

Research Article**ANTHROPOCENTRISM REVISITED: UNCOVERING ITS PRESENCE IN PREFERENCE UTILITARIANISM AND DEEP ECOLOGY, AND ADVANCING A PRAGMATIC WEAK ANTHROPOCENTRIC APPROACH IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS****Dr. Biju Koonathan P.**

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Corresponding Author: Dr. Biju Koonathan P.**Abstract**

Anthropocentrism has long occupied a contested position in environmental ethics, frequently portrayed as the principal philosophical cause of ecological degradation. Consequently, influential non-anthropocentric theories, including Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism and Arne Næss's deep ecology, have sought to transcend traditional human-centered ethical frameworks by extending moral consideration to non-human beings and ecological wholes. This article critically re-examines the assumption that these approaches are entirely free from anthropocentric commitments. It argues that preference utilitarianism retains an implicit anthropocentric orientation by grounding moral value in preferences, rational agency, and evaluative capacities that remain conceptually dependent on human moral reasoning. Similarly, while deep ecology rejects human supremacy and advocates the intrinsic value of all forms of life, its philosophical foundations and practical prescriptions reveal latent anthropocentric assumptions alongside tendencies that have been criticized as misanthropic when human interests appear subordinate to ecological preservation. Rather than endorsing either strong anthropocentrism or radical ecocentrism, this study advances pragmatic weak anthropocentrism as a mediating framework. Drawing particularly upon the work of Bryan G. Norton, while engaging with perspectives such as Wesley J. Smith's critique of anti-human environmentalism, the article argues that environmental ethics should acknowledge the inevitability of human evaluative perspectives while cultivating ecological responsibility, sustainability, and intergenerational justice. Weak anthropocentrism neither reduces nature to a mere instrument nor attributes absolute priority to ecological systems over humanity. Instead, it offers a philosophically balanced and practically applicable framework capable of reconciling human flourishing with the intrinsic and ecological significance of the natural world, thereby contributing to a more constructive paradigm for contemporary environmental ethics.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Weak Anthropocentrism, Environmental Ethics, Preference Utilitarianism, Peter Singer, Deep Ecology, Arne Naess, Bryan G. Norton, Wesley J. Smith, Sustainability.

1. Introduction

The unprecedented scale of contemporary environmental crises—including climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution, and the depletion of natural resources—has compelled philosophers to reassess the ethical foundations governing humanity's relationship with the natural world (IPCC, 2023; Rockström et al., 2009). While scientific inquiry provides increasingly precise accounts of ecological degradation, environmental ethics seeks to answer a more fundamental

normative question: *How ought human beings relate to nature?* At the center of this inquiry lies the concept of anthropocentrism, a worldview that regards human beings as the primary or exclusive locus of moral value (Passmore, 1974; Norton, 1984). For decades, anthropocentrism has been widely criticized as the philosophical foundation of environmental exploitation, with many environmental thinkers arguing that a genuinely sustainable ethic requires moving beyond human-centered perspectives (White, 1967; Sessions, 1995).

The emergence of environmental ethics as a distinct field during the latter half of the twentieth century was largely shaped by critiques of traditional Western moral philosophy (Callicott, 1989). Thinkers such as Aldo Leopold (1949), Arne Næss (1973), Holmes Rolston III (1988), and J. Baird Callicott (1989) challenged the assumption that moral concern should be restricted exclusively to human beings. Their work inspired a broad spectrum of non-anthropocentric approaches—including biocentrism, ecocentrism, land ethics, and deep ecology—which sought to recognize the intrinsic value of non-human organisms, ecosystems, and the biosphere as a whole (Taylor, 1986; Rolston, 1988; Devall & Sessions, 1985). These perspectives maintain that nature deserves moral consideration independently of its usefulness to humanity, thereby rejecting the instrumental view that has often characterized modern industrial civilization (Leopold, 1949; Næss, 1973).

Among the most influential contemporary ethical theories addressing environmental concerns is Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism. Although primarily developed within the context of animal ethics, Singer's extension of the principle of equal consideration of interests significantly expanded the scope of moral concern beyond the human species (Singer, 1975; Singer, 2011). By arguing that the capacity to experience pleasure, pain, and preferences—rather than mere species membership—determines moral standing, Singer challenged deeply rooted forms of speciesism and contributed substantially to contemporary debates regarding the moral status of non-human animals (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1983). Nevertheless, despite its progressive intentions, preference utilitarianism continues to rely upon evaluative frameworks constructed through human rational deliberation, thereby raising important questions concerning the persistence of anthropocentric assumptions within its ethical structure (Norton, 1984).

Similarly, Arne Næss's philosophy of deep ecology represents one of the most influential critiques of anthropocentric environmental thought (Næss, 1973; Devall & Sessions, 1985). Deep ecology rejects the notion that humans occupy a privileged position within nature and instead advocates the intrinsic worth of all living beings regardless of their utility for human purposes. Its famous eight-point platform encourages ecological diversity, biospheric egalitarianism, voluntary simplicity, and substantial changes in economic and political structures (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Næss, 1989). However, despite its explicit rejection of human-centered ethics, critics have argued that deep ecology occasionally exhibits implicit anthropocentric assumptions in its philosophical justification while simultaneously inviting accusations of misanthropy by appearing to subordinate human welfare to ecological preservation (Bookchin, 1987; Ferry, 1995; Fox, 1990). These criticisms raise important questions regarding the practical viability and ethical coherence of radical ecocentric frameworks.

The present study argues that the debate between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism is often framed as a rigid dichotomy that oversimplifies the complexity of environmental moral reasoning (Norton, 1984; Light & Katz, 1996). Rather than viewing anthropocentrism as an inherently flawed perspective requiring complete abandonment, this article contends that a critical distinction must be drawn between strong anthropocentrism, which values nature solely as a means to satisfy immediate human interests, and weak anthropocentrism, which recognizes that human beings inevitably evaluate the world from human perspectives while remaining capable of developing informed, reflective, and ecologically responsible values (Norton, 1984; Norton, 1991). This distinction provides a more nuanced understanding of environmental ethics by acknowledging both the uniqueness of human moral agency and humanity's profound ecological interdependence.

Accordingly, this article pursues three principal objectives. First, it re-examines the concept of anthropocentrism and demonstrates why it remains a contested yet indispensable category in

environmental philosophy (Passmore, 1974; Norton, 1984). Second, it critically analyses the extent to which anthropocentric assumptions continue to operate within Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism and Arne Naess's deep ecology despite their explicit critiques of human-centered ethics (Singer, 1975; Naess, 1973; Rolston, 1988). Finally, drawing primarily upon Bryan G. Norton's theory of weak anthropocentrism, while engaging with contributions from Wesley J. Smith and other contemporary scholars, the article proposes pragmatic weak anthropocentrism as a mediating framework capable of reconciling ecological integrity with legitimate human interests (Norton, 1984, 1991; Smith, 2012). Such a framework neither legitimizes unrestricted environmental exploitation nor embraces radical anti-humanism; instead, it seeks to cultivate an ethic of stewardship, sustainability, and intergenerational responsibility that is philosophically coherent and practically applicable in addressing contemporary ecological challenges (Norton, 1991; WCED, 1987).

By revisiting anthropocentrism through this critical lens, the article aims to demonstrate that environmental ethics need not abandon human-centered moral reasoning altogether. Rather, it should reformulate anthropocentrism into a reflective and ecologically informed ethical perspective capable of promoting both human flourishing and the long-term well-being of the more-than-human world (Norton, 1991; Light & Katz, 1996; Jamieson, 2008).

2. Why Discuss Anthropocentrism? Revisiting a Contested Concept

Anthropocentrism remains one of the most contested concepts in environmental ethics. Since the emergence of environmental philosophy as a distinct discipline during the 1970s, it has functioned both as a descriptive category and as a normative target of criticism. Frequently identified as a principal cause of ecological degradation, anthropocentrism is said to encourage environmental exploitation by assigning primary or exclusive moral value to human beings (White, 1967; Passmore, 1974). Nevertheless, despite sustained criticism, anthropocentric reasoning continues to shape environmental policy, legal frameworks, conservation practices, and sustainability discourse. This enduring influence raises a fundamental philosophical question: should anthropocentrism be abandoned entirely or critically reformulated (Norton, 1984)?

Derived from the Greek *anthrōpos* (human being) and *kentron* (center), anthropocentrism literally denotes "human-centeredness." In its strongest form, it maintains that nature possesses value primarily because it serves human interests and welfare. Forests, rivers, wildlife, and ecosystems are therefore regarded chiefly as resources whose protection is justified insofar as they benefit humanity. Moral obligations toward nature are thus indirect, arising from its instrumental rather than intrinsic value (Passmore, 1974; Norton, 1984).

Historically, anthropocentric thinking has deep roots in both classical philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Interpretations of the biblical doctrine of human "dominion" over nature, together with the Greek emphasis on human rationality, contributed to the view that humanity occupies a privileged moral position. The Scientific Revolution and the rise of industrial capitalism further reinforced this outlook by portraying nature as an object to be understood, controlled, and exploited for human progress (White, 1967; Merchant, 1980). Although these traditions are internally diverse and cannot be reduced to a single environmental ethic, critics argue that they have often encouraged economic and technological priorities at the expense of ecological responsibility.

The emergence of environmental ethics challenged this inherited worldview by extending moral concern beyond humanity. Aldo Leopold's land ethic argued that humans should regard themselves as "plain members and citizens" of the biotic community rather than its conquerors (Leopold, 1949). Holmes Rolston III defended the intrinsic value of species, ecosystems, and evolutionary processes independent of human interests (Rolston, 1988), while J. Baird Callicott further developed Leopold's ecological ethics by emphasizing the moral significance of ecological communities (Callicott, 1989). These perspectives inspired broader non-anthropocentric approaches, including biocentrism, ecocentrism, and Arne Næss's deep ecology, all of which reject the assumption that human interests automatically take precedence over those of other living beings (Taylor, 1986; Næss, 1973; Devall & Sessions, 1985).

Despite the importance of these critiques, identifying anthropocentrism solely with environmental destruction oversimplifies the philosophical landscape. Bryan G. Norton argues that

anthropocentrism is not a single doctrine but encompasses distinct forms, particularly strong and weak anthropocentrism (Norton, 1984, 1991). Strong anthropocentrism evaluates nature exclusively according to immediate human preferences and economic interests, reducing forests, wildlife, and ecosystems to instruments for human satisfaction. Such an approach readily legitimizes short-term exploitation when economic benefits outweigh ecological concerns and has therefore attracted sustained criticism from environmental philosophers (Norton, 1984).

Weak anthropocentrism, by contrast, grounds environmental decision-making in informed, critically examined, and ethically responsible human values rather than unreflective preferences. Although humans remain the agents of moral evaluation because of their capacities for rational deliberation and ethical responsibility, these same capacities enable them to recognize the importance of biodiversity, ecosystem resilience, and intergenerational justice (Norton, 1991). Environmental protection thus becomes an expression of reflective moral judgment concerning the long-term conditions necessary for both human flourishing and ecological sustainability.

This distinction also highlights an important epistemological point. Every ethical theory—including those that reject anthropocentrism—is necessarily formulated, interpreted, and defended through human rationality and moral reflection. Concepts such as intrinsic value, ecological integrity, and biospheric equality are articulated through human language and philosophical reasoning (Light & Katz, 1996; Norton, 1991). Consequently, completely escaping human evaluative perspectives may be impossible. Rather than invalidating non-anthropocentric ethics, this insight suggests that environmental philosophy should focus on transforming human-centered reasoning into an ecologically responsible framework.

This perspective is reinforced by contemporary environmental governance. Climate agreements, biodiversity conventions, conservation legislation, and sustainable development policies are all formulated and implemented through human institutions and democratic deliberation. Even when such policies recognize the intrinsic value of nature, their legitimacy and enforcement depend upon human moral and political agency (WCED, 1987; Norton, 1991). Accordingly, environmental ethics cannot simply dispense with anthropocentrism; it must cultivate forms of anthropocentrism that promote stewardship, restraint, and long-term ecological responsibility.

Revisiting anthropocentrism is therefore philosophically indispensable. The central issue is not whether humans occupy a distinctive position within moral discourse, but how that position should be understood and exercised. The following sections examine Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism and Arne Naess's deep ecology as two influential attempts to transcend anthropocentrism. While both significantly broaden the scope of moral concern beyond the human species, this article argues that each retains implicit anthropocentric commitments. These tensions ultimately reinforce the case for pragmatic weak anthropocentrism as a philosophically coherent and practically viable framework capable of reconciling ecological integrity with legitimate human interests (Norton, 1991; Light & Katz, 1996).

3. Anthropocentric Bias in Preference Utilitarian Ethics

Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism is among the most influential ethical theories in contemporary moral philosophy, animal ethics, and environmental ethics. Through *Animal Liberation* (1975), *Practical Ethics* (1979), and *The Expanding Circle* (1981), Singer challenged traditional anthropocentric assumptions by extending moral concern beyond the human species. Rejecting species membership as the basis of moral worth, he formulated the principle of the equal consideration of interests, according to which moral standing depends upon sentience—the capacity to experience pleasure, pain, and corresponding interests—rather than belonging to *Homo sapiens* (Singer, 1975, 1979, 1981, 2011). By identifying speciesism as an arbitrary form of discrimination comparable to racism or sexism, Singer profoundly reshaped debates in animal ethics, bioethics, and environmental philosophy (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1983).

Singer's critique represents a decisive departure from traditional anthropocentric ethics, which often grounded moral status in rationality, language, or self-consciousness. Instead, he argues that the capacity to suffer constitutes the minimum criterion for possessing morally relevant interests. Since many non-human animals are sentient, their interests deserve equal consideration

alongside comparable human interests. Consequently, practices such as factory farming, unnecessary animal experimentation, and recreational hunting become morally indefensible because they inflict avoidable suffering on sentient beings (Singer, 1975, 2011). Preference utilitarianism further departs from classical utilitarianism by emphasizing the satisfaction of preferences rather than the maximization of pleasure. Moral agents are therefore required to impartially evaluate the interests of all affected beings regardless of species membership, thereby rejecting the assumption that human interests possess inherent moral superiority (Singer, 1979).

Despite these important contributions, preference utilitarianism retains significant implicit anthropocentric assumptions. These assumptions do not arise from the scope of moral concern—which clearly extends beyond humanity—but from the conceptual framework through which moral value is identified, interpreted, and justified. The theory relies on preferences as its primary criterion of moral value, yet the identification, comparison, and balancing of preferences inevitably depend upon human rational deliberation. Although non-human animals possess interests, determining what constitutes those interests and resolving conflicts among them require human interpretation. Thus, the evaluative structure of the theory remains rooted in human cognitive and philosophical frameworks rather than in an entirely non-human perspective (Norton, 1984).

A second anthropocentric element concerns Singer's conception of rational moral agency. Preference utilitarianism presupposes impartial reasoning capable of comparing the interests of different beings. Such impartiality is itself a distinctly human ethical ideal. Non-human animals neither formulate ethical principles nor participate in moral deliberation; instead, humans act as interpreters and representatives of their interests. Consequently, even an ethic that seeks to transcend species boundaries ultimately depends upon human intellectual capacities and normative judgment (Norton, 1991).

Singer's distinction between persons and merely sentient beings has generated further philosophical debate. He argues that beings possessing self-awareness, future-oriented preferences, and sophisticated cognitive capacities generally have stronger interests in continued existence than beings lacking such characteristics (Singer, 1979, 2011). Although this distinction is not explicitly species-based, it privileges capacities traditionally regarded as paradigmatically human. Critics therefore contend that the moral significance assigned to autonomy, rationality, and self-consciousness reflects values derived from human philosophical traditions rather than from a value-neutral assessment of nature (Regan, 1983; Rolston, 1988). In this respect, preference utilitarianism risks reproducing subtle forms of anthropocentric evaluation while rejecting explicit speciesism.

From an environmental perspective, the theory also exhibits important limitations. Singer's moral framework focuses primarily on individual sentient beings rather than ecological wholes. Ecosystems, rivers, forests, species, and biodiversity possess no direct moral standing unless their preservation contributes to the interests of sentient creatures. This emphasis distinguishes preference utilitarianism from ecocentric approaches, which attribute intrinsic value to ecological systems independent of individual welfare (Rolston, 1988; Callicott, 1989). Consequently, environmental value remains mediated through the interests of humans and other sentient beings rather than being recognized as an inherent property of ecosystems themselves.

Preference utilitarianism also encounters practical difficulties in comparing competing preferences. Environmental decision-making frequently requires balancing immediate human interests against biodiversity conservation, ecosystem resilience, climate stability, and the welfare of future generations. Such judgments inevitably reflect human social, cultural, political, and economic values rather than purely objective moral calculations (Norton, 1991; Jamieson, 2008). The identification and prioritization of preferences therefore remain inseparable from human evaluative frameworks.

These criticisms should not diminish Singer's substantial contribution to environmental ethics. By exposing speciesism as an ethically arbitrary principle and extending the principle of equal consideration beyond the human species, Singer significantly expanded humanity's moral responsibilities toward non-human animals and inspired major developments in animal welfare, bioethics, and environmental policy (Singer, 1975, 2011). His theory represents a considerable

advance beyond strong anthropocentrism, which regards nature solely as an instrument for satisfying human desires.

Nevertheless, preference utilitarianism demonstrates the difficulty of completely escaping anthropocentric reasoning. While it broadens the circle of moral concern, ethical evaluation continues to depend upon human capacities for rational reflection, language, and moral deliberation. Anthropocentrism is therefore relocated from the objects of moral concern to the framework through which moral judgments are made. Preference utilitarianism is thus better understood as a sophisticated and ethically expanded form of human-centered moral reasoning rather than a wholly non-anthropocentric ethic (Norton, 1984, 1991).

Recognizing this implicit anthropocentric dimension reinforces the central argument of this article. Environmental ethics cannot entirely transcend human perspectives because ethical theories are themselves products of human reflection. The philosophical challenge is therefore not to eliminate anthropocentrism altogether but to reformulate it into a reflective, ecologically responsible framework capable of promoting both moral inclusiveness and environmental sustainability. This issue becomes even more pronounced in Arne Næss's deep ecology, which explicitly rejects anthropocentrism while, as the following section argues, retaining implicit anthropocentric assumptions and facing criticisms of misanthropic tendencies.

4. Unveiling Implicit Anthropocentric and Misanthropic Tendencies in Deep Ecology: An Analysis of Arne Næss's Platform Principles

Deep ecology emerged during the 1970s as one of the most influential and philosophically ambitious movements in environmental ethics. Developed principally by Arne Næss, it sought to challenge the anthropocentric assumptions that had long shaped Western ethical thought by affirming that all living beings possess intrinsic value independent of their usefulness to humanity (Næss, 1973; Devall & Sessions, 1985). Rather than viewing humans as masters of nature, deep ecology emphasizes ecological interconnectedness, biospheric equality, and a fundamental transformation in humanity's relationship with the natural world. Although the movement has profoundly influenced environmental philosophy and conservation ethics, it has also generated sustained debate. This section argues that, despite its explicit rejection of anthropocentrism, deep ecology retains implicit anthropocentric assumptions in its philosophical foundations while some interpretations of its practical implications exhibit misanthropic tendencies.

Næss distinguished "shallow ecology" from "deep ecology." Shallow ecology seeks environmental protection primarily because ecological degradation threatens human health, prosperity, and economic development. Nature is therefore protected for its instrumental value. Deep ecology rejects this instrumental perspective, maintaining that ecosystems, species, and all forms of life possess value in themselves regardless of their utility to humans (Næss, 1973; Devall & Sessions, 1985). Environmental responsibility thus arises from recognizing humanity as one participant within a larger ecological community rather than its privileged center.

The normative core of deep ecology is expressed in the Eight-Point Platform, formulated by Arne Næss and George Sessions in 1984 (Devall & Sessions, 1985). The platform affirms the intrinsic value of human and non-human life, the importance of biological diversity, limits on human interference except for vital needs, reductions in ecological disruption, structural changes in economic and technological systems, a shift from materialism to quality of life, and a moral obligation to implement these principles. Collectively, these commitments constitute one of the strongest philosophical critiques of strong anthropocentrism, rejecting unrestricted human domination while affirming the intrinsic worth of biodiversity and ecological integrity. Næss's concept of the ecological Self further reinforces this vision by encouraging individuals to identify themselves with the wider community of life rather than as isolated human subjects (Næss, 1989).

Despite this explicit rejection of anthropocentrism, deep ecology reveals an important philosophical paradox. The claim that all life possesses intrinsic value is itself a human normative judgment. Concepts such as intrinsic value, equality, justice, and moral obligation do not emerge directly from nature but are articulated through human philosophical reflection. Thus, biospheric equality ultimately depends upon human evaluative capacities and ethical reasoning. In this sense,

the attempt to transcend anthropocentrism paradoxically relies upon the very human intellectual framework it seeks to overcome (Norton, 1984, 1991; Light & Katz, 1996).

A similar difficulty arises with the principle of biospheric egalitarianism, according to which all living beings possess equal rights to flourish. While this ideal promotes ecological humility, it becomes problematic when translated into practice. Human societies must continually make decisions involving agriculture, healthcare, infrastructure, disease control, conservation, and resource management, all of which require prioritizing some forms of life over others. Ecological systems themselves are characterized by competition, adaptation, and predation rather than absolute equality. Consequently, environmental policy inevitably depends upon human moral judgment concerning competing values and interests (Rolston, 1988; Callicott, 1989).

The platform's third principle—that humans have no right to reduce biodiversity except to satisfy vital needs—illustrates this challenge. Although it places important ethical limits on environmental exploitation, the concept of "vital needs" remains philosophically indeterminate. Whether it encompasses only biological survival or also education, healthcare, technological development, economic security, and cultural flourishing depends upon historical, political, and cultural contexts. Human communities must therefore define these boundaries, thereby reintroducing anthropocentric reasoning into the framework itself (Norton, 1991).

Deep ecology has also attracted criticism for what many scholars describe as misanthropic tendencies. These criticisms do not necessarily reflect Næss's own intentions but arise from interpretations that emphasize reducing human interference with nature, limiting population growth, or prioritizing ecological preservation even when significant human interests are affected. Such interpretations risk portraying humanity primarily as an ecological threat rather than as a morally responsible participant within the natural world (Bookchin, 1987; Ferry, 1995; Smith, 2012).

Thinkers such as Murray Bookchin, Luc Ferry, and Wesley J. Smith argue that radical ecocentrism may unintentionally weaken commitments to human dignity, human rights, and social justice by denying any distinctive moral status to human beings (Bookchin, 1987; Ferry, 1995; Smith, 2012). If humans are regarded as merely one species among many without recognizing their unique capacities for moral responsibility, democratic deliberation, and ethical accountability, it becomes difficult to justify legal institutions, environmental governance, and obligations toward future generations. Environmental ethics, these critics contend, should promote ecological responsibility without diminishing the moral significance of humanity.

A further limitation concerns the movement's relative neglect of social and political structures. Environmental degradation is not simply the result of anthropocentric attitudes but is closely connected to economic systems, technological development, patterns of consumption, colonial histories, and unequal distributions of power. Consequently, social ecology, ecofeminism, and environmental justice theorists argue that ecological sustainability cannot be separated from concerns about poverty, inequality, gender, race, and political oppression (Bookchin, 1987; Plumwood, 1993). Similarly, the implementation of the Eight-Point Platform depends upon democratic institutions, scientific expertise, public deliberation, and legal systems—all of which are products of human moral and political agency (Norton, 1991).

These criticisms should not diminish the enduring contributions of deep ecology. Næss fundamentally reshaped environmental philosophy by challenging assumptions of human supremacy, emphasizing ecological interconnectedness, and inspiring global movements dedicated to biodiversity conservation, ecological restoration, and sustainable living (Næss, 1989; Devall & Sessions, 1985). His insistence that ecological crises require profound ethical and cultural transformation remains especially relevant in the context of accelerating climate change and biodiversity loss.

Nevertheless, deep ecology ultimately does not eliminate anthropocentrism; rather, it relocates it to the level of philosophical justification and practical implementation. Human beings continue to formulate ecological values, interpret intrinsic worth, define vital needs, and establish environmental priorities through moral deliberation. At the same time, radical interpretations risk cultivating an adversarial view of humanity that may undermine commitments to human dignity and

social responsibility. These tensions reveal the limitations of both strong anthropocentrism and uncompromising ecocentrism.

The analyses of Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism and Arne Næss's deep ecology therefore converge on a common philosophical insight: environmental ethics cannot fully transcend the human standpoint because ethical reasoning is itself a human activity. The more constructive task is not the complete rejection of anthropocentrism but its critical reconstruction. This conclusion provides the foundation for the following discussion of pragmatic weak anthropocentrism, particularly as developed by Bryan G. Norton, which offers a more balanced and practically viable framework for reconciling ecological integrity with human flourishing (Norton, 1984, 1991).

5. Developing Pragmatic Weak Anthropocentrism as a Mediating Framework in Environmental Ethics

The preceding analysis has shown that both Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism and Arne Næss's deep ecology, despite their efforts to transcend anthropocentrism, continue to depend upon human evaluative frameworks while encountering significant philosophical limitations. Preference utilitarianism extends moral concern beyond humanity but grounds ethical judgment in human concepts of preferences, rational deliberation, and impartiality (Singer, 1975, 1979, 2011). Deep ecology attributes intrinsic value to all forms of life, yet its philosophical justification and practical implementation remain rooted in human moral reasoning and, in some interpretations, risk fostering misanthropic attitudes (Næss, 1973, 1989; Bookchin, 1987; Ferry, 1995). These observations suggest that the primary challenge of environmental ethics is not to eliminate anthropocentrism altogether but to reconstruct it into a morally responsible and ecologically sustainable framework. In this respect, pragmatic weak anthropocentrism, as developed by Bryan G. Norton, provides a compelling mediating alternative between strong anthropocentrism and radical ecocentrism (Norton, 1984, 1991).

Norton's central contribution lies in redefining anthropocentrism rather than rejecting it. He distinguishes between felt preferences, which reflect immediate wants and subjective desires, and considered preferences, which emerge through critical reflection, scientific understanding, ethical deliberation, and ecological awareness (Norton, 1984). Environmental degradation, he argues, is caused less by anthropocentrism itself than by unreflective and short-term human preferences. Consequently, environmental ethics should cultivate informed values that recognize humanity's long-term dependence upon healthy ecosystems (Norton, 1991).

This distinction fundamentally transforms traditional anthropocentrism. Strong anthropocentrism values nature solely for its immediate utility, often legitimizing resource exploitation and environmental degradation whenever economic or social benefits are achieved. Weak anthropocentrism, by contrast, acknowledges that rational human beings can critically evaluate and revise their preferences in light of ecological knowledge, moral responsibility, and concern for future generations. Nature is therefore valued not merely as an economic resource but as the ecological foundation of human flourishing, cultural continuity, biodiversity, and planetary resilience (Norton, 1984, 1991).

A further strength of Norton's approach is its rejection of the rigid opposition between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism. He argues that this debate is often overstated because, in practice, both perspectives frequently support similar environmental objectives, including biodiversity conservation, ecosystem restoration, climate mitigation, and sustainable resource management. The decisive issue is therefore not whether environmental value is intrinsically or instrumentally grounded, but whether ethical frameworks can effectively motivate environmental responsibility and sound public policy (Norton, 1991). This pragmatic orientation shifts attention from abstract metaphysical disputes toward practical ecological governance.

Weak anthropocentrism also recognizes an unavoidable epistemological reality: all environmental ethics is formulated from a human standpoint. Ethical theories, scientific knowledge, legal institutions, and conservation policies are products of human cognition, language, and moral reflection. Concepts such as biodiversity, ecological integrity, sustainability, and intrinsic value acquire normative significance only through human interpretation (Light & Katz, 1996; Norton,

1991). Acknowledging this does not deny nature's independent worth; rather, it affirms that environmental responsibility necessarily depends upon human moral agency.

This framework effectively addresses the limitations identified in Singer's preference utilitarianism. Whereas Singer focuses primarily on the interests of individual sentient beings, Norton broadens ethical concern to include ecosystems, biodiversity, and long-term ecological stability (Singer, 1975; Norton, 1991). Ecosystems need not possess intrinsic value in a metaphysical sense to deserve protection. Their preservation is ethically justified because healthy ecological systems sustain present and future human communities while simultaneously supporting the flourishing of non-human life. Weak anthropocentrism therefore avoids reducing environmental ethics to individual preferences without relying upon controversial ontological claims concerning the intrinsic rights of ecosystems.

Similarly, pragmatic weak anthropocentrism responds to several practical difficulties within deep ecology. Although Næss's principle of biospheric egalitarianism provides a powerful critique of environmental exploitation, it offers limited guidance when ecological preservation conflicts with food security, healthcare, renewable energy, poverty alleviation, or economic development (Næss, 1989). Weak anthropocentrism acknowledges that such conflicts cannot be resolved through absolute ecological equality. Instead, they require responsible human deliberation informed by scientific evidence, democratic participation, ethical reflection, and ecological prudence (Norton, 1991).

Another significant advantage of weak anthropocentrism is its compatibility with sustainable development. Contemporary sustainability seeks to integrate environmental protection, economic development, and social justice rather than treating them as competing objectives (WCED, 1987). Weak anthropocentrism provides an ethical basis for this integration by recognizing that human prosperity ultimately depends upon ecological stability. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion threaten not only ecosystems but also public health, economic resilience, cultural continuity, and intergenerational equity (IPCC, 2023; Rockström et al., 2009). Environmental stewardship thus becomes an expression of enlightened human self-interest rather than a sacrifice imposed by anti-human ideology.

The writings of Wesley J. Smith reinforce this balanced perspective. Smith argues that environmental ethics should avoid philosophies that diminish human dignity or portray humanity merely as an ecological burden. While advocating responsible conservation, he criticizes forms of radical ecocentrism that subordinate human welfare entirely to ecological preservation. Human beings possess distinctive capacities for rationality, creativity, ethical responsibility, and stewardship, which justify a unique moral role—not as absolute rulers of nature, but as responsible caretakers of ecological systems (Smith, 2012).

The concept of stewardship therefore occupies a central position within weak anthropocentrism. It rejects both the unrestricted dominion characteristic of strong anthropocentrism and the denial of human distinctiveness found in some radical ecocentric theories. Human exceptionalism is interpreted not as a source of privilege but as the basis of greater responsibility. Scientific knowledge, technological innovation, democratic governance, and ethical reflection become means through which societies conserve biodiversity, restore degraded ecosystems, mitigate climate change, and promote ecological resilience (Norton, 1991).

This approach also possesses significant practical value for environmental governance. Contemporary challenges—including climate adaptation, renewable energy transitions, biodiversity conservation, water management, sustainable agriculture, and urban planning—require balancing competing ecological, economic, and social priorities. Weak anthropocentrism encourages adaptive decision-making grounded in ecological science, democratic participation, ethical deliberation, and long-term sustainability, making it especially suitable for pluralistic societies characterized by diverse cultural and philosophical traditions (Norton, 1991; Jamieson, 2008).

Moreover, weak anthropocentrism strengthens the principle of intergenerational justice. Environmental degradation imposes burdens not only upon present populations but also upon future generations whose opportunities depend upon healthy ecological systems. Protecting forests,

conserving biodiversity, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and safeguarding freshwater resources become obligations grounded in justice toward future humanity while simultaneously benefiting countless non-human species (WCED, 1987; Norton, 1991). Human welfare is thus understood in an expanded temporal and ecological sense rather than as immediate economic gain.

Importantly, weak anthropocentrism is not a return to traditional human-centered exploitation. Unlike strong anthropocentrism, it recognizes the ecological, aesthetic, cultural, scientific, and spiritual significance of nature alongside its material benefits. Human values themselves can evolve through environmental education, ecological experience, and moral reflection, enabling societies to appreciate that long-term human flourishing is inseparable from the health of the natural world (Norton, 1984, 1991).

The principal philosophical strength of pragmatic weak anthropocentrism lies in its mediating character. It incorporates the insights of non-anthropocentric ethics by affirming biodiversity, ecological integrity, and respect for non-human life, while preserving the indispensable role of human moral agency, democratic governance, and practical decision-making. Rather than attempting the impossible task of eliminating anthropocentrism, it reconstructs human-centered ethics into an ecologically informed and morally reflective framework (Light & Katz, 1996).

Accordingly, pragmatic weak anthropocentrism provides a more balanced and practically viable response to contemporary environmental challenges than either strong anthropocentrism or uncompromising ecocentrism. By integrating ecological science, sustainability, stewardship, and ethical reflection, it offers a coherent normative foundation for addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental injustice, and other ecological crises. Human beings' distinctive moral capacities, properly understood, do not justify domination over nature but establish a responsibility to protect and sustain the ecological systems upon which both humanity and the wider community of life ultimately depend (Norton, 1991; Jamieson, 2008).

6. Conclusion

Anthropocentrism remains one of the central debates in environmental ethics because it addresses the fundamental question of how human beings ought to relate to the natural world. Although anthropocentrism has frequently been identified as a principal cause of ecological degradation, leading many environmental philosophers to advocate non-anthropocentric alternatives such as preference utilitarianism, biocentrism, and deep ecology (White, 1967; Næss, 1973), this study has argued that these approaches do not entirely transcend human-centered reasoning. Rather, they reveal the conceptual difficulty—and perhaps the impossibility—of constructing an environmental ethic wholly independent of human evaluative perspectives (Norton, 1984; Light & Katz, 1996).

The analysis of Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism demonstrated that, although Singer successfully challenges speciesism and extends equal moral consideration to sentient non-human animals, his ethical framework continues to rely upon human concepts of preferences, rational deliberation, and impartial moral judgment (Singer, 1975, 1979, 2011). Ethical evaluation remains grounded in human capacities for reflection and decision-making, even when its scope extends beyond the human species. Preference utilitarianism therefore represents not the abandonment of anthropocentrism but a significant reformulation of human-centered ethics (Norton, 1991).

Similarly, the examination of Arne Næss's deep ecology highlighted both its philosophical strengths and its conceptual limitations. Deep ecology offers a powerful critique of instrumental views of nature by affirming the intrinsic value of all living beings and emphasizing ecological interconnectedness through its Eight-Point Platform and the concept of the ecological Self (Næss, 1989; Devall & Sessions, 1985). Nevertheless, its justification of intrinsic value, interpretation of biospheric equality, and practical implementation inevitably depend upon human moral reasoning. Moreover, some radical interpretations risk cultivating misanthropic tendencies by portraying humanity primarily as an ecological threat rather than as a morally responsible participant within the biosphere (Bookchin, 1987; Ferry, 1995; Smith, 2012). These tensions suggest that the complete elimination of anthropocentrism is neither philosophically convincing nor practically feasible.

In response, this article has proposed pragmatic weak anthropocentrism as a more balanced framework for contemporary environmental ethics. Drawing primarily upon Bryan G. Norton's distinction between strong and weak anthropocentrism, it argues that environmental responsibility does not require abandoning the human standpoint but transforming it through critical reflection, ecological knowledge, informed preferences, and long-term moral responsibility (Norton, 1984, 1991). Weak anthropocentrism recognizes that environmental values are necessarily articulated through human moral agency while simultaneously affirming humanity's profound ecological dependence upon healthy natural systems. It therefore avoids both the instrumental reduction of nature characteristic of strong anthropocentrism and the practical difficulties associated with uncompromising ecocentrism.

The incorporation of Wesley J. Smith's emphasis on human dignity further strengthens this mediating approach. Human uniqueness is understood not as a justification for domination but as the basis of greater moral responsibility. Humanity's distinctive capacities for rational deliberation, scientific inquiry, technological innovation, and ethical judgment generate corresponding obligations to conserve biodiversity, mitigate climate change, restore ecosystems, and promote intergenerational justice (Smith, 2012; WCED, 1987; Norton, 1991).

The principal contribution of this study is therefore to challenge the assumption that anthropocentrism and environmental ethics are inherently incompatible. The decisive question is not whether environmental ethics should be anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric in absolute terms, but whether it cultivates forms of human-centered reasoning that are reflective, ecologically informed, and ethically responsible. Pragmatic weak anthropocentrism offers such a framework by mediating between the excesses of strong anthropocentrism and the impracticalities of radical ecocentrism. By integrating ecological science, democratic responsibility, sustainability, stewardship, and intergenerational justice, it provides a philosophically coherent and practically viable foundation for addressing the environmental challenges of the twenty-first century while fostering a more balanced and enduring relationship between humanity and the more-than-human world (Norton, 1991; Jamieson, 2008; IPCC, 2023).

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