GEOGRAPHY, VALUE PARADIGMS AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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This is a pre-publication working paper, written while I was a doctoral student in the Department of Geography, University of Minnesota. The occasion was the Geography and Environmental Ethics: Panel on Equity and Justice session at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, held in Chicago, IL on Thursday, 16 March 1995. For the final manuscript, see:


Introduction
I’ll direct my comments to the focus question, “Is environmental justice inherently anthropocentric?”. Anthropocentrism is the belief that only humans have moral value. It remains one of the most controversial issues in environmental ethics. This is the motivation for my reflecting on the connection between environmental justice and anthropocentrism in this session.

In my experience, the most common answer is “Yes, environmental justice is inherently anthropocentric”. The reasoning for this claim follows something like this.

1) Only human beings have moral value.
2) Justice is a moral concept and practice.
3) We can act justly only to other moral beings.
4) Environmental justice is consequently restricted to concerns about humans and their well-being.

In this view, environmental justice is social justice with an environmental component. To paraphrase Robert Bullard, an environmental injustice occurs when people are not equally protected from intentional or unintentional environmental harms, especially as these correspond to race, class, gender, or ethnicity. Movements for environmental justice attempt to ensure that no person or group bears or gains a morally unjustifiable environmental burden or benefit, especially because of their race, class, gender, or ethnicity.

Today, I shall sketch an argument that environmental justice should not be anthropocentric. It is true that the concept of justice is a human creation (i.e., anthropogenic). It is also true that the focus of environmental justice is overwhelmingly with human well-being (i.e., anthropofocused). But it is not true that an anthropogenic concept or anthropofocused project must or should ethically value human beings alone. Moreover, I think we strengthen the concept and practice of environmental justice by taking a non-anthropocentric point-of-view.

Anthropocentrism and Environmental Justice
To critique anthropocentrism, I need to say something about moral value and the value paradigms of environmental ethics. Value derives from the Latin “valere” (to be strong, to be worthy), and connotes worth, goodness or desirability. Moral value has several meanings. The first is ethically praiseworthy actions, the second is characteristics of the world which are necessary in moral understanding, and the third is the ethical standing and significance of a being or thing in our moral community. For example, honesty is generally regarded as morally praiseworthy, and the human
capacity for self-consciousness and culture is a necessary consideration when thinking about humans ethically.

I will focus on the third meaning of moral value--ethical standing and significance. This meaning is at the core of all environmental ethics. The reason is simple. Moral value is the usual (although often unvoiced) criterion by which we determine who has ethical standing, that is, who is morally considerable, is within our moral community, and is owed moral obligations. Moral value is also the criterion by which we assess ethical significance, that is, the relative importance of competing moral claims or concerns.

Anthropocentrism is a value paradigm that recognizes the ethical standing and significance of human beings alone. Only humans have intrinsic moral value, are part of moral communities, and are owed moral obligations. Animals and the rest of nature have only instrumental value as means to human ends. Given this understanding, it does makes sense to claim that environmental justice is necessarily anthropocentric. Justice is a concept of moral discourse, and it would be meaningless to apply it to animals and the rest of nature.

The problem with anthropocentrism, and thus an anthropocentric environmental justice, is this: it is simply unreasonable. It lacks both conceptual and empirical rigour, being founded on assertions of human superiority or morally irrelevant criteria such as the capacity to speak a language. Frankly, it is akin to the ideologies of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, etc., and is inconsistent with the liberatory intentions of environmental justice.

Non-Anthropocentrism and Environmental Justice

So what is the alternative to anthropocentrism, and how would the alternative affect the concept and practice of environmental justice?

The alternative is non-anthropocentrism. There are several forms of this value paradigm (biocentrism, ecocentrism, geocentrism). All of them hold that moral value extends beyond human beings into the natural world. Animals (and often the rest of nature) have intrinsic value, should be included in our moral community, and are owed ethical obligations. To paraphrase a popular bumper-sticker, “Humans are not the only species with moral standing, they just act like it”. Disagreements exist within non-anthropocentrism regarding who or what has moral value. Some say cognitive mammals, others say all life-forms, and still others say species, biomes, and the geosphere. Disagreements aside, what's important here is two-fold.

1) Non-anthropocentrism refuses to endorse 'human exceptionalism' in ethical matters, including that of justice.
2) Non-anthropocentrism shares the liberatory sensibility of social justice, in this case directed at the human domination of nature.

A non-anthropocentric value paradigm would affect the concept and practice of environmental justice in at least four ways.

First, it would emphasize the deep and practical questions about what moral norms should guide our social relations to people and nature in the context of natural and humanized environments. This is justice in its broadest sense--the desire to be in right relation to members of our moral community, human or otherwise.

Second, it extends considerations of justice beyond the boundaries of humanity, to include at least part of the natural world. Animals are probably the most likely to benefit from this extended consideration. Their shared capacities with humans for self-awareness, emotion, and purposive
actions make it easy to recognize their membership in our moral community, and acknowledge unmerited environmental harms done to them or their habitat as unjust. In this schema then, environmental justice includes not only imperatives of social justice, but of natural justice.

Third, it forces us to face and adapt to the reality of hard choices. There will be times when the well-being of nature is necessarily pitted against the well-being of humans. In seeking just treatment for people, we may do grave injustice to parts of non-human nature. To resolve these conundrums, we must seek win/win solutions that balance and meet our obligations to social and natural justice. Unlike anthropocentrism, a non-anthropocentric perspective does not allow us the luxury of either ignoring these conundrums, or resolving them through a priori assumptions that privilege our own species. Cogent ethical understanding will be necessary to justify any choice human communities make.

Finally, it helps sets the stage for mutual respect and solidarity between the more nature-focused environmental organizations, and the emergent environmental justice movement. Both may share a common moral regard for the well-being of the human and natural worlds, even as they pursue different agendas in environmental politics. To loosely paraphrase Arne Naess, “Our common moral/political frontier is long and diverse, and there are many places to stand for positive change”.

Conclusion
Environmental justice is certainly anthropogenic (a human conception), and it is most often anthropofocused (concerned with social justice), yet is not necessarily anthropocentric, nor should it be. Anthropocentrism is an unreasonable value paradigm, and an anthropocentric environmental justice is vulnerable to its critique. A non-anthropocentric environmental justice is more rigorous conceptually, and potentially more robust politically.

Notes

References
I have not made specific citations in this short paper, but the following authors and text were especially influential


