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Finding Value in Nature

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the idea that a proper valuing of natural environments is essential to (and not just a natural basis for) a broader human virtue that might be called ‘appreciation of the good’. This kind of valuing can explain, without any commitment to a metaphysics of intrinsic values, how and why it is good to value certain natural phenomena for their own sakes. The objection that such an approach is excessively human-centred is considered and rebutted.

KEY WORDS

Intrinsic value, value in nature, anthropocentrism, virtue ethics

BACKGROUND AND AIM

In an earlier paper, ‘Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments’, I argued against the assumption that the only factors morally relevant to environmental problems are human rights and welfare.¹ This assumption seems less common now, but there is no general agreement on what the best alternative is. My concern was not only with environmental ethics. Some of the same narrowness of vision, I thought, affected philosophical ethics in general. In short, it is *not all about* human rights and welfare. A key question that opens the way to broader reflection is, ‘What sort of person would do that?’ This calls for thinking about attitudes, understanding and sensibility more often discussed under the ethics of virtue than in theories of rights and costs and benefits. Apart from concerns about the natural environment, our attitudes and acts that express these attitudes are often objectionable even though they violate no one’s rights and harm no one – or at least they are not objectionable solely because they violate rights or cause harm. Arguably what is objectionable in some cases is not that

rights are violated or welfare is diminished. The ungrateful heir who spits on his grandmother's grave after the genuine mourners have left expresses an attitude that seems bad independently of rights, benefits and harms. Similarly, I argued, those who despoil the natural environment often express objectionable attitudes rooted in ignorance, self-importance and patterns of aesthetic insensitivity that, if not themselves vices, give evidence of deficiency in the natural bases of human excellences, such as proper humility, gratitude and aesthetic appreciation.

My argument appealed to common understandings of human virtues and vices that are often ignored in the rights and welfare literature, but it would not satisfy those who want an ethics and value theory that can support good environmental policies without relying on assumptions about human relations and attitudes. Insofar as it appealed to ideals of human excellence and attitudes, my main argument made no appeal to the intrinsic value of nature, or non-human animals, or eco-systems, at least as 'intrinsic value' is often construed.² Although sceptical of uncritical talk of 'intrinsic values', I also believe strongly that the wrongness of most objectionable acts and attitudes is *over*-determined. It is usually a mistake to say that *the* reason that something is morally objectionable is such and such (just one thing). So whether there are other, less human-centred, reasons against the environmental practices I discussed is another issue – left open by my argument. My main point was that arguments from the intrinsic value of nature are *not necessary* to show the inadequacy of theories that appeal solely to human rights and welfare. Whether such arguments are tenable and provide additional support for the same conclusion is a further question.

Many familiar objections to an ethics exclusively focused on human rights and welfare appeal to the idea of animal rights or the intrinsic badness of pain in any sentient beings. Other arguments turn on the value of species or ecosystems. My earlier essay set these aside, not because they are unimportant but because I thought that, for my limited purposes, they were unnecessary. Even broadening the discussion to include 'animal rights' arguably fails to capture the full range of values that are important to environmentalists and lovers of nature. My concern was to explore possible connections between attitudes towards the natural environment and familiar human virtues, such as humility, gratitude and aesthetic sensibility. The question raised, about strip-mining, logging old redwood groves and replacing gardens with asphalt, was not 'Whose rights and interests were violated?' but 'What sort of person would do that?' My suggestion in the end was that those who regard *only* human rights and welfare as reasons not to destroy the natural environment seem to lack the natural basis of the virtues of proper humility, gratitude and aesthetic appreciation.³ My conclusion was limited, but implied that, barring special explanation, we can expect that virtuous persons will value nature for its own sake⁴ – at least they will not regard the natural environment merely as a means to human welfare or as something whose treatment is constrained only by human rights, for example, property rights. My aim in that essay, frankly, was to capture some important environmental

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values without resorting to certain familiar ideas that I find unpromising, such as Native American animism, religious mysticism and metaphysical realism about values inherent in nature.

So much for background. Now I want to explore the idea that a proper valuing of natural environments is essential to (and not just a natural basis for) a broader human virtue that we might call 'appreciation of the good'. Those who are already committed to the value of nature, or various aspects of it, as a metaphysical fact should have no objection to this idea, but they are likely to insist that the 'value of nature' is prior to and totally independent of human capacities for appreciation. In my view the relation is not so simple and one-directional. Values are not natural (or 'non-natural') properties that we happen to 'see' as pre-existing in a non-human world, but they are also not simply things we create or mere reflections of our subjective tastes. To understand all this is a major philosophical challenge, but, if successful, we would have gone beyond the aim and conclusion of my previous essay. That is, we would understand, without metaphysical obscurity or undue anthropocentrism, how and why it is good *to value* certain natural phenomena *for their own sakes* and to recognise and respond appropriately *to the value they have*, in a sense, independently of human rights and welfare.

THE COMMON EXPERIENCE OF FINDING VALUE IN NATURE AND ITS INTERPRETATION

Poets and novelists often express what many of us find difficult to put into words when we appreciate the beauty, variety, order, complexity and awesomeness of aspects of the natural world. But when thinking about the redwood groves, the Carlsbad caverns, and the interplay of living things in an unspoiled forest, most of us could say not only that we *want* to see them, but that we *value* them, value them *for their own sakes*, not just for their utility or as sources of aesthetic delight. Moreover, if challenged, we might add that we do not think this is just a matter of taste or fashion: they *are valuable*, and *would be* even if everyone were to become so crassly materialistic and self-absorbed that they cared about them only for the profit, comfort and passing pleasures that they get from them. If human beings were to disappear from the earth tomorrow, many of us would still count it as a bad thing, a further misfortune or calamity, that the earth be reduced to a lifeless, smouldering rock. This is no doubt due largely (and for some entirely) to a concern for non-human animals, but it is not obvious that even sentient animal life is all that we care about apart from its utility.

Some philosophers want to explain this attitude as a commitment to a metaphysics of independently existing intrinsic values that I find obscure and unhelpful. As before, however, I want to explore alternatives. Following my previous strategy, I want to consider a certain human excellence, or virtue, that seems

to have implications regarding our treatment of the environment. But this time the virtue in question itself requires us to consider the idea of intrinsic value, the very topic that earlier I tried to avoid. The virtue that I have in mind now, broadly speaking, is a *manifest readiness to appreciate the good* in all sorts of things, and not just as an instrument or resource for something else. Although this does not appear on every philosopher's list of moral virtues, arguably it is widely (and rightly) recognised as a human virtue or excellence, an admirable trait of character. The basic idea is simple enough. There seems something important missing in those who persistently ignore, cynically dismiss, or remain coldly indifferent to the vast range of things that are sources of joy, inspiration and value for others, and potentially for themselves. Obviously such people are more liable than most to behave in ways that mistreat, hurt and dampen the spirits of others, but, even apart from that, arguably their systematic lack of appreciation is a defect of character, at least a falling short of an ideal. We may hesitate to label this strictly a *moral vice*, comparable to cruelty, dishonesty and injustice, but we commonly treat the opposite trait as an aspect of an ideal person – that is, their openness to find and respond to value in a wide diversity of people, things and experiences

Most readers would probably concede the general idea that it is an admirable trait *to appreciate what is good*, but they would understandably require some qualifications in a fuller account of the virtue. We should appreciate what is good, *at least in appropriate contexts*. For example, we expect that a virtuous person, in most familiar circumstances, will value love and respect among friends, acts of courage and kindness, innocent pleasures of children at play, and so on. Perhaps we should appreciate *these* things in all contexts, but we do not suppose that in all circumstances a good person will value and take pleasure in everything that is *generally* good. This is partly because such things are often only provisionally good and become worthless or bad in special circumstances. Empathy and pleasure, for example, seem generally good, but not in someone engaged in sadistic torture. Even if these or other good things retain *some* value in all contexts, a virtuous person would not necessarily value and take pleasure in them in every case. There are good things of many kinds, some important and some trivial, and how ideally we would respond to them varies with many factors. For example, it is doubtful that a more virtuous Khrushchev would have tempered his public condemnation of Stalin by noting appreciatively that he often played nicely with his daughter. Also, we need not regard someone as a worse person because she channelled all her energies into one grand artistic or political project, remaining indifferent in the process to values that could be found in current TV comedies, stamp collecting and poker tournaments. These complications, however, are not our present concern.

What is more controversial is whether the virtue of appreciating the good has any special application to our attitudes about the natural environment. It will be readily admitted, of course, that human life and pleasure are generally

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good things and so it matters that pretty scenes cause innocent pleasure and air pollution kills people. The deeper controversy is about whether values in nature are independent of such effects on human welfare and rights. Are there such values, and, if so, how are we to understand them? This is an important question in itself, but it is also crucial to exploration of connections between human virtues and our treatment of the environment. Specifically, does the general virtue of appreciating the good in appropriate contexts imply that we should value aspects of the non-human natural world independently of their utility and effects on our welfare? The answer seems to depend on whether we should think that those aspects of nature *are* good and valuable for their own sakes.⁵ If so, a virtuous person should appreciate them; if not, appreciation would be optional, a matter of choice and not an issue of human excellence or virtue. For me the issue turns on whether we can plausibly affirm that aspects of nature are valuable in themselves, in an appropriate sense, without buying into a metaphysics that construes 'intrinsic values' as independently existing natural (or 'non-natural') properties of things.

I turn in the next section to the large issue of how we might understand *appreciating the value of aspects of nature for their own sakes* without making dubious metaphysical commitments. This is a large topic, but it is necessary to address it here, even if briefly, in order to round out my suggestion that the virtue of *appreciating the good in appropriate contexts* has significant implications for our treatment of the natural environment.

DESIRING, VALUING AND APPRECIATING VALUE: IS A METAPHYSICS OF INTRINSIC VALUE NECESSARY?

Desiring vs. valuing

As many philosophers have noted, desiring and wanting something is not the same as valuing it. Most obviously, people can desire something (for example, taking certain dangerous drugs) but not value it because they regard it as harmful, destructive, or otherwise troublesome. But such consequences aside, people may also desire something that they do not value because they regard it as in itself base and unworthy of our attention: for example, staring at a pile of corpses (Plato's example) or viewing violent and demeaning pornographic films. We often *want* what we value, though not everything we value is an object that we desire to acquire, possess, or control. (Consider past events, the welfare of future human and nonhuman animals, sunsets, mountains, etc.) Valuing, it seems, is typically a relatively stable attitude, capable of withstanding (some) critical reflection, reaffirmed over time despite significant alterations in mood, impulse and momentary inclination. Some desires give those who have them little or no reason, even from the agent's perspective, to follow them – they disapprove of these desires or reasonably regard them as something alien to be

resisted, altered, or suppressed. We typically filter out such unwanted *desires* as we form our *values*. So it seems that, with fewer exceptions, a person who values something has a reason, at least from his or her perspective, to do, say and think various appropriate things with regard to it.

Valuing instrumentally and valuing for its own sake

Some things we value only for other goods they may bring, not for themselves. We may value these persistently, insistently, and for very good reasons, while still valuing them only for their effects: for example, food, unpolluted water and shelter for oneself and one's family. Other things we value and not just for their effects or accompaniments, and not unreasonably so. Contrary to some traditional assumptions, what we value for no further reason is not always an 'end' to be pursued, nor need it be an object possessing a metaphysical property of 'intrinsic value', natural or non-natural. Despite Aristotle, arguably it need not be the natural *telos* for human beings or some constitutive aspect of this. Particular human beings are wonderfully diverse and complex, and the values they *all* happen to share, if any, have no pre-emptive weight per se, apart from context, over what *individuals* care about for itself. It is unlikely that all human beings value aspects of the natural environment for their own sake, but surely the case for an appropriate environmentalist attitude does not assume otherwise.

Valuing and being valuable

Presumably we want to say not merely that many people do in fact *value* natural phenomena in themselves, but also that these phenomena *are valuable* in themselves. What more is implied in this last claim? This is a large and difficult question, but a few things seem clear enough. When we say that something is valuable, and not merely valued by some, we imply that its being valued is not (or need not be) simply the result of mistakes of various kinds – for example, failure to understand it, confusion, bad reasoning, judgment skewed by irrelevant biases, and so on.⁶ Moreover, we seem to imply that what is valuable has in itself features that make it worthy of being valued even when it is not. We readily acknowledge this with respect to unappreciated items of potential utility or delight to human beings – for example, a scientific discovery before its time, an unfashionable poem or painting, or a secret act of kindness. But the point could be extended. We may think that the aspects of nature that we value in themselves have features worthy of being valued in this non-instrumental way even if ignorance, greed and closed mindedness prevent all remaining generations of human beings from appreciating them. That is, we do not merely value them non-instrumentally, but also regard them *as valuable in themselves*, at least if this is understood in an ordinary sense. In my view, this is not a judgment that presupposes an untenable metaphysical value realism, but it does at least imply

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that, if these aspects of nature were to continue to be valued non-instrumentally, the attitude need not rest on mistakes (factual misunderstanding, bias, faulty inferences, etc.).

Moreover, as just noted, when we say that something is *valuable* in itself, not merely *valued* for its own sake, we imply that it is *worthy* of being valued for its own sake. We can perhaps imagine someone saying, ‘I value X for its own sake even though I admit X is not really worthy of this attitude’, but could we understand someone who said, ‘X is intrinsically *valuable* but not worthy of being valued for its own sake’? Although we can only touch on the issue here, there are various ways that the further claim of worthiness could be interpreted without resorting to a metaphysics of intrinsic value as an independently existing property. For example, it seems, at least in part, to express the speaker’s endorsement of valuing the object for its own sake, perhaps with an expectation that other reasonable, aware and informed persons would tend to share this attitude if appropriately situated. Any analysis of the meaning of these expressions is likely to remain controversial, but consideration of how we actually make and revise our judgments can be helpful. When we confirm that something has market value, it is sufficient to observe that very many people value it enough to exchange other things for it. If we learned that many, even most people, familiar with something valued it for its own sake, however, this would not by itself prove to us that the thing is intrinsically valuable. Their attitude, and not merely their beliefs about the object, might have been shaped by political indoctrination, cultural pressures, irrelevant associations and desires unrelated to the valued object. Discovery that the attitude was entirely due to such factors would undermine their claim that the object was intrinsically valuable. If, apart from such factors, the object itself has no stable disposition to lead anyone to value it for its own sake, then those who do value it for its own sake, we might say, do so not because it is worthy of such evaluation but for other reasons.

IS THIS ACCOUNT STILL TOO HUMAN CENTRED?

A persistent objection to accounts of the value of nature of the sort sketched here is that they still make the value too dependent on human nature. This is a kind of objection sometimes raised against any value theory that treats value judgments as involving a relation between facts, events and objects in the world and those who actually or potentially observe, experience, respond to them evaluatively. Such objections often rest on misunderstandings of the theories in question or groundless optimism about the possibility of developing a defensible metaphysically realist alternative. Here I can only offer a few brief comments on the issue – with apologies to both sides of a long-standing dispute.

First, it is mistaken, or at least misleading, to suppose that the only alternative to metaphysical value realism is that human beings ‘create’ or ‘invent’

the value of natural phenomena as opposed to their being valuable 'because of what they are'. In my view, we do 'find value' in nature, *in a sense*, when we learn and experience 'what it really is'. We do not arbitrarily choose what to value but form our value judgments, over time, as we come to experience and better understand natural phenomena. Sometimes, to our surprise, we 'discover' valuable aspects, and not just useful ones, that previously we had ignored or considered worthless. We often 'correct' our superficial impressions and initial value judgments as we enlarge and correct our understanding of the natural phenomena. When asked for the reasons why such things, themselves, are valuable, we cite identifiable features of the things that have value. These facts about what we are judging, rather than facts about our human nature and individual tastes, are 'what makes the things valuable' in the ordinary sense, even though in a meta-level philosophical discussion we may 'explain' values by reference to a relation between features of what is judged and dispositional features of actual or potential judges. This meta-level philosophical discussion is not what is at issue in practical contexts when someone asks whether something in nature is valuable in itself. The question is usually whether all that matters about it is its effect on human rights and welfare. In the ordinary sense at work here, the *reasons* why some natural phenomena are valuable, even apart from such effects, are properties that they really have, but this is not to say that their value is a property, like physical mass and extension are often thought to be, that can be understood without any reference to the potential receptivity, experience and response of non-inert beings.

Second, the ordinary expressions 'good in itself' and 'valuable for its own sake', which (I believe) are quite appropriately applied to nonhuman natural phenomena, are often blown up (or stripped down) by philosophers into meta-physical categories that few ordinary users of these terms would even recognise if explained to them.⁷ For example, expressions such as 'good in itself' ('important in itself', etc.) typically make a contrast with another kind of evaluation (not always 'good as a means') that becomes clear in context. At least we need to pause to consider whether the technical uses have anything to do with real environmental debates.

Third, the debate about what is valuable for its own sake should not be burdened with the familiar, but far from obvious, assumption that the right thing to do is always to produce the greatest possible amount of such (intrinsic) value. When we say that something is valuable, we almost always mean to convey some idea about the *reasons* someone has for doing, thinking, or feeling something, but what is implied varies with the expressions and context. The judgment that aspects of nature are valuable in themselves is not irrelevant to what we should do, but it is unnecessary and unhelpful to try to treat it as assigning points on a scale of commensurable values that always determine what we should do. The controversy on this point is old and familiar, of course, but it is worth keeping in mind when discussing intrinsic values in the context of environmental issues.

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Finally, because ‘anthropocentrism’ has become a term of abuse among some environmentalists, it may be helpful to raise again the question what this means and why it is a bad thing. ‘Anthropocentrism’ can refer to significantly different ideas, and more and less radical ideas may be unfairly swept away with the same rhetorical brush.⁸ The following, for example, are *prima facie* significantly distinct claims: (i) Everything in nature except human beings exists solely for the material benefit of human beings; (ii) Everything in nature except human beings exists solely for the benefit of human beings; but this includes aesthetic and spiritual benefits as well as material benefits; (iii) All valid concerns about the natural environment derive ultimately from human rights and duties to respect human interests; (iv) It is good for us to value nonhuman animals, natural wildernesses and ecosystems noninstrumentally; that is, it is virtue of *human* beings, though not of other creatures, to do this; (v) All moral obligations and duties, virtues and vices, blameworthiness and praiseworthiness are, strictly and literally, attributed only to human beings (or other ‘rational’ beings); (vi) The ultimate justification for thinking that we should value nature noninstrumentally (and count it as ‘morally considerable’) must appeal not only to the facts about the natural world and our place in it but also to the nature of moral justification – which is, in the end, a process dependent on human reason, sensibility, experience, dialogue and reflection; (vii) This process of moral justification, properly understood, is not a matter of either perceiving values that exist as facts in nature or of intuiting nonnatural ‘intrinsic values’, and so, though we should *value* nonhuman nature and even *regard it as valuable* noninstrumentally, the ultimate justification cannot be ‘It simply exists with the non-relational property of intrinsic value’ which we ‘see’ or ‘intuit’.

If being anthropocentric is to be objectionable, we should be careful to indicate which claims it encompasses. My own view is that the first three claims are the primary ones that environmentalists should protest. The fourth is environmental friendly, for it endorses valuing nature noninstrumentally without denying other environmentalist themes. Controversies about the fifth – that only human beings, strictly, have moral virtues – will, I suspect, largely turn on whether we use ‘moral’ in a sense that is narrow or broad, perhaps literal or metaphorical. The last two points, concerning ultimate justification, are subject to philosophical disagreement, but I see no practical or theoretical advantage for environmentalists to treat these claims as the enemy. To do so would require them to draw up battle lines against the major developments in moral theory this century, and much before, and quite *unnecessarily* as far as I can see. I suspect that confusing these claims, i.e. (vi) and (vii), with some of the others has been largely responsible for the idea that serious environmentalists must deny them.

NOTES

¹ Hill 1983. This paper has been reprinted in several anthologies, including Thomas E. Hill, Jr., *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

² The term 'intrinsic value' has been interpreted in different ways. As should become clear, my scepticism about its use applies primarily to interpretations, such as G.E. Moore's, that treat intrinsic value as a simple, non-natural metaphysical property. This is a special philosophical usage, not inherent in the common understanding of 'good in itself' or 'valuable for its own sake'.

³ By 'natural basis' for a virtue I mean a pervasive human disposition, not primarily the product of particular social and cultural influences, that is not itself a morally excellent or praiseworthy trait but is a background tendency necessary to (or usually important for) the development of a morally excellent or praiseworthy trait. For example, in 'Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments' I conjectured that a natural basis for proper humility is a tendency to care about animals and things independently of their utility (p. 220) and a natural basis for gratitude is a disposition to cherish for their own sakes things that give us joy (p. 224). Whether these conjectures are correct is, of course, an empirical question.

⁴ It is important to note here, and later, that 'valuing something for its own sake' is not the same as 'believing that something is intrinsically valuable'. This is especially evident if the latter is interpreted as the belief that the thing in question has a metaphysical property ('intrinsic value') that exists independently of relations to anything else. 'Valuing for its own sake' is an attitude about the thing in question, not a belief about its intrinsic properties or even its relation to other actual or potential valuers.

⁵ This is a point at which approaching environmental issues from a perspective on human virtues seems to require, rather than provide a way of avoiding, discussion of intrinsic value. My suggestion, however, is that practical judgments that aspects of nature are 'intrinsically valuable', when understood in the ordinary sense relevant to real environmental debates, do not presuppose the metaphysical realist conceptions of intrinsic value that I have been trying to avoid. For present purposes I am not distinguishing 'being intrinsically valuable', 'having intrinsic value', and 'being *valuable* for its own sake', though all of these, I assume, go beyond 'being *valued* for its own sake'.

⁶ The possibility of such mistakes about what *is valuable* is important to distinguish the concept from the weaker ideas that the thing *seems valuable* and *is valued*. It must make sense to say, 'It seems valuable, it is valued (e.g. by many others), and I did value it, but really it is not valuable.' The distinction, however, need not be explained as the difference between false and true attributions of a metaphysical property of the thing in question independent of its relations to those who do or might observe, experience, or otherwise respond to the thing. The difference has to do both with other possible errors and misjudgments as well as endorsement of something as *worthy* of being valued, a normative judgment that needs more discussion but does not necessarily invoke the kind of metaphysics of which I am sceptical.

⁷ Long ago, in the days of 'ordinary language philosophy' at Oxford, I studied in some detail the common (non-philosophical) use of these expressions, and this investigation (Hill 1961) convinced me that G.E. Moore and other philosophers had changed the subject substantially when they wrote about 'intrinsic value' in their technical sense.

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⁸ The following with minor revisions is from Hill 2001.

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