

Wisdom, Wildlife and Power: Understanding Anthropocentrism

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Contents

| | |
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| What is Anthropocentrism? | 3 |
| Criticisms of Anthropocentrism | 3 |
| Anthropocentrism Today | 4 |
| Conclusion | 5 |
| Sources | 5 |

Any holiday or break is a chance for me to escape into films – especially ones from my childhood. They melt the exam stress away, taking me back to simpler times (at least for me, I was eight when everyone thought the world was ending in 2012). It was an era when all children’s films were *lathered* with political messaging – one such classic being *The Lorax*, with its powerful critique of exploiting the planet for profit. Beyond greed, what was *The Lorax* trying to stop anyway?

Twelve years after the film, and five decades after the book, I have the answer: **anthropocentrism** – the belief that human existence is the most important and central fact in the universe.

This blog on Anthropocentrism and next week’s one on Philanthrocapitalism have more in common than a reference to *The Lorax* (visual masterpiece, and inspiration to all short environmentalists) – they belong to the *Wellness Inc.* (2025) project. The project aims to highlight overconsumption in our society and its impact on the planet – seeking to understand how society has been influenced to consume and shift responsibility for systemic issues back onto corporations (as they should be), whilst encouraging individual action! This blog will explore anthropocentrism and its impact on environmental ethics and how humans treat planet Earth.

What is Anthropocentrism?

Anthropocentrism, a concept rooted in environmental ethics, is the belief that humans and their existence is the most important fact in the universe. Derived from Ancient Greek, with ‘*anthrōpos*’ meaning ‘*human being*’ and ‘*Kétron*’ meaning ‘*centre*’, anthropocentrists believe that all beings and objects only have merit concerning their contributions to human survival and pleasure. This places human interests at the forefront – diminishing the value of the planet, and the worth of other life forms.

Anthropocentric thought is embedded in many religions that form the foundation of cultures around the world, such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism – where humans are viewed as the stewards of the Earth, created to take care of the planet as the dominant species. This idea has been emphasised by philosophers, such as Protagoras, who stated that ‘*man is the measure of all things*’, reinforcing anthropocentric thought by suggesting that an individual’s perception and judgement are the ultimate determiners of truth. This makes reality exclusive to the human experience, with human understanding shaping what is real and valuable; but how can we know what is best when nature has no voice to guide us?

Criticisms of Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism has been criticised as the root of the ecological crisis, encouraging people to act with little regard for the other beings they share the Earth with. Human

chauvinism and speciesism have undermined the rights of non-human entities, granting preferential treatment to human needs and desires. This mindset is seen through scientific discovery: humans have positioned themselves as the most important beings, justifying the testing of products and medicines on animals, without regard for the wellbeing of animals, contributing to deforestation by destroying the homes of animal habitats to build homes for themselves. Although scientific developments, such as space exploration and the prospect of other intelligent extraterrestrial life (despite the intelligence of octopuses, and the longer lifespan of sea creatures) have challenged humanity's importance, our interactions with the planet as a resource to exploit rather than our home, reinforces an anthropocentric worldview.

Criticising anthropocentric thought makes it clear that we need to move away from prioritising human needs above everything else, as we ignore the importance of ecosystems and the lives of the other beings who share our planet. Now, what if I told you that anthropocentrism could be the key to turning your sceptical relatives into environmentalists?

Anthropocentrism Today

Anthropocentrism has been highlighted by figures such as Theodore Kaczynski, a mathematician turned domestic terrorist, who you may know from the opening lines of his manifesto: '*The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race*'. Kaczynski's actions brought further attention to anthropocentrism through his manifesto which criticised the dehumanising nature of technology, stemming from the human chauvinist view that progress is always good if it serves human convenience, regardless of ecological or ethical cost. One example of this progress is genetic testing: companies like 23andMe have faced scrutiny regarding data breaches and the sale of user data without informed consent. It shows how human-centric technologies, designed around curiosity around ancestry and health can be used to dehumanise people, through the sale of *their history* as a commodity.

Anthropocentrism has also been challenged by historical scientific figures such as Charles Darwin. Darwin claimed in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), that every being on the planet considers itself and offspring to be at the top of the chain of importance. This has continued to be observed, with creatures such as vampire bats regurgitating blood to share meals with those who didn't find food that day which strengthens social bonds. Pathocentrism grants value to sentient animals, giving them moral status – showing that a type of anthropocentrism may be a type of failsafe to ensure species survival – even single celled amoeba help their kind!

Recognising anthropocentrism's flaws in addition to its practicalities form an important discussion in modern environmentalism. Appealing to human self-love and preservation can be an effective entry point for encouraging environmentalism: if not advocating for the protection of the planet for all inhabitants, then at least future

human generations. This allows for broader conversations that move towards more inclusive, ecosystem-based thinking – as all living beings depend on one another, and all have complex relationships with one another, somewhere along the chain.

Conclusion

Anthropocentrism has been criticised for allowing humans to do whatever they wish to the Earth, without considering its impact on other beings, offering moral justification for prioritising human needs. We must rethink the way that we take our role in the world, guided by science and empathy to protect the planet and all its inhabitants. If you're trying to influence your relatives to take up environmentalist thinking, anthropocentrism can be an amazing introduction, but it should by no means be the end of the journey.

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