

John Basl

The Death of the Ethic of Life

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019

ISBN 978-0-19-092387-7 (HB) £47.99. x + 207pp.

John Basl's *The Death of the Ethic of Life* is a serious and careful treatment of the philosophical issues that arise in debates about biocentrism (the view that living things have direct moral importance simply in virtue of being alive). This book is a very welcome addition to the literature: while a variety of papers have come out recently proposing new arguments related to biocentrism, many drawing on recent work in the philosophy of biology and philosophy of mind, there has been no book-length treatment of these issues in over a decade. Basl's book brings together much of this recent work, and carefully works out what he takes to be its implications. The view that he ultimately argues for, that anything teleologically structured has a welfare but only sentient creatures have a morally important welfare, is a novel position in these debates and one well worth taking seriously.

In the first chapter, Basl explains what he takes the philosophical commitments of biocentrism to be. As he understands it, biocentrism is by definition an individualist view; holists (who argue that ecological wholes such as species or ecosystems also have direct moral importance) do not count as biocentrists. He also describes the case for biocentrism ('the dominant approach' to defending it) as involving both the view that the direct moral importance of living things is a matter of their having morally important interests and the view that artefacts are not bearers of direct moral importance. All three of these commitments -- the individualism, the moral importance of welfare, and the exclusion of artefacts -- will be challenged in his case against biocentrism. The second chapter mainly serves to eliminate two obstacles to his view: the claim that the truth of biocentrism depends on which normative theory is true and the claim that welfare is necessarily subjective. Stage-setting complete, the third chapter is where Basl begins laying out the details of his positive view. Here he argues for what he calls an 'etiologically account of teleological welfare' (p. 90). This is, roughly, the view that the welfare of nonsentient organisms consists in the promotion of their ends, where to be an end is to be a current behaviour that was selected for in the organism's ancestors in the evolutionary past. Thus far in the book, the view Basl has argued for is compatible with biocentrism. Starting in chapter four, however, he argues that the three commitments of biocentrism described above are in fact untenable. In this chapter he criticises the commitment to individualism. Working through contemporary views from philosophy of biology about the units/levels of selection, he argues that some wholes (such as ecosystems)

are teleologically organised in such a way that a biocentrist must admit they have a welfare. In chapter five he criticises the exclusion of artefacts, arguing that some artefacts are also teleologically organised in a way that qualifies them as having a welfare. While attributing welfare to artefacts might strike some readers as strange, Basl argues that this is only because we assume that their welfare must be morally important. On the contrary, he argues in chapter six, only the welfare of sentient creatures matters morally. Since the welfare of nonsentient organisms, ecological wholes and artefacts does not matter morally, we needn't be so bothered by the fact that they have a welfare. His view thus complete, Basl ends by briefly working out some of the implications of his theory for issues in bioethics and the ethics of artificial intelligence.

In my view the sixth chapter is the most intriguing and challenging part of the book. Basl's argument for the claim that the welfare of nonsentient things doesn't matter morally proceeds by a series of cases meant to show readers that they don't think people do anything morally wrong in itself, or even morally significant, in disabling the functions of artefacts. For example, the last human on earth would do nothing morally wrong if she turned off a water pump before she died, even though this would clearly prevent the pump from achieving its (etiological) ends. Since earlier parts of the book showed that nonsentient organisms, some ecological wholes, and many artefacts are equivalent in terms of having a welfare based on their teleological organisation, and since these cases show that the welfare of artefacts isn't in itself morally important, then we should conclude that the welfare of the nonsentient organisms and ecological wholes isn't morally important either.

Of course, one could reason in the other direction: if it would seem wrong for the last human to kill all of the plants on earth before dying, then this might lead us to (1) accept the moral importance of artefacts' welfare, since we assume the equivalence of artefacts with plants; or (2) question whether we should be convinced of the equivalence of the welfare of artefacts with that of plants, since the last human cases seem to show an important difference between them. Cases aside, one is still left wondering what it is about artefacts that would make their welfare morally important or unimportant.

Basl's positive view raises two sets of interesting philosophical questions. First, how should we understand what it is to have a welfare that's not morally important? Does this render the distinction between things that have a welfare and things that do not insignificant? If not, what is its significance? Second, why should we trust our ordinary sense of which things have a morally important welfare (not water pumps, apparently), but not our sense of which

things have a welfare in the first place (perhaps, not water pumps either)? Deciding when to rely on judgements about cases is a tricky business, especially when one is simultaneously relying on and challenging conventional wisdom about different aspects of an issue.

Over the years environmental philosophy has shown that including the nonhuman world in our theorising can lead to deep questions about concepts that had previously been taken for granted. As Basl's book makes clear, welfare is starting to look like one of those concepts. About this and other matters, I believe that the questions raised by this deep and thought-provoking book should provoke fruitful philosophical discussion for years to come.

KATIE McSHANE
Colorado State University