Biocentric Consequentialism and Value-Pluralism: A Response to Alan Carter

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My theory of biocentric consequentialism is first shown not to be significantly inegalitarian, despite not advocating treating all creatures equally. I then respond to Carter's objections concerning population, species extinctions, the supposed minimax implication, endangered interests, autonomy and thought-experiments. Biocentric consequentialism is capable of supporting a sustainable human population at a level compatible with preserving most non-human species, as opposed to catastrophic population increases or catastrophic decimation. Nor is it undermined by the mere conceivable possibility of counter-intuitive implications. While Carter shows that value-pluralism need not be riddled with contradictions, his version still introduces some, and faces further problems. Thus consequentialist theories may be needed to sift our values, at least if our values are commensurable. Carter's apparent suggestion that monistic theories such as biocentric consequentialism can never be harnessed to rich theories of value and must each myopically give undue prominence to a single value is questioned.

I

First, an aspect of my theory of biocentric consequentialism should be clarified. In some ways this is an egalitarian theory, advocating equal consideration of equal interests (both among humans and across species boundaries); in others inegalitarian, giving precedence in certain circumstances to sophisticated capacities such as autonomy where they are at stake. But it is not socially inegalitarian, assigning (as it does) high priority to the satisfaction of basic needs. Nor does it prioritize the interests of humans as humans. Alan Carter often writes as if I held that all humans have more sophisticated capacities than other creatures, and that if so we should develop the greater capacities of humans to some degree in preference to developing any of the capacities of the members of other species.[1] But this clashes with what I have argued elsewhere[2] (as Carter also recognizes). Since some creatures lack capacities (such as the capacity to vote) and related interests held by others, they cannot and should not be considered or treated equally

[1] Alan Carter, 'Inegalitarian Biocentric Consequentialism, the Minimax Implication and Multidimensional Value Theory' [hereafter IBC], *Utilitas* 17.1 (2005), published above.

[2] Robin Attfield, *Value, Obligation and Meta-ethics* [hereafter VOME] (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1995), pp. 18, 93; *The Ethics of the Global Environment* [hereafter EGE] (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 159–60.

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at polling stations. The egalitarian biocentric view that every creature counts alike (person, penguin or plant) ignores important differences of capacity and thus of interests. It is only because I oppose this position that mine is inegalitarian. I also hold that the satisfaction of basic needs makes such a difference to value that everyone's basic needs should be satisfied before anyone's non-basic needs. This is hardly an inegalitarian stance. However, I will briefly respond to Carter's more central remarks in the limited space available here.

II

Carter attempts to fit my theory into a pattern that he identified in 'Moral Theory and Global Population', where he argued that each of the central moral theories is flawed because it attempts to maximize one value, and in so doing contrives to flout other values we hold.[3] My theory, he now suggests, emphasizes autonomy at the expense of other values (a strange representation of biocentric consequentialism). In fact, biocentric consequentialism incorporates a rather elaborate account of priorities among values,[4] and later relates 'values' such as justice to the balance of value over disvalue that this theory of priorities seeks to optimize.[5] Thus it embodies several features of value-pluralism (recognizing the value of health, the development of capacities, worthwhile life, justice, etc. as well as autonomy) while seeking to provide a value-based rationale for choices between recognized 'values'. It is pluralistic in recognizing and relating a plurality of values, but monistic in relating them, consequentialist-wise, to the overall balance of value over disvalue, rather like the Total View version of utilitarianism, of which it is a variant with a richer axiology and a broader understanding of the range of bearers of moral standing.

Carter now recognizes that the biocentric aspects of biocentric consequentialism supply reasons against large increases of the current human population, but suggests that this makes little or no difference, since harm to humans is a reason of sufficient strength anyway. But (as I have argued elsewhere)[6] non-human interests, as recognized in biocentric consequentialism, can justify crucial differences to human practice and policies. This could easily be relevant to practice and policies concerning population size and distribution.

[3] Alan Carter, 'Moral Theory and Global Population', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1998–9), p. 307

[4] VOME, ch. 6.

[5] VOME, ch. 9.

[6] Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics: An Overview for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge and Malden, MA, 2003), pp. 71–5, 89–91.

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Nevertheless, in view of my supposed prioritizing of the interests of humans as humans, Carter infers that biocentric consequentialism 'may well enjoin us to bring into existence billions and billions of humans with their capacities developed ever so slightly in preference to the existence of many other species'.[7] However, I have argued that it does not enjoin bringing into being billions and billions of humans on a planet such as ours in circumstances such as our own at all, and that we should instead aim at a sustainable human planetary population of around 8 billion.[8] Biocentric consequentialism could advocate adding billions and billions of people only if the others could be supported on other planets without damaging the creatures or the ecological systems of those planets, or if they were to live not simultaneously but spread out diachronically over the centuries, with a sustainable but limited human population on Earth continually replacing itself. Nor does biocentric consequentialism advocate developing people's capacities 'ever so slightly', or even 'to a slight degree',[9] since such a practice would standardly fail to satisfy basic human needs for the development of essential capacities. (Consider, for example, people whose capacity to communicate was restricted to pronouns and present-tense verbs only.) Nor would it prefer the slight development of the essential capacities of billions and billions of humans 'in preference to the existence of many other species', not least because it incorporates grounds for the preservation of most current species, from the independent value of these species and also from human interests (see below).

But Carter persists in claiming that my theory may well imply 'the extinction of many inessential species'.[10] Granted his continuing reluctance to define 'inessential species', the reader is left to infer that he means 'species inessential to human interests'. But this is where the biocentric elements of biocentric consequentialism should be recognized as supplementing arguments for preservation from human interests, and where the case that I presented previously in *Utilitas* from considerations such as biodiversity preservation should be heeded.[11] While my theory (like Carter's) does not prohibit all extinctions of species, it cannot be construed as giving a general authorization for extinctions of species of which the continued existence is neither positively advantageous to humanity nor vital for the ecosystems on which humanity depends. Rather, it implies that the intrinsic value of

[7] IBC, sect. I, p. 66.
[8] EGE, pp. 116–24.
[9] IBC, n. 28, p. 68.
[10] Carter, Review of Attfield, *Ethics of the Global Environment*, *Mind* 110 (2001), p. 152; IBC, sect. II, p. 67.
[11] Attfield, 'Biocentric Consequentialism, Pluralism and the "Minimax Implication": A Reply to Carter' [hereafter BPM], *Utilitas* 15 (2003), pp. 82–8.

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present and future species members means that a very strong case is required to justify any extinctions, and that current extinctions and the rate at which they are being perpetrated are massively unjustified.

In his *Mind* review, Carter writes of 'the Minimax Implication: the lowest acceptable level for the greatest number of human beings'.[12] In my reply, I argued that this passage mischaracterizes my theory, since no such implication flows from it.[13] Carter now reaffirms this supposed implication of my theory, as if it favoured the curtailment of human development for the sake of adding extra people. Carter now seems to grant that such curtailment would not be implied by my theory for all circumstances, but suggests that this theory still yields counter-intuitive implications, apparently finding a case in point in a passage where I say that the generation of an additional child may be justified even if it reduces the attention that can be paid to an existing child whose basic needs are already being satisfied.[14] Carter replies above that mine is too weak a reply since 'a single, highly unintuitive result may suffice to pose enough of a problem to any moral theory that implies it'.[15] Whether or not every unintuitive implication of a theory is fatal to it (see below), this implication of my theory is not a counter-intuitive one anyway; such a situation often happens in families when the second child arrives, without anyone finding this unjustified. Besides, there are in fact numerous constraints from the standpoint of my theory on the generation of additional people, some of which are summarized in the passage of 'Biocentric Consequentialism' quoted slightly earlier by Carter.[16]

In section II of IBC, in support of his Minimax Implication objection, Carter argues that my theory commits me to preferring (for a world with similar food-resources to Earth) the actualizing of a population of 25 billion people over 'retaining' a population of 1 billion, even if all the larger population were afflicted by malnutrition. But some of the basic needs of a malnourished population would be unsatisfied (as Carter himself recognizes here). Hence I am not committed to favouring this scenario, but to seeking to avert it. On grounds relating in part to food[17] and fresh water (grounds including human needs and the value of their satisfaction), I actually argue in the population chapter

[12] Carter, Review, p. 151.
[13] Attfield, BPM, pp. 80–1.
[14] Ibid., p. 82.
[15] Carter, IBC, sect. II, p. 69.
[16] Attfield, BPM, p. 79, quoted by Carter in sect. II, p. 67.
[17] Carter makes great play in IBC of food being a scarce resource for which species are in competition. While this is sometimes true, food is of course species-specific, and there is often no competition, even when, as with polar bears and humans, it is wrongly believed to be true, and when, as with prey and predators, species depend on each other.

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of *The Ethics of the Global Environment* (as Carter, who reviewed that book, should know) for stabilizing the population at a lower level (8 billion) than the possible ceiling of 10 billion, on grounds including prospects for sustainability.[18] In view of the detailed argument of this chapter, Carter's claim that I am committed through my core premisses to preferring a population of 25 billion for the circumstances specified by Carter is itself unsustainable. The only alternative option offered by Carter, 'retaining a human population of 1 billion' for 'a world with similar food-resources to Earth' (which in fact currently provides enough food for far more than that) skews the issue. (Why 'retaining' when the current population is in excess of 6 billion?) If the issue were between moving from the actual world to either global famine and 25 billion people or global decimation down to 1 billion, it would be unclear which catastrophe to prefer. But in any case my theory is clearly compatible with a preference (given a world with similar food-resources to Earth) for a population somewhere between these imaginary options, but at the same time one in the lower part of the range of UN population scenarios (such as 8 billion).

This is also relevant to Carter's second main objection to my theory. While this theory could commit me to preferring a population of 25 billion over a population of 1 billion for other circumstances (if, for example, the 25 billion were spread over several generations, several planets, or both), it does not commit its adherents to this preference for a world in which some of their basic needs are not going to be met, or for one where their joint impact on other species is likely to be disastrous for those species. Far less does it commit its adherents to preferring a population of 25 billion that 'continually reproduce themselves', partly because the malnutrition that forms an objection to one such generation now counts against every such generation. A further reason is the loss of value to other species. Granted that the value of the flourishing of some members of some species is, for my theory, insignificant, the value of the flourishing of most animal species is not, and comprises a very strong consideration against introducing a human population that would endanger those species. The endangering of non-human species becomes greater the more generations there are of a human population of this size; some might survive one such generation, but succumb to several. This response is of course independent of the risk, mentioned

[18] Attfield, EGE, pp. 120–4. Carter has also written as if I were committed to favouring the maximum sustainable human population ('Moral Theory and Global Population', p. 312), another strange interpretation of biocentric consequentialism. I have in fact argued to the contrary that even if a larger population were sustainable, a lower sustainable population of around 8 billion would be preferable (EGE, ch. 7, pp. 120–4), partly on grounds of biodiversity preservation and its multiple contributions to the world's value.

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by Carter in Section II, of the destruction of the planet's life-support systems.

Later in Section II, Carter claims that it is conceivable that *Homo sapiens* could evolve into another species with capacities whose development would have still greater value. Yet it is also conceivable that *Homo sapiens* could evolve into a species of utility monsters, and perhaps that mass tele-transportation to other galaxies could liberate the Earth of its human inhabitants altogether. But decision-making and policies have to be based on what there are reasonable grounds to expect or foresee. Hence the conceivable possibility that overpopulation might generate a greater overall surplus of value over disvalue than other courses of action does not undermine the consequentialist conclusion that it should be avoided where the much likelier prospects for value and disvalue are otherwise. Relatedly, conceivable scenarios such as these do not invalidate theories (not even value-pluralism) that could in theory generate them, just as thought-experiments about utility monsters and pleasure wizards do not undermine theories based on utility.

Near the end of Section II, Carter seems to have misunderstood my earlier argument about endangered interests.[19] I was not using the premiss 'where greater interests, such as interests in self-consciousness and autonomy, are endangered and conflict with lesser interests, they take priority', nor the conceptual constraint that only what exists can be endangered, in support of any conclusion about the interests of possible people not mattering. I was rather opposing the use of this particular premiss about what is 'endangered', concerning as it does the endangering of what already exists, in an argument for bringing additional humans into being on the strength of the interests of these possible people. Biocentric consequentialists are not committed to any of the interests of potential living beings not being counted at their full value, and they can afford to accept that in some circumstances the value of the autonomy of possible humans could justify possible people being introduced in place of (say) a number of plants. That I was not treating the 'endangered interests' premiss as conclusive against the colonization of the habitats of species lacking capacities such as autonomy for the sake of homes for additional humans is attested by my continuing to regard this issue as unresolved until reasons are presented (introduced by 'For') at the top of p. 86.

Carter's claim: 'But, we are now told, autonomy is only to be prioritized when it and the creature to which it belongs already exists' does not reflect my position. What I was precluding in my remark about

[19] Attfield, BPM, p. 85.

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endangered interests was the prioritizing of all interests of a creature just because it is autonomous (that is, merely because of its status as an autonomous creature), as opposed to the prioritizing of interests in autonomy when those interests are at risk. For example, the interest of human consumers in eating veal should not be prioritized over the interests of veal-calves just because these humans are autonomous. I was not precluding taking seriously the interests in autonomy of possible humans or of other creatures (as Carter suggests), or any of their other interests. Carter's charges against me of using arbitrary, *ad hoc* defences are thus misleading. This is hardly a 'degenerating problemshift'; as Lakatos (the author of that phrase) writes, even research programmes subject to apparent refutations are sometimes rehabilitated.[20]

III

Carter distinguishes value-pluralism from pluralisms of theory and of principle. Is value-pluralism really distinct from pluralism of theories (with its associated contradictions)? While this is possible in theory (as Carter has persuasively argued elsewhere),[21] it is not so if the values are characterized as representing theories that are contraries. Yet on standard definitions, anthropocentrism, zoocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism are mutual contraries, conveying respectively that only human interests matter, only animal interests, only those of living creatures, or the supposed good of ecological collectives alone or together with the interests of individuals. So when the values of value-pluralism are characterized as anthropocentric etc. (as Carter now proposes), it seems to inherit the problems of theory-pluralism after all. Even if standard definitions are being discarded, Carter's recognition that these theory-types all contrast with each other seems to reinstate this problem. His polychrome butterfly could prove to be a kite with leaden strings.

While value-pluralism tackles some of the problems associated with principle-pluralism through employing indifference curves as decision-procedures, it shares with principle-pluralism the need for a meta-principle for selecting and including in the first place the values that it recognizes and for excluding others (rather as intuitionism requires but lacks a meta-principle for admitting principles to the status of prima facie principles). In environmental connections, insisting on (say) ecocentric values being honoured in all decision-making presupposes that these values are not reducible to or captured by biocentrism or

[20] Carter, IPC, sect. II; Lakatos, in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 137.
[21] Carter, 'Value-Pluralist Egalitarianism', *Journal of Philosophy* 99 (2002).

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zoocentrism or anthropocentrism (contrary to the claims of biocentrists, zoocentrists and anthropocentrists respectively); indeed in this regard, Carter's theory is a version of ecocentrism (given the above definitions). But this irreducibility needs to be shown, not assumed. If they are reducible, then treating them as independent values within value-pluralism may give them an excessive value, since value-pluralists are obliged to honour every recognized value, at the possible expense of adequately satisfying the others.

But in any case, our values may not be incommensurable; and if they are not, then we may not need to resort to value-pluralism or multi-dimensional indifference curves to resolve what to do. Rational optimizing, in the traditional manner of consequentialism, remains a defensible possibility.

Besides, do recognized normative theories necessarily each give prominence, myopically, to just one value? Theories can be non-pluralistic (rejecting radical incommensurability) without being monistic in this myopic sense. Some of them seek to relate values in a scheme of priorities (as does biocentric consequentialism). By contrast, value-pluralism (with its indifference curves) seems to hold that there is little scope for reasoned comparisons other than trade-offs, but that each recognized value must still be honoured. And this reintroduces the problem that if we mistakenly recognize any one value as independent and factor it into multi-dimensional indifference-curves, our findings will exceptionlessly be skewed.

To this kind of value-pluralism, a non-myopic monist could further respond that it should not be assumed that monistic theories must have a less rich set of values than pluralistic ones, nor that a monistic theory that embodies a priority rule assigning a proper priority to a suitably rich range of values cannot be found,[22] or cannot surmount the criticisms presented by Carter against monistic theories in general. Thus value-pluralism and non-myopic forms of monism such as biocentric consequentialism have certain elements in common. Accordingly, the kind of nuanced and discriminating stance associated with Aristotle's *phronimos* confers no distinctive support upon value-pluralism, being compatible, as Peter Railton has shown,[23] with (monistic) act-consequentialism, and (implicitly) with a range of practice-consequentialisms, not excluding biocentric variants.[24]

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[22] I have attempted to present one in the early chapters of VOME.

[23] Peter Railton, 'Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984).

[24] I am grateful to my colleague Christopher Norris for generous help and suggestions.

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