

The Teachings of Francis of Assisi as a Possible Theistic Model of a Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory for Environmental Ethics

Amidst the shift towards an eco-friendly perspective, challenges arise regarding the specifics of defining exactly what an eco-friendly world should look like with various previously established religious beliefs, moral practices, and governmental systems. An integral part of these systems is the dependance on moral philosophy to provide people direction, but a shifting system requires a shifting road map. As Callicott explains in his 1984 article, the subfield of environmental ethics has emerged from moral philosophy with the intention to consider the effects of humans on the environment, i.e., the spreading of pollution, consummation of resources, and more.¹ Callicott explains the need for a non-anthropocentric value theory within environmental ethics, one that intrinsically values other, non-human aspects of the world. He critically analyzes three possible models: theism, holism, and sentimentalism. After providing on example of each, Callicott discards the theistic and holistic models, instead arguing for the sentimental model that he calls the Darwin-Leopold environmental ethic, which he grounds in Hume's moral psychology.²

Although I follow Callicott's argument, I challenge such a quick dismissal of theism as a possible model. The aim of this paper is to propose the teachings of Francis of Assisi as another theistic model within Callicott's framework. *Canticle of the Sun* is Francis' most popular text where he illustrates his relationship with God through a praise of the natural world.³ The text is popularly interpreted as depicting Francis' understanding of creation: "What we call nature, he

¹ J. Baird Callicott, "Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory and Environmental Ethics," (*American Philosophical Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (October 1984): 299-309. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20014060>), 299. For the origin of the necessity for a non-anthropocentric value theory for environmental ethics, Callicott refers readers to Holmes Rolston III, "Is there an Ecological Ethic?" (*Ethics* 85, no. 2 (January 1975): 93-109. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2379925>).

² Callicott, 304-305

³ "The Canticle of the Sun." The Franciscan Friars: Franciscan Ministries and Missions. 29 August 2021. <https://franciscanfriarscresson.org/the-canticle-of-the-sun/>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

regarded as creation. Creation in nature is seen in the light of the Creator.”⁴ It is this perspective as well as the actions of Francis himself that will be explored in this paper. As one averse to endlessly preaching, he generally preferred to share his teachings through his actions, assuming people would imitate his behaviour.⁵ Thus, reference to Francis’ teachings throughout this paper will include not only his texts but his biographical actions as well.

This paper will reinterpret Francis’ beliefs as seen through his actions and in the *Canticle of the Sun* through the lens of Callicott’s work on non-anthropocentric value theory. The following sections will critique Callicott’s dismissal of the theistic non-anthropocentric value theory model, establish the requirements for an effective theory according to Callicott’s framework, and explore the teachings of Francis of Assisi. Ultimately, it will be argued that Francis of Assisi’s teachings provide a plausible theistic model for a non-anthropocentric value theory regarding environmental ethics, according to Callicott’s framework.

Callicott’s Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory Framework

Callicott defines an anthropocentric value theory as one that “confers intrinsic value on human beings and regards all other things, including other forms of life, as being only instrumentally valuable, i.e., valuable only to the extent that they are means or instruments which may serve human beings.”⁶ He claims that this has been the traditional ethical theory applied to moral issues. However, relevant moral issues have now expanded to include symptoms of modern technology, such as the disposal of radioactive waste.⁷ The practice of anthropocentric-based ethics thus far

⁴ Willem Marie Speelman, “A Song in the Dark. Francis of Assisi’s *Canticle of Brother Sun*,” (*Perichoresis* 14, no. 2 (2016): 53-66. DOI: 10.1515/perc-2016-0010), 55.

⁵ “Francis assumed that his followers would learn by imitation. Giving them rules or structures to follow was not merely difficult for him; it placed him in a position of superiority that he found painful.” Augustine Thompson, *Francis of Assisi A New Biography*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1900), 40.

⁶ Callicott, 299

⁷ Callicott, 299

cannot appropriately account for the changes towards non-anthropocentric values because it was not designed with concern for such aspects of the world. Therefore, a push for a non-anthropocentric value theory is necessary.

Callicott defines a non-anthropocentric value theory as one that purposely recognizes intrinsic value on non-human beings, which, although clearly a broad statement, has the basic principle appropriate for an ethical structure shifting to include environmental factors.⁸ Environmental ethics is both “environmental because it concerns non-human natural entities, natural communities, or nature as a whole, and ethical because it attempts to provide theoretical grounds for the *moral standing* or *moral considerability* of non-human natural entities, natural communities, or nature as a whole.”⁹ Callicott ultimately views this perspective as a developing shift in the moral philosophy paradigm and suggests that an appropriate non-anthropocentric value theory can support the adjustment.¹⁰

The first model Callicott considers for a non-anthropocentric value theory, and the only model considered in this paper, is the theistic axiology of the Judeo-Christian God. Callicott claims that by using the interpretation of God as creator who has declared his creation of the natural world to be ‘good,’ then everything within creation has intrinsic value.¹¹ He considers the resulting perspective of the stewardship position, which Callicott supports as there appears to be significant textual support for such a stance and it values the natural world as a whole rather than selected individuals.¹² However, this model is rejected because Callicott claims, “[i]t is primitive, essentially mythic, ambiguous, and inconsistent with modern science, and more especially with

⁸ Callicott, 299

⁹ Callicott, 300

¹⁰ Callicott, 300

¹¹ Callicott, 302

¹² Callicott, 302

modern ecological, evolutionary biology.”¹³ Therefore, according to Callicott, it is metaphysically inconsistent with “the world view in which environmental problems are [perceived] as fundamentally important and morally charged in the first place.”¹⁴

There is a lack of substantial and detailed support for the rejection of the Judeo-Christian theistic model, as well as a lack of consideration of any other possible theistic model. The notion of God as creator is a fundamental belief for such a wide array of Christian denominations on which their morals are built. It is not an appropriate argument to be used as a model because it is too broad of a concept with many interpretations, nor can it simply be rejected as a general model without extensive evidence. However, from the critique of this theistic model, as well as the critique of the holistic model not addressed in this paper, Callicott deduces the requirements for an appropriate non-anthropocentric value theory for environmental ethics.¹⁵

There are several requirements for a sufficient non-anthropocentric value theory for environmental ethics, according to Callicott. The theory,

must provide for the intrinsic value of both individual organisms and a hierarchy of superorganismic entities - populations, species, biocoenoses, biomes, and the biosphere. It should provide differential intrinsic value for wild and domestic organisms and species. It must be conceptually concordant with modern evolutionary and ecological biology. And it must provide for the intrinsic value of *our present* ecosystem, its component parts and complement of species, not equal value for any ecosystem.¹⁶

¹³ Callicott, 302

¹⁴ Callicott, 302

¹⁵ The presentation and critique of the holism model can be found on pages 302-304.

¹⁶ Callicott, 304

In short, the theory must demonstrate intrinsic value of both an individual (human or animal) and its system, differentiate value based on domesticity, concur with modern science, and establish the value of all aspects of our current ecosystem above other possible ecosystems. A value theory that fails to meet one of these standards ultimately fails as an appropriate non-anthropocentric theory for environmental ethics. The following sections offer the possibility of different avenue for a theistic model of a non-anthropocentric value theory, which is found in Francis of Assisi.

Francis of Assisi's Teachings and the *Canticle of the Sun*

Francis composed the *Canticle of the Sun* or *Canticle of Brother Sun* near his death, which showcases his clear affinity for all of nature, or creation.¹⁷ In this text, Francis praises God through appreciation of creation as a unified whole, specifying the four elements of earth, fire, air, and water, as well as the place of death within life.¹⁸ It is clear in this work that Francis sees and praises God in all aspects of creation, and recognizes the interconnectedness of the natural world.

The most notable feature of the *Canticle of the Sun* is the use of familial language, which suggests that Francis accepted all of creation into his spiritual family.¹⁹ Phrases like, “Sir Brother Sun,” “Sister Moon,” “Brother Wind,” and “Sister Water” are found throughout the *Canticle*, implying an apparent view of interconnectedness between himself and the natural world.²⁰ Francis also mentions giving “sustenance to Your creatures” and “Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and

¹⁷ Thompson, 55; Francis viewed nature and creation as synonymous terms.

¹⁸ Speelman, 53-55. The translated version of the *Canticle* used in this paper can be found here. Speelman cites the translation from: R. J. Armstrong, J. A. W. Hellmann and W. J. Short, *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 2: The Founder, (New York, NY: New City Press, 2000)

¹⁹ Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes towards the Environment*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 127

²⁰ Speelman, 53-54

governs us, and who produces fruit with colored flowers and herbs,” lines that show Francis’ respect of the current ecosystem with the simultaneous ability to value the animals, plants, and humans, which he seems to set apart from animals due to their responsibility to serve God.²¹ However, Francis does differentiate between the value of individual animals outside of the *Canticle*. An example is his use of names like “Brother Fly” as a form of criticism towards his followers or brothers, contrasting with the act of saving a hare intentionally caught for food.²² The juxtaposition of these actions reinforces Francis’ view of the place of humans as separate from and essentially above the place of animals, yet supporting the intrinsic value of the animals.

Although he obviously found immense joy in nature, it is important to note that Francis’ approach to nature was ultimately based on scripture. He refused to become a vegetarian, as his opinion was that “animals praise God by their being and are a model of obedience to God; they are not...identified with God himself.”²³ They are still simply creatures, and, according to Corinthians, he was to eat what was put before him.²⁴ It is these kinds of actions and beliefs that show Francis’ dedication to God above all else; while he supported non-anthropocentric values, he retained a place for functional anthropocentrism in the name of God.

Ultimately, the *Canticle of the Sun* is an appropriate summary of the personal affinity for and official use of nature in Francis of Assisi’s lifelong teachings: “the celestial bodies, weather, water, fire, and earth, human beings who share life together in peace, and finally a good death, all create space for life as God gave it.”²⁵ He remained a devout Catholic throughout the course of his life and was canonized within two years after his death, although his beliefs are becoming

²¹ Speelman, 54

²² Thompson, 55-56

²³ Speelman, 56

²⁴ “Corinthians 10:27 (New International Version),” *Bible Gateway*.

²⁵ Speelman, 62

increasingly relevant in modern times.²⁶ It is from these teachings that an environmentally conscious, Judeo-Christian theistic model can be drawn for Callicott's non-anthropocentric value theory for environmental ethics.

Francis of Assisi's as a Theistic Model for Non-Anthropocentrism

This section will explore the extent to which Francis of Assisi's teachings fit within Callicott's requirements for an effective non-anthropocentric value theory for environmental ethics. Recall that an appropriate theory must demonstrate the intrinsic value of the individual, the intrinsic value of larger systems within the biosphere to which the individual belongs (e.g. populations, species, biomes, etc.), differentiate the value between domesticated and wild animals, prioritize the value of our current ecosystem structure above other potentialities, and concur with modern science.²⁷

Francis of Assisi's support of the intrinsic value of the individual is apparent both in his use of familial language and in his daily actions towards animals. The familial language concerning his comrades (recall "Brother Fly") and towards himself as "Brother Ass" demonstrate periods of frustration with individual humans.²⁸ The existence of these irritations does not negate the intrinsic value that Francis recognized in each of these individuals simply as humans, but instead shows the extent of personal involvement that he devoted to those around him. Without a high level of attention and care, Francis surely would not have been aware enough of the state of himself or others to warrant individual names, even negative ones. Such awareness is also exemplified in his relationship with animals. For example, the compulsion to safely remove worms from the main

²⁶ Lawrence Cunningham, "Francis of Assisi as a Catholic Saint," (*Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2006): 56-71, <https://doi.org/10.1353/log.2006.0004>), 65

²⁷ Refer to pages 2 and 3 for this explanation.

²⁸ Thompson, 55

road to avoid their being stepped on shows the care he had for each type of creature.²⁹ It was a completely selfless act exemplifying how he naturally perceived the existence of other creatures.

The examples mentioned thus far have demonstrated the intrinsic value of the general wild animal. However, Francis also has multiple encounters with creatures that have become more individually meaningful, which show his ability to differentiate the kinds of value animals have based on personal experiences. The hare that Francis refused to eat and instead set free became a kind of pet for a time. “The small creature must have found a sense of security beside Francis, for it would not leave his side...”³⁰ In addition, lambs had a particularly personal value to Francis as well, because “lambs were always images of Christ...”³¹ He had a similar approach to birds, which is detailed in his “Sermon to the Birds.”³² These practices can arguably be interpreted as the animals that Francis perceived to have a greater relevance or connection to God therefore offered a more personal and individual value to Francis. This notion is analogous with how one would view a pet; the animals to which one can closely relate become increasingly intrinsically valued. However, that is not to say that such a perspective decreases the intrinsic value of non-domesticated animals – it is simply two different approaches.

Expanding from the individual to ecosystems, the value Francis places on these larger structures can be found within the *Canticle of the Sun*. The use of familial language explored in the previous section regarding the classical elements of earth, air, fire, and water shows Francis’ acknowledgement of a personal relationship with fundamental components of creation through which he recognizes his God, the creator. His love and appreciation for creation itself is clear in

²⁹ Thompson, 56

³⁰ Thompson, 56

³¹ Thompson, 57

³² Sorrell dedicates a chapter to analyzing the “Sermon to the Birds” in *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*; 55-68.

the *Canticle*, suggesting that it is within reason that Francis values not only systems within the biosphere, but the current system in which God has placed him and his fellow humans.

The last requirement set by Callicott for a non-anthropocentric value theory to be appropriate for environmental ethics is that it must assent to modern science, specifically ecology and evolutionary biology. Admittedly, there is nothing that Francis plainly says in the *Canticle* nor specific actions that specifically support modern science as the current state of science, as such, did not exist during Francis' time. However, it is clear that Francis supported the right to life and prosperity for both humans and the natural world. The *Canticle* describes not only his appreciation for the fundamental elements, but it showed that he understood how those elements worked within a bigger system; Brother Sun radiates light for the world, Brother Wind provides air for all creatures, Sister Water is useful and precious, Brother Fire offers light during the night, Sister Mother Earth sustains creatures with fruit, and Sister Death is inescapable for every creature.³³ Francis viewed God the creator through these aspects of the natural world, but nonetheless understood the basic relationships of these fundamental concepts.

Conclusion

As environmental ethics becomes an increasingly important subfield of relevant moral philosophy, it is vital to develop a value theory to represent the shift. Callicott's argument for a non-anthropocentric value theory and critiques of three different possible models to fill this need helped to open up the conversation. However, the lack of substantial evidence for his rejection of theism is problematic as the model he presents is too general to function effectively.

³³ Speelman, 53-54

This paper considered the teachings of Francis of Assisi as found in biographies and the *Canticle of the Sun* as another potential theistic model for a non-anthropocentric value theory. Following examples of instinctive actions performed by Francis as well as the concepts found in *Canticle*, it can be argued that Francis' beliefs and practices meet the requirements set forth by Callicott for an adequate theory. Admittedly, there are many aspects of Francis of Assisi that were not considered in this paper due to a lack of space, but general subject analysis suggests that his teachings include supporting the intrinsic value of all creatures on an individual and hierarchical level, values the current ecosystem above all other possibilities, and concur with modern science. His practices have moral, environmental, and modern relevance that provide a substantial case for a theistic model for a non-anthropocentric value theory of environmental ethics.

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