

# 1

## Moving Away from Human-Centeredness: From *Silent Spring* to Deep Ecology

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT AND ECOPHILOSOPHY

IN TODAY'S WORLD, environmental problems have become part of everyday existence. Pick up almost any newspaper or general scientific magazine and you will be confronted by such environmental issues as terrestrial pollution; the pollution of freshwater and marine environments; atmospheric pollution (ranging from local effects to such global concerns as acid rain, the greenhouse effect, and the depletion of the ozone layer); the unintended consequences of the widespread use of biocides (ranging from damage to human health to the emergence of biocide-resistant varieties of pests); the long-term containment of highly toxic chemical and nuclear wastes; the hazards associated with nuclear testing and nuclear power generation; the immediate, mid-term, and long-term devastation that would be caused by nuclear war and the nuclear winter that would follow such a war; the hazards associated with releasing genetically engineered organisms into the environment; the degradation and depletion of fisheries, forests, croplands, and grazing lands and the related issues of topsoil erosion, desertification, and urban expansion or citification; the destruction of wilderness; the destruction of nonhuman habitat (whether wilderness or not); the extinction or threatened extinction of particular plant and animal species and, more generally, the astonishing rate of these extinctions; the cruelties inflicted upon nonhuman animals in the course of factory farming and scientific study; the degradation and extinction of aboriginal

human cultures; and, finally, the plethora of problems associated with exponential human population growth.<sup>1</sup>

Increasing awareness of these worldwide problems has given rise to a variety of popularly based responses that are collectively referred to as the environmental movement. This movement has increasingly become a significant minority force in contemporary social and political life at whatever level one wishes to consider—local, national, or international. The birth of the environmental movement as a vigorous, temporally continuous, geographically widespread, and increasingly well-organized social and political phenomenon is typically dated to the virtual explosion of interest that attended the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.<sup>2</sup> Carson indicted modern humanity for its headlong and unthinking rush down the technological "quick fix" path of employing synthetic chemicals to control insects. She referred to these pesticides, themselves initially a by-product of Second World War research into chemical warfare, as "elixirs of death," and she warned that they invited the prospect of a dying world, a world in which springtime might no longer bring forth new life, only a chilling silence. Carson's forceful statement had an enormous impact at the time: her book generated both widespread concern and fierce controversy, remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for thirty-one weeks, sold half a million copies in hardcover before being brought out in paperback, aroused attempts at the character assassination of Carson as well as the intimidation of her publishing company, and went on to win a string of awards.<sup>3</sup> Given the way in which *Silent Spring* served to raise and galvanize public concern over environmental issues, and given the continuing and likely future importance of these issues to society at large, it can be seen why Robert B. Downs included Carson's book, along with the Bible and works by such figures as Plato, Aristotle, Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, Marx, and Freud, as the most recent of the twenty-seven entries in his *Books That Changed the World*.<sup>4</sup>

Although *Silent Spring* was primarily concerned with the biological damage we were doing to the world and, particularly, to ourselves, it was clear that, at another level, Carson's book was

also an indictment of our arrogant conception of our place in the larger scheme of things. For Carson, our ecological thoughtlessness was matched only by our lack of philosophical maturity. In the last paragraph of her book, Carson concluded that “the ‘control of nature’ is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man.” The effect of Carson’s critique was to suggest to many people that what was needed first and foremost in regard to ecological problems was not bigger and better technical solutions but rather a thorough rethinking of our most fundamental attitudes concerning our place in the larger scheme of things.

This view was powerfully reinforced just a few years later in a now-famous paper by the medieval historian Lynn White, Jr., presented to a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science held in December 1966. This paper was published the following March in *Science* under the title “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” and has since been reprinted in numerous places.<sup>5</sup>

White struck an extremely sensitive nerve in the body of Western culture in arguing that “especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric [i.e., human-centered] religion the world has seen” and that, accordingly, “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” for the ecological problems that have attended the “Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man’s transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature.” White was implying a distinction between the Christian tradition that developed in the Latin West and that which developed in the Greek East. As White explained in his paper, Western Christianity developed in the direction of seeking to “understand God’s mind by discovering how his creation operates,” whereas Eastern Christianity continued to conceive of nature “primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men: the ant is a sermon to sluggards, rising flames are the symbol of the soul’s aspiration.”<sup>6</sup> The Latin West, in other words, adopted an active, voluntarist approach to nature whereas

the Greek East maintained a contemplative-intellectualist approach.

In concluding his analysis, White urged that the solution to our ecological problems lay not in the abandonment of religion *per se*, but rather in the abandonment of anthropocentrism:

What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one. . . . We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man. . . . Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our destiny.<sup>7</sup>

In White's view, the remedy for our ecological problems lay in the direction of the alternative Christian view of the human-nonhuman relationship provided by St. Francis of Assisi: "St. Francis proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it: He tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation." St. Francis's attempt "to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures" makes him, for White, "the greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history." Accordingly, White concluded his analysis by proposing St. Francis as "a patron saint for ecologists."<sup>8</sup>

For his heretical indictment of Western Christianity for its anthropocentric nature, White's paper has probably generated more controversy than any other paper—as distinct from book—in the history of modern environmental thought. Moreover, this straightforward but erudite paper is *still* compulsory reading for anyone interested in ecophilosophy or the development of science and technology. And for those who have previously read White's paper, rereading it remains a rewarding experience.

White's critics have generally attempted to show that the Bible is best interpreted as advocating an attitude of benign steward-

ship on the part of humans toward the nonhuman world. However, White does not doubt that the resources exist within the Christian tradition for a less anthropocentric approach to the nonhuman world (indeed, as we have just seen, he proposes St. Francis as “a patron saint for ecologists”). Rather, as a historian, White is more concerned with how the Bible *has* been interpreted. And even here, he accepts that these interpretations have not always been employed in such a way as to encourage and legitimate the technological domination of the nonhuman world; this is the point of his contrast between the voluntarist Latin West and the contemplative-intellectualist Greek East.

White reiterated his rejection of anthropocentrism a few years later in a strong and insightful (but far less well-known) defense of his controversial “Historical Roots” paper:

I have not discovered anyone who publicly advocates pollution. Everybody says that he is against it. Yet the crisis deepens because all specific measures to remedy it are either undercut by “legitimate” interest groups, or demand kinds of regional cooperation for which our political system does not provide. We deserve our increasing pollution because, according to our structure of values, so many other things have priority over achieving a viable ecology. [The problem with] our structure of values [is that] a man-nature dualism is deep-rooted in us. . . . Until it is eradicated not only from our minds but also from our emotions, we shall doubtless be unable to make fundamental changes in our attitudes and actions affecting ecology.<sup>9</sup>

This rejection of the assumption of human self-importance in the larger scheme of things is, of course, hardly original with Carson and White. It can be traced right back through the rich, albeit minority, philosophical and religious tradition that informs the modern environmental movement. One thinks, for example, of the pre-Socratics, of St. Francis, Spinoza, Thoreau, John Muir, Santayana, Robinson Jeffers, Aldo Leopold, and the later Heidegger.<sup>10</sup> What is of interest here, however, is the fact that although *Silent Spring* effectively laid down a nonanthropocentric challenge to philosophers at what is typically considered

the birth of the modern environmental movement, it can be generally said that philosophers did not seriously begin to address the question of our anthropocentric attitudes toward the nonhuman world until the early 1970s. The few papers and books that addressed this issue in anything more than a passing fashion prior to the mid-1970s are thus now considered as “early” work in this area of inquiry—an area that has since come to be referred to as *ecophilosophy*, *environmental philosophy*, or *environmental ethics*.

A note on terminology is warranted at this point. I will employ the term *ecophilosophy* in preference to *environmental philosophy* or *environmental ethics* herein for two reasons. First, the term *environment* refers to the *external* conditions or surroundings of organisms, whereas *ecology* refers to the *relationships* between organisms and their external conditions or surroundings, that is, their environment. The prefix *eco-* (for “ecology”) is therefore more appropriate for my purposes than the adjective *environmental* because the kind of approach that I will be developing herein is one that attempts to break down the rigid distinctions that we tend to draw between ourselves and our environment. Instead of seeking to maintain these distinctions, this approach attempts to foster a greater awareness of the intimate and manifold relationships that exist between what we conventionally designate as *self* and what we conventionally designate as *environment*. It attempts, in other words, to foster the development of an *ecological* rather than *environmental* consciousness. Second, my approach (in common with other ecophilosophical approaches) is one that includes considerations that would generally be conceived of as belonging not only to the sphere of ethics but also to the spheres of metaphysics, epistemology, and social and political philosophy. *Philosophy* is therefore a better covering term than *ethics*. Thus, my strong preference for the term *ecophilosophy*.

Ecophilosophical thought proceeded to develop quite vigorously during the mid- to late 1970s and can be considered as having attained the status of an institutionalized force in contemporary philosophy—to have come of age, we could say—in 1979, with the publication of the consistently interesting and high-quality journal *Environmental Ethics*. This was the first profes-

sional, academic journal exclusively devoted to the *philosophical* aspects of environmental problems broadly conceived.<sup>11</sup>

Many in the wider environmental movement might well consider that ecophilosophy's coming of age was in fact too long in coming. After all, it followed some seven years after the first major international conference on environmental problems (the "United Nations Conference on the Human Environment," Stockholm, May–June 1972); some seven years also after the 1972 publication of such landmarks in environmental awareness as *The Limits to Growth* (a report commissioned by the Club of Rome) and *A Blueprint for Survival* (written by the editors of *The Ecologist*); and some seventeen years after the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.<sup>12</sup> But this late development itself simply further illustrates the human-centeredness that Carson and White identified as pervading our culture—as does the fact that ecophilosophy is still very much a marginal rather than a mainstream pursuit in contemporary academic philosophy. For the truth is that the assumption of human self-importance in the larger scheme of things has, to all intents and purposes, been the single deepest and most persistent assumption of (at least) all the *dominant* Western philosophical, social, and political traditions since the time of the classical Greeks.

Before moving on to illustrate this last claim, it is important to note two significant qualifications that are built into it. First, I say "to all intents and purposes" because where these dominant traditions have supposedly been primarily theocentric rather than anthropocentric, it has of course still been humans who have, by divine decree, had "dominion . . . over all the earth [which they are enjoined to] fill and subdue . . . and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen. 1:26, 28). Moreover, from a nonanthropocentric perspective, personalistic kinds of theocentrism, such as the dominant form of Christianity where humans are made in the image of a god to whom they have a privileged personal relationship, are in any case simply anthropocentric *projections* upon the cosmos. The second qualification is in the phrase "since the time of the *classical* Greeks" (i.e., the Sophists, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) as distinct from the *early* Greeks,

who initiated Western philosophy (i.e., the early and later Ionians, the Pythagoreans, the Eleatics, and the Atomists—often collectively referred to as the pre-Socratics), because, as Bertrand Russell has pointed out, “What is amiss, even in the best philosophy after Democritus [i.e., after the pre-Socratics], is an undue emphasis on man as compared with the universe.”<sup>13</sup>

Moving on to illustrate the assumption of human self-importance in the larger scheme of things, we can see that this assumption shows through, for example, in those prescientific views that saw humans as dwelling at the center of the universe, as made in the image of God, and as occupying a position well above the “beasts” and just a little lower than the angels on the Great Chain of Being. And while the development of modern science, especially the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions, served to sweep these views aside—or at least those aspects that were open to empirical refutation—it did no such thing to the human-centered assumptions that underlay these views. Francis Bacon, for example, saw science as “enlarging the bounds of Human Empire”; Descartes likewise saw it as rendering us the “masters and possessors of nature.”<sup>14</sup> Approximately three and a half centuries later, Neil Armstrong’s moon walk—the culmination of a massive, politically directed, scientific and technological development effort—epitomized both the literal acting out of this vision of “enlarging the bounds of Human Empire” and the literal expression of its anthropocentric spirit: Armstrong’s moon walk was, in his own words at the time, a “small step” for him, but a “giant leap for Mankind.” Back here on earth, we find that even those philosophical, social, and political movements of modern times most concerned with exposing discriminatory assumptions have typically confined their interests to the human realm, that is, to issues to do with imperialism, race, socioeconomic class, and gender.

When attention is finally turned to the exploitation by humans of the nonhuman world, our arguments for the conservation and preservation of the nonhuman world continue to betray anthropocentric assumptions. We argue that the nonhuman world should be conserved or preserved because of its use value to



humans (e.g., its scientific, recreational, or aesthetic value) rather than for its own sake or for its use value to *nonhuman* beings. It cannot be emphasized enough that the vast majority of environmental discussion—whether in the context of public meetings, newspapers, popular magazines, reports by international conservation organizations, reports by government instrumentalities, or even reports by environmental groups—is couched within these anthropocentric terms of reference. Thus, even many of those who deal most directly with environmental issues continue to perpetuate, however unwittingly, the arrogant assumption that we humans are central to the cosmic drama; that, essentially, the world is made for us. John Seed, a prominent *nonanthropocentric* ecological activist, sums up the situation quite simply when he writes, “The idea that humans are the crown of creation, the source of all value, the measure of all things, is deeply embedded in our culture and consciousness.”<sup>15</sup>

For the large majority of philosophers, however, anthropocentrism is simply not an issue. It is “where they live,” and they have no desire to demolish such a secure and comfortable home. Descartes, the acknowledged father of modern philosophy, provides what can be seen as an archetypal image here: in the first of his six *Meditations* he describes how he has cut himself off from the world—“Today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone . . . sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown”—in preparation for a sweeping review of his beliefs, in which he manages to doubt the existence of everything but his own existence.<sup>16</sup> William Barrett accurately sums up the legacy of this tradition when he writes, “The idea of nature has played a small part in contemporary philosophy. Bergson once remarked that most philosophers seem to philosophize as if they were sealed in the privacy of their study and did not live on a planet surrounded by the vast organic world of animals, plants, insects, and protozoa, *with whom their own life is linked in a single history*” (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup> Of course, ecophilosophers also need clear stretches of uninterrupted time to think their views through and set them down, but the point of the image provided by Descartes

is, as Barrett's quotation suggests, that the social, psychological, and ecological circumstances of his thinking—a solitary, thinking being cut off from the world—so perfectly match the content of his thinking, which gives priority to the reality of his own existence qua a thinking being at the expense of everything else.

The dominance of this anthropocentric philosophical tradition is such that those philosophers who find its atmosphere too stifling are likely to find themselves professionally locked out in various ways if they should venture too far afield. A public but by no means isolated example of this possibility is provided by the editor of *Environmental Ethics*, Eugene Hargrove. In a Fall 1987 editorial, Hargrove explained to his journal's readers why he was refused tenure in his university's philosophy department and, consequently, why the question of the continued publication of *Environmental Ethics*, the journal he had founded, had reached a crisis point:

This state of affairs [i.e., refusal of tenure] was not entirely unexpected. The journal and I came to the university [of Georgia] expecting to participate in a planned master's program in philosophy and ecology, which was turned down by the philosophy faculty three weeks before I arrived on campus. Soon thereafter some members of the department unofficially indicated to me that the negative vote on the master's program implicitly defined environmental ethics outside of philosophy, and that, as a result, I needed to discontinue or greatly reduce my emphasis on research work in environmental ethics if I wanted to have any chance at getting tenure—work in an area that was no longer "real" philosophy could not count as quality professional work. From then on I frequently received similar advice both formally and informally. My last annual evaluation before the tenure vote, given over the objections of the chairman, reported the majority view that *my work as the editor of this journal did not count as significant scholarly and professional activity* and that *none of my published research work was of sufficient quality to meet the standards of the department* (first emphasis added).<sup>18</sup>

Although everybody working in the area of ecophilosophy is familiar with this sort of thing it is particularly depressing when it occurs to the editor of the central journal in one's field. For all

this, however, a growing number of philosophers have, as it were, been leaving the respectable, anthropocentric home they were brought up in and turning feral. In challenging the anthropocentric assumptions that have dominated our culture, these ecophilosophers have been vigorously addressing problems that, by and large, are still struggling for a hearing in such ecologically relevant disciplines as geography, sociology, political theory, and economics. In their own way, ecophilosophers—especially those who have gone “far out”—are now howling in the moonlight for others (including their more domesticated professional colleagues) to join them. The question now is, how many will respond to this call of the wild? It is interesting to note here that the *Collins English Dictionary* defines *the wild* as referring not only to wilderness but also to “a free natural state of living.”

#### A CLOSER LOOK AT THE ISSUE OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM

But why *should* anyone respond to this philosophical call of the wild? In other words, what’s wrong with being anthropocentric? This is a massive question, and the answers to it can be elaborated upon to fill whatever space one wishes to devote to it—indeed, virtually every paper and book that ecophilosophers have written either implicitly or explicitly develops some kind of answer to this question. However, since my primary concern herein is with the positive exposition and development of a particular approach to ecophilosophy rather than with the critique of anthropocentrism per se, I intend to summarize the general kinds of arguments that can be employed against anthropocentrism quite briefly. Reflection upon the significance of these arguments and upon the extent to which they could be elaborated should be enough to show, however, that anthropocentrism represents not only a deluded but also a dangerous orientation toward the world.

There is a *prima facie* reason why we should at least be on our guard with respect to anthropocentric assumptions. This is because anthropocentric assumptions—assumptions that magnify

our sense of self-importance in the larger scheme of things—are obviously *self-serving* assumptions. And everybody knows the temptation that is involved in accepting self-serving views of any kind; we are generally all too prepared to accept such views on the basis of less than rigorous scrutiny. We are, for example, much less likely to question a favorable assessment of ourselves than an unfavorable assessment. When was the last time any of us tried to convince our teacher or professor that they had given us too *high* a mark for an assignment; or our employer that they were paying us too *much* relative to the skills of those around us? Favorable assessments are “obviously” correct assessments; poor assessments are “obviously” suspect assessments. Of course, the fact that a view happens to be self-serving does not, in itself, represent a decisive argument against the view. A favorable assessment *can* also be a correct assessment: someone may not only believe that they are just about the fastest sprinter on earth; they may also *be* just about the fastest sprinter on earth. All that is being highlighted here is the point that we need to subject self-serving views to considerable critical scrutiny if we are interested in establishing the most genuine truths possible, rather than simply settling for “truths” of convenience.

In addition to this *prima facie* reason for at least being on our guard with respect to anthropocentric assumptions, there are at least five general kinds of arguments *against* anthropocentrism. First, in those instances where we have been able to check our anthropocentric assumptions against reality, we have discovered again and again that these views—views that have been of the first importance in determining our thinking about our place in the larger scheme of things—have been empirically incorrect and, hence, disastrous for the development of our theoretical understanding of the world. We do not live at the center of the universe and we are not biologically unrelated to other creatures. And yet, although “everybody knows” these truths, it is still worth reminding ourselves of the perhaps subtler points that we are not even psychologically, socially, or culturally different *in kind* from all other animals and that we are not the “end point” of evolution.

In regard to the question of human uniqueness, Peter Farb neatly summarizes the situation at the beginning of his book *Humankind*: “Scientists now know that the chasm separating humans from animals is not so wide as it once appeared. Some animal species have evolved a rich communication system, while others make and use tools, solve difficult problems, educate their young, live in complex social organizations, and apparently possess an aesthetic sense. . . . So any definition of human uniqueness obviously would have to be based on differences in degree.”<sup>19</sup> And before we get carried away with emphasizing the “differences in degree” between humans and other animals (differences that Farb is, of course, entirely willing to emphasize), we need to remember that such differences *cut both ways* (a point that Farb does not emphasize): just as there are lots of things that humans have more of or do much better than many other animals, so the reverse is also true. What we need to bear in mind, then, is that, as John Rodman points out, the attempt to assimilate other animals to the status of inferior *humans* makes as little sense as “regarding women as defective men who lack penises, or humans as defective sea mammals who lack sonar capability and have to be rescued by dolphins.” As Rodman argues, assimilations of this kind succeed only in degrading other beings by failing “to respect them for having their own existence, their own character and potentialities, their own forms of excellence, their own integrity, their own grandeur.”<sup>20</sup>

As for the view that humans effectively represent the end point of evolution, every evolutionary theorist who is taken seriously in the scientific community rejects such a claim outright: evolution is a luxuriously branching bush, not a linear scale of increasing developmental perfection. Recently, however, some speculations in physics that go under the name of the *anthropic cosmological principle* have, for some people, rekindled the “end-point” line of thinking. All I will say about such speculations here is that it is a safe bet that any strong, genuinely anthropocentric version of the anthropic cosmological principle will go the same way as the pre-Copernican, pre-Darwinian, pre-comparative psychology, and pre-ethological anthropocentric assumptions to which I have

already alluded. John Earman's critical examination of the strong version of the anthropic principle provides a guide to the smart money: "And insofar as anthropic principles are directed at promoting Man or Consciousness to a starring role in the functioning of the universe, they fail; for either the promotion turns out to be an empty tease or else it rests on woolly and ill-founded speculations."<sup>21</sup>

The second general kind of argument against anthropocentrism is that our anthropocentric attitudes have proved disastrous in practice. This line of argument has already constituted an important theme of the first part of this chapter. It was the *point* of the critiques authored by Rachel Carson and Lynn White, Jr., and it is a point now routinely made by other thinkers who ponder the roots of our human-caused ecological ills.

The third general kind of argument against anthropocentrism is that anthropocentrism is not even a logically consistent position: it is not possible to specify any reasonably clearly discernible, morally relevant characteristic that includes all humans but excludes all nonhumans. Popular examples of reasonably clearly discernible characteristics that are often held to be morally relevant and to refer only to humans include such traits as rationality, self-awareness, free will, the capacity for symbolic communication, and the capacity to enter into arrangements involving reciprocal duties and obligations. However, accepting any of these characteristics as a criterion of moral considerability means that one excludes not only all nonhumans from the domain of moral considerability (or let us at least say this for the sake of the argument) but also some or all of the following classes of humans: members of "primitive" cultures, imbeciles, infants, the senile, human "vegetables," and people who are temporarily or irreversibly comatose. Conversely, any reasonably clearly discernible, morally relevant characteristic that includes *all* humans (e.g., being alive) will include many nonhumans as well.

It is possible, of course, to specify vague and entirely contentious characteristics that are held to be morally relevant and to refer only to humans; for example, the claim that all humans and no nonhumans have a special relationship to God or the claim

that all humans and no nonhumans possess a soul. However, claims of this kind work against themselves as much as they work for themselves since it can just as easily be charged that they represent nothing more than self-serving anthropocentric *projections* upon the cosmos. The upshot is that vague and entirely contentious claims of this kind represent impotent contributions to rational debate.

The fourth general kind of argument against anthropocentrism comes from the increasing number of moral philosophers who have been coming to the conclusion that anthropocentric attitudes are morally objectionable. It is important to realize that this kind of objection is distinct from the previous charge of logical inconsistency. This is because the moral philosophers to whom I am referring are effectively arguing that, even if it *were* possible to specify some kind of clearly discernible, morally relevant characteristic that included all humans but excluded all nonhumans, the kinds of criteria that *ought* to be accepted as deeming an entity worthy of moral consideration are such as to include not only humans but many other kinds of entities as well.

I will not attempt at this point to summarize the main kinds of arguments that have been developed for a nonanthropocentric ethics. To do justice to these revolutionary arguments requires considerably greater exposition than is appropriate in the context of this brief summary of the general kinds of arguments against anthropocentrism. However, these arguments are outlined in some detail and critically examined in chapter 6.

Finally, a number of apparently highly perceptive people have claimed, independently of any obvious reference to the foregoing kinds of arguments, that anthropocentrism simply does not accord with a genuinely open approach to experience. (A much greater number of other apparently highly perceptive people have claimed that anthropocentrism does accord with their experience of the world, of course, but the extent to which these experientially based claims really are perceptive is called into question by the other four general kinds of arguments against anthropocentrism that I have cited here.) It is possible to offer many eloquent

examples of the point that a genuine openness to the world leads one away from anthropocentrism rather than toward it. The following three brief expressions of this point should, however, be sufficient to convey something of the flavor of this general kind of argument against anthropocentrism. First, in an address delivered at the University of California in 1911, the American-European philosopher George Santayana claimed that the philosophical systems handed down since the time of Socrates could be characterized as “egotistical . . . anthropocentric, and inspired by the conceited notion that man, or human reason, or the human distinction between good and evil, is the center and the pivot of the universe.” But, Santayana told his audience, things would have been very different “if the philosophers had lived among your mountains, . . . [for] the mountain and the woods . . . suspend your forced sense of your own importance not merely as individuals [i.e., your egotism], but even as men [i.e., your anthropocentrism].”<sup>22</sup> Another example of this kind of argument is provided by the American existentialist-oriented philosopher William Barrett, who concludes in his significant book *The Illusion of Technique* that the “first lesson [of trees and rocks] is to draw us outside the narrow and presumptuous horizons of our humanism.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, the Taoist- and Zen-inspired writer Alan Watts argues in *Nature, Man, and Woman* that a genuine openness to nonhuman nature leads us to see “all the weirdly abstract and pompous pursuits of men . . . [as] natural marvels of the same order as the immense beaks of the toucans and hornbills, the fabulous tails of the birds of paradise, the towering necks of the giraffes, and the vividly polychromed posteriors of the baboons. Seen thus, neither as something to be condemned nor in its accustomed aspect of serious worth, the self-importance of man dissolves in laughter.”<sup>24</sup>

This brief summary of the general kinds of arguments against anthropocentrism should be enough to show that anthropocentrism can be trenchantly criticized on the grounds that it is empirically bankrupt and theoretically disastrous, practically disastrous, logically inconsistent, morally objectionable, and



incongruent with a genuinely open approach to experience. That doesn't leave much to recommend it!

To place the above arguments in the general context of this book, it will be seen that the arguments in chapter 6 draw mainly upon the logical and, especially, moral arguments against anthropocentrism, while the arguments in chapters 7 and 8 draw mainly upon the scientific (or cosmological) and experiential (or psychological) arguments against anthropocentrism. The argument that anthropocentrism is practically disastrous has been an important theme in the first part of this chapter.

The fact that anthropocentric assumptions are convenient, self-serving assumptions that have become, to repeat John Seed's phrase, "deeply embedded in our culture and consciousness," means that criticisms of anthropocentrism, in any form, naturally meet with various kinds of reactions. These reactions range from considered counter-criticisms to outright attacks which can easily justify the label hysterical. The most obvious ill-considered, knee-jerk sort of reaction to such criticisms is the charge of misanthropy. The extent to which people in general are ready to equate being opposed to human-centeredness with being opposed to humans per se is itself a function of the dominance of the anthropocentric frame of reference in our society. Just as those who criticize capitalism, for example, are liable to be labeled as communists and, by implication, the enemy, when in reality they may be concerned with such commendable aspirations as a more equitable distribution of wealth in society, so too those who criticize anthropocentrism are liable to be labeled *misanthropists* when, in reality, they may be (and, in the context of environmentalism, generally are) concerned with advancing a more impartial, ecosphere-centered (or *ecocentric*) view of the world and of advocating behaviors appropriate to such a view. In failing to notice the fact that being opposed to human-centeredness is logically distinct from being opposed to humans per se (or, in other words, that being opposed to anthropocentrism is logically distinct from being *misanthropic*), and in equating the former with the latter, these critics commit what I refer to as *the fallacy of misplaced misanthropy*.<sup>25</sup> Criticizing nonanthropocentrists on the

basis of such fallacious reasoning involves not just a crucial misreading of their negative or critical task (i.e., opposing *anthropocentrism*) but also the oversight of two other considerations that simply contradict such a misreading. First is the positive or constructive task urged by ecocentrically oriented nonanthropocentrists of encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans toward all entities in the ecosphere—including humans. And second is the fact that ecocentrically oriented nonanthropocentrists are among the first to highlight and draw inspiration from the fact that some humans have not been human-centered, both within the Western tradition and outside it. Far from being misanthropic, ecocentrically oriented nonanthropocentrists celebrate the existence of these human beings.

There is also a more considered and subtle kind of objection that is regularly directed at the charge of anthropocentrism. This is the objection that it is in any case impossible to escape anthropocentrism since all our views are, necessarily, human views. However, critics who put forth this argument fail to distinguish between the weak, trivial, tautological sense of anthropocentrism and the strong, informative, substantive sense of the term. Such a criticism is weak in that it does not allow us to make any distinctions between statements (i.e., it suggests that all human statements are *equally* human statements); trivial in that it simply states the obvious; and tautological in that it is true by definition.

Consider the following. The tautological fact that everything I think and do will be thought and done by a male with white skin does not mean that my thoughts and actions need be sexist or racist in the strong, informative, substantive sense, that is, in the sense of exhibiting unwarranted differential treatment of other people on the basis of their sex or race—which is the sense that really matters. Similarly, the tautological fact that everything I think and do will be thought and done by a human (the weak, trivial, tautological sense of anthropocentrism) does not mean that my thoughts and actions need be anthropocentric in the strong, informative, substantive sense, that is, in the sense of exhibiting unwarranted differential treatment of other beings

on the basis of the fact that they are not human—which, again, is the sense that really matters. Note that in both cases “unwarranted differential treatment” can be understood in both an aggressive sense and a passive sense. In the aggressive sense it refers to acts of commission—that is, to overt acts of discrimination—whereas in the passive sense it refers to acts of omission—that is, to actions and decisions that “innocently” overlook certain beings or entities by virtue of the fact these beings or entities simply do not figure in one’s awareness.

To imply that the views of nonanthropocentrists are anthropocentric in some informative, significant sense thus represents a logical sleight of hand that can only be accomplished by conflating the trivial and significant senses of anthropocentrism. It confuses the inescapable fact of our human *identity*, the trivial sense of anthropocentrism, with the entirely avoidable possibility of human chauvinism or human imperialism, the significant sense of anthropocentrism. (The terms *human chauvinism* and *human imperialism* might for convenience be taken as emphasizing, respectively, the passive and aggressive faces of this significant sense of anthropocentrism.) Such a confusion amounts to the same as implying that a male who argues for equal opportunity or affirmative action for women is being “sexist” simply on account of the fact that his view is androcentric (i.e., male-centered) in the weak, trivial, tautological sense that it is a view put forward by a male. If this is granted, then all male views (and all female views for that matter) are equally sexist and the significant function of the word *sexism* is lost.

The conflation of different senses of a term in order to enable a conclusion that would not otherwise be possible commits what philosophers technically refer to as the *fallacy of equivocation*. However, since this practice is so common in ecophilosophical discussion, I have previously proposed that we identify this particular form of the fallacy of equivocation by referring to it as *the anthropocentric fallacy* or, more generally (to cover the same fallacy in regard to issues of race, class, age, and sex, as well as species), *the perspectival fallacy*, since it conflates obvious and inescapable facts about a speaker’s perspective with the substance

of the speaker's view.<sup>26</sup> Whenever the anthropocentric fallacy occurs in ecophilosophical discussion, or whenever moves are made in that direction, it should be pointed out immediately that while all human views are equally anthropocentric in the trivial sense of the term ("all our views are human views"), they are stunningly different in the significant (chauvinistic, imperialistic) sense of the term, that is, in the extent to which they see humans as all-important or at least as morally superior to other beings and, hence, in the extent to which they advocate or at least legitimate the relentless exploitation of the nonhuman world by humans.

To make my own position perfectly clear, then, I employ the term *anthropocentrism* throughout in what I have here characterized as its significant sense—a sense that, as I have noted, can also usefully be subdivided into a passive sense and an aggressive sense. This is, of course, in accordance with the normal usage of the term by nonanthropocentrists (for example, Lynn White's usage, above) and would have gone without saying were it not for critics who have insisted on conflating the trivial and significant senses of this valuable term.

### THE VARIETIES OF ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

In the course of examining the emergence of the environmental movement and ecophilosophy in the first section of this chapter, something of the extent to which anthropocentrism pervades Western thinking in general has been illuminated. The present section will now focus on the pervasiveness of anthropocentrism in a much more specific way by drawing attention to the fact that anthropocentrism is widely regarded as pervading even those *particular* kinds of thinking that have been characterized as *ecological* or *environmentalist*.

In contemplating the sheer range of contemporary environmental problems, their intractability, and their degree of causal interconnectedness, it would seem to be the case that more and