



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

McShane, Katie. "Convergence, Noninstrumental Value and the Semantics of 'Love': Reply to Norton."

*Environmental Values* 17, no. 1, (2008): 15-22.

<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6021>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 2008. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publisher. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk/>

## Convergence, Noninstrumental Value and the Semantics of ‘Love’: Reply to Norton

KATIE McSHANE

*Department of Philosophy and Religion  
North Carolina State University  
Campus Box 8103, Raleigh, NC 27695-8103, USA  
Email: [katie\\_mcshane@ncsu.edu](mailto:katie_mcshane@ncsu.edu)*

### ABSTRACT

Bryan Norton argues that my recent critique of anthropocentrism presupposes J. Baird Callicott’s philosophically problematic distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value and that the problems that it raises for anthropocentrism in general are in fact only problems for strong anthropocentrism. I argue, first, that my own view does not presuppose Callicott’s distinction, nor any claims about instrumental value, and second, that the problems it raises for anthropocentrism apply to weak and strong anthropocentrism alike.

### KEYWORDS

Anthropocentrism, Norton, value, intrinsic, instrumental

## INTRODUCTION

Before replying to Norton's particular criticisms, let me say a bit about the scope of the arguments in the original essay.<sup>1</sup> The thesis of the essay was that even if anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism recommend the same norms for action (as Norton's convergence hypothesis claims), they cannot recommend the same norms for feeling. More specifically, I argued that the claims about value made by anthropocentrism run counter to certain valuing attitudes: love, respect and awe. The conclusion was that insofar as one thinks that these valuing attitudes are appropriate ones to take toward at least some parts of the nonhuman world, the fact that anthropocentrism deems them mistaken should be considered a drawback of anthropocentrism. In the course of the essay I did not argue for the claim that nonanthropocentrism is the all-things-considered better view, nor did I articulate or defend a particular version of nonanthropocentrism or endorse J. Baird Callicott's nonanthropocentric theory of value. Far from wishing to declare an allegiance in the epic battle of Norton v. Callicott, I had hoped merely to point out a consequence of anthropocentrism that hadn't received much attention.

## RESPONSE TO NORTON'S TWO CRITICISMS

Norton argues that my analysis suffers from two problems: (1) it assumes a philosophically problematic distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value; and (2) the problems that it raises for anthropocentrism in general are in fact only problems for strong anthropocentrism. Let me address each of these criticisms in turn.

(1) In the original essay, I mentioned intrinsic value only to say that I thought it orthogonal to the debate between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism; I did not mention instrumental value at all. Nonetheless, Norton believes that my arguments rely on Callicott's understanding of the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value, a distinction that he finds dubious. As he puts it, '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' [p. 7].

I defined anthropocentrism as 'the view that the nonhuman world has value only because, and insofar as, it directly or indirectly serves human interests,' and nonanthropocentrism as the denial of this claim.<sup>2</sup> Defining these terms in such a way requires one to accept a distinction between directly or indirectly serving human interests and not doing so, but this distinction is very far from Callicott's intrinsic versus instrumental value distinction. As Norton points

## REPLY TO NORTON

out, Callicott's distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value is really a distinction between the different ways that an object can be valued by valuing subjects. To have instrumental value, on Callicott's view, is to be valued as a means; to have intrinsic value is to be valued as an end.<sup>3</sup> While there isn't room here to detail my own views about intrinsic value, it is worth noting that I think that Callicott's account is flawed in two ways.<sup>4</sup> First, it doesn't seem to leave any room for a thing to be extrinsically valuable in a way that is not instrumental.<sup>5</sup> Second, it seems to have the consequence that whatever is valued instrumentally or intrinsically is thereby *valuable* instrumentally or intrinsically, ruling out the possibility that our actual valuations might be erroneous.<sup>6</sup> These both seem to me to be mistakes. Norton remarks that he and Callicott agree that 'whatever intrinsic value is – or isn't – it is best thought of as a "kind of human valuing" ... value is adverbial, not substantive because "value" is a verb, not a noun' [p. 8]. In that case, I disagree with both of them. Value is both a noun and a verb; more importantly, to be valuable is not just to be valued, but rather to be properly or appropriately valued.

In any case, the question of whether a thing is valued instrumentally is not the same as the question of whether that thing serves human interests. We actual valuers are notorious for valuing things that don't serve our interests very well while failing to value things that are essential to them. There may well be things that serve our interests right now (e.g., that the two asteroids currently speeding toward the earth crash into and destroy each other), though we remain entirely ignorant of them and thus value them neither instrumentally nor intrinsically. What is in one's interest and what one takes an interest in are independent matters. The mere fact that an analysis distinguishes between things that serve human interests and things that do not, then, does not commit it to Callicott's claims about instrumental and intrinsic value.<sup>7</sup>

Yet perhaps concerns about Callicott's particular theory of value are not really at the heart of Norton's worry. What he says is that nonanthropocentrists (among whom he counts me) 'assume ethicists have a fairly clear conception of "instrumental value"' which allow us to distinguish between things that benefit humans and things that do not. While I would not want to be accused of thinking that ethicists have a clear view of anything, perhaps the worry here is that there isn't a clear view to be had on this matter – either because (a) there is no difference between things that directly or indirectly serve human interests and things that do not, or because (b) while there is such a difference, it is not one that plays any role in the way that we do or should value things. Claim (a), I think, can be straightforwardly rejected – that some ways the world could go would be good for us, others would be bad, and others might not matter at all, is presupposed by most of ethics and environmental policy, not to mention by Norton's own philosophical position. Claim (b) might be able to get more traction – after all, it isn't always clear to us how and why we value the things we value – but I think it too should be rejected. Many of our common, everyday

moral assessments invoke distinctions among different reasons for caring about things and take those distinctions to be morally important. When we say things like, ‘He doesn’t really love her; he’s just using her’ or ‘She seems like a good-hearted person, but she only acts that way because she thinks it will make other people like her’, hearers understand what we’re talking about. The difference between valuing things because of what they can do for you and valuing them independently of their effect on your welfare isn’t a philosopher’s invention; it plays an important role in the way that ordinary people understand different ways of caring and the norms that govern those ways.<sup>8</sup>

(2) Norton’s second criticism is that the problem I raise for anthropocentrism only legitimately applies to strong anthropocentrism. Strong anthropocentrism, according to Norton, requires us to explain all value ‘by reference to satisfactions of felt preferences of human individuals’. Weak anthropocentrism, on the other hand, requires us to explain all value as a matter of satisfying ‘some felt preference of a human individual’ or ‘bearing upon the ideals which exist as elements in a world view essential to determinations of considered preferences’ (where ‘considered preferences’ are again defined as those of ‘a human individual’).<sup>9</sup> I think that Norton’s criticisms of my claims involve some misconstruals of my original argument, but they also raise an important philosophical issue that I think merits further exploration. First, let me address the misconstruals.

Norton reads my argument as claiming that ‘anthropocentrists cannot ‘love’ nature,’ and claims that this is silly – his own love of his dog is just one of many counterexamples. I agree that such a claim would be silly. What I claimed was that the way of valuing objects that love, respect, etc. involve runs counter to the way of valuing the nonhuman natural world that anthropocentrism deems appropriate (i.e., deserved or merited by the nonhuman natural world). To say this is not to say that anthropocentrists cannot love their dogs; it is just to say that anthropocentrists who love their dogs have a kind of tension within their world-view: their claims about what kind of value the nonhuman world has conflict with their sense of how it is appropriate to care about parts of the nonhuman world. While there is a tension here, it is by no means impossible for one’s theoretical commitments to exist in a state of tension with one’s practical commitments. My own sense is that most of us live much of our lives with at least some such unresolved conflicts. The problem, then, isn’t in the first instance a practical one – I am not concerned about the quality of anthropocentrists’ relationships with their dogs or about the dedication with which they can pursue environmentalist goals. The problem is a philosophical one: anthropocentrists’ theoretical claims about which kinds of things can matter in which ways and why seem to run counter to the presuppositions of their valuing attitudes.<sup>10</sup>

Norton argues further that “‘Weak anthropocentrists’” – ones who base policy on the full range of human values not just economic ones – could express an interest in protecting [an] 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

## REPLY TO NORTON

have derived from that ecosystem' [p. 10]. I'm inclined to agree with Norton that anthropocentrists could express such views. Notice, however, that what is at issue in this example is whether anthropocentrists can support the same behaviours and policies as nonanthropocentrists – i.e., whether Norton's original convergence hypothesis is true. In his example, the concern for human interests isn't functioning as a reason for the love of the ecosystem, but rather as a reason for the preservation of the ecosystem. The whole point of my original essay was to ask about whether the value claims made by anthropocentrism are in conflict with the value claims implicit in the attitude of love, not to ask whether the value claims of anthropocentrism (either accompanied or unaccompanied by love) can serve as sufficient motivation for preservationist policies.

It is worth noting that throughout his essay, Norton uses the term 'motives' to refer to what I had called 'emotions' or more specifically 'valuing attitudes'. Perhaps this slight shift in meaning is revealing of at least part of the reason for our differences. To view emotions simply as motives is to consider them only in their action-related aspects. However, one of the points of the original essay was to argue that the importance of our emotional lives goes far beyond the ways that they do or don't motivate our actions. If we only cared about emotions because of the role they play in bringing about good or bad actions, then Norton's conflation here would be understandable. If anthropocentrists can still be motivated to do good in the world, why quibble about the reasons or feelings that motivate them? As I tried to argue in the essay, however, I think that we have good reasons for caring about our emotions independently of their effect on our actions. The question to put to Norton about the case he raises, then, isn't whether or not this anthropocentrist could be motivated to adopt preservationist policies on the basis of love for the ecosystem and concern for human interests, but whether the anthropocentrist's claim to love the ecosystem wouldn't be undermined by the anthropocentrist's belief that the ecosystem has no value except for its contribution to human interests.<sup>11</sup>

That aside, however, Norton's response raises an interesting philosophical issue – one that there wasn't room to discuss in the original essay, but which I think well worth pursuing. This is the question of what kind of a difference it makes to the conceptual claims about love, respect, awe, etc. whether self-interest is understood in the first-person singular or the first-person plural. The claim of the original essay was that there are problems with assertions of the following type: 'I love it but think its only value is in whether and how well it serves my interests' and 'We love it but think its only value is in whether and how well it serves our interests.' But what about claims such as, 'I love it but think its only value is in whether and how well it serves *our* interests' or even 'I love it but think its only value is in whether and how well it serves *their* interests' [where 'they' are the other members of my group]? Here, matters are more difficult to sort out. On the one hand, there doesn't seem to be any conceptual difficulty involved in loving someone for her kindness and generosity, even if these virtues

are mostly a matter of her furthering the interests of others. In fact, one could think that the value of people is entirely a matter of whether they possess such virtues. On the other hand, if someone claimed to respect a woman but then claimed that her value was entirely a matter of how well she furthered the interests of men (even on the broadest construal of what the interests of men might be), then I think we would rightly question whether true respect is present. The upshot of this is that there are philosophical questions to be raised here about whether love, respect, awe, etc. are ways of valuing things intrinsically (and what that might mean), or just ways of valuing things for reasons other than how they can benefit you and yours.

Interestingly, although Norton is perhaps the most well-known proponent of anthropocentrism in environmental ethics, I think that his view would in fact be changed very little by giving up its requirements that the benefits relevant to value be group-specific. Weak anthropocentrism, as he defines it, requires that all value be a matter of satisfying 'some felt preference of a *human* individual' or 'bearing upon the ideals which exist as elements in a world view essential to determinations of considered preferences' (where 'considered preferences' are defined as those of 'a *human* individual').<sup>12</sup> In his reply, he comments, 'the logic of the weak anthropocentrism is constrained by a whole range of *human* values ...' [p. 11, emphasis added]. I don't see what would be lost by deleting the word 'human' in the above definitions. This would leave it an open empirical question as to which things in the world can have preferences of the kind the theory says are relevant to the existence of value. I would think that someone who criticises others for 'distinctions [that] have their origins in a priori concepts' and 'setting up a context in which psychological states...must answer to an unrelated theory of value derived from highly questionable sources' might look favourably on such a move.

## CONCLUSION

I maintain that insofar as our ways of caring about the world are consistent with some value claims and inconsistent with others, we have reason to think carefully about the norms for feeling that our theories of value do or do not license. Insofar as anthropocentrism's value claims are opposed to the views implicit in some of our ways of caring about the nonhuman world, we have reason to worry about the adequacy of anthropocentrism. To say this is not to say that anthropocentrism is thereby wrong or that nonanthropocentrism is the all-things-considered better position to take on these matters. To draw such conclusions would, as Norton points out, require one to articulate and defend a particular version of nonanthropocentrism. I have not tried to do that here, nor did I try to do so in the original essay; my only claim is that in thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of these different theoretical positions, we shouldn't ignore

## REPLY TO NORTON

the implications that each view might have for our claims about how it makes sense to care about the nonhuman parts of the world in which we live.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> McShane 2007a.

<sup>2</sup> McShane 2007a: 170.

<sup>3</sup> Callicott 1985: 262. Callicott uses the term ‘inherent value’ in place of ‘intrinsic value’.

<sup>4</sup> For my own views on intrinsic value, see McShane 2007b.

<sup>5</sup> So for example, one might think that a memento has extrinsic rather than intrinsic value (since it gets its value from a relation it bears to some valuable experience) though not instrumental value (it is a representation of the experience, but not a means to remembering or valuing the experience – it is not the case that in the absence of mementos we would be unable to recall such experiences). For a discussion of cases like this and for arguments against identifying extrinsic value with instrumental value, see Korsgaard 1983 and Green 1996.

<sup>6</sup> This comes from Callicott’s subjectivist metaethic, which I join Norton in rejecting.

<sup>7</sup> Nor do I think that it commits it to any claims, much less a priori claims, about things in the world having ‘spirit’ or not, being of moral concern to a deity or not, and so on. The closest the analysis comes to Cartesian dualism of the kind that Norton seems to be worried about is that it utilises a two-part category scheme. Doing so, however, does not seem to me to constitute a philosophical problem.

<sup>8</sup> I think that by acting as if such distinctions weren’t a part of ordinary psychology, it is Norton who is ‘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’ [p. 6]. (I explain and defend some of the above claims about the ordinary psychology of valuing further in McShane 2007b.)

<sup>9</sup> Norton 1984: 134. It is my assumption that Norton is following most proponents of preference-satisfaction accounts in taking considered preferences to be indicative of interests. (If they weren’t indicative of interests, we would need a separate argument to show why we should care about considered preferences rather than interests.) Since Norton’s reply doesn’t challenge this assumption, I won’t go to the effort of defending it here.

<sup>10</sup> To call something a ‘philosophical problem’, on my view, is not to say that it can be safely ignored, especially not by philosophers invested in the project of defending the theoretical adequacy of anthropocentrism.

<sup>11</sup> Norton claims that I employ ‘a quite narrow sense of “interest” – a common ploy by nonanthropocentrists – to narrow the legitimate concerns of humans’ [p. 6]. I never defined ‘interest’ anywhere in the original essay, and so I find this charge slightly puzzling. The claims I make here and in the original essay I take to be legitimate on even the broadest construals of what a human interest might involve.

<sup>12</sup> Norton 1984: 134, emphasis added.



## REFERENCES

- Callicott, J. Baird. 1985. 'Intrinsic value, quantum theory, and environmental ethics'. *Environmental Ethics* **7**: 257–275.
- Green, Karen. 1996. 'Two distinctions in environmental goodness'. *Environmental Values* **5**: 31–46, doi: 10.3197/096327196776679384.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. 1983. 'Two distinctions in goodness'. *Philosophical Review* **32**(2): 169–195, doi: 10.2307/2184924.
- McShane, Katie. 2007a. 'Anthropocentrism vs. nonanthropocentrism: Why should we care?' *Environmental Values* **16**: 169–185, doi: 10.3197/096327107780474555.
- McShane, Katie. 2007b. 'Why environmental ethics shouldn't give up on intrinsic value'. *Environmental Ethics* **29**(1): 43–61.
- Norton, Bryan G. 1984. 'Environmental ethics and weak anthropocentrism'. *Environmental Ethics* **6**: 131–148.
- Norton, Bryan G. 2008. 'Convergence, noninstrumental value and the semantics of "love": Comment on McShane'. *Environmental Values* **17**: 5–14, doi: 10.3197/096327108X271914.