

# The Will to Live and Reverence for Life: A Philosophical Base for Biocentrism

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**ABSTRACT:** Biocentrism environmental ethicists and animal rights defenders have been articulating ethical principles to extend moral standing to nonhuman beings. The natural propensities of living beings to pain and pleasure, being a subject of life, and having specific good and interest (as proposed by Singer, Regan, Tayler, and Goodpaster, respectively), have been taken as a reason to determine the moral status of the beings in question. This article makes the case that none of them can offer all-inclusive ideal for biocentrism to embrace all life forms as moral patients since they are either exclusive, hierarchical, or imprecise. To this end, I argue that it is possible to drive a unifying ideal from Schopenhauer's metaphysics: the will to live. The will to live is a quality that all living beings share, regardless of their abilities and propensities. Both conscious and unconscious beings, sentient and non-sentient creatures, lower animals and plants are the embodiments or physical forms of the ultimate reality that is the will to live. Thus, biocentrism becomes more valid and effective in environmental preservation by incorporating the will to live into its ethical principle.

**KEYWORDS:** biocentrism, will-to-live, environmental ethics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The anthropogenic environmental crisis is partly caused by views, philosophies, and ecological theories that implicitly or explicitly justify extrinsic evaluation and treatment of all life forms. Allocating a merely instrumental value to living beings amounts to disregarding their natural will to live and disdaining or denying them intrinsic or inherent value/worth. As Minteer points out, such a perception of nonhuman beings gains "ethical", "ontological", and "epistemological" support from anthropocentrism<sup>1</sup> that approaches the environment and its elements in terms of their utilities to the manifold goals of human beings. This extrinsic appraisal enables human beings to have untrammelled encroachment on the natural functions of nonhuman beings. It will end up in an irrepressible ecological crisis.

The impending danger cannot be mitigated unless humans shift their perception and evaluation of the environment from human-centred thinking to life-centred thinking, from viewing the environment and its elements as a collection of merely material stuff to viewing them as parts of nature with specific biological interests and goals that necessitate the moral extension of moral agents. Thus all that need to be considered (to dispense with anthropocentrism), is to show that environment with its living constituents possesses intrinsic value. "This is then thought to provide the basis for 'expanding the circle' of moral concern to include elements of nature."<sup>2</sup> The counterargument to human-centred (anthropocentric) thought is proposed by biocentric environmental ethics that extends moral standing to all life forms.<sup>3</sup> However, the standards biocentrists and defenders of animal rights set to incorporate living beings into subjects of moral worth are either vague or exclusive. For example, Singer<sup>4</sup> extends moral standing to "sentient beings," which includes only beings with the ability to feel pain and pleasure. Nevertheless, his standard of ethical treatment is undoubtedly exclusive and partial. Broader than Singer, Tom Regan considers being "subjects-of-a-life" as a standard to extend moral standing.<sup>5</sup> According to him, beings that are subjects of life are meant to be the beneficiaries of ethical treatments. However, his standard excludes plants from ethical treatment. Kenneth E. Goodpaster offers a broader ideal to embrace living beings as the subject of moral consideration. Living beings that have their own "good" and "interest" have to be incorporated into our moral treatments.<sup>6</sup> This appears to be vague or hierarchical regarding the interest and good of plants.

In this paper, I will derive a unifying (all-inclusive) principle for biocentrism environmental ethics from Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy of "Will-to-Live" and Albert Schweitzer's ethical principle of "Reverence for Life." For Schopenhauer, the world or the reality we perceive by our senses is the manifestation of a "blind" force: the will-to-live; "nature has her centre in every individual, for each one is the entire will-to-live."<sup>7</sup> From such a metaphysical assumption, we can deduce that every living being has intrinsic value, representing the ultimate reality—the will to live. The aforementioned ethical principles of biocentrism proposed by Singer, Regan, and Goodpaster can be subsumable, if not ignored, to Schopenhauer's doctrine of will-to-live. And it can serve the moral agents to extend moral standing for all life forms inclusively. Every life's will to live can be the centre of environmental ethics, as Albert Schweitzer articulates, if moral agents have the sentiment of reverence for life. According to Schweitzer, reverence for life is the most immediate and profound manifestation of the will to live.<sup>8</sup> Honouring and respecting the survival instincts of all living things is an ethical act. I contend that respecting the will to live with other living beings can be an all-encompassing ideal. It promotes biocentric egalitarianism and the unity of all life forms since every living thing possesses the will to live, which is the ultimate reality.

## 2. BIOCENTRISM IN NEED OF INCLUSIVE PRINCIPLES

Biocentrism, larger than anthropocentrism and narrower than environmental holism, extends ethical consideration to all life forms. While anthropocentrism, as Attfield contends, limits its moral reaches to current or future humans alone

environmental holism encompasses all ecological things. The latter prioritizes the balance and natural course of the ecosphere over the well-being of individual living beings. As Callicott suggests, nature (whole) deserves environmental ethics' attention. "If nature lacks intrinsic value, then environmental ethics is but a particular application of human-to-human ethics."<sup>9</sup> In line with Callicott's argument, G. E. Moore contends, "a beautiful world would be intrinsically good even if there were no sentient beings to enjoy it."<sup>10</sup> It is a problematic assumption to envisage the beauty and the inherent good of the whole without the actual constituents of individual beings, for the ecosphere or the system is abstract in the absence of its elements. Proposing an environmental remedy without considering the interests, well-being, value, and good of animals and plants is like arguing about human societies or communities without respecting and valuing the individual self, whose fundamental interests, survival, and well-being define and buttress the communities. Shrader-Frechette has a logical reply for those who pursue the welfare of the ecosystem by disregarding its living members. "There is no clear sense in which one can claim that natural ecosystems proceed toward homeostasis, stability, or balance, and there is no consensus among ecologists on the eco-systemic view of balance or stability."<sup>11</sup>

By situating itself between holism and anthropocentrism theories of environmental ethics, biocentrism attributes intrinsic value to individual living beings or all bio communities. Independent of the material, aesthetical, and spiritual purposes they give to human beings or each other, all life forms demand humans' ethical consideration.<sup>12</sup> To justify this moral extension, biocentrists and animal rights defenders consider the biological or natural reality of living beings. In what follows, I will present some of the principles used by bio centrists and figure out their ambiguity and exclusive approaches. Singer, for instance, devises specific standards to extend moral standing to nonhuman beings. What is the reason for Singer to bring animals into equality? In what kinds of conditions are animals given equal consideration? He sets the conditions in which the basic principle of equal moral treatment is extended. Every interest, want, desire, and will, whether animals or humans hold it, should be given similar consideration and treatment. Every being whose interests are impacted by an activity must be considered and given the same weight as any other beings' interests of a similar nature.<sup>13</sup> Singer limits 'interest' only to those beings or animals that can feel "pleasure and pain." The suffering and enjoyment of such beings (animals) should be considered and minimized as that of human beings because both have similar capacities as far as "sentience" is concerned. The principle of equality necessitates, regardless of a being's nature, its pain be counted equally with other sufferings of a like sort.<sup>14</sup> However, given that they are thought to be naturally incapable of feeling pain or pleasure, his norm of moral treatment unquestionably eliminates countless creatures and plants. Sentience is not an all-encompassing principle and cannot be applied equally to all living things.

Broader than Singer, Regan considers being "a subject-of-life" as a principle to have moral standing; beings that are subjects of life are meant to be the beneficiaries of ethical treatments. Beings with "a subject-of-life", according to him, are aware of their environment and natural interests. Subjects of life are more

than animate substances, separate from living and dying plants. The conclusion we draw is straightforward, at least in the case of mammals and birds: these creatures are, in reality, subjects-of-a-life.<sup>15</sup> Unequivocally, subjects-of-a-life as a standard to extend moral consideration excludes plants. Thus, subjects-of-a-life cannot serve biocentrism to treat every life as a moral community. J. Feinberg has a counterargument for both Singer and Regan about their treatment of plants. Plants are living entities having inherited biological propensities that govern their natural growth; they are not “mere things.” Furthermore, we do describe certain situations as “excellent” or “poor” for plants, implying that, unlike rocks, plants can experience “good” or “bad” conditions.<sup>16</sup>

Taylor and K. Goodpaster provide the second rationale for the moral extension to nonhuman beings. In Taylor’s words, a being has its good if “we may declare, accurately or erroneously, that something is good for an entity or bad for it, without reference to any other entity.”<sup>17</sup> In an article entitled “On Being Morally Considerable,” Goodpaster contends that beings with their own good and interests must be incorporated into our moral treatment. He suggests that the truth appears to be that non-sentient beings’ “interests” with sentient beings are much more likely to be taken into account than sentient beings’ own “interests.”<sup>18</sup> According to his argument, all living things share a specific interest and good, regardless of whether they are sentient. However, they have varying qualities and capacities to deal with obstacles in life. In his defence of ‘bio species impartiality’, Atfield takes the ability to have interest and good as the ground for moral agents to incorporate it into moral spheres. He accentuates that “the principle of biospecies impartiality, to the extent that it is acceptable, should be interpreted as applying to all living creatures, and not just to some.”<sup>19</sup> However, good and interest, or biological propensities, cannot be seen in all life forms equally and vividly. The type and intensity of good and the interest of living creatures differ. It is ambiguous or debatable whether to give equal ethical consideration to conscious beings, unconscious beings, and plants because all have their own good and interest.

Biocentrists frame environmental ethics to be concerned with interest and good of living beings. Hisao Onishi calls this environmental orientation “environmental virtue ethics” that pursues the flourishing of the ecology. Any virtue under this paradigm must aim to advance both the “good of the individual and the good of the collective, broadly construed to include non-human community.”<sup>20</sup> Trying to extend moral standing to beings based on interest and good leads to hierarchical treatment of them. As sentience and subject-of-a life fail to be all-inclusive principles of biocentrism because they leave various living creatures out of the moral sphere, being a possessor of good and interest cannot be applied to all life forms. Thus, biocentrism is in need of unequivocal, all-inclusive, and objective principles to justify its claims that all living beings deserve moral treatment and consideration. I argue that this gap can be resolved by applying Schopenhauer’s metaphysics (the will-to-live) to environmental ethics.

### 3. WILL-TO-LIVE AS AN INCLUSIVE PRINCIPLE FOR BIOCENTRISM

Our metaphysical understanding of humans, nature, and other living beings determine how we treat and approach them. In other words, the ethical consideration of a being is done according to the ontological status ascribed to the being. "Human agency is intrinsically value oriented. If an agent wishes to reach a goal, she puts a value upon it. To agents, it seems impossible not to value . . . We make evaluation to "establish or determine the goodness, value, quality, virtue, or correctness of the object of evaluation."<sup>21</sup>

Most thinkers derive moral ideals from metaphysical assumptions, i.e., their metaphysical view reveals itself in their ethical position. This is true for Schopenhauer. If we examine his metaphysics, we can learn environmental ethics lessons. More specifically, we can derive an inclusive ethical ideal from his concept of the will to live to corroborate biocentric ethics. For him, the world or the reality we perceive by our senses is the manifestation of a "blind" force: the will to live. He continues by saying that because every one of us embodies the entirety of the will to live, nature finds its centre in every one of us.

Nature therefore asserts, "I alone am all in all; in my preservation is everything concerned; the rest may perish, it is really nothing," even though this individual is simply a bug or worm. As a result, nature expresses itself, particularly in self-aware ways. By searching within, each person discovers the only reality in their inner being: their will to live, the thing-in-itself. As a result, they believe that they are the most significant and central beings in the universe.<sup>22</sup> The implicit message here is that every living being is equal in manifesting the ultimate reality, which is the will to live. Every living being considers itself the centre of nature and maintains and prioritizes its interests over the interests of others. In doing so, the will to live embodies itself in every living creature, and all are equal in performing this ontological task. Big and lower animals, conscious and unconscious animals, plants, and insects have a strong urge to live in themselves, planted by nature to enable them to survive, live, and maintain their good and interest. Hence, from such a metaphysical assumption, we can deduce that every living being has intrinsic value, for it represents the ultimate reality, which is "the thing-in-itself."<sup>23</sup> Of course, daring to argue that Schopenhauer's concept of the will to live can substantiate biocentric ethics seems a risk-full venture because he is a pessimistic thinker who finds nothing good in existence. He somewhat regrets that every form of existence is an error or a mistake that should be annihilated or terminated by death. He argues that "all good things are empty and fleeting, that the world on all sides is bankrupt, and that life is a business that does not cover the costs, so that our will may turn away from them."<sup>24</sup> He doesn't want to live in this world and sees death as a way to escape pain and suffering. But it's also important to remember that Schopenhauer thought life struggled in its way to survive because there was a blind force driving that endeavour or struggle. Since all life forms praise life over death and yearn to be something rather than nothing, my starting point from his metaphysics is not to reexamine his nihilistic perspective on life. Instead, I want to pick out a biocentric principle from it.

Thus, an ethically good deed or strategy would be to respect life regardless of its utility while acknowledging life's wish to live. The universal principles of biocentrism, which assign each life form inherent worth (intrinsic value), can be seen as the empirical embodiment of the ultimate reality (the will-to-live). Schopenhauer argues for biocentrism, saying that "every animal is capable of recognizing things" and that this allows them to control their movements. Even non-sentient living things like plants with the will-to-live would have some intrinsic value.<sup>25</sup>

This view can be the philosophical foundation for the central arguments of biocentric ethics, that every living being is a bearer of intrinsic value and deserves ethical treatment. I argue that the ideals of being "sentient," "the subject of life," and "having certain goods and interests" (which are developed by Singer, Regan, and Goodpaster, respectively) are subsumable to Schopenhauer's "will to live" and could serve the moral agents to extend moral standing unequivocally. For a being to have a will to live or to be an embodiment of reality, it does not need to be conscious, sentient, and have a specific interest of its own. Because the will to live, as a natural and irresistible force, compels living beings to maintain life. The will to live finds itself objective and embodied by forcing the individual to live. Schopenhauer asserts that it is true that the will to live manifests itself primarily as an effort to maintain the individual, i.e., it exhibits itself merely as an impulse to self-preservation, and it is an affirmation of the unique phenomenon for the period of its natural duration.<sup>26</sup> This natural dictation is inherent in all living organisms; all that exists represent a particular will.

#### 4. THE WILL-TO-LIVE IN HUMAN BEINGS

The practical and theoretical superiority of the human species to other living creatures seems to be a significant challenge to biocentric ethics that gives intrinsic worth to all living beings. Unfortunately, some thinkers prioritize the interests and values of human beings over other fellow creatures, completely deny the inherent values of nonhuman beings, and fail to consider these beings in their moral philosophy. For example, Kant is well known for disregarding the ethical treatment of nonhuman beings for their own sake. He denies taking the will to live in nonhuman beings for themselves; instead, he attributes them a mere extrinsic value; they are the means for the satisfaction of autonomous, rational, and end-in-themselves human beings.

The remark that follows makes it plain how Kant treats nonhuman animals. If a man shoots his dog because it can no longer do its duties, he does not fail in his duty to the dog because the animal cannot judge. Still, his conduct is inhumane and harms humanity because it is his responsibility to be moral towards humankind.<sup>27</sup> Mistreating (killing and suffering) nonhuman beings is inhuman not because the beings in focus are moral patients but because doing that hurts human-to-human relations.

The question is whether "the will to live" in humans is more significant or vital than the will to live in other creatures. On the other hand, does "the will to live" in human beings give them special privileges over other living beings?

Schopenhauer tells us that though the will-to-live, as a thing-in-itself, is objectified in any individual or Self that exists in the world, it becomes aware of itself or reaches the highest degree of self-realization in human beings. As a result, the will to live, or the inner being of nature, has passed through all animal species in a restless quest for complete objectification and enjoyment. This frequently occurs at various points as new species emerge on the same planet. However, it ultimately finds reflection and self-realization in being endowed with the faculty of reason, namely human beings.<sup>28</sup>

According to this viewpoint, the will to life is developing toward the stage of self-awareness. It appears hierarchical to assert that humans are where the will to live reaches self-realization and total embodiment. However, this never implies that humans have a greater will to live than other living creatures. All living things, including plants and animals, have an unbroken urge to survive. The only difference between the drive to live in humans and nonhuman creatures is that the former is self-aware. Being self-aware never establishes that humans are superior to other animals or the natural world, nor does it imply that only people possess honour, dignity, or intrinsic value. Many philosophers claim that humans have inherent values because of their rationality and other purportedly distinctive traits. For instance, Kant asserts that it is pointless to ask "...why does man exist?"<sup>29</sup> because, in Kant's perspective, rational beings are ends in themselves or have intrinsic value; no other goal for which human or rational beings are the means for. He maintains that when a rational person establishes universal law inside it while still yet being subject to these laws himself, he is a member of the kingdom of ends. When he is the one who makes laws and is not subject to the will of anybody else, he belongs to it as sovereign.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that human life is an end in and of itself and that all other wills are subordinated to the former. It is a reason for Kant to give human beings rights, honour, and dignity.

Schopenhauer, however, asserts that despite their intelligence and aptitude for thought, people lack honour and dignity. Man is instead "an object of pity."<sup>31</sup> Why does Schopenhauer disregard the dignity and rationality of human beings to establish moral standards among themselves? Why does he prefer to consider humans as "objects of pity" rather than as rational and ends in themselves? Because the will to live in humans becomes conscious of itself, and they are rational beings, it brings them nothing but misery and suffering.

He regards human nature and the state of the world as evil and unfit for habitation. According to Schopenhauer, "man" is a solid being who "is concrete willing and concrete wanting through and through; he is the concretion of a thousand desires and needs. With this, he stands alone on Earth, unsure of everything except his own needs and suffering."<sup>32</sup>

Unlike Kant and Descartes, Schopenhauer believes that humans' uniqueness is not for good but for bad. In other words, being aware of oneself and one's surroundings brings them burden and suffering rather than relief, comfort, and good. Then in this world, the capacity to feel pain increases with knowledge and therefore reaches its highest degree in man.<sup>33</sup> The more a being is capable of reasoning or thinking, the more it can feel the error or the mistake of nature. This in turn, creates the feeling of boredom and meaninglessness in nature.

Schopenhauer contends that since humans are aware of their nature (conscious of their will to live); and they know that the miseries and pains they suffer also happen in the lives of other living beings (because the will to live is similar in every living being), human beings extend compassion and sympathy to other beings and thereby develop ethics. He goes on to say that once people comprehend the solidarity of the will, a feeling of empathy is created in them, which is the primary fountain of ethical behaviour. Therefore, any morally sound system must forbid us from achieving prosperity at the expense of the suffering of others.

We might gain philosophical or metaphysical support for developing biocentric environmental ethics from his notion that all living things are objectified manifestations of the will to exist and require human compassion and ethical treatment. The core tenet of biocentric ethics—that every living thing has a right to exist, flourish, reproduce, or preserve itself—is justified by Schopenhauer’s claim that all living things have a shared drive to live.

## 5. REVERING LIFE TO WILL THE WILL-TO-LIVE

I have made an effort to emphasize the notion that moral beings should recognize the fundamental worth of every living being. Every kind of life is an end, as it is the empirical manifestation of the ultimate reality. Now I turn to the concept of reverence for life to corroborate will-to-live as the fundamental principle for life-centred environmental ethics—a form of ethics that respects the will-to-live in other living creatures and considers them as one among moral patients. The scope of any good ecological ethic should incorporate all life forms. Because to will the will of others to live is to be sensitive to others’ pleasure and pain. Schweitzer secures the concept of reverence for life as a fundamental principle of his biocentric ethics. The influence of Schopenhauer on Schweitzer’s view of living beings is apparent. When Schweitzer argues that moral agents ought to adopt reverence for life, he explicitly confirms Schopenhauer’s understanding of living beings: that all that happens to exist is the physical representation of the will to live. Next, Schweitzer explains the relational nature of the will to live. The will to live enters into relationships with all expressions of the will to live that surround it. The sentiment of revering life is an inner compulsion to be true to itself and consistent with itself.<sup>34</sup>

Contrary to the Cartesian dualistic understanding of human beings, Schweitzer argues that the inner sentiment of reverence for life clearly defines a human being. That is why Schweitzer replaces Descartes’ assertion of the existence of the human Self: I think, therefore I am. For Schweitzer, Descartes’ famous statement (I think, therefore I am) is too abstract and isolates the human Self from nature or other life forms around her. He replaces it with more inclusive and spontaneous views of human beings. Here is his alternative idea of Descartes’ dualism: “I am life which will to live, and I exist in the midst of life which will to live. This is no more excogitated subtlety. Day after day and hour after hour, I proceed on my way invested in it.”<sup>35</sup> More than the capacity for thought (accomplished intellectually and mentally), being alive and coexisting with other living beings serve as



an objective definition of the human person. According to Schweitzer, the human Self is a part of the cycle of life rather than existing outside of it.

When Schweitzer discusses the ethics of reverence for life, he considers the integration of life. Ethics begins with moral agents fully formulating and seeking to realize the world affirmation inherent in their will to exist. Ethics is self-devotion for the sake of life, inspired by reverence for life. To be ethical is to think honestly. The specific theme is that everyone has an inherent desire to live. But humans express this desire most clearly through their ethics, which are founded on the reverence for life. All empathy, sympathy, pity, love, and enthusiasm for nonhuman beings are included in this sentiment. It is a natural impulse to preserve life at a justifiable cost; it is willing to recognize oneself in others and acknowledge the interconnectedness of life. These are all examples of feelings of reverence for life. The following is how Schweitzer explains this phenomenon: "Just as the wave has no existence of its own, but is part of the continual movement of the ocean, thus I also am destined never to experience my life as self-contained, but, always as part of the experience which is going on around me."<sup>36</sup> Being aware of the interwoven nature of life gives rise to the sentiment of reverence for life. He takes all living creatures as the community of life in which no species has the privilege to foster its interest and good at the expense of others.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Humans' untrammelled encroachment on the natural function of the environment is behind the anthropocentric ecological crisis. Anthropocentrism has given philosophical and ethical justification for unchecked human interference with the natural environment; it attributes extrinsic value to ecology in general and nonhuman beings in particular. Lately, biocentric environmental ethics challenges human-centred thinking by extending moral consideration and treatment to all life forms. In doing so, biocentrism acknowledges the inherent value (intrinsic) of living beings and regards them as the end in themselves. However, biocentrists and animal right defenders fail to provide all-inclusive philosophical and ethical ideals for biocentrism. Their attempt to propose a unifying ethical principle is either exclusive, hierarchical, or vague. Biocentric environmental ethics can't extend moral standing to all life forms by considering the particular propensity of living beings. By sentience, non-sentient creatures are excluded; plants are left out of the ethical sphere by a *subject-of-life*. Considering susceptibility (having an interest and good of its own) fails to be a unifying ideal for two reasons. First, the intensity and type of good and interest are different in every creature. Conscious beings, mammals, and birds have more complex interests and good than lower animals and plants. Thus, taking the interest and good of creatures to incorporate them into the moral sphere leads to hierarchical treatment. One could argue that the more complex and intense the being's interest, the more ethical consideration (priority) it deserves. Second, it is difficult to identify the good and interests of some beings.

Therefore, an all-encompassing principle that can be applied to all life forms is needed in biocentrism environmental ethics. I contend that Schopenhauer's

metaphysics contains an all-encompassing biocentric ideal: the will to live. The will to live is a quality that all living things share, regardless of their abilities and propensities. Both conscious and unconscious beings, sentient and non-sentient creatures, lower animals and plants are the embodiments or physical forms of the ultimate reality that is the will to live. Whatever the circumstance, everyone attempts to be something rather than nothing, someone rather than nobody and adjusts themselves to the change. We can broaden our moral horizons by establishing our ethical standards on this reality. Respecting the will of others to live, grow, and preserve their interest in something is a fundamental ethical principle. Because the will to live as the ultimate reality is a relational force, it recognizes itself in others.

## ENDNOTES

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