflection gradually widened its scope. Thinkers such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan played a crucial role in extending moral concern to nonhuman animals, while Paul Taylor further broadened this perspective by arguing that all living beings deserve moral respect. This trajectory continued with ecocentric approaches, where philosophers like Aldo Leopold and J. Baird Callicott emphasized the ethical significance of ecosystems and the larger biotic community.

Despite these important developments, expanding the circle of moral concern does not completely address the deeper issues within environmental ethics. Although these theories differ in scope, they largely rely on a shared assumption—that ethical reasoning depends on identifying which entities possess value. This value-based orientation gives rise to ongoing challenges, including tensions between the well-being of individuals and the preservation of larger systems, uncertainty about how intrinsic value should be interpreted, and difficulties in making clear decisions in complex, real-world situations.

In light of these limitations, the relational perspective offers a more nuanced way of thinking. Drawing on ideas from Arne Naess, Confucius, Zhuangzi, and Nel Noddings, this approach redirects attention from abstract discussions of value to the lived reality of relationships. It highlights interdependence, empathy, and context, suggesting that ethical responsibility emerges not only from what we consider valuable, but from the ways in which we are connected to and interact with the world around us.

From this perspective, the expansion of moral concern should be seen as a necessary but incomplete stage in the development of environmental ethics. While it successfully challenges the exclusivity of anthropocentrism, it does not fully capture the complexity of human engagement with nature. The relational approach builds on these earlier insights while offering a more flexible and grounded framework that better reflects the interconnected nature of life. In conclusion, the future direction of environmental ethics lies not simply in extending moral boundaries, but in deepening our understanding of relationships. By fostering more attentive, responsible, and meaningful connections with the natural world, this shift provides a stronger foundation for both ethical reflection and practical action in addressing contemporary environmental challenges.

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