On Moral Prioritization in Environmental Ethics: Weak Anthropocentrism for the City

Shane Epting[*]

Developing a way to address troublesome issues in areas such as urban planning is a challenging undertaking. It includes making decisions that involve humans, nonhumans, future generations, and historical and cultural artifacts. All of these groups deserve consideration, but not equally. Figuring out how to approach this topic involves overcoming the problem of moral prioritization. The structure of weak anthropocentrism can help with this problem, suggesting that future research on the environmental aspects of metropolitan regions should make use of its applicability. Despite its strengths, weak anthropocentrism must be expanded to address complicated urban issues. A multitiered weak-anthropocentric measure, a "complex moral assessment," is needed to address these concerns.

INTRODUCTION

Decisions in areas such as urban planning affect marginalized people, the public, nonhumans, future generations, and historical and culturally significant artifacts. All of these groups deserve consideration, but not equally. Finding a just solution entails overcoming the problem of moral prioritization, meaning that choices that pertain to the order of who or what should receive consideration are subject to moral scrutiny. For instance, weighing too heavily in favor of nonhumans while disenfranchised groups suffer could bring charges of environmental racism. Such a position would be tantamount to saying that green lives matter more than black (or brown) lives matter. We must avoid such egregious missteps, and using a "complex moral assessment," a measure that can *fully* address the moral obligations to the categories above, can lessen the chances of acting in a discriminatory fashion.

The purpose of this paper is to show why we need such a measure to underpin arguments that deal with multifaceted urban issues. To make this case, I examine ecocentrism and weak anthropocentrism because they rely on intrinsic value, a quality that is required to fully flesh out the moral dimensions of urban affairs. While ecocentrism is a good option for dealing with problems between human and nonhuman interests, it is disadvantageous for cities. In turn, I examine how the structure of weak anthropocentrism is better suited for dealing with the problem of moral prioritization in population centers.

Even though I champion weak anthropocentrism, it is not exempt from criticisms. To understand how it can avoid discriminatory charges, however, I reveal how specifying the conditions of its structure can avoid unintended prejudice. In closing, I suggest some additional areas of study wherein philosophers can help mitigate negative environmental impacts and promote human flourishing.

ON INTRINSIC VALUE AND URBAN AFFAIRS

Perhaps the most relevant work to address complex urban issues that involve an entanglement of human and nonhuman topics is Robert Kirkman's *The Ethics of Metropolitan Growth: The Future of our Built Environment*.[1] In this work, he wrestles with the ways that metropolitan areas antagonize the nonhuman world, but he avoids intrinsic value, paying attention to policy issues instead. Although Kirkman deserves praise for his practical approach, disregarding intrinsic value narrows the scope of inquiry, he does not provide a full account of the moral dimensions of cities.

While there are several ways to conceptualize it, the model for which I advocate fits Eugene Hargrove's view of weak anthropocentric intrinsic value. He argues that we can understand the subject through thinking about how we understand art.[2] For example, while great paintings can emotionally move us, such works rely on standards of taste that change with the times. Yet, they do not lose their intrinsic value when popular appeal dictates, but instead they depend on experts who can make relevant social assessments.[3] When it comes to applying this line of thought to the nonhuman world, these are the values that motivate nature "experts" and trained enthusiasts.[4]

While one might get the impression that Hargrove is confusing intrinsic and instrumental values because they both involve aesthetics, this condition is merely co-extensive. Instrumental value entails something of beauty giving the person who is valuing it pleasure. Intrinsic value, however, involves an appreciation of the thing in question that requires an act in judgement that goes beyond mere aesthetic pleasure. For such judgments, worries should rest on standards and ideals used for evaluation. The danger is that people will try to demean an object, claiming that it only has instrumental value as a way to justify exploitation.[5]

This view of intrinsic value does not only pertain to the arts and environmental affairs, but library historians have made the case that we should preserve old documents that have been digitally preserved because they have this kind of intrinsic

---

[1] Robert Kirkman, *The Ethics of Metropolitan Growth: The Future of our Built Environment* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

[2] Eugene C. Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value," *The Monist* 75, no. 2 (1992): 198.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., p. 199.

value.[6] That is to say, making a digital copy of an old document preserves its instrumental value, but we can still value the original for its own sake. Although I argue that this view of intrinsic value can provide the moral grounding that is required to deal with affairs that include human and nonhuman elements, other ecocentric approaches appeal to different accounts of intrinsic value. In the next section, I examine them to determine if they will work well with issues in the built environment.

ECOCENTRISM FOR THE CITY

Ecocentrism holds steady as the most developed approach within the literature that makes use of intrinsic value for dealing with conflicts between humans and nonhumans. The general tenets of this position maintain that the intrinsic value of ecosystems should motivate our decisions behind environmental consideration.[7] In turn, ecocentrism should be well primed for addressing multifaceted urban concerns. The thinking behind this view largely rests on Aldo Leopold's seminal work, *A Sand County Almanac: Sketches Here and There*, encapsulated in the following excerpt: "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land. . . . In short, a land ethic change the role of *Homo sapiens* form conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it."[8] Inspired by Leopold's thought, several environmental ethicists have developed elaborate systems to address humankind's place in the world.[10]

For example, J. Baird Callicott explains that ecocentric thinking emerged when environmental philosophers called for a complete overhaul of Western thinking, moving the locus of intrinsic value from people to entire ecosystems.[10] The goal was to build a new a metaphysical and ethical paradigm for thinking about the world.[11]

The call to recenter how humankind fits within the continuum of life, as a member of a larger whole, is the essential criterion that defines the ecocentric position, a notion justified by non anthropocentric intrinsic value. Hargrove has identified two kinds of such values in the literature, objective nonanthropocentric and subjective nonanthropocentric.[12] The former holds that nonhumans have intrinsic value that exists without humans valuing them, while the latter relies on valuing by humans.

---

[6] For example, see Lynn Westney, "Intrinsic Value and the Permanent Record: The Preservation Conundrum," *OCLC Systems and Services: International Digital Library Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (2007): 5–2.

[7] For an example, see J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 3–4.

[8] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 204.

[9] Hargrove, "WeakAnthropocentrism," pp. 183–207.

[10] Callicott, *In Defense,* pp. 3–4.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentrism," p. 184.

Holmes Rolston, III endorses the objective nonanthropocentric view of intrinsic value.[13] In accordance with his formulation of this approach, he argues that all nonhuman life has intrinsic value, just as they have other characteristics.[14] This kind of intrinsic value is comprehensively understood through thinking about each living thing in an ecosystem; all life depends on interconnected relationships, but each organism strives to maintain itself.[15] Within this web, each organism requires the instrumental value of other organisms for metabolism.[16] Because they defend their lives in such a manner, they have intrinsic value, respectively.[17] Due to this assemblage, these organisms, existing as an ecosystem, have systemic value.[18] According to Rolston, "The way the world *is* informs the way it *ought to be.*" Through developing this positon, his view appears to overcome the naturalistic fallacy, showing how "ought" and "is" are exclusive in this instance. Considering that they have this value, they carry moral weight, and we have a duty to respect it.[19]

Slightly differing from the objective view, nonanthropocentric subjective intrinsic value maintains that nonhuman life does not have intrinsic value unless humankind values it.[20] Callicott favors this position, and he shows how it applies to environmental conflicts of interest between human and nonhuman.[21] For instance, he lays out his second-order principles [SOP-1 and SOP-2] as ways to deal with conflicts of interest between human and nonhuman considerations. Callicott maintains that membership in an immediate community gives a person SOP-1 obligations that outweigh considerations for distant communities.[22] For example, a person has an SOP-1 obligation to his or her family that overrides an obligation to one's neighbors. In terms of SOP-2 obligations a person has stronger interests involving duties that outweigh weaker interests.[23] Consider, for instance, that I have an obligation to spend time with my family (SOP-1), but if I do not earn money at my job (SOP-2), then my family will be homeless. In such a case, my SOP-2 obligation has more importance than my SOP-1 obligation.

---

[13] Ibid. It is worth mentioning that Katie McShane holds that Rolston's view of intrinsic value endorses the following: "Views according to which claims about the intrinsic value of X are claims about which properties of X make it valuable. . . .Views according to which claims about the intrinsic value of X are claims about the metaphysical status of X's value properties." See, Katie McShane, "Why Environmental Ethics Shouldn't Give Up on Intrinsic Value," *Environmental Ethics* 29, no. 1 (2007): 47.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 100.

[16] Holmes Rolston, III, *Conserving Natural Value* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 177.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics,* pp.186–87; also see p. 216.

[19] Ibid., pp. 230–31.

[20] Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentrism," p. 194.

[21] J. Baird Callicott, *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 73–75.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

The SOP-1 and SOP-2 arrangement provides a blueprint for how to justify decisions that would prioritize nonhumans over humans. The strength of this position is that it allows humans to put their interests ahead of nonhumans, but there is some flexibility when stronger nonhuman interests arise that require reprioritization. Due to its structure and flexible nature, Callicott's ecocentrism provides a means of making environmentally minded decisions without moral conflicts. Ecocentrists could argue that these qualities make it well suited as a problem-solving measure. For instance, Callicott exhibits how these principles work:

> The spotted owl is threatened with preventable anthropocentric extinction—threatened with biocide, in a word—and the old-growth forest biotic communities of the Pacific Northwest are threatened with destruction. . . . If we faced the choice of cutting down millions of four-hundred-year-old trees or cutting down thousands of forty-year-old loggers, our duties to the loggers would not take precedence by SOP-1, nor would SOP-1 be countermanded by SOP-2. But that is not the choice we face. The choice is between cutting down four-hundred-year-old trees, rendering the spotted owl extinct, and destroying the old-growth forest biotic community, on one hand, and displacing the forest workers in an economy that is already displacing them through automation and raw-log exports to Japan and other foreign markets. And the old-growth logging lifestyle is doomed, in any case to self-destruct, for it will come to an end with the "final solution" to the old-growth forest question, if the jack-booted timber barons continue to have their way. With SOP-2 supplementing SOP-1, the indication of the land ethic is crystal clear.[24]

From the example above, we can extrapolate a guide for how to put ecocentric principles into practice. Although Callicott is addressing wilderness preservation, applying his second-order principles to cities can inform us about how urban elements should or should not affect ecosystems. Consider highways versus mass transit. One could argue that public transport has a lesser impact on the nonhuman environment, whereas highways and automobiles harm several species and exacerbate climate change. Each person should have the "right" to safely drive as he or she sees fit, but moral obligations to ecosystems are of greater importance. Consequently, city leaders should advocate on behalf of mass transit, an ecocentric defense of urban mobility.

This example shows how to employ Callicott's methods in a manner that is consistent with Leopold's land ethic. It exhibits how urban dwellers can reduce their ecological footprints through selecting infrastructures that reduce resource consumption and carbon emissions. However, there are some reservations that might prevent us from fully advocating for this approach. For instance, some conceptual criticisms of ecocentrism could affect its integrity and applicability. In the next section, I examine these issues to discover why such shortcomings could require us to search for an alternative.

---

[24] Ibid., p. 75.

PROBLEMS FOR ECOCENTRISM IN RELATION TO CITIES

Although ecocentrism has a foundation and a means to employ its principles, both versions have challenges. For the objective nonanthropocentric based approaches, serious criticisms in the history of environmental ethics indicate why they might not be the best-equipped approach for dealing with cities. For instance, Hargrove points out that they require anthropocentrism: "After discovering that something has a good of its own, the human or humans must decide to intrinsically value it. . . ."[25] In making this claim, Hargrove shows that even if objective nonanthropocentric intrinsic values do exist, acting on their behalf cannot occur unless one does so as a human who is capable of valuing. The problem here for ecocentrism is that it was supposed to replace anthropocentrism, reorienting our view of the nonhuman world wherein we are simply members of the biotic community. Yet, anthropocentrism is a necessary component of objective nonanthropocentric thinking and acting, suggesting that it is a troubled concept.

While this criticism takes aim at objective nonanthropocentrism, it also indicates a problem for subjective nonanthropocentric intrinsic value. For instance, Hargrove argues that we cannot escape having a human's perspective, alluding to Thomas Nagel's "What's it like to be a Bat?" Hargrove illustrates that the problem with nonanthropocentrism rests with our inability to access the required knowledge to fully experience being a bat (or any other nonhuman living thing).[26] If such an experience is impossible, then describing aspects that stem from such experiences rests on guesswork. Replacing "bat" with "ecosystem" epistemologically complicates matters because there is no way to know what it is like to be a mindless system of different species. Echoing Hargrove, Frederick Ferré formulates this condition as perspectival anthropocentrism, while other philosophers refer to this view as conceptual anthropocentrism.[27] Apart from these criticisms, there are practical concerns for ecocentrism's inability to deal with urban issues.

For example, Rolston's ecocentrism does not make significant room for the intrinsic value (in the Hargrovian sense) of the abiotic community.[28] In turn, his approach cannot significantly address issues that pertain to environments such as caves. If he cannot address nonhuman nonliving entities with gusto, then weighing in on the intrinsic value of metropolitan areas would not fare any better. For instance, cities have problems such as balancing the historical preservation of architecture and new housing developments, and objective nonanthropocentric intrinsic value has

[25] Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentrism," p. 191.

[26] See Thomas Nagel, "What is it like to be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–50; Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentrism," p. 201.

[27] Frederick Ferré, "Personalistic Organicism: Paradox or Paradigm?" *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 36 (1994): 72; see Allan Thompson, "Anthropocentrism: Humanity as Peril and Promise," in Stephen Gardiner and Allen Thompson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 82.

[28] Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentrism," pp. 193–94. Also, see Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, pp. 232–45.

nary an application. If we want to appeal to the kind of intrinsic value that Hargrove supports for thinking about topics such as architecture, then we are at a loss.

When it comes to applicability problems, Callicott's version of ecocentrism also raises concerns about its practicality. For instance, regarding SOP-1 and SOP-2, as instruments for addressing ecological affairs in cities, it is challenging to think that there could ever be a case in which humankind would or could act against its own interests, especially considering Hargrove's criticisms about the mere possibility. For example, when using SOPs to make a complex decision that involves balancing human and nonhuman interests, it does not make sense to say that nature could have an interest in anything beyond basic biological well-being and flourishing.

What does an ecosystem have to say about transportation infrastructure? The only answer that can come with any degree of certainty would be to identify what counts as being in humankind's direct or indirect (long-term environmental) interests. If this notion holds, then it means that the thinking behind SOP-1 and SOP-2 remains anthropocentric, yielding human-favored outcomes. In turn, ecocentrism fails to provide a way to work in practice that is true to its principles. This notion suggests that it cannot reorient our thinking about the nonhuman world in way that is congruent with cities on epistemological or practical grounds.

Aside from these criticisms, ecocentrism faces other challenges when it comes to avoiding issues that rest on its inherent structure. The problem is that it fails to explicitly prioritize humans above nonhumans. This orientation suggests that human-to-human social justice concerns are not strong motivating considerations. In all fairness, neither Callicott nor Rolston gave any indication that they were developing an approach to social justice. This would be an excellent rebuttal, but ecocentrism is still a moral theory, and thus is not exempt from moral scrutiny. This point is not to suggest that ecocentrists go against social justice causes, and charging their views as being racist goes too far. However, the field of environmental philosophy and environmental thought has had its share of such criticisms.

For instance, Bill Lawson points out that some of the early work in environmental ethics that dealt with cities fails to consider the poor people who live in them.[29] Charles W. Mills holds that environmental inquires neglect to account for the political realities of race and place.[30] Having served as the editor-in-chief of *Environmental Ethics* since 1979, Hargrove argues that environmental ethics has mostly neglected environmental racism, pointing out that most philosophers mainly research subjects such as the protection of ecosystems and nonhuman animals.[31] Considered as a collection, these criticisms paint a picture showing that, by virtue

---

[29] Bill Lawson, "Living for the City: Urban United States and Environmental Justice," in Laura Westra and Bill Lawson, eds., *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), p. 41.

[30] Charles Mills, "Black Trash" in Laura Westra and Bill Lawson, eds., *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), p. 74.

[31] Eugene Hargrove, "Forward," in Westra and Lawson, *Faces of Environmental Racism,* p. ix.

of concentrating on some problems, environmental thinkers and philosophers unintentionally neglect such issues.

Moving forward, the path should be clear. The aim should be to act so that our actions reflect our moral priorities, and weak anthropocentrism might be able to provide a consistent, moral way to address complex urban affairs in such a manner. In the following sections, I examine this position, searching for a way to morally balance relevant considerations.

WEAK ANTHROPOCENTRISM FOR THE CITY

Although he does not appeal to intrinsic value, Bryan Norton developed a weak anthropocentric approach to argue against strong anthropocentrism, the view that humans determine all value based on the degree of satisfaction of our *felt* preferences.[32] In contrast, weak anthropocentrism holds that humans' *considered* preference determine all values.[33] This idea suggests that our well-reasoned thinking about the environment could lead to environmental protection.[34] For example, we could argue for environmental protection due to an interest in having thriving ecosystems for future generations, a move that speaks to efforts in sustainability. In turn, Norton shows how humankind can develop approaches to environmental consideration that do not bring charges of misanthropy.

This view benefits environmental ethics because it provides a way for humans to include considerations for nonhumans, but it receives criticism because it neglects intrinsic value and excludes other dimensions such as aesthetics.[35] Norton has since abandoned this position, opting for a pragmatic approach instead.[36] Hargrove maintains a different version of weak anthropocentrism, focusing on intrinsic values as described earlier. For him, dismantling nonanthropocentrism involves showing how it is a version of weak anthropocentrism.

Bearing in mind his criticisms of nonanthropocentric intrinsic value above, we can understand how he grounds his approach. For instance, while Hargrove holds that we cannot escape having a human's perspective, appealing to nonhuman (living and nonliving) intrinsic beauty to justify moral consideration of the nonhuman world provides a means to defend it.[37] By including this stipulation in his version of weak anthropocentrism, he goes beyond Norton's preferences/consideration framework. This move also justifies moral consideration based on intrinsic value that benefits how we understand the beauty of cities and their parts.

---

[32] Bryan G. Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism," *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1984): 134.

[33] Norton, "Environmental Ethics," p. 134.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ben Minteer, "Anthropocentrism," in Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman, eds., *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy* (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Macmillan Reference USA/Gale Cengage Learning, 2009), p. 60.

[36] Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentrism," pp. 206–07.

[37] Ibid., pp. 201–02.

For instance, Hargrove reminds us that anthropocentrism simply means "human centered." One way to interpret the term *weak* is to suggest that anthropocentrism is flexible, showing that we can engage in practices that fall outside of our immediate interests in favor of interests that bring the nonhuman world into our perspective. Weak anthropocentrism still makes humans the prime focus for consideration, but making room for nonhumans' intrinsic value makes it weak. Through making this modest concession, weak anthropocentrism can avoid missteps while dealing with the problem of moral prioritization by not placing humans beneath nonhumans. This basic structure shows that humans' interests remain respected as a highly regarded priority, and nonhumans remain in view for reasons that go beyond gross instrumentalism because they are seen as ends.

We can extend the thinking behind this kind of weak anthropocentrism to several areas to cover intrinsic value in cities. Considering Hargrove's partiality toward (living and nonliving) nature's beauty and its intrinsic value, for instance, most urban artifacts could also be viewed as having it. If so, then almost anything in the city could have intrinsic value, keeping in mind that urban artifacts could be considered for their aesthetic value in a manner similar to the Mona Lisa or a cave. Recalling Hargrove's weak anthropocentric intrinsic value, one could argue that urban artifacts such as buildings, bridges, and ballparks could fit under this description. Perhaps people will not agree that a dumpster is an awe-inspiring work of art, but expert designers could disagree. The same notion applies to the infrastructure holding the city together, along with street lamps, highways, and historic buildings. They might not have much aesthetic appeal to residents, but such devices have the possibility of being aesthetically appealing to a point that transcends mere appreciation.

What is more, if having enough beauty to transcend mere aesthetic value can serve as the basis for intrinsic value arguments, we should also inquire about similar grounds such as historical and or cultural significance. If we can agree that humans, nonhumans, and artifacts deserve consideration based on the standards of weak anthropocentric intrinsic value, then concerns should rest on how we prioritize them, bearing in mind that we cannot always preserve everything that has such values. Denying this realism implicitly (and erroneously) suggests that sidewalks deserve the same consideration as human babies.

In turn, we must ask: "Do all urban artifacts warrant consideration?" The short answer is "yes." Yet, as Hargrove argues, we have to rely on well-informed as-sessments to determine if an artifact has such value. Although in trivial cases such as removing a dumpster, there is little reason to worry that someone would protest by appealing to its intrinsic value. However, there are serious cases that involve meaningful topics that include quality-of-life issues.[38]

For example, consider highway removal projects. Such undertakings show that getting rid of a highway that has proven to put residents at a disadvantage clearly indicates that such a structure lacks instrumental value; removing it would serve

---

[38] It is worth mentioning that in some cities (e.g., New Dehli) having no dumpsters is a serious quality-of-life issue.

the people in some capacity.[39] On the contrary, one could argue the highway's historical significance gives it intrinsic value. This example shows that we have to debate who gets to count as being qualified to make assessments about intrinsic value. To undertake this task, I explore ways to weigh the intrinsic value of urban artifacts in the following section, showing how weak anthropocentrism can benefit this process.

WEAK ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND COMPLEX MORAL ASSESSMENTS

For matters that pertain to human-nonhuman relations, weak anthropocentrism provides congruence, but examining its internal organization could reveal neglected social concerns. For instance, during the outset, I mentioned that failing to prioritize marginalized groups over nonhumans is problematic. Structurally, weak anthropocentrism (perhaps by default) does not have any disadvantages in its design regarding social justice. With some fleshing out, it can serve as the basic blueprint for developing a just way for addressing environmental issues in cites that can escape the charges mentioned above. What is left to figure out for weak anthropocentrism, then, is how to make prioritizations that properly consider these elements as they intersect. If we neglect to morally prioritize the order of who or what should receive consideration, then weak anthropocentrism would not fare any better than ecocentrism. Completing this task means illustrating how to embed weak anthropocentrism into a complex moral assessment (CMA) that can guide moral prioritization.

In a paper published elsewhere, I touched on developing CMAs, but I did not account for the problem of moral prioritization and its intricacies.[40] As a theoretical device, they can help us prioritize actions that affect marginalized people, the non-marginalized public, nonhumans (individual animals and ecosystems), future generations, and urban artifacts. Each category deserves respect, but not all categories equally deserve it.

I hesitate to advance a strict model because a rigid structure could result in a moral upset, wherein prioritization becomes a device for oppression. That is to say, if we think about moral prioritization as a long-term utopian goal, then committing short-term wrongs could be justified. Thinking in this manner suggests that we ought to frame CMAs as a morally sound means rather than an end, but we cannot deny that achieving a moral outcome is the goal. Achieving such a reality calls for a CMA that can adapt to different situations, yet it is also reliable, ensuring that it promotes justice. Below, I provide a sketch of how to design a CMA for dealing with complicated urban affairs.

Consider the following case: when debating which kind of transportation systems

---

[39] City of Seattle, "Case Studies in Urban Freeway Removal," http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/docs/ump/06%20SEATTLE%20Case%20studies%20in%20urban%20freeway%20removal.pdf.

[40] Shane Epting, "A Different Trolley Problem: The Limits of Environmental Justice and the Promise of Complex Moral Assessments for Transportation Infrastructure." *Science and Engineering Ethics* 22, no. 6 (2016): 1781–95.

that cities *should* invest in, marginalized people, the public, nonhumans, future generations, and artifacts deserve consideration. Yet, which group should receive the highest degree of prioritization? I tend to side with views put forth by Emmanuel Levinas and Enrique Dussel, arguing that we ought to help people who are suffering the most, and this model supports their views.[41] If one requires an additional argument for why the people who are suffering more than nonsuffering groups, Dussel holds that if we examine the sociopolitical conditions that pertain to oppression, then we discover moral reasons to ground such considerations. For instance, Dussel argues:

> They are the ones who, by the side of the road, outside the system, show their suffering, challenging faces: "We're hungry! We have the right to eat!" That right, outside the system, is not a right that is justified by the *proyecto* or the laws of the system. Their absolute right, because they are sacred and free, is founded in their own exteriority, in the real constitution of their human dignity. When the poor advance in the world, they shake the very pillars of the system that exploits them. . . . The mere presence of the oppressed as such is the end of the oppressor's "good conscience." The one who has the ability to discover where the other, the poor, is to be found will be able, from the poor, to diagnose the pathology of the state.[42]

From this passage, we can infer that if the means that a politically organized society used to advance involved exploiting particular groups of people, then such conditions raise moral questions that pertain to how they should be treated in light of such histories. For the urban planner or engineer who can make decisions that can mitigate harms that are connected to historical mistreatment, they have a moral grounding for acting in such a manner. While they are not responsible for such harms, choosing not to act in such a fashion could perpetuate historically rooted oppression. Due to these conditions, it seems rather axiomatic that we should aim to alleviate indirect harms that stem from a tainted past before designing a hopeful future, unless doing so can simultaneously accomplish both goals.

To identify specific ways that a marginalized group has been unjustly treated, we can use an environmental justice framework. Robert M. Figueroa, for example, developed an environmental justice paradigm wherein we can pinpoint different kinds of harm, including physical and mental injuries, damages to cultural identity, disrespect toward traditional forms of knowledge and heritage, along with provisions for marginalized people to be included in policy decisions that affect them.[43]

---

[41] See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 213 (French original published in 1961). See Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, Aquila Martinez and Christine Morkovsky, trans., (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 43.

[42] Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, Aquila Martinez and Christine Morkovsky, trans., (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), p . 43.

[43] Robert M. Figueroa, "Evaluating Environmental Justice Claims," in Joan Bauer, eds., *Forging Environmentalism: Justice, Livelihood, and Contested Environments* (Amonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2006), pp. 360–76.

While Figueroa's paradigm makes room for inclusive measures in policy, I argue that the limits of participation should extend beyond such practices. To recall a point made in the previous section, we must ask: who gets to count as being qualified to make an assessment about the intrinsic value of an urban artifact? We need to remain consistent with Figueroa's approach, including marginalized people who have intimate access to such artifacts via cultural or historical connection is essential.[44]

In accordance with these considerations, we must then make an assessment about how a decision would harm or benefit the public, along with how it would affect the rights of individuals, a mix of utilitarianism and deontology. This imperfect, inconsistent examination could uncover problems that do not fit within the justice framework above because the public is not a marginalized group, but its size does not exclude it from victimization. Consider, for example, that a governing body (federal or state) could pass a law that harms everyone, and we need a way to morally scrutinize such actions.

One could argue that employing utilitarianism for this measure within a CMA works because it provides a simple criterion, "Act to maximize the most happiness for the greatest number of people." Yet, we should not completely discount individuals' rights. Although these positions are mostly incompatible, planners, engineers, and architects have to face the real-world manifestations of such irreconcilable tensions. This reality (having to address "best-worst case" scenarios) could justify this faulty vacillation. Finally, there should be a discussion about participatory measures as mentioned above. While it could be the case that residents would like to be free from such decisions, others could hold that they want to have their voices included. Following considerations for the public, we must integrate science into this approach. An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) could help determine how an action would affect the nonhuman world.[45] While they can provide information about how a decision could influence people living today, EIAs can also indicate how a choice might affect future generations. Putting considerations for nonhumans above future generations might seem as if I am violating the principles for which

---

[44] While highly technical cases that involve massive engineering or public works project will require trained expertise, one could argue that developing an approach that includes meaningful inclusion is possible. The significant amount of attention that this topic requires, however, is outside of the purview of this paper, but it should be noted that a CMA is arguably unjust if it does not include meaningful participation from residents. I have addressed this subject in terms of transportation infrastructure in a previous paper. See Shane Epting, "The Peñalosa Principle of Transportation Democracy: Lessons from Bogotá on the Morality of Urban Mobility," *Science and Engineering Ethics* 23, no. 4 (2017): 1085–96. This point is not meant to suggest that every historical artifact deserves to be considered as having intrinsic value. For example, consider recent arguments about Confederate monuments in the southern United States. Proponents could argue that these artifacts have intrinsic value and in turn deserve protection. The problem is that this view fails to recognize that these monuments have a different history for African Americans, and one could argue that they would not hold these artifacts in the same awe-inspiring regard, meaning that these monuments have something along the lines of "negative intrinsic value."

[45] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Environmental Impact Assessment," http://www.epa.ie/monitoringassessment/assessment/eia.

I advocate, but this is not the case. Although future generations of humans come after nonhumans in this arrangement, placing non-existing humans over existing ecosystems is shortsighted. In order for humans to exist in the future, caring for the environment is a required condition, and humans existing today require a non-harmful environment.[46] That is to say, we can make or retrofit cities to exhibit care for the nonhuman world, preserving its instrumental value while concurrently wanting to preserve its awe-inspiring ability, its intrinsic value. In turn, this approach still supports the version of weak anthropocentrism that I put forth above because it keeps humans as the prime focus, but the environment is not strictly viewed only for instrumental reasons.

Future generations are the next "entity" that "receives" moral consideration in this model. "Entity" is qualified because the term requires existing, a quality that future people do not have. Analytic philosophers refer to this issue as the "non-identity problem."[47] The problem with considering future generations, according to Hans Jonas, is that it is challenging to say that we have an obligation to future generations because they do not exist.[48] However, it seems as if we want to be able to say something meaningful about taking care of the planet for the sake of future generations.

For instance, world leaders such as former President Barack Obama and Pope Francis have urged us to embrace environmental stewardship for this reason.[49] To find an amicable way to address this notion, Jonas argues that we need not look any further than our duties to ourselves:

> With this imperative we are, strictly speaking, not responsible to the future human individuals but to the *idea* of Man, which is such that it demands the presences of its embodiment in the world . . . thus making it a duty to us who can endanger it.[50]

With this passage, Jonas circumvents the problem of non-identity, meaning that we do not even need to have the conversation about obligations toward future generations for their own sake.

Thinking about the magnitude of Jonas' view, the idea of future generations suggests that we are thinking about a topic that is so important that we need not go outside of our own self-interest to give it more weight. One could argue that

---

[46] Robin Attfield, "Beyond Anthropocentrism," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 69 (2011): 46.

[47] For a recent work that addresses the non-identity problem in great detail, see David Boonin, *The Non-identity Problem and the Ethics of Future People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[48] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1984), p.38. This claim is also present in Richard Routley and Val Routley, "Nuclear Energy and Obligations to the Future." *Inquiry* 21, no. 1-4 (1978): 143.

[49] Barack Obama, "Weekly Address: Protecting our Planet for Future Generations," https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/24/weekly-address-protecting-our-planet-future-generations.

[50] Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 43.

the idea of future generations has a kind of intrinsic value that is consistent with Hargrove's earlier description. That is to say, thinking about them has instrumental value because it can drive us to make the world a better place to live. However, the idea of perpetuating the existence of the human race goes beyond mere instrumental motivation. It is a good thing in and of itself, suggesting that we can make room for it in a CMA.

Lastly, the intrinsic value of the built environment deserves attention, even though such cases are highly distinctive. For example, each city has its own unique history, architecture, landmarks, neighborhoods, and social issues. When a problem arises that involves these kinds of elements, a solution for one city is not guaranteed to work for another city. Aside from this point, I put the intrinsic value of urban dimensions (buildings, bridges, infrastructure, etc.) at the bottom because these components constantly change and can be replaced, whereas we cannot interchange people, de-extinct species (to their original state), or easily restore the conditions for genuine human life in the future if we destroy them.

While this configuration addresses the problem of moral prioritization, it does not assume that such an arrangement is without exception. Similar to SOP-1 and SOP-2, conflicts will arise when formulating a response wherein it appears that moral prioritization fails. Consider, for instance, if a track of land is set to be developed for affordable housing for marginalized people. However, an environmental impact assessment determines that doing so would devastate a nearby wetland that provides numerous ecosystem services that are essential for the community. If we employ the CMA as described above, then we would lose the wetland, along with flood control, water purification, wastewater treatment, and it would harm several nonhuman species that the locals revere.

It seems that acting for nonhumans in this case, instead of acting for marginalized people, would be a well-supported endeavor, but it would be one that would appear to violate the CMA described above. While it might appear that impeding construction would fail to comply with the CMA, preserving the wetland would actually be of greater importance, considering that marginalized groups and the non-marginalized public would tremendously benefit, along with nonhumans and future generations. In turn, such efforts would not violate the CMA. These kinds of circumstances justify giving CMAs a flexible nature.

When dealing with multitiered conflicts, solutions that appease all parties will be challenging. For example, arguing that acting in humankind's environmental interests while simultaneously acting on behalf of nonhumans' intrinsic value to develop high-rise affordable eco-housing that includes tearing down a culturally historic building could be overwhelming. The historical significance of such a structure to some people might be a stronger interest than preserving an ecosystem. Settling such cases would not come easily, but these conditions do not mean that moral prioritization within complex moral assessments must collapse into relativism.

On the contrary, these conditions suggest that we must face hard questions, but not impossible ones, about moral rightness in such instances. Simply because we might not discover a moral solution does not entail that one does not exist, or that similar cases are doomed. Nevertheless, these challenges come with problems such as climate change and, in general, learning to live on a complex biosphere.

While CMAs offer great theoretical and applied benefits for addressing environmental issues in metropolitan areas, the manner that they have been laid out above could also deserve attention. The approach that I am developing could involve embedded discrimination. Beginning with a theoretical approach rooted in environmental philosophy instead of social justice potentially indicates a proclivity for environmental thought over the well-being of marginalized groups. This criticism could reveal a bias that could be entrenched in my perspective. This is a fair criticism, but it does not dismiss the reality that issues of moral prioritization require solutions.

The point worth emphasizing is that CMAs are consistent with and can be described as weak anthropocentric positions. Any inherent bias is a coextensive feature that arises when addressing the tension between acting for humans and our perspective of acting for nonhumans. The only defense that I have against such charges is to show that in CMAs indirect nonhuman concerns have a moral prioritization that places them beneath care for humans, except in instances in which there is an overriding interest that negatively impacts humankind (similar to SOP-1 and SOP-2). This notion means that social justice issues are a subcategory of issues that must be addressed within the top tier of a CMA. Bearing this point in mind, the bias described above only applies to the theoretical development in this text, a proposal showing how environmental ethicists can contribute to how we understand cities. Addressing CMA outside of this context entails discussions about the nonhuman world, but other areas of concern (i.e., concern for disenfranchised people) will prevail in a properly composed plan of moral prioritization.

THE WAY FORWARD

The problem of moral prioritization in urban affairs requires a significant amount of additional attention from philosophers. For one vein of research, efforts in a broad sense should work against relativism, trying to establish absolutes for dealing with problems within the context of moral prioritization. I mention this point because variance between issues could demand case-by-case solutions. After all, cities differ, and each one has a particular history, culture, topography, and people that requires diligence to discover how to manage complicated conflicts.

Living in a progressively urbanizing world also means that such matters will continue to advance, and ecological and social problems will compound. In the face of such challenges, however, new forms of knowledge must provide insights into the sphere of metropolitan morality. By making such advances, philosophers can

deliver urban planners, landscape architects, and engineers the means to ethically build and rebuild cities so that they can ensure the continued survival and flourishing of humankind, a condition that depends on ecological well-being.

Achieving such ends requires philosophers and other researchers to complement scientific advances in the academy and social progress in the street. Researchers have revealed how data science can assist municipal professionals with issues in urban sustainability.[51] Specifically, their work delivers a predictive model for addressing issues that typically accompany population increases, furthering research efforts in resource management and troubleshooting.[52] Yet, such progress does not provide a way to deal with the moral and justice aspects that come with metropolitan growth, and a thoroughly developed guide for moral prioritization could bolster such efforts.

---

[51] Bettencourt and West, "A Unified Theory," pp. 912–13.
[52] Ibid.