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"The Value of Nature's Otherness"

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Environmentalist philosophers often paint a holistic picture, stressing such things as the continuity of humanity with wider nature and our membership of the "natural community." The implication seems to be that a non-anthropocentric philosophy requires that we strongly identify ourselves with nature and therefore that we downplay any human/non-human distinction. An alternative view, I think more interesting and plausible, stresses the distinction between humanity and a nature valued precisely for its otherness. In this article I discuss some of its main elements, and some of the difficulties involved with keeping nature's otherness in focus. Firstly (in sections 1–5), I try to clarify what I take to be the otherness-based position by distinguishing it from the apparently similar views of John Passmore, Robert Elliott and Keekok Lee, and some opposed holistic views, especially of J. Baird Callicott. Then, in the second half of the article (sections 6–7), I argue that if nature is valued in virtue of its otherness, this value is best thought of as an extrinsic, final and objective good, where "objectivity" is a "method of understanding," in Thomas Nagel's sense. Although I give some reasons for preferring an otherness account to certain alternative positions, I make no overall attempt to "prove" that nature is valuable for its otherness. My aim is to show that, if it is, then this seems the best way to understand that value.
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