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Respect for Life from the Point of View of Naturalness

Szacunek do życia z punktu widzenia naturalności

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Abstract: In daily debates, people often use the words “natural” and “naturalness”, and the meaning is often regarded as unproblematic. However, as the author points out, this can lead to misunderstanding in discussions, especially those regarding ethical matters. This paper relies mostly on philosophical methods of conceptual analysis and synthesis. The purpose of this study is to find answers to the question – Is respect for life natural and if so, in what sense? An analysis of several concepts of naturalness is presented, and later, applied to the concept of respect for life in environmental ethics for the purpose of synthesis. By analysing the concept of naturalness, the author is inspired, mostly by the investigations made by M. Sagoff and by H. Siipi. Regarding the findings, the author concludes that some senses of naturalness are not appropriate for the ethics of respect for life, because they are, for instance, not specific enough and ethically irrelevant in this context, while others may be useful in argumentation for respecting non-human living beings. The author claims that the most suitable sense seems to be the sense of naturalness in accordance with Aristotelian telos, although also modified for the sake of non-anthropocentric environmental ethics. Even though several authors dealt with the concept of respect for life and the concept of naturalness, this contribution enriches the discussion in the environmental ethics as it seeks answers to a question – if the respect for life is natural, in what sense of naturalness is it? The philosophical methods of asking related questions, and conceptual analysis of the term “naturalness”, as well as seeking its application and synthesis, can also be applied in schools when promoting the critical and philosophical thinking of students, who can, at once, become citizens dealing responsibly with ecological crisis and environmental problems.

Keywords: naturalness, respect for life, nature, natural

Streszczenie: W codziennych rozmowach ludzie często używają terminów „naturalny” i „naturalność”, a ich znaczenie nie budzi kontrowersji. Jednak, jak zaznacza autorka, może to prowadzić do nieporozumień w dyskusjach, zwłaszcza dotyczących kwestii etycznych. Artykuł opiera się głównie na filozoficznych metodach analizy i syntezy pojęciowej. Celem niniejszego opracowania jest znalezienie odpowiedzi na pytanie – czy szacunek dla życia jest naturalny, a jeśli tak, to w jakim sensie? Przedstawiono analizę kilku pojęć naturalności, a następnie w celu syntezy odniesiono je do pojęcia poszanowania życia w etyce środowiskowej. Autorka analizując pojęcie naturalności inspirowała się przede wszystkim badaniami M. Sagoffa i H. Siipiego. Odnosząc się do wyników badań, autorka stwierdza, że niektóre ujęcia naturalności nie pasują do etyki poszanowania życia, bo np. nie są w tym kontekście dostatecznie konkretne i etycznie istotne, podczas gdy inne mogą być przydatne w argumentacji na rzecz poszanowania życia istot pozaludzkich. Autorka twierdzi, że najbardziej odpowiednim ujęciem wydaje się pojmowanie naturalności zgodne z arystotelesowskim telosem, choć zmodyfikowanym na rzecz nieantropocentrycznej etyki środowiskowej. Choć kilku autorów podjęło badania nad pojęciem szacunku dla życia w powiązaniu z pojęciem naturalności, to opracowanie to wzbogaca toczącą się dyskusję na polu etyki środowiskowej o poszukiwanie odpowiedzi na pytanie – czy szacunek dla życia jest naturalny oraz jak rozumieć tę naturalność? Filozoficzne metody

zadawania powiązanych pytań oraz konceptualna analiza pojęcia „naturalność”, a także poszukiwanie jego zastosowania i syntezy, mogą być również stosowane w edukacji szkolnej poprzez promowanie krytycznego i filozoficznego myślenia uczniów, którzy dzięki temu mogą kształtować w sobie postawy odpowiedzialnego podejścia do kryzysu ekologicznego i problemów środowiskowych.

Słowa kluczowe: naturalność, szacunek dla życia, przyroda, natura, naturalny

Introduction

Having been long interested in the issue of respect for life¹ as a way of approaching the ecological crisis, the author would like to think about this issue also in connection with the concept of “naturalness”. In daily debates, people frequently use the words “natural” and “naturalness” and the meaning is often regarded as unproblematic. However, the present paper points out several senses of naturalness common especially in contemporary debates within environmental philosophy, that, if not distinguished properly, can lead to confusion. The analysis of naturalness conducted here has been inspired by Mark Sagoff and by Helena Siipi. Moreover, this paper deals with the problem of naturalness, in relation to respect for life.² Therefore, in first part of the article, presents a short overview of several of the most influential approaches to respect for life, and

akin to concepts in environmental philosophy and related disciplines.

1. Respect for life

Let us begin with the concept of respect for life, and several examples of notable authors dealing with the concept. The following introductory chapter will mention authors, such as: A. Schweitzer and P. Taylor, and provide a brief overview of the approaches of E. Fromm and E.O. Wilson because they seem to appear in the literature on environmental ethics most often, regularly cited in relation to respect for life.³

However, it is worth mentioning that respect for life can be understood in a broader sense, too; including alternative approaches to normative environmental ethics, such as anthropocentrism, which focuses especially on respect for life of human beings, or ecocentrism, which focuses on respect for life of ecosystems, zoocentrism which focuses on respect for life of animals, or the closely related concept of pathocentrism, with respect for life of sentient beings, etc.

Nevertheless, as has already been mentioned, Albert Schweitzer is probably the most renowned author dealing with respect for life. He was a major promoter of the idea of respect (or reverence) for life (Schweitzer 1993; 1986), not just in theory, but also practice. Albert Schweitzer’s concept of respect (or reverence⁴) for life is

1 For more, see earlier publications, e.g.: Baďurová 2016a; Baďurová 2016b; Baďurová 2010; Baďurová 2014.

2 In connection with the relationship between respect for life and naturalness, many interesting questions arise, such as: Is respect for life natural? Can we understand what is natural as the equivalent of what is moral? Does our immoral behaviour justify the fact that it is natural? Is respect for life natural and (therefore) moral? Is disrespect for life unnatural and (therefore) immoral? Can a person really be perfectly moral? Or would she/he have to be a ‘god’ without natural needs? What does it even mean that something is natural? The present paper will focus only on some of the above-mentioned questions, and it will begin with the following two questions: How can we understand respect for life in environmental philosophy? What does it even mean that something is natural?

3 Or alternatively respect for nature, respect for living beings, biophilia, or reverence for life.

4 This paper will not deal with the distinction between respect and reverence, or analyse different approaches to the notion of respect, as this has been covered in other texts. (Baďurová 2016a; Baďurová 2016b).

based on the approach of voluntarism, as he perceives different wills of life of living creatures and their interrelations. Schweitzer presents his approach in his seminal work *Civilization and Ethics* or *The Ethic of Reverence for Life*, arguing that:

The universal will-to-live experiences itself in my personal will-to-live otherwise than it does in other phenomena. For here it enters on an individualization, which, so far as I am able to gather in trying to view it from the outside, struggles only to live itself out, and not at all to become one with will-to-live external to itself. The world is indeed the grisly drama of will-to-live at variance with itself. One existence survives at the expense of another of which it yet knows nothing. But in me the will-to-live has become cognizant of the existence of other will-to-live. There is in it a yearning for unity with itself, a longing to become universal (Pojman, Pojman, and McShane 2017, 171)⁵.

Albert Schweitzer describes the main idea of his ethical approach, as follows:

Ethics thus consists in this, that I experience the necessity of practising the same reverence for life toward all will-to-live, as toward my own. Therein I have already the needed fundamental principle of morality. It is good to maintain and cherish life; it is evil to destroy and to check life (Pojman, Pojman, and McShane 2017, 170).

Later, respect for living beings, as an ethical concept, was addressed by others, including P.W. Taylor, especially in his work *Respect for Nature* (1986). Paul W. Taylor's concept uses ideas stemming from Aristotle's work, and his idea of telos, at the same time combining it with certain elements of an evolutionary approach.

⁵ The author of this article has worked mostly with Slovak translations of the books of A. Schweitzer, but also with translations in English. The quotation in English comes from (Pojman, Pojman, and McShane, 2017) who present in English the full text on reverence for life by Albert Schweitzer.

According to P.W. Taylor, it can be characterized as a life-centred theory, or we can call it, biocentrism:

From the perspective of a life-centered theory, we have prima facie moral obligations that are owed to wild plants and animals themselves as members of the Earth's biotic community. We are morally bound (other things being equal) to protect or promote their good for their sake (Taylor 1981, 197).

Respect for nature (or more precisely living beings) based on Taylor's view can be understood as follows:

when moral agents have the attitude of respect for nature, they subscribe to a set of normative principles, and hold themselves accountable for adhering to them. The principles comprise both the standards of good character and the rules of correct conduct. The attitude of respect is embodied or expressed in their character and conduct, to the extent that their character fulfills the standards, and their actions are in accordance with the rules (Taylor 1986, 169).

Similarly, in relation to the respect for life, it is possible to mention the idea of biophilia developed by Erich Fromm, and later, E.O. Wilson.

Although E. Fromm understands biophilia⁶ primarily from the psychological point of view, he admits his inspiration by the above-mentioned A. Schweitzer:

(...) biophilia is not constituted by a single trait but represents a total orientation, an entire way of being. It is manifested in a person's bodily processes, in his emotions, in his thoughts, in his gestures; the biophilous orientation expresses itself in the whole man. The person who fully loves life is attracted by the process of life in all spheres. He prefers

⁶ To the concept of biophilia of E. Fromm, in relation to the concept of A. Schweitzer, see (Bađurová 2010).

to construct, rather than to retain. He is capable of wondering, and he prefers to see something new to the security of finding the old confirmed. He loves the adventure of living more than he does certainty. His approach to life is functional rather than mechanical. He sees the whole rather than only the parts, structures rather than summations. He wants to mold and to influence by love, by reason, by his example – not by force, by cutting things apart, by the bureaucratic manner of administering people as if they were things. He enjoys life and all its manifestations, rather than mere excitement (Fromm 1964, 23).

Regarding ethics in accordance with biophilia, Fromm (1964, 24) argues as follows:

Biophilic ethics has its own principle of good and evil. Good is all that serves life; evil is all that serves death. Good is reverence for life (this is the main thesis of Albert Schweitzer, one of the great representatives of the love of life – both in his writings and in his person), and all that enhances life. Evil is all that stifles life, narrows it down, cuts it into pieces. Thus it is from the standpoint of life-ethics that the Bible mentions as the central sin of the Hebrews: “Because thou didst not serve thy Lord with joy and gladness of heart in the abundance of all things.”

In the prologue to his book *Biophilia*, E.O. Wilson, defines the term as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (Wilson 2003, 1). He “proposed that the tendency of humans to focus on and to affiliate with nature and other life-forms has, in part, a genetic basis” (Rogers 2019).

Based on the above-presented approaches to respect for life, we can ask a summarising question – what is respect for life? The answer can also be based on the author’s previous texts where it is stated that respect for life in the field of environmental ethics can be understood, very generally, as an attitude, and/or action, that expresses a positive appreciation of living beings (or other

natural entities), and an active effort to support and protect them by a moral agent.⁷

On the basis of the views mentioned above, it seems that some sort of respect for life may be intuitively understood as “natural.” However, this intuition will be examined and the relation between respect for life and naturalness will be analysed in the third chapter.

2. The concept of naturalness

The following chapter will deal with the concept of naturalness. Philosophers have long been concerned with what the word “natural” means, and whether it can be used in a normative sense, that is, that something that is natural⁸ is better than something that is not (Sagoff 2001, 6).

A well-known example of the latter problem is the so-called naturalistic fallacy, which is associated, in particular, with the author named G.E. Moore. Through the open-question argument, he rejects the assumption of naturalistic ethics that good is synonymous with, or equivalent, to any natural property (Moore 1989). That is, good is equivalent to what is natural.

Despite this classical objection, it seems that some arguments that something is natural, may be *prima facie* morally relevant. This assumption will also be made for the purposes of this text and it will be considered whether it is possible to meaningfully claim that respect for life is natural in a morally relevant sense.

For now, let us move on to the question – what does it mean for something to be natural? Although it may not seem as though this word has many diverse meanings, it is

⁷ The concept of respect in environmental ethics has been analyzed in some of my previous texts, see (Baďurová 2016b).

⁸ It is possible to note that in Slovak language (which is the mother tongue of the author of this paper), there are variations of the translation of the word “natural” – “prírodný”, “prirodzený”, “naturálny” and “nature” – “príroda”, “prirodzenosť”, “podstata”, “povaha” etc., which are often not synonymous with each other. This problem has been reflected in (Baďurová 2013, 97-102).

of interest to several theorists, along with their investigations and analysis.

Mark Sagoff (inspired by J.S. Mill) distinguishes 4 basic meanings of the terms “natural” and “naturalness.” They are as follows (Sagoff 2001, 7):

1. Everything in the universe. The opposite of the natural is then the supernatural. For example, everything that is the result of technological progress is natural because it is subject to natural laws and principles.
2. God’s creation. Natural is understood here as sacral and is in contrast to the profane, i.e., human creation.
3. What is independent of human influence. The opposite is then artificial.
4. Authentic and true. The opposite is then deceptive or illusory. Natural is then understood as something credible or honest.

Another author, who systematically deals with what is natural from a philosophical point of view, is Helena Siipi⁹. She distinguishes several approaches to what is referred to as natural in the field of ethics, for example:

1. Natural is something that leads the being closer to what Aristotle called *telos* (Siipi 2005, 33).
2. Similarly, something can also be understood as natural if it meets certain reasonable, moderate needs of a given being (Siipi 2005, 39).
3. Another meaning is that natural is what is independent of a human being (Siipi 2005, 42).
4. Similarly, what is independent of certain human activities may be natural (Siipi 2005, 42). We can also understand it as something immaculate (see also e.g., Lee 1999, 83).

⁹ It is also possible to mention another important contemporary author in the field of environmental ethics, who deals with the question of what is natural, see (Lee 1999).

3. Methods

This paper relies mostly on philosophical methods of conceptual analysis and synthesis. Analysis of several concepts of naturalness is presented, and later, applied to the concept of respect for life in environmental ethics, for the purpose of synthesis. By analysing the concept of naturalness, the author was mostly inspired by the investigations made by Mark Sagoff and by Helena Siipi.

The purpose of this study is to find answers to the question – Is respect for life natural and if so, in what sense of naturalness?

The paper is oriented more on metaethical aspects of the given topics, rather than on the normative ethics.

4. Is respect for life natural, and if so, in what sense?

Let us now try to find an answer to one of the questions mentioned in the introduction, namely: Can we understand respect for life as natural? And thus, in what morally relevant sense is respect for life natural?

Based on the study of various approaches to that question, respect for life, can be understood as follows: respect for life in the field of environmental ethics can be understood, very generally, as an attitude and/or action that expresses a positive appreciation of living beings (or other natural entities), and an active effort to support and protect them by a moral agent. Based on the analysis of the concept of naturalness and synthesis of the approaches presented by M. Sagoff (2001) and H. Siipi (2005), we can distinguish the following interpretations of naturalness:

1. Everything in the universe is natural. The opposite of the natural is, in this context, the supernatural.
2. Natural is something that is God’s creation. Natural is understood here as sacral, and is in contrast to the profane, i.e., human creation.
3. Natural is what is independent of human influence, of a human being, and

of some of his/her activities. The opposite is then the artificial.

4. Something natural is something authentic and true. The opposite is then deceptive or illusory. Natural is understood, therefore, as something credible or honest.
5. Similarly, natural can also be understood as something that fulfills certain reasonable, moderate needs of a given being and something that leads the being closer to what Aristotle called *telos*.

Let us start with the first meaning mentioned above. Natural is everything in the universe and it contrasts with the supernatural. So, is it meaningful to say that respect for life is natural? From this point of view, respect for life seems as natural as disrespect for life. Because if everything in the universe is natural, any human action is probably natural. Anything that happens must be seen as natural. This approach, therefore, does not seem appropriate.

The second approach to what is natural, is that it is something that is God's creation. Natural is understood here as sacral, and is in contrast to the profane, i.e., human creation. Is respect for life natural, that is, sacral? Since the afore-mentioned Albert Schweitzer was a religious person, it is possible to claim that respect for life is natural and is an expression of God's will. However, could we say that respect for life is not profane, that it is not a human creation? Rather, it is also possible to claim that a human being is not determined by God's decision in respect for life, but by being able to respect life or other living beings is a manifestation of his/her human decision. Thus, in the view of this meaning, respect for life, if we accept the existence of God, could be understood as both natural and unnatural. This approach is, therefore, not very appropriate.

Another meaning is that natural is what is independent of human influence, of a human being, and of some of his/her activities. At first glance, this meaning is problematic in connection with respect for life. Respect for life, if it were to be natural, would have

to be independent of a human being and his/her activities. Moral agents are considered to be primarily human beings (although they may not be all human beings, but only rational beings). From this point of view, it is then impossible for a human being, as a moral agent, to do something natural in this sense, if it were to be independent of a human.

Nevertheless, we might ask ourselves, what about events that happen beyond human influence – are they moral or immoral? What would happen if there were no people in the world to do good or bad things? Some seem to think that only good things would happen. This can be read, for example, between the lines of Paul Taylor, who claims that if people became extinct, other living beings would be much better off than before (Taylor 1986).

However, I believe that a human being is both a full member of the biotic community, and that he/she can be an important moral agent. It, therefore, seems inappropriate for us to argue that respect for life is natural in a morally relevant sense, if it were to require the non-existence of human beings.

Another approach is that something natural is authentic and true. The opposite is then unnatural, as deceptive or illusory. Natural is understood as something trustworthy or honest. It is probably possible to say that respect for life is something authentic. That is, a human being expresses what he/she is¹⁰. Nevertheless, it seems that, this meaning is more appropriate in discussions where people are concerned with, for example, whether any genetically modified food is natural or not. This is how the above-mentioned M. Sagoff (2001) uses it. Somewhat similar to the given understanding of what is natural is that it is something that leads the being closer to what Aristotle called the *telos*. Many theorists believe that human beings also have a *telos* that is both

¹⁰ This aspect can be partly related also to the approach of E. Fromm or E.O. Wilson, since they seem to understand the sane, but also desirable nature of human beings as linked to the biophilia.

natural and morally significant. The *telos* means what every living entity strives for, it is the primary and appropriate goal of how it should evolve. The pursuit of this goal may not be conscious, because even non-conscious beings, such as plants, seek it (Siipi 2005, 37). *Telos* in human beings is, according to classics, such as Aristotle's eudaimonia (see Aristotle 1979). Thus, what helps the being to reach its *telos* and thus leads to its flourishing, is natural.

Thus, is respect for life natural in a given sense? It seems quite reasonable to say so. Many authors, such as the mentioned P. Taylor (but also, for instance, K. Lee, and J. O'Neill), have drawn attention to the *telos* of living beings, in an effort to justify our moral obligations to non-human beings.

Taylor, for example, talks about his own well-being (good-of-its-own) of living beings. This good objectively exists, it is something like the mentioned *telos*. According to him, the objective self-good of a living entity can be revealed by scientific research, so it is probably possible to reveal what benefits a living being (Taylor 1986, 60-70). What is interesting in Taylor's text, however, is that although the good-of-its-own is important to him as a concept, he does not understand it as an intrinsic value, or does not reduce the intrinsic value to this natural property, biological fact. Taylor, on the other hand, acknowledges the difficulty of moving from facts to values. In his book, he explicitly acknowledges that it is not possible to logically justify the transition from the biological self-good of the living entity, to that of intrinsic value. In essence, he claims that rational beings who adopt a biocentric view of the world, would give every living being an intrinsic value¹¹ (Taylor 1986, 47). The reason may be that, if we humans are beings who we think deserve respect, because they have their own good, we should

expand our respect for all living beings who have their own good.¹²

Although the understanding of the natural as authentic is also applicable in this context, the latter concept of nature seems to be the most appropriate for the ethics of respect for life¹³. It is best suited as a positive answer to the question of whether respect for life is natural, as well as the question of whether respect for life is natural in a morally relevant sense. From this last point of view, respect for life for non-human living beings is natural, because it leads both to the well-being of other living beings, and to our moral and biological well-being.

5. Discussion

As has been already mentioned, several authors dealt with the concept of respect for life (A. Schweitzer and P.W. Taylor being the most influential among them). It is worth noting that there are also other approaches, not mentioned here, which may lead to a different interpretation of respect for life, although this article presents a general definition of respect for life, based on the author's previous study.

¹² Similarly, another author interested in the concept of *telos* and applying it in environmental ethics is John O'Neill. He believes that he can more easily overcome the mentioned problem. He understands the good-of-its-own and flourishing of the living entity, as both moral and biological. He argues that caring for the welfare of other living beings leads to our own welfare. O'Neill links this relationship to friendship, where we also care about the well-being of friends, not only because it is good for us, but for themselves. He, therefore, modifies some of Aristotle's ideas (O'Neill 2001, 170). Aristotle deals with friendship in *Nicomachean ethics* (1976, 189-235).

¹³ I think that these approaches correspond to the opinion of P. Krchnák that biocentrism (as an ethic of respect for life) is a way for a human being to gain human self-identification, as it is a path to reciprocity of human beings and nature. (Krchnák 2011, 194). Thus, it could be said that respect for life is natural, because it helps a person to discover what he/she is, as well as what is the best life for him/her.

¹¹ Nevertheless, he understands the intrinsic value as objectively existing.

The search for the answer whether respect for life is natural presented here was based on the analysis of the concept of naturalness, created by H. Siipi and M. Sagoff. However, it is possible that there exist more approaches to naturalness that were not presented in this paper. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that this contribution enriches the discussion in the environmental ethics of seeking answers to the key question, namely, if respect for life is natural and, if yes, then, in what sense of naturalness.

The philosophical methods of asking related questions and conceptual analysis of the term “naturalness,” as well as seeking its application and synthesis, can be applied also in schools, in promotion of the critical and philosophical thinking of students,¹⁴ who can once become citizens dealing responsibly with ecological crises and environmental problems. The analysis and clarification of different concepts in environmental ethics, can also prevent confusion in discussions regarding environmental issues between lay people, but also experts.

Conclusion

The present paper refers to the problem of naturalness and the various possible meanings of it. It provides an analysis of the relationship between the concepts of naturalness and respect for life in environmental philosophy. The author was trying to point out that some senses of naturalness are not appropriate for the ethics of respect for life, because they are, for instance, not specific enough, and ethically irrelevant in this context, whereas others may be useful for argumentation for respecting nonhuman living beings.

It is claimed here that the most suitable sense seems to be the sense of naturalness, in accordance with Aristotelian *telos*, although modified also for the sake of non-anthropocentric environmental

ethics, that is respect for life for non-human living beings is natural, because it leads both to the well-being of other living beings, and to our moral and biological well-being, based on the assumption that if we humans are beings, who we think deserve respect, because we have our own good, we should expand our respect for all living beings, who have their own good.

However, it must be admitted that there are still many unanswered questions and doubts in this regard, that may be interesting and require further investigation, such as: What form should respect for life take? Are all beings, who have their own good, worth the same respect? What do we mean by respect? Is it possible to connect moral and biological good? Do living beings even have their *telos*?

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¹⁴ Regarding the method of philosophical discussion with pupils and students, see (Baďurová and Stachon 2020).

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