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Divergent Teleology:  
A Response to Zoe Grabow's Reconciliation of Taylor and Aristotle

In this paper, I will provide a commentary of "Unified Teleology: Paul Taylor's Biocentric Egalitarianism through Aristotle." In addition to providing an account of Zoe Grabow's reconciliation of Aristotle's value ethics with Paul Taylor's "respect for nature," I will also attempt to offer a few thoughts on some of the primary philosophical tensions mentioned by Grabow. The most notable of these issues include the adoption of Aristotle's ancient philosophy to a modern conception of environmental ethics, the limitations of Taylor's "biocentric egalitarianism", and the nature of the relationship between humans and the environment.

It would be prudent however to first establish a set of descriptions for the most commonly used ideas in the essay. Some concepts are defined by the author, others are defined relative to my understanding of their popular usage. "Nature" refers to the set of living and non-living things which comprise the planetary environment, sometimes viewed in opposite relation to the human element. "Respect" is a term defined by Taylor as "an ultimate moral [human] attitude" that when applied to nature binds humankind to a protection of living things and a promotion of their good for their own sake (*The Ethics of Respect for Nature*, 197-8). Living things in this instance refers to those entities which have their own biological interests and exist to fulfill some end (or *telos*).<sup>1</sup>

Taylor's biocentric egalitarianism refers to the positive treatment of all living things in nature based upon the inherent equal value that all natural entities possess. Grabow redefines this

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<sup>1</sup> Grabow and Taylor both do not seem to concern themselves with microfauna, or the role of smaller, unobservable organisms in nature. Rather, the interest is in what is referred to as "plant life" or "animals", presumably those members of the various species of flora or macrofauna that are observable or whose negative treatment is felt and seen by other members of the surrounding environment. This is not to say that Grabow and Taylor would not be concerned with the effects of human pollution or environmental damage on these smaller organisms; it is rather that the examples given focus on the treatment and preservation of "nature" as a whole, with preference given to the larger species of plant and animal life (a hierarchical argument readily identified by Grabow on pages 9-10 of their essay).

respect as the preservation of the right to survival for every living entity, the denial of speciesism and other environmental or biological prejudices, and the fair and unbiased treatment of all living things as defined by Taylor in his work *Respect for Nature* (Grabow, 8). One objection to this particular view that deserves clarification is identified by Grabow as a general critique of egalitarianism itself. “If all things have value,” Grabow problematizes, “they are all equally valueless” (6). The issue here is the lack of relative value which serves as the foundation of an egalitarian moral theory. This is essentially problematic for theorists who privilege the human element above the non-human element, and denote those actions that are positive or negative inasmuch as they are aligned toward a treatment of other humans or neutral inasmuch as they relate to the lack of moral obligation towards non-human entities.

The issue of the absence of relative value, especially as related to the human/non-human (or sentient/non-sentient, intelligent/non-intelligent, etc.) dichotomy, is somewhat alleviated by the preferential treatment of living things over non-living things. This view seems to be partially supported by Aristotle (who also holds a higher moral opinion of living things over non-living things, though still argues for the dominance of humankind over all other living creatures). The moral preference for living things over non-living things serves as the basis for Taylor’s biocentrism and becomes the primary method for identifying proper moral action (i.e. if it is a living thing, treat it well). There is still the obvious question of why the quality of life itself is preferred (in Taylor’s account) to the quality of sentience (in Aristotle’s account) or even the favored treatment of certain living things over those other living or non-living things that might be favored by the modern human (e.g. family, knowledge, money, or the conception of enhanced human survival over the survival of other species). In response to this, Grabow and Taylor both point out the evident bias that exists in any human-centric conception of ethics (8). The goal in

accepting Taylor's egalitarianism is then to understand the ways in which our human character may already inform a preference for the human element over the non-human element found in the already non-human environment. The attempt at moving away from an anthropocentric conception of moral action to a biocentric one focuses the discussion on treating living things well and equally "for the sake of" themselves, out of respect for their own teleological goals.

The teleological aspect of Taylor's account is perhaps the most contentious, as it readdress the problem of the human/non-human distinction (or more appropriately, the hierarchical ordering of living organisms). For Taylor, removing a living creature from its biological interests, such as survival or reproduction (that organism's *telos*), constitutes a moral wrong. However, this seems to be an insufficient basis for the proper treatment of living things for two related reasons: first, that the conflicting interests of various organisms reignites the debate over which organism's *telos* is preferred when they cannot be reconciled<sup>2</sup>; and second, that the proper [human] treatment of living things is already inherently anthropocentric, since the evaluation of an organism's natural interests is subject to human prejudice. This is perhaps why Grabow points us towards an understanding of both Taylor and Aristotle as supporting the *negative* rights of (non-human?) living things only; that is, that it would be wrong to harm any other living creature directly or indirectly, but morally uncertain as to whether or not it would be permissible to "save" other living things or "undo" the environmental damage that has been done in the past or by other living creatures (i.e. humans) in the present. Ultimately the reading of Aristotle as supporting Taylor holds inasmuch as Taylor is guilty of the "weak egalitarianism" Grabow defines on 9-10, and is suspect to supporting the notion that human beings are separate from nature and other living beings.

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<sup>2</sup> Grabow identifies the ways in which Taylor begins to admit of a kind of "weak egalitarianism" when he preferences the treatment of certain living things over others (9-10)

However, a positive reading of Taylor might support the idea that humankind is in fact a part of nature, and that all living creatures are subject to the same kind of ethical criteria that he seems to be advocating for with regard to the way in which human beings as a whole negatively treat the environment. The only reason it may seem as though human beings are separate from the rest of nature is because we might believe we are the only species to have evolved outside of our primary biological interests; that is, we have found a new *telos* that is not subject to the biological restrictions of those other species found in nature (a view which would most likely be supported by Aristotle). Our primary responsibility as a species is to then support the biological *teloi* of other species, just as much as they support our own. Were it possible for other species to disregard their biological impetus and attempt to fulfill a goal that infringed on the natural rights of other species, then they too would be committing a kind of unethical action similar to that which the human creature performs frequently, through the continued negative harm of the natural environment: it creatures, its fauna, and the air, land, and water we all share.