On the intrinsic value in the more-than-human world

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Any ethical theory contains an account of which values we should acknowledge and on which principles we place them. Here, intrinsic value is the main attribute for being morally considerable. It is defined as the value something has by its own existence, so without reference to some external valuer. Classical moral theories reserve the possession of this status to human beings alone and thereby, deny non-human beings, like other animals and plants, categorical moral worth. Various environmental philosophers challenge this view under the impression of increased species extinction and human-accelerated climate change. In the following, I present possible arguments for and against the intrinsic value of non-human beings. I will argue that non-human beings have intrinsic value once ethics is placed on a proper ontology.

The instrumental value of nature is widely accepted in the Western tradition of philosophy. This view implies that the value of non-human beings lies solely outside themselves so that they can only be valued as a means to a subject with intrinsic value (Curry 2018, p. 52). The energy we extract from animals to satisfy our nutritive needs and the plants we turn into economical profit, like clothes and building materials, are two evident examples where non-human life is of instrumental value for humans. Kant as one of the leading moral thinkers of this tradition claims that human beings are the only intrinsic valuable beings due to their rational faculty. This is expressed through the good will as the capacity to set own goals and deliberate about the means to achieve them (Kant 2011, p. 947). Any value-judgment includes thus the relation between the will and its target, such that the will is necessarily the source of all value and to be considered as the only entity with intrinsic value (Wood 1999, p. 211). Moral agency becomes the ultimate measure of value reciprocally: all agents carry value intrinsically but also ought to respect the intrinsic value of all other rational agents in their actions. This symmetry condition of moral considerability leads to the conclusion of a general human dignity which is an undeniably important achievement in human history. In contrast, any irrational being

cannot possess intrinsic value due to the lack of agency.

It is however this symmetry condition which makes Kant's theory unacceptable to me. The idea of agency as the only source and locus of intrinsic value is rooted in the teleological world view of Kant where human beings are the ultimate end of nature, in the sense of being the origin of the end of an aimless nature, guided by rationality from the start (Wood 1999, p. 311). As such, his theory reflects the anthropocentric belief in the supremacy of pure reason typical for the enlightenment period (Wood 1999, p. 331). Since at least Darwin's theory of evolution, it is undeniable that we do not just share our rational faculty with at least many other animals but also that this faculty developed over time from common ancestors.

Is it then sufficient to drop the symmetry premise of agency to assign intrinsic value to non-human beings? Callicott (1989) argues for this possibility by opening up the distinction between source and locus of value. Following scientific naturalism, he places the source of intrinsic value solely in human consciousness because humans are the only moral agents whereas nature is value-neutral. In contrast to Kant, the locus of intrinsic value cannot be logically equated with some objective natural property (Callicott 1989, p. 159), like reason, because value is generally subjective. A naturalistic view however does not deny that value can be projected onto objects through the assertion of a subject, so that non-human beings can be valued for, though, not in themselves. Callicott (1989, p. 160) refers to this as inherent value.

This acknowledgement of multiple loci of intrinsic value shall mark a shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric ethical theory because it extends the direct moral consideration from people only to non-human entities. Once inherent value is placed in nature, consciousness and concern about the environment arise in us due to our natural dispositions according to Callicott. He explains this mechanism by combining the ideas of Hume, Darwin and ecology. For Hume, moral judgements arise from moral sentiments or passions such as benevolence and sympathy which are universal and natural to us. As such, altruism is as primitive to us as egoism (Callicott 1989, p. 148). Evidence for this is provided by Darwin's theory of evolution which predicts a survival advantage through being a member of a social community. This led to the development of an ethical instinct towards fellow human beings. The success of ecology is to show that nature is integrated and we are part of it. Thus, a biotic community consisting of the whole ecosystem including human beings is present. This "ecological enlightenment" (Callicott 1989, p. 124) of interdependency shall reveal for us that the biotic community is a proper object of our natural, altruistic sentiments (Callicott 1989, p. 126), and thus, has inherent value.

This shift is enabled by reason as an indirect guide for our passions through posing facts about the world (Hume 2011, p. 809). Our ecologically-informed reason plants a seed in our moral senses through which our feelings towards non-human beings can become like towards humanity (Callicott 1989, p. 125).

A common objection to Callicott's moral subjectivism is the accusal of relativism. Callicott rejects this by referring to the Darwinian foundation of his theory. As such, our moral feelings are evolutionarily standardised despite cultural and natural variations (Callicott 1989, p. 164). In fact, this variability is required to be able to extend the objects of our moral sentiments to the biotic community. I agree with Callicott insofar as some universal basis of morality might be included in all humans. But irrespective of this, his defence reveals naive thinking with regards to the practical shift of our passions. Though the ecological enlightenment might raise our awareness of our systemic dependency and evolutionary kindness, far more is needed to actually change the beliefs and actions of human beings in society. Callicott (1989, p. 80) seems not completely ignorant of this topic because he supports his thesis with references to anthropological studies showing that the content of an ethical theory generally reflects the perceived value boundaries of a society. However, the simple extension to the biotic community in otherwise anthropocentric societies grounded in oftentimes long traditions is rather a hope of Callicott (Vetlesen 2016, p. 114) than a self-adjusting process. Even Hume would disagree with Callicott on this point because for him, stronger passions would always overcome weaker passions (Hume 2011, pp. 804-5). Therefore, it would be not sufficient to simply state ecological facts, but rather required to engage people actively through encountering the biotic community. Vetlesen (2016, p. 209) points out that particularly children need to experience nature as intrinsically valuable to value it later in life as well. But, we do not live in nature but artificial surroundings (Mathews 2005, p. 69) where we can only encounter ourselves or products made by human technology. Thus, a simple moral extension becomes fiction.

In addition, I notice that the extension of Hume's moral sentiments to non-humans seems to contradict Hume's own understanding of the nature of our passions. For Hume, it is "a fact of our nature [...] that our moral sense is aroused by certain features or actions of humans, but is not aroused by the apparently analogous features or actions of animals, plants, or other" (Norton 2009, p. 290). In particular, it is the reflection in conversations with other members of our community that leads to a shared moral discourse based on our common humanity according to Hume (Norton 2009, p. 326). Thus, moral sentiments are forms of our natural sympathetic responses cultivated in conversation with one another (Norton 2009, p. 329). Non-human beings, lacking the necessary language features specific

to humans, are therefore categorically excluded from intrinsic value questions. Callicott might oppose that Hume was not aware of the work of ecology and would eventually adapt his theory in light of the knowledge about our interrelationship with nature. But, I think the most Hume could admit is giving these relationships a similar bearing as justice in his *Treatise*. Here, it would be an artificially learned virtue to value non-human beings intrinsically (compare Hume (2011, p. 818)). However, the mechanism for this is an enlightened self-interest (Norton 2009, p. 297). Callicott (1989, p. 173) himself brings up this point of valuing nature due to self-interest and egoism in a later essay by reflecting on our conceptual integration with our environment in the light of quantum theory. This is a clear departure from sympathetic appreciation of nature towards anthropocentric chauvinism. As a result, any argument for the intrinsic value of non-human beings is lost as stated by Vetlesen (2016, p. 117). The acceptance of egoism as the ground of intrinsic value reflects Kant's narcissism by pointing out some arbitrary psychological trait in human beings as the foundation of morality.

The fundamental problem Callicott ultimately faces is his moral subjectivism which is in line with classical moral thinking based on Newtonian cosmology (Mathews 2021, p. 37). In this mechanical world view manifested in the widely accepted dualism of Descartes, the human mind as the only subject is separated from the body and all external entities consisting thus of lifeless matter. For Descartes and Kant, reality solely depends on our knowledge so that it is filtered by our epistemic assumptions and abilities. With the rise of scientific naturalism, sense perception became the only measure for objective knowledge, whereas direct experiences of the world are invalid interpretations of the external world (Jonas 2001, p. 35). Thus, intrinsic value became subjective, so human-mind dependent, because unobservable in a scientific manner. It has been overlooked by Callicott that the cosmology he maintains undermines his effort to locate intrinsic value outside human consciousness right from the start. Thus, he simply fails to explain why human beings have intrinsic value in the first place and rather presupposes it a priori in line with Kantian thinking. As pointed out by Jonas (2001, p. 62), the validity of the dualistic premise has not been validated in the course of the centuries. The idea of a value-neutral external world is a metaphysical premise, though eventually forgotten. Therefore, it loses its imperative status.

As a result of this, it seems promising to challenge this premise to find intrinsic value outside the human realm. Rolston (1988) abandons the privilege of subjectivity to qualify as value holder and adopts life as the objective ground for ethics instead. Thus, human agency as a requirement for intrinsic value is dropped in favour of scientific value realism:

value becomes part of the fabric of the objective world (Vetlesen 2020, p. 48).

Rolston argues that intrinsic value is a part of physical reality based on the observation that our subjective, intrinsic value ultimately arose from an objective ecosystem that created humanity: if subjective life arises from nature, value should be present in the whole projective system and not only in the historically recent emerge of human beings (Rolston 1988, p. 216). Objective life, present in all organisms, implies that things matter to them. Our knowledge about genes reveals that each organism forms an evaluative system seeking a valued state of growth and resisting death, its telos. A tree seeks for sun and grows roots in the soil to benefit from nutrients, and "benefit" is a value word (Vetlesen 2016, p. 121). Thus, the defence of its own kind as a good kind manifests the intrinsic value of all living beings (Rolston 1988, p. 99). Here, the value cannot depend on our consciousness alone because e.g. photosynthesising the sun happens independent of us (Vetlesen 2016, p. 122). Instead, the state of affairs, as the source of intrinsic value, is in the organism itself and not projected from us (Vetlesen 2016, p. 127).

But why should this biological fact compose a better argument for the intrinsic value of non-human beings than the contrasting claim of philosophers like Kant? I think it is the connection to the system generating the value by promoting life which appeals to Rolston. One level above the organism, each individual inherits the genetic set from its ancestors, exemplifies the described strive for living and passes this ability to future generations (Rolston 1988, p. 143). The species, as the dynamic forms enduring this process in time, are thus the underlying sources of intrinsic value. Ultimately, nature inhabits the history of all species and maintains the necessary organic processes to continue life in the future (Rolston 1988, p. 164). It conserves the value holders through promoting the increase of kinds and holds all intrinsic valuable things in a web of interrelationship (Rolston 1988, p. 188). These modes of relations are not just contingent but necessary because, in the process of metabolism, the integration of matter from outside is a prerequisite for continuing life (Jonas 2001, p. 84). Therefore, "the inventiveness of systemic nature is the root of all value" (Rolston 1988, p. 198). It is thereby no moral agent but a place of satisfactory fitness which serves as the criterion for moral judgements (Rolston 1988, p. 60). Consequentially, the classical acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of the human species ought to be extended to all other forms of life because our value arises historically from nature like all other creatures.

Though Rolston makes a compelling argument for value realism, I reject his position in parts due to issues arising from the implicit acceptance of the subject-object distinction of dualistic thinking. In doing so, *projective nature* becomes universal for him, however

not on a substantival level. Thus, it becomes possible to challenge him on account of Newtonian atomism which he seems actually to endorse when he states that ecosystems are stochastic processes with "individuals interacting with other such individuals and with abiotic and exbiotic material and forces" (Rolston 1988, p. 168). Here, the individual as substance is ontologically built from small units, so independent of any relation to the whole and value-neutral because consisting of matter (Mathews 2021, p. 174). He would struggle with the same problem materialists are faced with: how can life and human consciousness evolve in terms of pure matter. Rolston (1988, p. 191) ignores this issue but plainly states that the evolutionary system creates life and selects for adaptive fit, with subjectivity as its most significant product. His idea, that intrinsic value arises from the striving for existence in all life, becomes however doubtful through this appeal to evolution as its source. For Rolston, evolution as the historical process in ecosystems has no head (Rolston 1988, p. 175) or telos, so "no unified program it is set to execute" (Rolston 1988, p. 172). In arguing this, he seems to follow what Jonas labels *evolutionalism*: natural selection, in contrast to a purposeful telos, decides on the direction of apparent progress in the world. This can be identified as a negative teleology where forms are eliminated if unfit but never created (Jonas 2001, p. 51). Thus, there are "causes but no reason for the system as it happens to exist" (Jonas 2001, p. 49). This gives rise to a new sort of dualism between the organism and its germ plasma. The only effect of the organism on this continuing core is the allowance for the plasma to continue its being in the future, whereas the particular experiences and achievements in the life-long struggle with the environment cannot be transmitted (Jonas 2001, p. 52). I think that this transforms the organism into an epiphenomenon, irrelevant to the system as long as not extinct. But why should it be then convincing that irrespective of its origin, the life struggle of the individual is goal-oriented and thus, intrinsically valuable? For Rolston, valuing life beyond the necessary physical existence-supporting relationships seems contingent because of the objectivity in nature. If the whole is not alive, without telos, it tends towards meaninglessness and Newtonian value-neutrality. Thus, the valuing of particulars, i.e. individual beings, becomes in some sense unimportant, without value, due to the sheer endless source of life we all are connected with irrespective of our doing. Accepting Rolston's plea is then nothing else than an appeal to respect our roots and all its fruits based on an epistemic claim from scientific realism. Interpreted this way, Rolston follows Kant in putting epistemology first and ontology second.

It is in fact ontology, constituting the basic substances building up the world, on which any cosmology is based upon (Mathews 2021, p. 6) and thus, also epistemology and our

ethical value system. If a strong argument for the intrinsic value of non-human beings shall be formulated, the ontological premise of dualism is to be changed first. Mathews (2021) defends a substance monism as ontology for this purpose. She thereby relies on panpsychism which attributes a psychic dimension to all physical so that the universe becomes a psychophysical unity (Vetlesen 2016, p. 193). The universe no longer consists of mind and matter but matter with the capacity to relate to its existence in an animated world (Vetlesen 2016, p. 195).

Thus, subjectivity constitutes a deeper level of self-presence out of which self-consciousness arises (Mathews 2003, p. 31). Empirical, mind-dependent experience alone is then not sufficient to distinguish between shear appearances and true reality (Mathews 2003, p. 34) because the self-presence or innerness of matter cannot be grasped from an external point of view. Instead, an additional way of communication, connected to our personal experience of the world, the encountering of other subjects, is required. Value realism can thus only fully succeed if it accounts for our experience linked to the self-realisation of ourselves (Mathews 2021, p. 54). Mathews (2021, p. 53) is not unaware of the inflexibility of cosmologies and states that a new world view attains legitimacy only by founding itself in the existing framework, i.e. science in the Western tradition. Therefore, she defends her monistic cosmology in part by appealing to geometrodynamics which is an extension of the general theory of relativity by Einstein. Accordingly, the universe is made of a single substance, empirically manifested as spacetime, which renders space intrinsically dynamic and mutable, though not divisible. It constantly expands globally and curves locally. Energy becomes the curvature of spacetime, matter local highly curved regions (Mathews 2021, p. 66). Thus, the continuum is also holistic: the substantival universe determines and influences the behaviour of all its parts (Mathews 2021, p. 73), but each part also acts everywhere to some extent because all physical variables depend on spacetime (Mathews 2021, p. 76). Reality is understood in terms of a single, extended, universal substance: a self-contained process where the whole is not built up from atomistic units with positional value, like space in a mechanical world view, but intrinsically relational because dependent on the curvature values of its parts, which by themselves are only definable in relation to all other parts (Mathews 2021, p. 134).

As a consequence of adopting substance monism, the criterion for individualisation is no longer required to be substantival. Instead, the distinction between oneself and the continuum becomes the activity of maintaining one's local structure itself. This dynamic stability is achieved through a constant exchange of energy with the environment (Mathews 2021, p. 111). On a phenomenological level, the arising self is marked off as an

agent with interest and purpose, though eventually unconscious, in contrast to a link in a causal chain dictating its action (Mathews 2021, p. 122). Its purpose is linked to the quality of being-for-itself, being in existence becomes its telos, which gives also ground for the interest in perpetuating itself (Mathews 2021, p. 121). By the interest in the own existence, intrinsic value is constituted because this valuing is independent of the assignment of some other external valuer (Mathews 2021, p. 123). Thus, intrinsic value becomes inextricable from the sheer existence of being through the activity of maintaining this existence. This is in strong contrast to classical egoistic thinking à la Hobbes, where one seeks to maintain oneself because of valuing the own existence, but very much in line with Rolston's definition of intrinsic value in organisms.

Any self-realisable system is open and not independent of its environment. Therefore, intrinsic value becomes a function of ecological interconnectedness, not just intrinsically but also logically because of the relational constitution of selves and spacetime (Mathews 2003, p. 57). The question of intrinsic value in any being, or self, is thus fundamentally linked to the question of the intrinsic value of the whole, so to the question of whether the whole qualifies as a self-realising system. This qualification of the whole as a self is the step which Mathews takes to avoid the issues of Rolston's objective nature. She argues that the universe realises itself not through external exchange (like organisms) because it is a closed system, but through internal self-expansion and -differentiation into a multiplicity of local selves (Mathews 2003, p. 56). Thus, it expands not only in space but also within the inner aspect of reality (Mathews 2021, p. XII). The universe becomes a living cosmos where our own telos and intrinsic value are inscribed (Mathews 2021, p. XIII). In a similar manner, ecosystems and landscapes, like forests, qualify as selves as well because they are self-maintaining and -evolving (Mathews 2021, p. 157). They too come into existence as particular beings, oriented by telos and full of value.

This makes telos and with it, intrinsic value real and independent of scientific realism: on a first level, the cosmos as a whole constitutes intrinsic value through its self-realisation, which is required for the self-realisation of all beings and thus, their value (Mathews 2021, p. 143). On the level below then, all selves inhabit intrinsic value because they maintain themselves as beings through relating to larger selves and the whole. On the third level of value, the selves determine instrumental value to elements of their environment in accordance with their needs to promote their interest in self-realisation (Mathews 2021, p. 146). A possible result of this account is to value human beings the most due to their power of self-maintenance in contrast to more simple organisms. As Mathews (2021, pp. 148-9) admits herself, this power can be linked to the complexity of organisation in

living systems because it relates to higher survival chances. But she is quick to reply that this apparent intrinsic value hierarchy breaks down due to the logical interconnectedness to the whole and other selves (Mathews 2021, p. 152). Ecological interrelatedness is part of the essence of selves, so it cannot be described independently of references to its particular environment (Mathews 2021, p. 150). As a result, an egalitarian view on the intrinsic value of selves, including non-human animals, plants as well as ecosystems, is the appropriate attitude.

In conclusion, I showed that Kant, as one of the classical moral thinkers arguing against the intrinsic value in non-human beings, grounds his theory on two disputable assumptions: human narcissism and symmetry between the source and locus of value. Both are expressed through reason as the only qualifier for intrinsic value and ascribed to human beings alone. However, there is neither a necessity of symmetry nor is reason part of human beings alone for which reason Kant's argument fails. Callicott takes up the contingency of the symmetry condition and assigns the locus of intrinsic value in the biotic community consisting of all participants in the ecosystem. Non-human beings can thus be valuable for themselves, though not in themselves because human consciousness is the only source of intrinsic value. Callicott overtakes this subjective view on morality from Hume, on whom he grounds his thesis. I provided evidence that the argument in itself is flawed but the deeper problem arises from moral subjectivism per se. It reveals the dualistic premise upon which scientific naturalism is built. Thus, Callicott simply affirms an ontology based on human exceptionalism (Vetlesen 2020, p. 165). Rolston tries to avoid this fallacy by objectifying intrinsic value. The biological process of being in existence, life itself, is a goal-oriented pursuit of self-maintenance. This constitutes value objectively because irrespectively from any valuer outside the being itself. However, Rolston fails to acknowledge the fallacy of situating his individual valuers into an objective nature driven by natural selection without own telos. On the one hand, this leads to the classical problem of a dualistic world view to explain the origin of life. On the other hand, it makes the intrinsic value in other forms of life to a certain degree contingent because connected to an independent entity, objective nature. If other beings are to be valued because they have a will-to-live like us, it seems still open to us to follow this biologically inspired claim or Kant's psychological alternative. Finally, Mathews overcomes this apparent contingency by basing value realism on a proper ontological foundation. The appeal to substance monism explained through quantum mechanics does not only avoid the shortages of Newtonian cosmology but also adds an inner dimension to reality which gives rise to the universe as a self with own telos and with it, intrinsic value. The living

cosmos seeks to actualise a good which is its self-increase through inner unfolding. Beings with intrinsic value, like humans, other animals, plants but also ecosystems, replicate this telos through the open exchange of energy with their surroundings but also through communication with other selves and the whole on an inner level (Mathews 2003, p. 73). Telos becomes real and part of the whole fabric of the world, and so does intrinsic value. Therefore, all beings necessarily value their existence intrinsically as they would otherwise not qualify as selves. The world is alive an intrinsically connected so that it is epistemically unavoidable for us to accept the intrinsic value in all beings to make sense of our own existence; it would resemble schizophrenia to deny this fact (Evernden 1999, p. 135).

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