COMPETING CLAIMS IN NATURE AND TELEOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM

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Views that hold the inherent value of individual organisms, rather than holistic ecological systems, to be the central notion in environmental ethics are manifold. This paper is a critical engagement with one such view; one that I have dubbed teleological individualism.

There are a number of ways in which one can argue that individual organisms have inherent worth. I cannot account for all of them here. The most common one (at least the one that I have come across most readily) is some variation of the claim that biological organisms have a good of their own because they are goal-oriented creatures. The rough idea is this: Since all organisms strive towards goals such as *feeding themselves* and *reproducing*, and away from things such as *pain* and *danger* they are also capable of having better or worse lives. This ability to have a good life further grounds an organism's inherent moral value. If one combines this view with the view that the earth's natural environment is morally significant only because it affects the possibility for organisms living in it to have better or worse lives, then one ends up with the view I call *teleological individualism*. It is this view that I want to engage with in this paper.

> **Teleological individualism is insufficient as a ground for environmental ethics because it is unable to account for how we ought to decide between competing claims in nature.**

Teleological individualism is widespread in popular culture, environmental movements and political parties. I regard anyone who thinks that biological organisms have a right to live out their natural lives, and that this right should ground our concern for the earth's biosphere, to be a teleological individualist. In philosophy, one of the clearest articulations of this view was made by Paul W. Taylor in his influential book *Respect for Nature* (1986). Because of its accessibility, his version of teleological individualism will be used as a starting point from which this paper launches its investigation.

I will claim roughly the following: Teleological individualism is insufficient as a ground for environmental ethics because it is unable to account for how we ought to decide between competing claims in nature. As a consequence of this insufficiency the view needs to be revised. I suggest such revision is best done by adding "tie-breakers" – additional moral considerations which only come into play in cases where the teleological individualism considered in isolation is insufficient.

Teleological individualism

I will begin by defining teleological individualism. There are four main parts to all versions of the view: (i) The ontological claim: All organisms have a good of their own, (ii) The epistemic claim: One can know what such "goods" are (iii) The teleological claim**:** An organism's "good for itself" is realized by allowing it to fulfil its teleological functions (iv) The individualistic claim: Holistic ecological systems ought to be considered valuable in moral theories only in so far as they are useful for individual organisms.

There are problematic issues in regard to all of these four points, but in this paper I will focus on (iii) and (iv).[1] The purpose of (iii) is to give content to the claim made in (i): All organisms have a good of their own, and this good is constituted by the organism fulfilling its own teleological goals. What these teleological goals are will vary from organism to organism, and different philosophers will give different accounts of such goals. Taylor loosely defines biological teleological fulfilment as the organized tendency to secure one's own future survival (Taylor 1986). I am not convinced by his account. I think instead that a teleological individualist ought to give an account of teleological fulfilment similar to Lawrence E. Johnson's, which inclu-

des reference to an organism's ability to engage in all of its natural behaviours (Johnson 1991). This protects the teleological individualist from having to say that animals in zoos and circuses are allowed to fulfil their teleological functions, since Johnson invokes stricter requirements on biological function fulfilment than just securing survival. Such requirements include such things as eating, roaming, mating, forming social bonds, growing freely etc. I think most environmentalists would agree that a definition of an organism's teleological nature that is close to Johnson's is broadly correct.[2] I will therefore operate on such an understanding of (iii) for the rest of this paper.

The purpose of (iv) is to frame teleological individualism in opposition to holism, according to which ecological systems have value over and above individual organisms, which in turn have value only because they play a role in larger systems. According to individualists, holism fails because it does not account for the intrinsic value of individual organisms.

To sum up: Teleological individualism about environmental ethics is the view that we ought to base our concern for the biosphere on the fact that it grounds teleological fulfilment for individual biological organisms. The ultimate holder of value is the individual organism, and it holds this value *because* it can live a good or a bad life, and it can live a good or a bad life *because* it has goals which it can succeed/fail to fulfil.

The problem of competing claims

I will now advance the claim that there is a class of cases where teleological individualism cannot deliver determinate answers or verdicts: cases of competing teleological claims. These cases arise because organic life is filled with teleological goals that can be fulfilled only at the expense of some other teleological goal *not* being fulfilled. Most of these competing claims are *external*.[3] They are competing claims *between* organisms. One example of this is the teleological goal of the predator to eat the prey. This goal can clearly only be fulfilled at the expense of the teleological goals of the prey. Thus the two stand in competition to each other.

How can teleological individualists solve such cases? Preventing some organism A from expressing its teleological nature TN_1 in order to save some other organism B

(towards which TN_1 is hostile) would mean preventing A from expressing TN_1, while saving B, enabling it to express its teleological nature TN_2. No matter which side we take, one teleological expression will be inhibited. Furthermore, if all of nature behaves in this competitive manner, we seem to have become the arbiters of billions of impossible cases of competing claims.[4] Surely, this is not a stable and intuitive basis for environmental ethics.

Taylor attempts to "solve" cases of competing claims by circumventing the issue. He begins by invoking a distinction between moral agents and moral subjects, where a moral agent is one who can act morally/immorally and be acted morally/immorally upon, and a moral subject is one who *cannot* act morally/immorally, but *can* be acted morally/immorally upon. According to Taylor, there are essentially two reasons for why moral subjects cannot act morally/immorally: (a) they are unable to claim/account for their own moral rights, and (b) they are unable to claim/account for the moral rights of others. Although there is much to be said about both (a) and (b), I think they function well enough to ground intuitive differences between, say, humans and horses, to *prima facie* justify themselves
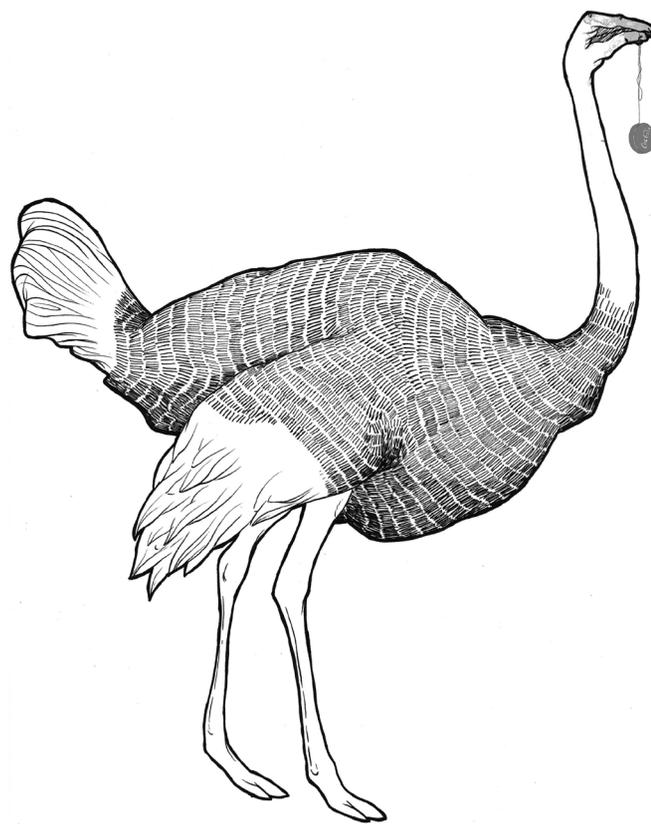
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as philosophical principles. Humans (moral agents) are capable of accounting for both their own and horses' (moral subjects) moral rights, while horses cannot account for either. I will not dig further into the justification of (a) and (b) in this paper.[5]

One of the main issues with Taylor's distinction is its terminology. It seems to me more natural to use the notion of "moral subjects" to denote *any* being which can be acted morally/immorally upon, and "moral agent" to denote those moral subjects who can *also* act morally/immorally. But this leaves the moral subjects Taylor discusses (the subclass of moral subjects who are not moral agents) without a proper name. After all, "moral subjects," in Taylor's sense, denotes those beings who can be acted morally/immorally upon, but who at the same time lacks the ability to act morally/immorally, meaning that in Taylor's terminology moral agents are not moral subjects. I think this is an unintuitive use of the involved notions, and I suggest instead that the notion "moral subjects" be used as a *family name,* which includes the *subspecies* "agentive moral subjects" and "non-agentive moral subjects". On this use, all moral subjects can be acted morally/immorally upon, while "non-agentive moral subjects" denotes the species of moral subjects which has *only* this property, and the term " agentive moral subjects" denotes the species of moral subjects which, in addition to being capable of being treated morally/immorally, can *also* act morally/immorally. I think this locution clarifies Taylor's intentions, and with it in mind we can continue to more substantive issues.

If two non-agentive moral subjects are making competing claims, no possible outcome ought to be considered immoral and so we needn't be worried with these kinds of cases at all.

Taylor uses the distinction just explicated to solve the problem of competing teleological claims in the following way: He says that competing claims between non-agentive moral subjects never include a wrongdoing, since none of the involved agents are capable of acting wrongly, while in the interplay between agentive moral subjects and non-agentive moral subjects, this balance is different. In such cases the non-agentive moral subject is unable both to claim his moral rights and to account for the rights of agentive moral subjects, while agentive moral subjects, on the other hand, *can* account for the rights of both themselves *and* non-agentive subjects. The possible configurations are illustrated in the following schema:

Thus, if a fox kills a mouse, none of the involved par-

ties are able to recognize their own, or the other's moral

	Wrongdoer	
	Non-agentive moral subject	Agentive moral subject
Non-agentive moral subject	Not immoral	Immoral
Agentive moral subject	Not immoral	Immoral

Receiver of wrongdoing

right to express their teleological nature, and therefore no wrong is committed. If a human, on the other hand, kills a fox, then a moral wrong *is* being committed (at least if it was killed for fun, and not for food) since a human is capable of recognizing the moral rights of a fox. If, on the other hand, a fox kills a human, no wrong has been committed since the fox is unable to understand the moral rights of the person.[6]

With regards to agentive moral subjects, we can thus call Taylor's theory *mono-directive*, since it tells us that we ought to care only about what happens when agentive moral subjects are behind an action, not when non-agentive moral subjects act against each other, or against agentive moral subjects. This seems to solve the cases of externally competing goals discussed previously. If two non-agentive moral subjects are making competing claims, no possible outcome ought to be considered immoral and so we needn't worry about these kinds of cases at all. This is obviously Kantian in structure. What we need to worry about is not the consequences of some action, but the intent behind it. Unfortunately, this defence does not always succeed: we can easily conceive of cases where it is highly counter-intuitive:

> **The over-powered algae.** Imagine a scenario where some species of algae, A (a non-agentive moral subject), evolves a metabolic system that is superior to all other living algae in its ecosystem. As a result, the population of A starts growing exponentially, out-competing the other occupants of its natural habitat, creating enormous monocultures of A which disrupt the entire ecosystem. This development (which, given what we know about biology,

is possible) threatens to destroy entire food-chains, forcing hundreds of species to face starvation, and possibly extinction.

According to a mono-directive theory like Taylor's, agentive moral subjects populating A's world would be under no moral pressure to intervene in this process. In principle, we ought not to be more concerned with what A is doing, than we ought to be concerned with a fox killing a mouse. Indeed, Taylor's mono-directive theory remains utterly silent on competing external claims between any clusters of non-agentive moral subjects.

A teleological individualist could respond that this aspect of the theory is acceptable. Having respect for nature, she could argue, includes respecting whatever evolutionary turns it might take; indifference towards the fate of the victims of A is actually a case of having respect for a natural process. Yet intuitively, I think most people would say that we *ought* to intervene and hinder A from destroying other species if we can. Ecosystems, and the good of groups of organisms such as species, seem to have at least *some* inherent worth that can be weighed against the good of individual organisms threatening them. Let us call this *the indifference problem.* I think that the indifference problem must be answered by teleological individualists if their theory is to be considered viable.

The stereo-directive interpretation
One way of solving the indifference problem could be to abandon Taylor's mono-directive view, and instead embrace a stereo-directive view which entails that agentive moral subjects *ought* to be concerned, not only with the interface between themselves and non-agentive moral subjects, but also with the interface between pluralities of non-agentive moral subjects. Thus, on the stereo-directive interpretation, the moral agents who inhabit the world in which A is rampaging through an ecological system could turn out to have a duty to regulate the behaviour of A, since the teleological expression of the organisms about to be out-competed by A ought to be respected *and protected* by agentive moral subjects. This would solve the indifference problem.

However, this approach comes with its own set of problems: How is one to decide whose teleological expression is worth protecting? Surely A's teleological expression is being hindered by the intervention of moral agents on the side of the other species in the cluster affected by A, and it seems arbitrary to take the side of non-A rather than A. Some criterion is thus needed to make alliances

between agentive and non-agentive moral subjects against some other non-agentive moral subjects non-arbitrary. Furthermore, teleological individualists who embrace the stereo-directive view must also have some criterion which limits the amount of cases that we have a duty to interfere in, otherwise we end up having to be the judge of every competitive case in all of nature, which would make the theory unusable in practice.

Thus the problem that arises for the teleological individualist is that she either, like Taylor, covers too little (the mono-directive interpretation *only* covers the interaction between agentive and non-agentive moral

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subjects) or too much (the stereo-directive interpretation covers the interaction between billions of non-agentive moral subjects), with the latter interpretation also having to deal with the difficulty of choosing sides.

Now, teleological individualists could answer this critique by stating that the purpose of their theory is narrow, in the sense that it is only concerned with regulating the behaviour of moral agents. They might concede that their theory does not possess the reach required to cover the interactions between non-agentive moral subjects, and simply call for another theory to cover those cases.

I think this defence could be successful if the teleological individualist provides a way of integrating his/her theory with theories that cover other cases. That is, if the teleological individualist wants a stable basis for a general theory of environmental ethics then she must supply us with an account of the relationship between her theory and other theories required for cases of competing claims. I call this *the interaction problem*.

Introducing tie-breakers
I believe that it is possible for the teleological individualist to solve the interaction problem if she introduces what I have chosen to call "tie-breakers". A tie-breaker is a moral consideration that enters into a moral theory only to help solve cases where the theory considered in isolation is insufficient.[7] I suggest that there are, *prima facie*, two tie-breakers available to teleological individualists: (i) embracing holistic considerations. Such considerations could be modelled on purely holistic theories like those of Johnson (1991) or Callicott (1989). (ii) Create hierarchies within the domain of organisms capable of teleological fulfilment, so that some organisms are taken to possess more inherent

worth than others. Giving increased moral worth to the goal-fulfilment of intellectually well-developed animals would probably be the most natural way of doing so.[8]

The idea here is that in cases where the teleological fulfilment of one organism stands in competition to the teleological fulfilment of some other organism, one allows tie-breakers like (i) or (ii) to enter the picture and help give a determinate answer to the case in question. If we consider again the case of the over-powered algae, one could then solve it in the following way:

> (1) Confirm that teleological individualism cannot solve the case.
> (2) Allow considerations regarding the status of the involved ecological systems to enter into our judgements.
> (3) See whether one of the competing claims threaten the ecological system.
> (4) Intervene on the side that is not destroying the ecological system.

Another solution would be the following:

> (1) Confirm that teleological individualism cannot solve the case.
> (2) Allow hierarchies regarding the moral status of different organisms to enter into our judgements.
> (3) See whether one of the competing sides has higher moral status, or threatens organisms with higher moral status.
> (4) Intervene on the side that has the highest moral status and/or does not threaten organisms with higher moral status

I will not argue here for whether one ought to use holistic or hierarchical considerations (or some other tie-breaker) to solve problematic cases. The point I want to make is rather different: It is not necessary to abandon teleological individualism simply because it cannot give determinate answers to every possible case, rather it is enough that one looks to other theories as possible *tie-breakers*. Note (1) in both of the lists above: they tell us to first confirm that teleological individualism *cannot* solve the case. Only *then* do we need to apply additional criteria. In cases where (1)

does not apply, teleological individualism seems unproblematic (at least the parts of it considered in this paper).[9]

This means that if a fox kills a mouse, teleological individualism tells us all we need to know; a non-agentive moral subject suppressing the teleological fulfilment of another non-agentive moral subject constitutes no wrongdoing. But if foxes are on the verge of exterminating mice altogether, then other moral considerations outside of the theory kick in, giving us reasons for intervening on the side of the mice (whether we ought to be motivated by protecting the species "mouse," or preventing harm to higher species by preventing ecological collapse is a further question I do not address here). We thereby have a non-arbitrary criterion for choosing sides in cases of competing claims in nature. This approach also limits the amount of cases we need to concern ourselves with by adding a criterion of demarcation: Moral agents need only to intervene in cases of competing claims between non-agentive moral subjects when these competing claims threaten the existence of holistic systems/organisms of higher inherent worth (or, possibly, according to some other tie-breaker criterion). Cases of competing claims between non-agentive moral subjects that have no bearing on such considerations need no arbiter.

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Conclusion

Teleological individualism has severe problems handling certain cases of competing teleological claims. This can be solved by adding moral considerations that act as tie-breakers. These considerations are only consulted in cases where teleological individualism considered in isolation is unable to give determinate answers. If one is open to the idea of adding such considerations, the theory looks salvageable. Such a move does, however, also forces the teleological individualist to argue, over and above his default position, for these extra "tie-breaker" considerations, which of them are the correct ones to use in which situation, and when they should kick in. Some might feel that adding such considerations is straying too far from the original intent of the theory, yet, not adding them seems to leave many basic cases without determinate answers.

NOTES

[1] Concerning (i), it is quite possible to question whether all organisms really have a good of their own. It is not implausible that having a good of one's own is possible only if one is *aware* of having said good. On this view, organisms require consciousness in order possess a good in themselves. Many teleological individualists, however, would hold that unconscious organisms are also capable of having a good of their own, and even if some of them wouldn't include bacteria and amoebae in this category, most would definitely include insects, and plants. The content of (iii) functions to motivate this move by defining "good" in terms of teleological fulfilment, which does not necessarily require that one invokes conscious experience. This move, however, must be argued for ver and above what I am capable of doing in this paper. Concerning (ii), it is quite possible to deny that it is possible to know what is good for non-human organisms. Taylor, however, holds that we can do so by "taking the view point of the organism," and seeing what is valuable and good for it from its own perspective. He writes when describing a butterfly, that it achieves its good by "successfully adapting to its physical surroundings and maintaining the normal biological functions of its species throughout its entire span of life … From the perspective of the butterfly's world, it has had a good life" (Taylor 1986:66). But Taylor could be dismissed as simply anthropomorphizing, and the ability to take another organism's view deemed a fantasy. I will not engage further in these critiques here, even though I think they are valid counterpoints that need to be answered. For the purposes of this paper I simply assume that it is possible for unconscious organisms to have a good of their own, and that we can have epistemic access to what constitutes this good.

[2] Taylor would probably agree with this view as well, as is indicated by the quote in note 1. The problem with Taylor is that he is vague about what exactly constitutes an organism's own good, and so it is difficult to extrapolate a clear view on (iii) from his writing. What is clear, though, is that he holds goal/function-fulfilment to be central to an organism living a good life.

[3] There are also *internally* competing goals. These are goals that organisms have built into themselves which contradict each other. One example of such teleology would be the phenomenon called "phenoptosis": the preprogramed death of organisms. It is becoming evident to biologists that organisms are, in some sense, programmed to die at a certain time to give fitness benefits to the species. Such built in biological goals stand in obvious contradiction to other mechanisms that function to keep us alive, like eating and resisting disease. Indeed, the idea that organisms have a single direction or contradiction-free purpose/nature is becoming increasingly archaic. Structurally, internally competing claims present the same problem for teleological individualists as externally competing claims. In this paper I focus entirely on external cases.

[4] In fact, I believe one does not have to hold that *all* of nature behaves competitively for my critique to hold, all one must do is to hold that *some fairly large part* of nature behave in this way.

[5] What ought to be included within the domain of moral subjects, will vary between different philosophical theories. The view considered in this paper, teleological individualism, includes any biological entity that has teleological goals.

[6] It must be mentioned that Taylor argues against ascribing moral rights to none-agentive subjects. However, he does this as a consequence of the schema I outlined. That is, because non-agentive moral subjects are unable to ascribe rights to other moral subjects (be they agents or not), we should not speak of them as having moral rights in the same sense as moral agents do. However, Taylor still ascribes non-agentive moral subjects with a corresponding set of "rights," by speaking instead of moral agents' responsibilities to act out of respect to nature. He even admits that excluding non-agentive moral subjects from the class of entities who have moral rights is mostly a matter of rhetoric, rather than a matter of constructing a resolute and coherent moral system.

[7] The idea of using tie-breakers to solve cases where a theory considered on its own is insufficient is not necessarily limited to teleological individualism. It is quite possible that the general structure of the idea could be used to solve other, unrelated, issues in moral philosophy. This, however, would have to be proved on a case by case basis.

[8] Note that I am not arguing exhaustively for some *specific* tie-breaker in this paper. I do think that the two alternatives being proposed here are both reasonable, but further arguments are needed to cement any of them as the best possible tie-breaker. What I am trying to do is to give the outlines of how to solve the interaction problem, and to show how to sketch a rough account of how to combine different ethical theories. This helps us solve cases that are difficult for some single theory to solve in isolation.

[9] (1) Is formulated in a very broad manner. What it actually takes for teleological individualism to be unable to solve a case is an important question. For the purpose of this paper, we would have to take it to mean that we either have good reasons to suspect that it cannot solve some case, or that we have strong intuitions against some solution that the theory does provide (the example of the over-powered algae would be an example of the latter), A committed proponent of tie-breakers and teleological individualism would have to explicate further exactly what it takes for a case to fulfil (1).

LITERATURE

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