Anthropocentric Biocentrism in a Hybrid
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ABSTRACT: Anthropocentric biocentrism says that human beings ought to promote the survival of our own species above the survival of other species. But those who attack AB sometimes take it to say something much stronger: we ought to promote our species’ various desires, interests, and goals. I call the latter view AB+. I argue that AB and anti-AB+ are not only mutually compatible but in some respects mutually complementary, such that there are good prospects for combining them into a hybrid-view. After all, we know that the survival of our species is deeply connected to the well being of the environment.

I. Introduction

Anthropocentric biocentrism (hereafter referred to as “AB”) is a view committed to species equality such that human beings should, just like any other species, privilege the survival of their own species above the survival of any other species – and should act accordingly.¹ So anti-anthropocentric biocentrism (hereafter, “anti-AB”) is just the view that human beings should not privilege the survival of their own species above the survival of any other species, or act as if their own species is privileged in such a way.

But in the literature, those who argue for anti-AB sometimes take AB to have far more packed into it:

In the literature of environmental ethics, anti-anthropocentric biocentrism is the position that human needs, goals, and desires should not be taken as privileged or overriding in considering the needs, desires, interests, and goals of all biological species taken together, and in general that the Earth as a whole should not be interpreted or managed from a human standpoint. According to this position, birds, trees, and the land itself considered as the biosphere have a right to be and to live out their individual and species’ potentials, and that members of the human species have no right to disturb, perturb, or destroy the ecological balance of the planet (Watson 1983, 245).

Notice how much stronger the construal above is, compared with the original construal of

¹ This is a standard formulation of the view, closest to that of Rolston (1989, 75), who formulates AB as follows: “All species should defend themselves, and may the fittest survive. Humans should seek their own survival and prospering first, eliminating other animals and species as may be necessary to doing so.” For slightly different formulations, see, for instance, Regan (1981), Rodman (1977), Sterba (2011), Taylor (2003), and Watson (1983). None of those authors, though, comment on the specific distinctions I’m interested in here, namely, the distinction between AB and AB+, and the distinction between anti-AB and anti-AB+. 
AB. Whereas AB just involves privileging the *survival* of the human species above all other species, the construal of anti-AB above seems to imply that AB involves privileging *not just* the survival of our species but, in addition, our species’ *every* need, goal, and desire. We have, then, four different claims:

**AB:** Human beings, just like every other species on the planet, should privilege their own species’ survival above that of all other species. So the survival of our own species is more important than that of all other species, and we should act accordingly.

**Anti-AB:** It’s not the case that human beings should privilege their own species’ survival above that of all other species. So the survival of our own species isn’t more important than that of all other species, and we should act accordingly.

**AB+:** Human beings should privilege every need, desire, interest and goal of our own species above those of all other species.

**Anti-AB+:** It’s not the case that human beings should privilege every need, desire, interest and goal of our own species above those of all other species.

Now, the Watson quotation is from a paper published over three decades ago. Since then, Sterba has advanced three principles in defense of the claim that biocentrism – a view committed to the equality of all species, just like AB, except without the anthropocentric bias – is compatible with treating different species (such as human beings) differently.²

Here are his three principles.

A principle of human preservation: Actions that are necessary for meeting one's basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings are permissible even when they require aggressing against the basic needs of individual animals and plants, or even of whole species or ecosystems.

A principle of disproportionality: Actions that meet non-basic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of individual animals and plants or even of whole species or ecosystems.

A principle of human defense: Actions that defend oneself and other human beings against harmful aggression are permissible even when they necessitate

² Sterba (2011, 191-2) advances those three principles as a defense against the attacks on biocentrism as articulated in Schmidt (2011).
killing or harming individual animals or plants, or even destroying whole species or ecosystems.

I’ll argue for two claims. First, AB and anti-AB+ are not only mutually *compatible* but in fact, in some respects, mutually *complementary*, such that there are good prospects for combining them into a hybrid-view. Second, the hybrid-view might well be compatible with – and might also serve to complement and ground – Sterba’s three principles.

**II. Descriptive facts about the world, and their consequences for AB and AB+**

After the Great Famine and the Black Death in 1350, it is estimated that there were about 370 million human beings living on this planet (Biraben 1980, 13). There are now nearly as many people living in North America alone. In 1804, the world population reached the milestone of one billion for the first time in history. It took until 1927 to reach two billion, but only until 1960 to reach three billion (United Nations Population Division 1999). Today in 2014 there are about 7,281,143,400 human beings living on this planet (Worldometers 2014). By the time the reader is reading this paper, that number will almost certainly be much higher – in fact, if you’re reading this paper in 2100, then it is estimated that the world population is going to be around eleven billion (Alkema et al. 2014). In the United States, the population increase has been even more pronounced, from just over 5 million in 1800 to 106 million in 1920, and over 307 million in 2010.

So the statistics certainly seem to support the claim that the survival of our species has never been less in doubt than it is today, as well as the claim that our survival is likely to be progressively less in doubt in the future. So for a proponent of the view that the survival of our species is of paramount importance and, more specifically, for a proponent of the view that our survival is of greater importance than the survival of any other species, the current state of affairs could not possibly be more ideal. Such a
proponent is likely to grow exponentially happier over the course of the next century. In short, AB-supporters should be sporting some of the broadest smiles for miles around.

But what do these statistical facts and predictions mean for a proponent of AB+, as opposed to just AB? AB+ is, after all, much stronger than AB, since it demands not just our prioritization of our species’ survival, but also our prioritization of our own species’ every need, desire, goal, and interest. The survival of our species does, of course, fall within the scope of AB+. But a proponent of AB+ wants prioritization of much more than even the virtual guarantee of our species’ survival for centuries to come. Survival is a need, and arguably the most basic need of all. Our species has many desires, goals, and interests that take us often worryingly far beyond the limits of our needs.

Take technological innovation. The exponential growth of public health measures and medical technology over the past century or so has played an enormously impactful role in the unprecedented recent proliferation of the members of our species. Our lifespans have increased dramatically, and that is largely the result of the sophistications of modern medical technology allowing us to combat and often easily cure diseases, illnesses, and ailments that only a few centuries ago might well have been fatal. That’s a good thing. But that medical technology is just a small subset of the exponential growth of technology in general. One need only look at many of the roads in North America, so often populated by thousands upon thousands of ordinary citizens driving trucks that look more like tanks that have horsepower and environmentally irresponsible fuel requirements – just one example among countless others. But the availability of such gas-guzzling and pollution-enhancing methods of transportation is an extremely common desire of millions of members of our species. We may not need those trucks, but we want
them. And we have a lot of them, thanks to mass production in the post-Industrial Revolution age. Nor does every regular person in the world need a personal computer as thin as a thirty-page notebook and yet with sufficient memory storage space to store every book ever written (and every video game ever made). But we desire them. And corporations such as Apple have become wildly successful exploiting that desire and other related desires.

Similarly, we don’t need to constantly gorge ourselves on cows, chickens, turkeys, pigs, and so on. But most of us want our burgers, our Thanksgiving turkeys, our chickens, Christmas hams, and so on. And we want a lot of such things. And we have a lot of such things, thanks to increases in the efficiency of agricultural technology. Perhaps most importantly of all, we don’t need to engage in devastating wars between factions of our species, resulting in the technological innovations that produced the invention and use of the atomic bomb. It’s a well-known fact that our species now possesses nuclear weapons capable of destroying our entire planet many times over – thus destroying all known species. But we want such conflicts and such weapons, often justified as security measures against the similar desires of other factions of our species. And we have a lot of those weapons, thanks to the rapid scientific progress that often so ironically occurs most markedly during large-scale military conflicts – the advancement in weaponry during the Second World War alone is staggering.

The examples go on and on: We create islands – literally, islands – of garbage in our seas, consisting in material that won’t break down naturally. A material such as plastic just doesn’t break down easily. But plastic is easy and cheap to make on an extremely large scale. So it’s desirable for those who want to make a profit without
worrying about the ramifications for future generations, or more generally for the survival of our species. We use cheap, easily distributed and highly toxic pesticides on our farms to keep insects off our fruit and vegetables, but end up poisoning ourselves with those pesticides just as much as we poison the insects and the soil and environment. (The Environmental Working Group has a widely disseminated list of the forty-eight fruits and vegetables found to have the most pesticide residue on average. The list is accessible by a simple Google search. At the top of the list are apples, strawberries, grapes, celery, peaches, spinach, sweet bell peppers, nectarines, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, snap peas, and potatoes. They’re all commonly purchased foods, all assumed to be healthy, and all now effectively inedible bought non-organic, unless you want your endocrine system destroyed.) But we desire cheap, huge, perfectly colored and shaped fruit, easily accessible in our grocery stores. And we have a lot of it, thanks to our increasingly efficient agricultural production system.

I described the military technology point as “perhaps most important of all” because it is arguably the most lucid example available to illustrate a crucial point. It’s not just the case that it takes a great deal more to achieve the goals of a proponent of AB+ than a proponent of AB. Instead, the goals of AB and AB+ are in some respects mutually exclusive. There is almost undoubtedly no greater threat to the guarantee that our species will continue to survive – the greatest threat to the sole ambition of AB – than the destructive capabilities our species now possesses, namely, enormous numbers of weapons of mass destruction. The desires of our species sometimes conflict with the needs of our species. Sometimes, our desires directly conflict with our needs. And in the case of a nuclear world war, our desires are maximally incompatible with the needs of
our species, on the assumption that survival is the most basic need of our species.

It seems, then, that descriptive facts about the world today are, at first glance, very pleasing both to proponents of AB and to those of AB+. But upon closer inspection, it seems that those facts are far more pleasing to the latter. Moreover, some of those facts could not be more threatening to proponents of the former. Just given these facts, then, without many if any normative assumptions taken for granted, it appears that AB is fundamentally incompatible with AB+, and thus shares a relation of mutual complementarity with anti-AB+. After all, a proponent of anti-AB+ is of the view that not all – though perhaps some – of the desires, interests, and goals of our species ought to be prioritized, namely, those desires, interests and goals that do not threaten the survival of our species, e.g., through the use of weapons of mass destruction and through widespread damage to the environment. So the proponent of anti-AB+ is likely to find few points of disagreement with a proponent of AB, who is of the view that the survival of our species is of paramount importance.

III. Prospects for a hybrid-view

In Section II we saw (through purely descriptive analysis) that AB and AB+ are fundamentally incompatible, and we saw that AB and anti-AB+ are not only compatible but seem to actually be mutually complementary in some important ways. I’ll now argue that there are good prospects for a fairly attractive hybrid-view, a combination of AB and anti-AB+. On this view, the survival of our own species is unequivocally prioritized: it’s more important than anything else. Moreover, on this view our species is allowed to pursue desires, interests, and goals. But there is an all-important proviso: any desire, interest or goal that is pursued must be carefully and justifiably judged to be highly
unlikely to damage our species’ guarantee of survival now and in the foreseeable future. Otherwise, that desire, interest or goal cannot be pursued let alone prioritized above the needs, desires, interests and/or goals of other species.

The hybrid-view, taken axiomatically (that is, taken as a basic first principle without a requirement for demonstration of that principle), would disallow things like nuclear armament, let alone nuclear warfare or even threats of nuclear warfare, and in general would disallow large-scale warfare and research into large-scale weapons. The reasons would have almost nothing to do with morality, but rather simply with the imperative to promote our species’ survival. The very existence let alone further creation or use of weapons of mass destruction is obviously in violation of that imperative. The hybrid-view would also disallow practices that are damaging to our planet in a significant way, since damaging our planet in a significant way is going to weaken the guarantee of our species’ survival – it’ll certainly weaken the guarantee for posterity.

Crucially, the hybrid-view prioritizes not just the protection of the survival of our species for now and for the next few decades, but the survival of our species for as long as possible into the future. Posterity is just as important as the seven billion human beings alive today, if not more so. That is precisely why putting into practice measures to decrease and eventually eliminate environmental epidemics such as global warming and pollution would be so emphatically required by the hybrid-view. There might be seven billion human beings on the planet now, but the fortunate oligarchy of the living has the ability to help strengthen the likelihood of the survival of what may potentially be hundreds of billions of lives in the future.

Perhaps even more importantly, putting such a view into practice would probably
encourage far more moderation in our wanton consumption of and damage to this little planet of ours. And the motivation for doing so wouldn’t rely on complex, contentious and often abstractly motivated ethical principles. Nor would it rely on agreed-upon religious principles – even on the tenuous assumption that such agreement is at all feasible. Rather, it would be motivated for what seems to be the most concrete, pragmatic, and easily understood imperative of all: protecting the survival of our species. Perhaps much more saliently, it would encourage more unity and solidarity among not just our own species, but in our attitude toward the rest of the biosphere. We would be forced to take seriously the fact that our impacts on the non-human aspects of our planet are often just as relevant to the survival of our species as our actions toward other human beings.

**IV. Linking the hybrid-view with Sterba’s three principles**

Recall the three principles advanced in Sterba (2011, 191-2), mentioned earlier on:

* A principle of human preservation: Actions that are necessary for meeting one's basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings are permissible even when they require aggressing against the basic needs of individual animals and plants, or even of whole species or ecosystems.

* A principle of disproportionality: Actions that meet non-basic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of individual animals and plants or even of whole species or ecosystems.

* A principle of human defense: Actions that defend oneself and other human beings against harmful aggression are permissible even when they necessitate killing or harming individual animals or plants, or even destroying whole species or ecosystems.

I think that my hybrid-view is not only compatible with Sterba’s three principles, but also to a large extent serves to ground and justify them. Why, for example, is the principle of disproportionality important? Why should we care enough to put it into practice? Must
we resort to arguing for something like intrinsic value in trees, birds, oceans, and in
general the whole of the biosphere? Or are these principles justified by the abstractly
driven view that all species in the biosphere should be treated with equality? The answer
to these questions, with the hybrid-view, seems a little more straightforward than other
answers: actions that meet non-basic or luxury needs of humans, aggressing against the
basic needs of animals, plants, or even whole species or ecosystems, are very damaging
to our planet. Since the well being of our planet is so crucial to our species’ chances of
survival now and into the future, actions that are very damaging to our planet are likely to
be in violation of the hybrid-view.

It seems that the principle of human preservation and the principle of human
defense also fit in quite nicely with the hybrid-view. The practice of both those principles
seems neatly in line with (a) the recognition that the survival of other animals, the
survival of plants, ecosystems, and the biosphere in general, is intimately tied up with the
survival of our own species; (b) the recognition that the survival of our species may
sometimes necessitate our damaging other animals, the damaging of plants, or even entire
ecosystems; and (c) the delicate balance that must be found between (a) and (b) if the
union of AB and anti-AB+ is to really prove both theoretically and practically applicable
as a hybrid-view. It will, after all, not always be entirely clear whether a given set of
alternatives includes an option that is obviously a case of damaging another animal out of
necessity as opposed to non-necessity. Eating less or even no meat at all might, for
example, make it more difficult for an athlete to maintain her muscle mass. She can
survive without meat, but her performance in her profession – and therefore her
livelihood – will suffer. Another fairly ordinary example: being forced to take the bus to
work every morning, as opposed to driving to work, might well cut into a person’s already-busy schedule, depriving her of a fairly significant portion of her sleep. As a result, her performance at work suffers. There are, then, likely to be many borderline cases.

But my contention is that even if the hybrid-view is successful only in clearly demarcating non-borderline cases, such as pollution on a massive scale just so that a profit can be made more easily, then it is both a theoretically and pragmatically attractive view. In particular, I think a good deal of its pull derives from its comparatively concrete, empirically supported, and universalized nature. Why “concrete” and “universalized”? We care deeply about the survival of our children and grandchildren, and so will they about their own – even if, at bottom, that care is motivated solely by a biologically intrinsic drive to want our own genetic material to be passed onto future generations. Therefore, we deeply care about the world our children and grandchildren will inherit, and so will they about the world their own will inherit.

V. An objection and two responses

There are, no doubt, many possible objections to what I’ve argued here. I cannot raise and respond to all of them. But I’ll try to address what I take to be one of the most pressing of those objections. Such an objection claims that the hybrid-view is far too unrealistic and idealistic: it sounds good in theory but will never be possible to put into practice in the real world. One good reason why might be spelled out as follows. I’ve yet to meet a single human being who cares anywhere near as much about the survival and prosperity of the human race as he/she cares about the survival and prosperity of his/herself and his/her loved ones. Consider the extremely familiar type of thought
experiment involving a train rushing toward five human beings helplessly (and presumably very firmly) tied up on a train track. There are several different scenarios that are frequently used here, but suppose that you have the ability to flip a switch that will divert the train onto a connected second track on which there is just one human being helplessly tied. But the five human beings on the first track are complete strangers to you while the one human being on the second track is your dearest loved one. I have posed this remarkably well known thought experiment over a dozen times to hundreds of students. There has never been a single student who sincerely would flip the switch.

Moreover, there has never been a single student who would flip the switch even as the number of strangers on the first track grows exponentially. In fact, virtually all the students refused to flip the switch even when just about every member of the human race – with the exception of their dearest loved one – is placed on the first track. What these results seem to show is that many human beings place far greater value in that infinitesimally small portion of their species constituting self and loved ones. The welfare of the species as a whole is nowhere near as great a concern for any given member of the species. In fact, if and when the welfare of the rest-of-species conflicts with the welfare of self and loved ones, the latter invariably takes precedence over the former. More generally, from a strictly naturalist and biological point of view, what individual members of a given species, such as human beings, tend to be fundamentally interested in is the survival and propagation of his/her individual genetic material. The idea, then, is that anthropocentric biocentrism conflates (a) the survival and motives of an individual member \( a_1 \) of a species and (b) the survival and motives of \( a_1 \)’s entire species consisting in the sum \( \Sigma \) of a very large number of members \( a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_n \). In the case of
the human species, $n = \text{over seven billion}$. But (a) and (b) are distinct, and in fact may quite easily conflict. The objection concludes, then, that the conflation of (a) and (b) is one of the main reasons the hybrid-view is unrealistic.

There are two ways I’d like to respond to the objection. One is more specific and the other is more general. My more specific response is that if one ran the same trolley scenario with a complete stranger on one track and an entire species of non-human animals on the other track, it is probably quite likely that most people would kill the entire nonhuman species rather than the single human stranger. So I doubt that it is wise to put too much stock in the fact that virtually all of us seem to have intuitions that prize the welfare of the human beings we know very well and love over the welfare of the billions of other human beings who we don’t know at all. And if one *does* put a lot of stock in that general intuition, then I think the version of the trolley example involving a thousand non-human animals pitted against a single human stranger shows that most of us naturally prize the well being of our species far above the well being of other species.

The more general way I would like to respond to the objection is to point out that it needn’t always be the case that our intuitions are right. It certainly needn’t be the case that our intuitions ought to be trusted in isolation from other more careful analyses and considerations. Moreover, a case involving killing fifty strangers or killing a loved one, where those options are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive, is probably not a case that produces meaningful intuitions. It is exceedingly difficult for a rational person to decide to choose either option. But it might appear a clear-cut intuition in the sense that most rational people virtually always choose to kill the strangers and save the loved one. According to the hybrid-view, such a decision is obviously wrong. So that contradicts the
intuitions of most rational people. The hybrid-view, therefore, has highly counter-intuitive consequences. Now, I might argue here that the objection has in some sense abandoned its origin. Whereas the objection was supposed to show that the hybrid-view is too unrealistic and idealistic to be applied in any useful way to the real world, the trolley example – which was originally construed as an objection to my view – is artificial, idealistic, and unlikely to occur in the real world. There is, though, another way to respond. Sometimes our intuitions are just wrong, and it seems undeniable that it will take more than just further intuitions to prove when, why, and how our intuitions are wrong. In particular, it will take critical and careful consideration of the relation between the relevant facts and the relevant principles. One attractive choice for such a relation, I think, is the relation between the state of our world today as described in Section II, and normative principles formed by the union of AB and anti-AB+ in an environmentally friendly hybrid.

**Conclusion**

In Section II I wrote that, according to the most recent United Nations estimates, today in 2014 there are about 7,281,143,400 human beings living on this planet (Worldometers 2014). I originally wrote that sentence on Wednesday, but kept updating the figure throughout the week. It is now Monday early afternoon, and I last updated that figure yesterday evening. If I were to update it again today, it would be about 7,281,298,800. There were, then, well over 150,000 new human beings born since yesterday evening. That’s 150% of the population of the city of Boulder, Colorado. What I failed to mention, though, is that nearly 20% of that 7,281,298,800 is located in one country: China. And in that one country, about 500 million people are without safe and
clean drinking water, industrial pollution has made cancer the leading cause of death, and only 1% of the 560 million people living in China’s cities are breathing air considered safe by the European Union (Joseph and Yardley 2007). Yet that same country continues to be a captain of industry, with countless, enormous factories billowing ever less Earthly smoke into the sky hanging menacingly over Beijing. Something has to give. I’ve argued for a principled impetus for such a change in the form of the hybrid-view, combining what I take to be the best of AB and the best of anti-AB+. But the core of that somewhat abstract, philosophical proposal is what I hope to be a universalized, concrete, and relatively uncontroversial claim: what we care about most of all is our children, and what our children will care about most of all is their own.3

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3 I am indebted to Michael Zimmerman and an anonymous referee for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
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