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# Convergence, Noninstrumental Value and the Semantics of ‘Love’: Comment on McShane<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Katie McShane, while accepting my ‘convergence hypothesis’ (the view that anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists will tend to propose similar policies), argues that nonanthropocentrism is nevertheless superior because it allows conservationists to have a deeper emotional commitment to natural objects than can anthropocentrists. I question this reasoning on two bases. First, McShane assumes a philosophically tendentious distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value – a distinction that presupposes a dualistic worldview. Second, I question why McShane believes anthropocentrists – weak anthropocentrists, that is – cannot ‘love’ or ‘feel awe’ toward natural objects. Her argument, that is, only works against strong anthropocentrism, which I never advocated.

## KEYWORDS

Anthropocentrism, emotions, convergence

## INTRODUCTION

Katie McShane has helpfully summarised some of the remaining issues between anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists and, by looking at the emotional aspect of valuing, opens up a new line of argument in the Rasputin-like life of the debates between anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists (McShane, 2007). She accepts, for the sake of argument, my 'convergence hypothesis', the claim that, given a broad enough interpretation of human values and a reasonable interpretation of the claim that nature has intrinsic value, the policies advocated by the proponents of these competing theories should converge (Norton, 1991). Then, she argues that, even if anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists could agree on all policy issues, there would still be an important difference in the effectiveness of these theories owing to the different *motives* being acted upon. First, let me say that I am not at all hostile to the introduction of the study of emotions and feelings into environmental ethics or into discussions of their role in environmental discourse, nor in environmental policy formation and evaluation. Indeed, in recent work I have allied myself with a new group of 'conservation psychologists' because of the immense potential for cognitive psychology, moral psychology and psychology of emotions to improve our understanding of how attitudes change, and for illuminating what works and what doesn't work in conservation education. McShane, however, presupposes a whole structure of philosophical concepts and distinctions, distinctions that in my view are not usually useful in characterising either value formation or change, thereby setting up a context in which psychological states such as emotions must answer to an unrelated theory of value derived from highly questionable philosophical sources.

Before going further, it may be worth saying that many of the apparently glaring differences between my view and that of McShane may be due to very different approaches to philosophical methodology. Since she reminds us that motives are important in conservation, it seems worthwhile to note that motives *have* played an important role in environmental ethics, often to very bad effect. In my work, I have tried to emphasise actions more than motives (Norton, 1986; 1991). When I began working on *Toward Unity* in 1985, Deep Ecologists such as Devall and Sessions (1985) had, by over-emphasising inward motives, distorted accounts of environmental values to the point of absurdity. According to their categorisations of actors affecting the environment, Gifford Pinchot – who saved for the public 172 million acres in 160 National Forests – and *all* of the leading environmental groups were lumped together with robber barons and growth economists as opponents of true-blue environmentalist like themselves. The Deep Ecologists stood, allied with a few of their followers, and their (somewhat distorted) memory of John Muir, alone, against almost anyone who has any political clout today. Having learned that motivational purity, such as that espoused by Deep Ecologists in the 1980s, confounds our understanding of

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environmental ethics and policy, I have been wary of attempts to make emotional commitment the measure of environmental virtue. Still, recognising as I do that environmental ethicists and policy analysts must understand people's motives, I suspect that McShane and I have more in common than would appear.<sup>2</sup> Much of the apparent disagreement may have more to do with my avoidance of distinctions and a pragmatic attempt to characterise many types of values, in contrast to McShane's preference for sharp distinctions based in philosophical theory.

Having said this, I want to discuss two aspects of McShane's arguments, and then end by commenting on the current status of the convergence hypothesis. (1) McShane and other nonanthropocentrists assume ethicists have a fairly clear conception of 'instrumental value', which in turn allows them to define a sharply separate category of values that can be traced to some direct or indirect benefit to humans, and another such category of values that cannot be traced by some path to direct or indirect human benefit. I do not think ethicists in general, and especially nonanthropocentrists in particular, have such a clear conception, so I am unconvinced by these arguments. (2) I must challenge, or at least examine, one key premise in McShane's argument that nonanthropocentric theories of nonhuman value have an advantage in allowing/encouraging certain emotional states that may be important or essential in motivating environmental protections.

## AGAINST THE INTRINSIC/INSTRUMENTAL DISTINCTION

(1) Much of what passes as philosophical theory is simply ossified categories of discarded philosophies of the past. In my view, the definition and use of a distinction between 'intrinsic' value and 'instrumental' value is a vestige of Cartesian dualism that conceptually separated elements of the world that have spirit, and are of moral concern to God, and those elements which are 'mere' inertial matter. The theory that there are only two kinds of values, intrinsic and instrumental, is taken as a matter of faith by nonanthropocentrists, and they build highly varied and practically contradictory theoretical details upon this faith-in-intuition-based distinction. There is no escaping the fact, however, that these distinctions have their origins in a priori concepts, not in observation or empirical data. Callicott, for example, says: 'We subjects value objects in one or both of at least two ways – instrumentally or intrinsically – between which there is no middle term' (Callicott, 2002, p. 16).<sup>3</sup> Having accepted this bit of a priori Cartesian dogma, and merely disputing the extent of the category of beings that have intrinsic value, Callicott (apparently embarrassed by the instability of his own definitions through countless amendments and reversals over the past decades) simply defined 'intrinsic' value as 'noninstrumental' value.

This definition, of course, is simply vacuous. Intrinsic value is defined negatively: it is value that 'is left over when all its instrumental value has been subtracted. In other words, "intrinsic value" and "noninstrumental value" are

two names for the same thing' (p. 21). The definition provides no guidance in identifying objects that have this kind of value, how to recognise it, etc. While not so explicitly reductionistic, McShane pursues the same tactic. In order to ensure a sharp separation of human- and nonhuman-oriented valuation, she defines the apparently *positive* concept of nonanthropocentrism in negative terms. A nonanthropocentrist is one who rejects the theoretical generalisation that all values accrue to human beings.

Of course, these negative definitions don't go very far, either theoretically or practically. They are simply ploys to avoid having to make explicit the highly controversial theoretical and epistemological claims that would be required to clarify the positive ideas espoused. If those claims were made explicitly, it would be obvious that there is not some position, called 'nonanthropocentrism', with minor variations, but rather a constellation of conflicting and incommensurate speculations and theories that agree on almost nothing except an urgent need to reject anthropocentrism.

Callicott's reduction of 'intrinsic' to 'noninstrumental' in order to achieve a formulation of nonanthropocentrism without committing to controversial and indefensible theoretical definitions and principles could only achieve its purpose if it is taken as unquestioned that no anthropocentrists ever value anything noninstrumentally – or, if Callicott believes that it is definitionally impossible for an anthropocentrist to do so. In this case, it seems that Callicott has simply relied upon definitions convenient to his theory, but totally at odds with ordinary language. His claims, then, are only as good as the theory that leads him to choose these tendentious definitions. This obligation will find a parallel in my response to McShane's claim (see 2, below) that anthropocentrists cannot love or respect natural objects and nonhuman organisms. First, we need to clarify the semantics a bit. Callicott and I have long agreed that, whatever intrinsic value is – or isn't – it is best thought of as a 'kind of human valuing', or as he so aptly says in his convincing rejection of Rolston's strong nonanthropocentrism, value is adverbial, not substantive because 'value' is a verb, not a noun (Callicott, 2002, p. 16). In this recent paper, Callicott goes so far as to say, 'Indeed, it is logically possible to value intrinsically anything under the sun – an old worn out shoe, for example' (Callicott, 2002, p.10). This claim seems to sever any connection between what we might learn about organisms and ecosystems and what we should value. Such value thus does not exist independently of a human valuer as Rolston claimed; in this context, Callicott avoids providing a positive definition of 'intrinsic' by going negative and minimalist.

Callicott's definition of intrinsic value as noninstrumental value, however, apparently entails that anyone who believes some element of the nonhuman world has noninstrumental value is a nonanthropocentrist (by Callicott's definition). But of course many anthropocentrists *say*, on many occasions, that they put non-use value on wildlife, and some of my economist friends are very generous in supporting wild species and their habitats by working through land trusts, etc.

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I, for example, have a life-long fascination, awe and love for wild wolves, and I have put quite a lot of effort into preserving and restoring their habitat. So, did I have 'instrumental' reasons for protecting the wolves? If any of my motives were to prove 'not instrumental', then I could – as justifiably as Callicott – claim to be a 'nonanthropocentrist', by his own definitions. Do I (can I?) have any noninstrumental values that I pursue when I work on these protectionist activities? I think so. But that depends on the definition of 'instrumental'. I believe my actions are 'instrumental' in furthering a moral obligation I accept; the direct beneficiary is intended to be future generations of humans who I hope will love and care for these species and habitats I have worked to protect. The difficulty in making this categorisation is not in the clarity of my commitment; the difficulty results from the unrealistically sharp boundaries in types of values that is enforced by the categories of dualism, and by the requirement that truly noninstrumental value must be attached to an 'independently valued' element of nature. Notice that this latter requirement cannot even be fulfilled by Callicott himself, since he insists that the value in intrinsically valued entities is *not* human-independent.

Using Callicott's definitions, either I am a nonanthropocentrist or else it is necessary to show that each of these moral commitments, which are not based on an assertion of independent value in nature, must be classified as instrumental. But where is the argument for this claim? Is it a simple lexicographic argument? If so it is clearly false: Anthropocentrists often value nature spiritually and most anthropocentrists believe they value things for lots of reasons, some of them involving use, others, respect, awe, even affection. They characterise these values in different ways, some referring to 'spiritual' values, others to 'transformative' values, yet others to 'non-use' values. For nonanthropocentrists to narrow the word 'noninstrumental' to include only things that have intrinsic value is simple theft of a perfectly good word by narrowing it beyond its usual meaning. If nonanthropocentrists are the only ones who can value things non-instrumentally, then they are simply proposing a rogue language, not related to English as it is spoken. This semantic and theoretical problem stems not from a failure of anthropocentrists to value nature in many ways, including ways that nonanthropocentrists describe as 'noninstrumental' values; they are rather a result of an outmoded distinction between 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental', which only has clear meaning as a classification of one particular way that some people value natural objects, and forcing this value – and all the other ways people value nature – into the conceptual Procrustean bed of dualistic categories. These categories can only be made clear, ultimately, if they are based in the Cartesian dualism between inertial matter and the world of 'spirit'.

## ANTHROPOCENTRIC LOVE

(2) I turn now to a parallel issue in McShane's argument. McShane, adopting Callicott's negative ploy, defines anthropocentrism first as the 'view that the nonhuman world has value only because, and insofar as, it directly or indirectly serves human interests' (p. 170). 'Nonanthropocentrism', she continues, 'is just the denial of this – i.e. the view that it *isn't* the case that the nonhuman world has value only because, and insofar as, it directly or indirectly serves human interests' (p. 170). She goes on to note that one can deny anthropocentrism without claiming that nature has intrinsic value. This is correct; the theory that nature has intrinsic value is only one theory of value and if one rejects this dualistic theory, then it seems to follow that people might value nature in a number of ways; some of these are use values, some are aesthetic, some might just be learning humility in the face of our humble beginnings in primordial slime. By using negative definitions, however, McShane has failed to provide even the thinnest of guidance regarding what it is to be a nonanthropocentrist.

Despite this lack of guidance or specificity regarding what nonanthropocentrists stand for, McShane seems to know a lot about what anthropocentrists can't do. After presenting a helpful discussion about the ways that emotions and feelings are involved in moral life, she concludes that 'we do have an ethical interest in answering questions about how to feel, and this doesn't just amount to wanting to know which actions to perform or which feelings it would be in our interest to have'. Which leads her to ask: 'What effect would anthropocentrism have on the way that we answer such questions?' (p. 175) She then states: 'some attitudes that we can take toward things are incompatible with thinking that its value is entirely dependent on its satisfaction of our interests. Take the case of love, for example' (p. 175). But here we see the critical role played by the term 'interests', and the interpretation given it. 'Weak anthropocentrists' – ones who base policy on the full range of human values not just economic ones – could express an interest in protecting this ecosystem because they love it, and feel that people in the future should not be deprived – at least by its lovers – of the joy they have derived from that ecosystem. McShane, however, using a quite narrow sense of 'interest' – a common ploy by nonanthropocentrists – to narrow the legitimate concerns of humans, denies that any anthropocentrist could 'love' a place or a species, at all. Why? Apparently because she imposes a 'strong anthropocentric' definition on anthropocentric motives. McShane's argument that anthropocentrists cannot 'love' nature or that they cannot include natural processes as 'standing in [the anthropocentrists'] scheme of things that matter' (p. 176), narrows the range of human values, then denies that anthropocentrists can value some aspect of nature. In this move, (which I thought I exposed in Norton 1984), the shifty use of terms like 'self-interest' is used to deny the existence of certain human values, only in order to make nonanthropocentric appeals necessary.

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Note that, while McShane's analogies based on human love seem plausible at first, they provide an apt analogy only if one assumes all anthropocentrists are *strong* anthropocentrists. Notice the equivocation that is necessary to finish the analogy she is suggesting. In her account of why an individual could not selfishly use and exploit someone in all situations and still 'love' that person, the 'you' involved clearly refers to an individual's selfish regard for himself or herself. A weak anthropocentrism, who values nature in many ways – as a teacher, a source of solitude and religious experiences, as an aesthetic bonanza, as well as for provisioning – and sees these values as adequate to motivate protection of these values for future generations – has another source of motivation – but it is not *selfish* in the way the false lover is, because the protectionist behaviours of the weak anthropocentrism reference other human values that guide behaviour as well as ego-centered ones. The logic of 'selfish' is to be *unconstrained* by limits outside oneself; the logic of the weak anthropocentrism is *constrained* by a whole range of human values, extending to human emotions of love, affection, and feelings of loyalty to animals and to places. I do not act unguided by my emotions in my attachments to places, my concern that wolves be brought back to natural habitats, and that these habitats are robust enough to guarantee that wolves will be seen and valued by many generations. Indeed, I would say these things are a major part of what it is to develop habits of action that show love of wolves. I only insist that all of these are *human values* and that human values are too plural, complex and intertwined to be classified according to jargons based in dualistic ethical theory.

Going further, McShane would deny my claim, I guess, that I 'really love wolves' or 'really love' my dog Max. Just as Callicott assumes that anthropocentrists cannot value things noninstrumentally, McShane argues that anthropocentrists cannot 'love' nonhuman animals, ecosystems, or species. McShane seems to assume that the following generalisation holds, and uses it as a key premise in her argument that, even if the convergence hypothesis is accepted, anthropocentrism is deficient: if someone values an object without attributing 'human-independent' value to it, that person cannot 'love' the object. Is that true? This generalisation clearly does not hold in general or in ordinary discourse. I love many ecosystems; I love some places; I love my dog. I love paintings by Van Gogh, even though I do not set ecosystems, places, or paintings in a category of things that have value independent of humans. I even know economists who love their dogs, or at least they *think* they love their dogs. Could we anthropocentrists all be mistaken in thinking we love animals and places?

Again, we find nonanthropocentrists assaulting ordinary language. It is not 'selfish' if I work toward preserving the opportunity to enjoy (and love) wolves in the future, even though I accept it as an interest of mine to try to ensure that. From the fact that it is an interest of mine that this result obtain does not imply that the interest was a selfish one. Perhaps McShane meant to be using an analogy, suggesting that the fact that my interest references future people, rather than



wolves themselves, implies that my interest is anthropocentric (switching the meaning of ‘our’ from referencing an individual actor’s perceived self-interest to the interests of all of us – all of humanity). This may imply that I attribute no human-independent value to wolves – valuing is a relational act, so how could my value of them be independent of me? – but how does it follow that I cannot love wolves?

At this point, the nonanthropocentrist, intent on showing that anthropocentrists cannot do x, y, or z that a true environmentalist would do, but faced with commonly available evidence that anthropocentrists *do* love their pets, aesthetic objects, places, species, etc., are in much the situation of psychological egoists. Faced with heroic acts and personal testimonies indicating unselfish motives, the psychological egoist re-interprets these motives in order to wipe away – based only on an a priori commitment to universal selfishness – altruism. Similarly, despite many examples of weak anthropocentrists emphasising love and awe toward nature, and many examples of anthropocentrists acting effectively to protect species and ecosystems, the nonanthropocentrists are more interested in re-interpreting every apparently selfless and noninstrumental-in-most-senses values as not true love or awe, but as disguised special pleading.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is interesting to note, then, how much effort nonanthropocentrists put into showing what anthropocentrists cannot value and what anthropocentrists have no reason to protect. I, too, have spent a lot of effort in pointing out weaknesses in intrinsic value theories. Would that more of that energy could be diverted to seeking policies that have a broad base of support by most groups and by environmentalists with widely differing views.

It was in this spirit that I urged that we move *Toward Unity among Environmentalists*. Then, I hadn’t yet realised the extent to which the disagreement between anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists is simply a manifestation of our dualistic language, metaphysics, concepts and perspectives. When I turned my attention to the subject of sustainable living for the human species in the mid-’90s, and as I worked with policy makers at EPA and in other policy contexts, I realised that the current language, steeped in hidden dualisms, ideologically suffused rather than empirically verifiable, will never enable a useful discourse about what to do. So, in *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management* (2005), I set out to place environmental policy discourse on an alternative footing of pluralism, problem orientation, emphasis on process, empiricism trumps ideology, and so on. It was my intention, then, to lead the discussion of environmental ethics and policy away from ideology based in a priori theories, toward open-ended, post-metaphysical discourse in which the emphasis is on improving communication and increasing cooperation in deci-

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sion making by finding actions that support many values. Accordingly, near the end of *Sustainability*, I explained that, while the convergence hypothesis is useful for anyone still trapped in the dualistic categories based on two kinds of substances, independent spirits/subjects and inert physical being and the intrinsic/instrumental distinction it implies, the convergence hypothesis is offered as a ‘patch’ on those dualistic categories. It was designed to remind environmental ethicists that there is a lot more agreement about what to do among environmentalists than there is agreement in environmental ethics regarding how those actions are justified. I also noted that the great figures of environmental history shifted comfortably between anthropocentric and (occasionally) nonanthropocentric formulations. I think they would be startled to see the extent to which environmental ethicists have polarised what seemed to them obvious: because the human being is a large and complex animal, its well-being is intertwined with that of other species. There is no choice implied; there is complementarity of interests and, given a broad and long-term enough conception of human value, policy programs advocated by the two value positions will converge. In *Sustainability*, however, I decided no longer to advocate patches on dualism. I decided instead to start from scratch and create a nondualistic language that places humans in a multi-scalar landscape with values unfolding at multiple scales. Convergence – an empirical hypothesis – remains a useful tool for enforcing reality upon ideology, when discussants fall into dualistic discourse. I look forward to the day when it is no longer useful, and I have written a long and complex book to make available an alternative to dualism, an alternative which I view as far preferable to a patch on dualism. I look forward to seeing whether readers avail themselves of that alternative. If enough of them do, perhaps the anthropocentrism/nonanthropocentrism debate, like Rasputin, will eventually die and the tyranny of Cartesian categories will dissolve.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Work on this paper was partially supported by a grant from the Human Social Dynamics program of the National Science Foundation, grant # SES 0433165.

<sup>2</sup> For example, I find much to agree with in her paper, ‘Neosentimentalism and environmental ethics’, in which she brings the sentiments into play in developing a ‘process’ approach to justification of ethical norms. Indeed, although she has a more intellectualised interpretation of ‘process’, everything she says there is quite compatible with a Deweyan framework of social learning through a process that involves both scientific and moral reflection within concrete decision contexts. So, I see the general approach of neosentimentalist ethics as more complementary than antagonistic to my pragmatist approach.

<sup>3</sup> Taken as a whole, this sentence seems self-contradictory or nonsensical – if there are ‘at least’ two ways of valuing, this seems to open up the possibility of a ‘middle term’, which in turn is denied. But aside from this odd mode of speech, I take Callicott to be committing himself to a sharp distinction between two kinds of valuings. The point is

that this commitment does not come from examining people's values as stated, because in common parlance most people are pluralists about environmental values, and draw no such sharp distinction between values that are instrumental, intrinsic, or whatever (Minteer and Manning, 1999). Callicott places his philosophical theory, derived ultimately from extending Cartesian thinking substance to include some (which?) elements of nonthinking nature, clearly in a dualistic tradition.

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