The Idea of Equality in Environmental Ethics

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Abstract

In recent decades, it has often been argued by environmental ethicists that human beings and the natural world ought to be considered as equals in some basic sense. The aim of this paper is to make sense of this view by examining what role, if any, the idea of equality ought to play in environmental ethics. Specifically, we have two aims: the first aim is to identify those environmental claims that are distinctively egalitarian. The second aim is to show these claims do not rest on a principled and convincing justification. Our main contention is therefore that equality has no place in environmental ethics. There are other promising ways to argue that our relationship with the natural environment must be fundamentally revised. By bringing clarity to this debate and dispelling the possibility of equality-based arguments, we hope to contribute to this endeavor.

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1. Introduction

Human beings traditionally have been considered the ultimate and only source of moral concern, thereby occupying a unique and special place within moral theory. In recent decades, however, many philosophers have argued moral consideration should be extended to a much wider range of beings: animal ethicists have strongly criticized anthropocentric views for their indifference towards the killing and the suffering of nonhuman animals (Regan 1983, Singer 2011), whereas environmental ethicists have condemned anthropocentric theories for regarding the natural environment merely as a means for human beings' ends (Dobson 1990).

Here, we aim to investigate what kind of moral consideration exactly should be extended to the environment. In particular, we will examine what role, if any, the idea of equality should play in environmental ethics. Equality is often invoked by environmental ethicists: according to egalitarian biocentrism or species egalitarianism, all species are equal in some fundamental sense. As Paul Taylor puts it, "[w]hatever its species may be, none is thought to be superior to another and all are held to be deserving of *equal* consideration" (Taylor 2011 [1986]: 79; emphasis added). Similarly, Arne Næss argues all forms of life have "the *equal* right to live and blossom" (Næss 1972: 95–96; emphasis added), and Lawrence Johnson contends the interests of all living entities ought to count *equally* towards what morality requires of us (Johnson 1991). Advocates of ecocentrism maintain we also should regard non-living things as equal to us. For instance, according to Aldo Leopold, the boundaries of equal moral consideration are to be expanded to include soils, water, as well as plants and animals—in one word, the land (Leopold 1970). We call this family of different views "*egalitarian environmentalism*."

Besides the distinction between biocentric and ecocentric views, there is a second important divide within egalitarian environmentalism between "individualistic views" and "holistic views." The former take individual beings to be the ultimate units of moral

consideration. The latter, instead, argue ecological collectives, such as ecosystems or species, are the primary objects of moral consideration. Advocates of biocentrism tend to be proponents of individualistic views, whereas proponents of ecocentrism tend to defend holistic approaches. Nonetheless, adopting a biocentric approach does not commit one to hold an individualistic view and, conversely, proponents of ecocentrism are not necessarily committed to holism. For instance, one can hold a biocentric holistic view according to which all species (rather than individual members of these species) are equal. The arguments developed in this article apply to all the different views in the family of egalitarian environmentalism.

However, importantly, they do not apply to egalitarian views in *animal ethics*. We leave it open whether the claim that human beings and nonhuman animals are moral equals can be successfully articulated and defended. The focus on environmental rather than animal ethics is in part motivated by the state of the two literatures. Despite the prominence of the idea of equality in the literature on environmental ethics, these claims have not yet been scrutinized using the resources developed in the recent literature on the basis of (human) moral equality (Carter 2011, Sangiovanni 2017, Waldron 2017, Floris and Kirby forthcoming). This is not the case when it comes to animal ethics, where we find much more discussion of these kinds of concerns (Singer 2011, Floris 2021). The lack of dialogue between the literature on environmental ethics and the literature on the basis of equality is regrettable for two reasons: first, it is sometimes unclear what the point of equality in environmental ethics is. What exactly does it mean to claim human beings and the natural world ought to be considered as equals in some basic sense? Second, environmental ethicists have so far not addressed the main challenges that theories of the basis of moral equality face. Hence, *even if* it is conceptually coherent to hold that human beings and the natural world have equal moral status, does egalitarian environmentalism ultimately rest on a principled and plausible philosophical justification? By bringing these literatures together, we develop a fully-fledged theory of the

meaning and the justification of equality within environmental ethics, which will allow us to answer these questions.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part examines the *meaning* of egalitarian environmentalism. It identifies the assumptions and implications of a distinctively egalitarian environmental view. Section 2.1 distinguishes between deontological and consequentialist views of moral equality. Section 2.2 argues the ascription of intrinsic value to nature is not sufficient to justify egalitarian environmentalism. Section 2.3 argues against the view, defended by several environmental ethicists, that equality between human beings and the natural world amounts to standing in relations of reciprocity, care, and harmony. Section 2.4 draws out the implications of the previous discussion and specifies when an environmental theory can be said to be distinctively egalitarian.

The second part of the paper addresses the question of the *justification* of egalitarian environmentalism. Section 3.1 describes the main challenges that theories of the justification of moral equality face and introduces the two main approaches to this question. The *property-first approach* maintains that moral equality is grounded in the equal possession of a morally significant property, such as rationality, sentience, or life. The *relation-first approach* holds that moral equality is grounded in a morally significant relationship on which entities (ought to) stand towards one another. Sections 3.2 and 3.3 argue neither approach offers a coherent and plausible justification for egalitarian environmentalism.

If our argument is correct, equality has no place in environmental ethics. This conclusion, however, should not be cause for concern for environmental ethicists, as there are other promising ways to argue for a radical change in our relationship with the natural environment, some of which will be the object of our discussion in sections 2.2 and 2.3. On the contrary, showing that the most fundamental environmental concerns do not rest on the

commitment to the moral equality of human beings and the natural world, which many find implausible, will strengthen the support for such positions.

2. The Meaning of Egalitarian Environmentalism

2.1. Moral Equality: Assumptions and Implications

In this section, we analyze the commitments upon which theories of moral equality rest and identify their distinctive normative implications.

It is common to distinguish between deontological and consequentialist theories of moral equality.[1] Deontological views maintain entities that have *equal* moral status hold *equally stringent* rights. To illustrate, consider deontological accounts of human equality. It is widely accepted that human beings have *moral worth* by virtue of holding some valuable properties, such as the capacity for rational agency or the capacity to care, and therefore they hold at least some fundamental *rights*—which correlate to *directed duties* owed to human beings, in particular—that cannot be violated for the sake of promoting the common good, or maximizing the satisfaction of others' rights (Kant 2002 [1785], Christiano 2015). Crucially, as human beings do not simply have moral worth, but they have *equal* moral worth, they have *equal* moral status. It follows from this that the directed duties we owe to some human beings are *as stringent as* those we owe to other humans, other things being equal. Rescue cases are a standard example. Suppose there are two individuals, A and B, who are drowning, but only one can be rescued. The fact that A and B have equal moral status implies their right to be rescued has an equal degree of stringency. That is to say, in the absence of other considerations such as our special relationship to A or B, we must work out whether priority ought to be granted to A or B by means of a neutral procedure (e.g., a coin flip) (Taurek 1977). In short, then, according to a deontological theory of moral equality, entities i) are moral equals

[1] For an overview of the different conceptions of moral equality, see also Kirby and Floris (forthcoming).

because they have equal moral worth (or value), and ii) they are considered and treated as equals *if* their rights have an equal degree of stringency.

Consequentialist theories of moral equality, instead, maintain that entities that have moral status do not have moral worth, but they are the objects of *moral concern*. Therefore, we have an *undirected duty* to take their interests into account in the moral calculus whose aim is to promote or maximize the interests of all entities that have moral status. Here again, it is important to note the principle of moral equality introduces a *comparative* dimension: if entities do not simply have moral status, but they have *equal* moral status, this implies their *comparable* interests ought to have *equal weight* when reasoning about what ought to be done.[2] For example, consequentialist theories of moral equality have been defended by animal ethicists, who argue human beings and nonhuman animals have equal moral status. Hence, we have no principled reason to hold that the comparable pain of the former counts more than the comparable pain of the latter, other things being equal (Singer 2011). In short, then, according to a consequentialist theory of moral equality, entities i) are moral equals *because* they are the object of equal concern, and ii) they are considered and treated as equals *if* their comparable interests have equal moral weight.

To conclude, in this section, we have identified the underlying commitments and the normative implications of a theory of moral equality.[3] Specifically, we have argued a theory

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[2] Both deontological and consequentialist theories then rest on a distinction between "moral status" and "equal moral status", where the former is a *non-comparative notion* that determines whether an entity has moral worth in and of itself or counts morally in its own right, whereas the latter is a *comparative notion* that determines the degree of moral worth an entity has compared to the degree of moral worth of other entities, or how much an entity counts morally compared to how much other entities count morally. Other authors have adopted a different terminology to capture this distinction. For example, Allen Buchanan maintains that "a being has *moral standing* if it counts morally, in its own right. [...] *Moral status*, in contrast, is a comparative notion. Two beings can both have moral standing, but one may be of a higher moral status" (Buchanan 2009: 346; emphasis added). Kenneth Goodpaster, instead, observes that "moral considerability" defines which being matters morally, whereas "moral significance" "aims at governing comparative judgments of moral 'weight' in cases of conflict" (Goodpaster 1978: 311).

[3] It is worth noting moral equality or inequality are not the only options available. One, in fact, could defend an incommensurability view, whereby the status of different beings is non-commensurable such that it is not possible to determine whether they have equal or unequal moral status. One can derive different implications from the incommensurability view, with some arguing it captures some of the core implications of egalitarianism. For

of moral equality i) rests on a commitment to equal moral worth or equal moral concern, and ii) it entails entities are considered and treated as equals if they hold equally stringent rights or equally weighty interests.

2.2. The Intrinsic Value of Nature

Claims about the intrinsic value of nature have been articulated in many different ways in the literature on environmental ethics (McShane 2007). It is commonly held that something that has intrinsic value is valuable in and of itself and for its own sake, rather than instrumentally valuable as a means to further other ends (Lockwood 1996). Furthermore, it is generally accepted entities that have intrinsic value play a special role in our moral deliberation: they have moral status and therefore their interests need to be taken into account when reflecting upon the right course of action (Taylor 1981, Nordstrom 1993). Most importantly for our purposes, the ascription of intrinsic value to nature sometimes has been taken to be an underlying assumption of egalitarian environmentalism: human beings and the natural world have equal moral status *because* they both have intrinsic value. Put differently, as both human beings and the natural world have intrinsic value, so the argument goes, they have equal moral worth or are the object of equal moral concern. Therefore, they have *equal* moral status (Agar 2001).

Holding that nature has intrinsic value significantly alters the kind of moral obligations we have towards the natural world, as it requires abandoning the exclusive focus on human interests and acknowledging these entities are morally considerable in their own right. This implies we ought to take their interests into account when making decisions that affect them, independently of whether these serve the interests of other beings. Or, as some put it, it entails living things and the natural world are worthy of some kind of "recognition respect,"

a discussion of this view in the context of human equality, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2022); for one in environmental ethics, see Wienhues (2022). Whereas this is an interesting possibility to be explored further, it is not the focus of our paper.

which consists in recognizing their value constrains what is required of us (Darwall 1977, Taylor 2011 [1986]).

However, our analysis in section 2.1 helps us see none of this amounts to a *justification* of equality. Affirming an entity has intrinsic value is sufficient to show it has moral status and therefore its interests matter towards what morality demands of us—or it has at least some rights that define what is required of us to do. But this does not entail that an entity has *equal* moral status and therefore its interests matter *equally* or its rights are *equally* stringent. As we will see more clearly in section 3, for an entity to have *equal* moral status, its *degree* of worth or value must be *equal* to that of those entities whose moral status is said to be equal. Hence, the ascription of intrinsic value is not sufficient to justify egalitarian environmentalism.

It follows from this that rejecting an anthropocentric perspective—whereby human beings are the only entities to have intrinsic value—does not require accepting human beings and other living entities have equal moral status, as it is sometimes argued (Schwarz 2021). In other words, claiming all living entities have intrinsic value and therefore are the object of moral concern or have moral worth does not imply their interests ought to be *equally* taken into account or their rights ought to be respected *equally*.

2.3. Reciprocity, Care, and Harmony

Relational considerations are often invoked by environmental ethicists to describe the sense in which human beings ought to consider and treat the natural world as equal (Leopold 1970, Kimmerer 2013, McShane forthcoming). Relational views of egalitarian environmentalism include a negative and a positive ideal. Negatively, human beings should refrain from regarding themselves as owners and conquerors of the land, free to exploit other species and natural resources with no regard for anything but furthering their interests (Leopold 1970).

Positively, human beings should live in harmony with the rest of the natural world, in mutually beneficial relationships of reciprocity and care, and consider themselves as plain citizens of the land community (McShane forthcoming).

In this section, we argue environmental relational views do not yield distinctively egalitarian normative implications, for standing in relationships of reciprocity, care, and harmony does not amount to standing in relationships of equality.

Let us begin with relationships of reciprocity. Two parties stand in a relationship of reciprocity if, and only if, either i) they gain a similar advantage from the relationship (even when this is not the result of a voluntary transaction) (Becker 2005: 22); or ii) they act in ways that are commensurate to the action of the other party—i.e., A confers an advantage to B, which is commensurate with the advantage B confers to A. The relationship between human beings and the natural world thus plausibly can be conceived as one of reciprocity in the first sense, even in the absence of intentional action from one of the parties. For instance, metaphors like gift-giving are often used to characterize the relationship between plants and human beings (Kimmerer 2013).

Now, it seems reasonable to hold that being in a relationship of reciprocity with the natural world generates an obligation to promote the interests, or protect the rights, of the natural environment. Thus, e.g., a relationship of reciprocity might justify a duty to avoid paradigmatic unequal relationships, such as domination and exploitation. However, this does not amount to standing in a relationship of equality. Regarding the interests or the rights of the natural environment as something that matters and should be advanced in line with the requirement of the relationship of reciprocity does not amount to any claim that the interests or the rights of all beings and species matter *equally*. Therefore, standing in a relationship of reciprocity amounts not to standing in a relationship of equality but to one that benefits both parties to some extent.

Egalitarian environmentalists sometimes refer to relationships of care as a way to understand what it means for human beings and the natural world to relate as equals (Whyte and Cuomo 2017). Relationships of care typically involve activities directly aimed at meeting the needs of the other(s) in the relationship, and are constituted by attitudes such as sensitivity, attentiveness, responsiveness, mutual concern, and trust. Care can be reciprocal or more one-sided (Held 2005) and care relationships thus can take different forms: they often exist between beings who are descriptively unequal in their power and capacities and might even be unequal in their status, as in the case of relationships of care between people and their pets (Kittay 1999).

Now, the fact that an entity A ought to care for the well-being of another entity B tells us a good deal about what is the appropriate way for A to relate to B. As in the case of relationships of reciprocity, this entails the cared-for should not be exploited or dominated. But, unlike relationships of reciprocity, relationships of care are centered around the promotion of the other's needs *independently of* the benefit the carer derives from the relationship. For example, William has an obligation to feed his cat, Molly, even though she has become increasingly withdrawn and William does not derive much joy from his relationship with her anymore. For this reason, relationships of care might be a better candidate for thinking about our relationships with the natural world as a whole, as the obligation to care for the interests of living entities does not rest on any claim about how different elements of the natural world all contribute to our wellbeing.

However, the fact that an entity A has a responsibility to care for the well-being of another entity B does not necessarily tell us much about B's moral status. The obligation to care for another is often grounded in the specific relationships between two beings. In William's example, whereas he has an obligation to feed Molly because she is *his* cat, it does not follow he also has a responsibility to feed other, or all, cats. Most importantly for our purposes, it

does not presuppose A and B have equal moral worth, or they are the object of equal moral concern. Nor does it entail A and B ought to have equally stringent rights or equally weighty interests. For example, the fact that William has a moral obligation to care for Molly's well-being means neither that William and Molly have equal moral worth or are the objects of equal moral concern, nor that their comparable interests are equally weighty, or their rights are equally stringent. Therefore, even if human beings ought to care for the interests of the natural world, this does not mean human beings and the natural world ought to relate to each other as equals.

Finally, some environmental ethicists have suggested human beings and the natural world ought to relate to one another as equals in the sense they ought to live together in harmony, i.e., in a state in which they all coexist in equilibrium (McShane forthcoming). Whereas harmony and reciprocity are often invoked together, living with others in harmony does not require mutually benefiting each other, but simply existing in a kind of equilibrium that allows for mutual flourishing. Accordingly, this view, like its predecessors, demands an end to the destruction, exploitation, and domination of the natural world and the creation of conditions for nature's preservation and flourishing. However, this again is not an egalitarian claim: from the fact that human beings and the natural world ought to stand in a sort of equilibrium that fosters mutual flourishing, it does not follow the flourishing of all living things matters *equally*.

To conclude, many environmental ethicists have argued human beings and the natural world ought to relate as equals in the sense they ought to stand in relationships of reciprocity, care, or harmony with one another. In this section, we have argued these are not distinctively egalitarian concerns. Importantly, however, this is not to say these arguments are not plausible or they cannot play a very important role in environmental ethics. On the contrary, these views offer some compelling reasons why human beings ought to fundamentally revise their

relationship with the natural world: showing they do not commit us to controversial claims of equality further strengthens their plausibility.[4]

2.4. Egalitarian Environmentalism

In previous sections, we have argued i) entities that have intrinsic value do not necessarily have equal moral status, and ii) entities that stand in relationships of reciprocity, care, and harmony need not relate as equals. This has enabled us to see some of the most fundamental environmental claims are not sufficient to justify egalitarian environmentalism and some of the most fundamental environmental concerns are not distinctively egalitarian.

We are now in a position to specify the necessary elements of egalitarian environmentalism. First, an egalitarian environmental theory must rest on a commitment to the *equal* moral worth or concern of human beings and the natural world. This is because only if entities have equal moral worth or are the objects of equal moral concern ought they to be considered and treated as equals. For instance, as Paul Taylor observes, "every entity that has a good of its own as possessing inherent worth—the *same* inherent worth, since none is superior to another" (Taylor 2011 [1986]: 115; emphasis added). This is a distinctively egalitarian claim because it is essentially *comparative*: it compares the degree of moral worth an entity has with the degree of worth of other entities, or the degree of moral concern that is owed to an entity with the degree of moral concern that is owed to other entities. The ascription of equal moral worth or equal moral concern then is a necessary element of any egalitarian environmental view.

[4] There are of course other ways to argue we should radically rethink our relationship to the natural world, which are not presented as egalitarian arguments. For instance, Anna Wienhues (2022) has developed an account of non-ranking biocentrism, which rests on a notion of "otherness" that looks at the fundamental difference between different beings rather than focusing on the properties they share. According to Wienhues, this account can justify several biocentric conclusions without having to appeal to the notion of moral equality. This further supports one of our main claims, namely the idea of equality is not the right notion to invoke in approaching questions around the moral status of the natural world.

Second, an environmental theory is egalitarian if its normative implications are such that human beings and the natural world have either equally stringent rights or equally weighty interests. This does not (implausibly) mean every right or interest of human beings is as stringent or as weighty as every right or interest of other living entities. Rather, more precisely, this implies the *comparable* rights—i.e., rights to equally weighty interests[5]—or the comparable interests—i.e., equally weighty interests—ought to count *equally* from a moral standpoint. To be sure, it is very difficult to determine when the interests of human beings and those of nonhuman entities are comparable, for the strength of the interests varies along several dimensions.[6] Firstly, interests vary in kind. For example, an interest in life is weightier than an interest in avoiding pain, other things being equal. Secondly, the strength of an interest depends on several factors. Take, for example, the interest in avoiding pain. The strength of such an interest depends, *inter alia*, on i) the intensity of the pain, and ii) the duration of the pain (Singer 2011: 53, Kagan 2016: 6): the more intense and longer one's pain is, the weightier one's interest in being relieved from pain is. For instance, consider two individuals, A and B: suppose A's level of pain is 10 and their pain will last for three weeks, whereas B's level of pain is 1 and their pain will last for three minutes. In this case, A's interest in being relieved from pain is weightier than B's. Accordingly, if A and B are moral equals, this entails priority should be given to A's right to be relieved from pain over B's comparable right, or A's interest in being relieved from pain should count more than B's

[5] It might be observed the notion of "interests" sits more easily within a consequentialist framework, whereas it is not easily reconcilable with a right-based theoretical framework. It is certainly true that not all theories of rights rest on the notion of "interests." Will-theorists, for example, maintain that being a right-holder consists in having control over another's duty (Hart 1955). However, interest-theorists hold that the function of a right is to foster or protect the fundamental interests of the right-holder (Raz 1986: ch. 7). Crucially, only the latter can be coherently applied to the question of the rights of those beings who are not capable of agency—such as some human beings (e.g., infants and very young children), all nonhuman animals, and other living entities—and therefore are incapable of exercising control over others' duties. Accordingly, the "interest theory" of rights is the appropriate theoretical framework to assess the question of the moral equality between human beings and other living entities from a deontological perspective.

[6] For further discussion, see also Floris and Spotorno (forthcoming), and Zuolo (2017).

comparable interest towards what morality requires of us *because* the interests at stake are not equally weighty.

This discussion helps us clarify the normative implications that are entailed by a commitment to environmental egalitarianism, and those that are not. Specifically, we now can see, on the one hand, proponents of egalitarian environmentalism are not committed to holding, e.g., the right to life of a human being is as stringent as the right to the life of a tree, because it is hard to deny the interest of the former is much stronger than the interest of the latter. The reason for this is a human being stands to lose a wider range of goods in dying than a tree (e.g., personal projects, and loving and caring relationships). Therefore, prioritizing the right to life of a human being over the right to life of a tree is not only consistent with but also entailed by egalitarian environmentalism. On the other hand, it is not the case all rights, or interests, of human beings always override the rights, or interests, of other beings. For instance, humans' interest in displaying flowers in their homes might not always outweigh the interest of flowers in not being cut. Similarly, the interest of a group of human beings to build a highway on the site of a forest might not outweigh the interest of the trees and other plants to live and the interest of different animals in their habitat. It follows from this that advocates of egalitarian environmentalism are committed to claiming that (i) the comparable rights or interests of human beings are not more stringent or do not have more weight than the comparable rights or interests of nonhuman entities, simply because they are the rights or the interests of human beings; and ii) at least in some cases the more fundamental rights or interests of nonhuman entities could have priority over less fundamental rights or interests of human beings.

To summarize, in the first part of the paper, we have argued most prominent environmental claims and concerns neither entail nor amount to a commitment to moral equality between human beings and the natural world. Furthermore, we have identified the necessary

elements of egalitarian environmentalism: an environmental theory is egalitarian if i) it rests on a commitment to the claim that human beings and the natural world have equal moral worth or are the object of equal moral concern; and, ii) it maintains they have equally stringent rights or equally weighty interests, other things being equal.

3. The Justification of Egalitarian Environmentalism

Critics often have dismissed egalitarian environmental views on the grounds of their implausible implications when it comes to comparing human and other beings' interests or rights and strong practical concerns related to the difficulty in structuring our lives around these principles (Palmer 2017: 103). One of our aims is to provide a more principled, and therefore more compelling, line of criticism that does not hinge on debatable interpretations of the claims at stake or contestable intuitive judgments about their implications. Rather, we argue that regardless of the conception one endorses and the implications one thinks it entails, egalitarian environmentalism must be rejected because it does not rest on a coherent and plausible justification. To this end, in what follows, we address the question of *the basis of egalitarian environmentalism*: what, if anything, grounds the equality of moral status between human beings and the environment, such that it is appropriate to consider and treat them as equals in some basic sense?

3.1. Two Challenges

To begin, it will be instructive to explain the challenges any account of the basis of equality must face. To appreciate this, consider a widely shared view of human moral equality, whereby humans are each other's equals because they all possess a morally valuable property—such as rationality or the capacity to flourish—which confers equal moral worth upon them or makes them objects of equal moral concern. Recent contributions to the literature on

moral equality have pointed out this view faces two daunting challenges. First, if the possession of a morally valuable property confers moral worth upon humans or makes them objects of moral concern, then it seems reasonable to hold that the degree of worth humans have or how concerned we ought to be about their interests should vary according to the degree to which they possess the property in question. However, all the status-conferring properties—such as those mentioned above—are held by human beings to *unequal* degrees. But if human beings hold the morally valuable property that grounds their moral status to an *unequal* degree, how come they should be considered as having *equal*, rather than *unequal*, moral status? This is the so-called *variations objection* (Arneson 1999, Christiano 2015, Floris 2021).

Second, as several critics have pointed out, even if it can be shown a range of entities holds a morally significant property to an equal degree, it remains possible some possess a further valuable property others lack—or this property is possessed by all but to an unequal degree—which therefore compromises the moral equality of the entities in question. To illustrate: animal ethicists have forcefully argued human beings and nonhuman animals are moral equals because they share the same status-conferring property, namely: sentience (Singer 2011). Some proponents of human superiority have objected whereas it is true human beings and nonhuman animals are both sentient beings, this does not entail they have equal moral status. The reason for this is human beings possess further significant properties—such as rationality or capacity for virtue—which nonhuman animals lack (or at least possess to a lower degree), that confers upon the former a moral status that is superior to that of the latter. Accordingly, the possession of a further morally significant property (or set of properties)

provides a non-speciesist justification for human moral superiority (Arneson 2015, Floris, 2021).[7] This has been called the *differentiation objection* (Floris 2023a).[8]

3.2. Property-First Views

Once we have illustrated the challenges any theory of the basis of moral equality must face, we can examine which accounts of egalitarian environmentalism, if any, succeed in overcoming them.

Let us begin with what has so far been the most prominent approach to the question of the basis of moral equality: the *property-first approach*. According to this approach, the equality of moral status is grounded in the possession of a morally significant *binary* property. A binary property is a property that is either possessed or is not; hence, all those entities that possess a binary property possess it *equally*. Therefore, it provides a coherent and plausible basis for their *equal* moral status (Carter 2011, Rawls 1971).

Arguably, the most worked-out and influential property-first egalitarian environmental theory has been developed by Taylor, who argued "all living things in the natural world have the same inherent worth" (Taylor 2011 [1986]: 178). Taylor's justification for egalitarian environmentalism can be summarized as follows:

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[7] A critic might object that if there is a range of significant properties that can ground moral status, then holding more than one significant property does not necessarily entail having a higher moral status. After all, one might think this is a case of overdetermination: e.g., we might suppose holding one status-conferring property is equal to having more than one. In response, we argue that while it is true that if an entity A holds a status-conferring property, X, while an entity B possesses two status-conferring properties, X and Y, they both have moral status, as X and Y are individually sufficient to have moral status, it is unclear why holding a further status-conferring property should not have any implications for the comparative degree of A and B's moral status. This is because if both X and Y are status-conferring properties, then, at the very least, the burden of proof lies with those who want to defend the moral equality of A and B to explain why Y is morally irrelevant. Why should we only focus on the morally relevant property X, which is possessed equally, and ignore the other morally relevant property Y, which is possessed unequally?

[8] In this section, we have articulated the two main challenges theories of moral equality are generally regarded as having to address. A critic might contend these are not the correct criteria for a theory of moral equality. In what follows, we present several reasons for believing these challenges apply to all theories of moral equality, including egalitarian environmentalism, and different versions of egalitarian environmentalism cannot meet these challenges. These considerations as well as the ubiquity of these challenges in the literature on moral equality in our view justify using these two objections as the relevant test for a theory of moral equality.

1) The possession of a wide range of sophisticated properties—such as rationality and sentience—is not *necessary* to have moral status (Taylor 2011 [1986]: 25–26).
2) All living beings have moral status because each thing "is seen to be a teleological (goal-oriented) center of life, pursuing its own good in its own unique way" (Taylor 2011 [1986]: 45).
3) Being a "teleological center of life" is a binary property.
4) Therefore, all living entities have *equal* moral status because they are "teleological centers of life."

To begin, one may note it is unclear whether 3) is true: to be a "teleological center of life" means being "a unified system of organized activity, the constant tendency of which is to preserve its existence by protecting and promoting its well-being" (Taylor 2011 [1986]: 45). But whereas it is true an entity is either capable of striving to preserve itself and realize its good or it is not, this does not entail all entities that are a "teleological center of life" are capable of preserving themselves and realizing their own good to an *equal* degree. For example, one might suggest human beings and most nonhuman animals are a very complex system of organized activity, comprising several sophisticated capacities that make them more capable of preserving themselves and realizing their own good than other living things. Taylor's view then seems vulnerable to the variations objection.

A critic might object to drawing a line between animals and other living things in this way, by pointing out the former might have more sophisticated goals and hence more sophisticated capacities to achieve them, but it is not obvious they are better at realizing their own good. On the contrary, some plants have sophisticated mechanisms that make them even more capable of preserving themselves than mammals. In reply, we argue even if that is the case, it is still true the property of being a "teleological center of life" is a scalar property that

comes in degrees and therefore is unable to account for the equal moral status of *all* entities of the natural world.

It might be objected what matters is that entities hold a relevant status-conferring property up to a sufficient minimum, whereas the variations above the threshold are morally irrelevant. Hence, all entities who hold the property of being "a teleological center of life" up to a sufficient degree have equal moral status regardless of the degree to which they possess this property above the threshold.

This threshold view, however, faces two significant challenges: first, it is unclear how the threshold for moral status—i.e., the minimum up to which the relevant property must be held to have moral status—can be set in a non-arbitrary way. Why should entities who hold the property of "being a teleological center of life" to a degree, D, have moral status whereas those who possess it to a degree, D_{-1}, do not have moral status? What is the non-arbitrary reason that explains why the threshold for moral status is at D instead of D_{-1} (Arneson 1999: 108, 2015: 37)?

Second, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, it is not enough to simply *assume* what matters is that living entities hold the status-conferring property up to a certain minimum, whereas the variations above the threshold are morally irrelevant, as this simply begs the question of the justification of moral equality. Rather, an independent explanation—i.e., an explanation that does not presuppose a commitment to moral equality—for why variations above the threshold for moral status do not generate differences in degrees of moral status should be provided (Carter 2011, Floris 2023b). After all, as Geoffrey Cupit puts it, "[w]hy should we suppose that our status is determined by our passing a particular threshold, whilst our possessing more than the minimum required to pass that threshold is entirely redundant?" (Cupit 2000: 110). For this reason, we conclude as Taylor's view does not offer an independent rationale for why what matters is that living entities possess the property of

"being a teleological center of life" up to a sufficient degree regardless of the variations above the threshold, it is unable to avoid the variations objection.

Alternatively, then, one might suggest "being a teleological center of life" is indeed a binary property because what matters is not whether some organisms are more successful in preserving their lives, but they all strive for something out of an inner incentive and therefore have a good of their own. In other words, "having a good to strive for"—regardless of how sophisticated one's abilities to preserve this "good" are—is a non-variable property that grounds the moral equality between human beings and other living organisms. One might observe that while it does not matter morally how *successful* a living organism is in accomplishing this "good of their own," it is still true the property to strive for a good can be held to unequal degrees. To see this, consider a view of human equality, which identifies the basis of humans' equal moral status in the capacity for rational agency. The problem with this view is not that human beings are not equally successful in exercising this ability, but that they hold such ability to unequal degrees (regardless of how they exercise it).

But even if we concede Taylor's view is successful in rejecting the variations objection, that does not entail it offers a plausible view of the basis of environmental egalitarianism because it runs up against the differentiation objection. To appreciate this, it is important to observe first that holding that the possession of some sophisticated properties, including rationality, is not *necessary* to have moral status only entails other properties, such as being a "teleological center of life," can ground moral status. However, to reject the differentiation objection, one must *also* argue the possession of rationality is *not sufficient* to have moral status; otherwise, if the possession of rationality is unnecessary but sufficient, it is unclear why those entities that possess both properties—i.e., entities that are both "teleological centers of life" and capable of rationality—do not have a moral status that is superior to those entities that are only a "teleological center of life."

Taylor is alive to this worry, as he offers an explanation for why being a "teleological center of life" is the *only* status-conferring property. He argues grounding human superiority on capacities and properties that are *valuable to* humans begs the question, for it amounts to claiming human superiority on the basis of human values. More precisely, Taylor contends "[o]ne entity is correctly judged morally superior to another if it is the case that, when valid moral standards are applied to both entities, the first fulfils them to a greater degree than the second. Both entities, therefore, must fall within the range of application of moral standards" (Taylor 2011 [1986]: 132).

To assess this line of argument, we need to understand how we can determine the validity of the moral standards that are to be applied to entities when determining the degree of their moral status. According to Taylor, valid moral standards are those that are "connected with what it is for a member of *that* species to live a good life" (Taylor 2011 [1986]: 131; emphasis in the original). It is therefore conceptually incoherent to claim humans are superior to plants on the basis that the latter do not possess the capacity for moral agency, simply because "being a moral agent" is not something that is connected to what it is for a plant to live a good life. Hence, human beings and plants do not fall within the range of application of this moral standard. Therefore, "being a moral agent" is not a moral standard that can be used to compare the degree of their moral status.

The problem with this line of argument is it fails i) to distinguish between the question of what is valuable *about* an entity—i.e., what grounds an entity's moral status—and the question of what is valuable *to* an entity—i.e., what makes an entity's life good, and ii) to see the former does not depend on the latter.[9] For instance, the capacity to walk is valuable to human beings, but it does not ground humans' moral status. Similarly, the capacity to jump

[9] To be sure, we do not mean to suggest Taylor fails to see the distinction between "what is valuable *to* an entity" and "what is valuable *about* an entity;" see Taylor (2011 [1986]: 41–47). Rather, in what follows, we show Taylor fails to see the implications this distinction has for his justification of the moral equality between human beings and other living entities.

from one tree to another is extremely valuable to monkeys, but it is not what makes them valuable. The moral status of monkeys is grounded in other properties, such as their ability to feel pain and pleasure.

Accordingly, Taylor is right to claim "being a moral agent" is not a moral standard that applies to all living beings, *if* the moral standard is to be used to determine what it is to live a good life for an entity. Clearly, this moral standard applies only to those entities that are or can be moral agents, for whom agency therefore is a constitutive element of a flourishing life. But from this, it does not follow it is conceptually incoherent to hold human beings have a moral status that is superior to that of plants because the former possess a status-conferring property—moral agency—that the latter lack. This is because for the proponents of property-first views when assessing the degree of entities' moral status, we must determine what makes them valuable—i.e., what features they hold that confer moral worth upon them or makes them objects of moral concern—and this is independent of what is valuable to them. In other words, once we realize i) the question of moral status depends on the question of what is valuable *about* a being, and ii) the question of what is valuable about a being does not depend on what is valuable *to* a being, we can see that holding moral agency is not a constitutive element of all living things' flourishing life is not a reason to maintain that moral agency is not a valid standard to assess the relative moral status of human beings and that of other living things. Hence, Taylor's argument fails to provide a convincing answer to the differentiation objection.

To conclude, in this section, we have argued one of the most prominent egalitarian environmental property-first accounts fails to reject the variations and the differentiation objections. These criticisms strongly suggest the prospects of property-first theories of egalitarian environmentalism are dim.

3.3. Relation-First Views

The property-first approach, however, is not the only approach to the question of the basis of moral equality. In recent years, some philosophers have argued to justify moral equality we should not look for a significant property that is held by a range of entities to an equal degree; rather, we should focus on how entities do or ought to relate to one another. This is the so-called *relation-first approach* (Floris 2019).

We can distinguish between two versions of the relation-first approach. According to the first version, moral equality is grounded in relations in which some entities *do stand* towards one another. For instance, prominent contributors to the debate on human equality have argued human beings are each other's equals because "as humans we are indeed a family" (Kittay 2005: 124): humanity, like the family, is a significant relationship that provides a compelling basis for the equal moral status of those who participate in it. Similarly, some environmental theorists have suggested our moral obligations towards other living beings are grounded in the fact that we stand in a morally significant relationship with them. For example, Næss argues all forms of life have an "equal right to live and blossom" because they are "knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations" (Næss 1972: 95).

To be sure, proponents of this version of the relation-first approach are not committed to holding that all kinds of relationships have a bearing on questions of moral status. Indeed, that would be problematic from an egalitarian point of view. For example, in the case of human equality, it would imply human beings to whom one is particularly close, e.g., those we love, have a higher status than others.[10] Further, it would also risk collapsing into a

[10] It is worth noting a version of this view has been defended by J. Baird Callicott (Callicott 1989). Callicot rejects the focus on individual property and instead argues "moral sentiment" should guide us to act ethically towards other beings. Such sentiment can be directed to collectives, including ecological collectives, of which we are part. Our membership in different groups and collectives, including ecological ones, generates a range of concentric circles of obligation, the stringency of which varies depending on the strength of the relationship or the kind of community bond on which the obligation is ultimately grounded. Whereas Callicott's theory is an interesting relation-first account of environmental ethics, it is not an egalitarian view as we have described it in section 2.

dangerously individualized account in which each individual's relationships determine questions of equality and inequality. Instead, proponents of this account argue only some relationships that have a distinctive moral significance, such as "being a fellow human" or "being a knot in the biospherical net or field," ground the equality of its participants.

Relation-first views might seem to offer a convincing answer to the differentiation objection. After all, if it is true human beings and other living entities stand in some morally significant relationships—such as relationships of reciprocity, care, and harmony—then one may argue there are no further relationships in which *only* human beings partake, which undermine the equality of moral status between them and the natural world.

But, even if this were true, it is difficult to see how relation-first views can avoid the variations objection: if a morally significant relationship is the basis of moral status, then the degree of moral status varies according to the degree of strength of the relationship. However, the strength of a relationship depends on "how robustly one instantiates the features defining the relationship (e.g., how robustly one qualifies as a member of a community) or on how well one actively relates (e.g., a child is a more active participant in a relationship than a fetus)" (Jaworska and Tannenbaum 2021: 10). Thus, for instance, some relation-first views point to relations of reciprocity and care as the basis of the moral equality between human beings and the natural world. However, relations of reciprocity and care between human beings are much stronger than those human beings have towards other living beings. Hence, why should human beings not consider each other as morally superior to the natural world, given their relationship of reciprocity and care is much stronger than the one between them and the natural world? More generally, morally significant relationships are not binary properties, as not all living things stand in the same relationship to an *equal degree*. Therefore, these kinds of relation-first views of egalitarian environmentalism are vulnerable to the variations objection, at least.

As observed above, however, this is not the only version of the relation-first approach. According to the second version, moral equality is not grounded in some actual relation on which entities stand towards each other. Rather, moral equality is grounded in a relation on which entities *ought to* stand towards one another. This relation-first view has been recently defended by Katie McShane, for example, who argues "we should be regarding one another as moral equals because doing so is required by the best ways of living well together" (McShane forthcoming): the equality of moral status between human beings and the natural world then is grounded in the *wrongness* of treating the latter as inferior. More precisely, human superiority entails the wrongful treatment of the environment by, *inter alia*, exploiting the natural world and disregarding the interests of all nonhuman living things. Therefore, considering and treating the natural world as an equal is grounded in the wrongness of treating it as an inferior (McShane forthcoming).

At first glance, this relation-first view seems to provide a compelling answer to both the variations objection and the differentiation objection: it does not rest on a scalar property or relation. Nor does it have to explain why other morally significant properties or relations are irrelevant when assessing the moral status of human beings and other entities.

However, the problem with this view is it is unclear what might be the justification for it. On the one hand, one may think moral equality is simply grounded in the rejection of treating others as inferiors. But this is circular: a theory of moral equality must provide an independent justification for why a range of entities must be considered and treated as equals. Claiming this is because they should not be considered and treated as inferiors simply presupposes what needs to be shown: not being treated as an equal is the same as being treated as an inferior; hence, the latter cannot ground the former.

On the other hand, one may observe this line of argument does not stop at the rejection of treating others as inferiors. Rather, the moral imperative to refrain from treating others

as inferiors is ultimately grounded on the claim that equality is a constitutive element of a flourishing life. This, for example, is the strategy deployed by Andrea Sangiovanni, who has developed a view of human equality that is structurally similar to the one described here. Sangiovanni argues certain modes of inferiorizing treatment are to be rejected because they constitute attacks on our ability to maintain and develop an integral sense of self, which, in turn, is a constituent ingredient and structural element of a flourishing life (Sangiovanni 2017). But whereas this seems plausible in the case of human beings, as being treated as an inferior does constitute an attack on our sense of self, it is not as clear what this argument amounts to in the case of the justification for egalitarian environmentalism. This is because it is unclear how being treated as an equal is a constitutive element of a flourishing life for plants and other natural beings. Put simply, whilst equality in itself matters to human beings and their flourishing, it does not seem to matter to the natural world. This point is further strengthened by the fact that—as we have argued above—it is possible to rethink the relationship between human beings and the natural world so as to respect and promote the interests of natural beings without appealing to the notion of equality. For this reason, we conclude relation-first views that ground moral equality in a relation on which human beings and other nonhuman entities ought to stand to each other fail to offer an independent justification for egalitarian environmentalism.

To summarize, in this section, we have argued justifying the moral equality of human beings and the natural world by appealing to morally significant relations is not a promising strategy. Relation-first views that are based on some actual morally significant relations may be able to avoid the differentiation objection but are unable to reject the variations objection, and relation-first views that rely on relations of which we ought to be part do not provide a plausible independent justification for why nonhuman entities ought to be considered and treated as equals.

4. Conclusion

The natural world for a long time has been considered merely as a means for the sake of human interests. It is undeniable that the relationship between human beings and the environment must be profoundly revised. In this paper, we have analyzed a prominent attempt to rethink such a relationship, wherein human beings and the natural world should relate as equals in some fundamental sense.

In the first part of the paper, we have shown that some of the most fundamental environmental concerns neither entail nor amount to a theory of moral equality. We have argued an environmental theory is egalitarian if, and only if, i) it rests on a commitment to the claim that human beings and the natural world have equal moral worth or are the object of equal moral concern; and, ii) it entails either human beings and the natural world have equally stringent rights, or their comparable interests have equal moral weight, other things being equal.

In the second part, drawing on the recent literature on the basis of human moral equality, we have examined two approaches to the justification of egalitarian environmentalism—property-first views and relation-first views—and we have argued they both face serious challenges.

The upshot is equality has no space in environmental ethics. This, however, should not worry those of us who want to argue for a radical reconceptualization of our relationship with the natural world. On the contrary, it enables us to see we can provide principled and compelling arguments for a wide range of environmental concerns without appealing to the controversial idea of equality.

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