

Values in Nature

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In this paper, I argue that the natural world is replete with values and norms of many different sorts. Humans access these values and norms in experience, in much the same way that, for instance, we come to know the shapes and sizes of things through experience. Naturally occurring values and norms can, and often do, serve as grounds for our choices and evaluations. I illustrate the practical and moral implications of natural value by considering how a conservation-minded ornithologist might arrive at and defend the decision to protect nesting areas for an endangered species of bird.

In what follows I argue that the natural world is replete with values and norms of many different sorts. We access these values and norms in experience, in much the same way that, for instance, we come to know the shapes and sizes of things through experience. Human practical, and even specifically moral, judgments are therefore answerable to contingent empirical facts – including facts about what is of value, and facts about what norms are in place. I'll argue for the presence of values in nature by demonstrating the role of natural values in a series of progressively complicated evaluative and practical decisions.

The 'natural' world of course includes human beings, our thoughts, our collective and individual practices, technologies, and all other products and by-products of our existence. And these human things do give rise to many sorts of values and norms. But my claim here is that values and norms are not generally, inherently contingent upon either the existence of human beings, or our evaluative dispositions and practices. Even if some values and norms depend on us, these are not the only natural values and norms that make claims on human practical and evaluative reasoning.

I. Characteristics as standards of evaluation

Let us begin by considering a very basic kind of natural normativity. There are norms that arise simply in connection with the characteristics of things – characteristics like the whiteness of snow or the fact that humans use language. The norms that arise with characteristics are the substrate, or root structure, of a broader, more complex kind of value in nature. In this section, I will describe the connection between characteristics and evaluation.

It's obvious that anything you can think of in the world will have some characteristics. This is just what distinguishes things from one another. Snow is white, humans use language, volcanoes erupt; bullies have low self-esteem. To say e.g. that it is characteristic of bullies to have low self esteem is not to imply that 'bully' is a natural kind or even a tidily bounded category. Nor is it to imply that absolutely everyone we might call a bully necessarily has low self-esteem.¹ But this characterization, if true, tells us something about what a bully is; it shows us (part of) what the word means.

If snow, humans, language, bullies, and volcanoes are real, they have some real characteristics that distinguish them from one another. I will therefore proceed on the assumption that characteristics are empirically real, and that some characteristics are characteristics of kinds,

¹Characterizing claims about natural phenomena are a species of 'generic' statement, and they exhibit the traits that are typical of generic statements; for example, they (characteristically) admit of exceptions. 'Snow is white' is true even though there are often particular quantities of snow that are far from white. But the characterizing claims I discuss here are not simply *equivalent* to generic statements; they are a particular type of generic, concerning characteristics of kinds of things in nature. The argument presented here is not intended as a semantic analysis of generics. It presupposes that there really are characteristics of types groups or kinds of things in the world, but it does not require that all generic statements make claims about such characteristics.

types, or groups of things, like ‘snow’ ‘humans’ or ‘bullies’. Each of the many different characteristics of kinds, types, or groups of things in nature constitutes a standard of evaluation for particular instances of the thing in question.

For example, let’s consider the evaluative implications of the fact that humans use language to communicate. Suppose Anna is a human being. What can we learn about her, from the fact that she is human, together with the fact that humans use language? Imagine that we encounter Anna for the first time, and observe that she is not using language. We can reach an evaluative conclusion about her, by reasoning as follows:

- (1) Humans use language.
- (2) Anna is human.
- (3) Anna ought to use language, qua human.
- (4) Anna is not using (or does not use) language.
- (5) Anna is not doing (or does not do) something she ought to do. Her silence constitutes a falling away from a norm (namely, human characteristic language-use).

First we must be clear about what this argument does not show. The conclusion in (5) is not a statement about Anna’s global success or failure qua human being.² Language use is, after all, only one among many human characteristics. The argument shows merely that Anna ought to use language, in order to exhibit the linguistic ability that is characteristic of human beings. Until we know why Anna is falling away from the norm of human language-use, we cannot draw any further conclusions. Anna’s silence might be a human imperfection of some sort. Perhaps she is physically incapable of speech. Perhaps she is sulking. But her silence might also be an act of heroic forbearance in a difficult social situation. It might constitute the fulfillment of a sacred vow. It might be the mundane consequence of being asleep, or lost in thought. The ought-claim in (5) has a narrow scope; its force is strictly determined by the characteristic described in (1).

²This fact about normative reasoning from characteristics generates a problem for some forms of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism, such as the view defended by Philippa Foot in *Natural Goodness* (Foot, 2001).

What the argument of (1)-(5) does, then, is to put us in a position to pose further evaluative questions. We learn that the fact that Anna is not using language stands in need of explanation.³ To see why this qualifies as making an ‘evaluation’ of Anna, it may help to imagine that Anna is not a human being, but a rare kind of talking mouse, who happens to be sulking. If an observer is ignorant of the fact that some mice use language, then she will never be able to figure out that sulking is what mouse-Anna is doing, because she simply won’t be able to perceive mouse-Anna’s tiny silence as uncharacteristic. This observer cannot understand mouse-Anna’s silence properly because she has not the faintest idea that a standard is in place for her. And so simply in order to comprehend that human-Anna’s silence requires explanation (unlike the speechlessness of a normal mouse), one must know that human-Anna is answerable to the standard of human characteristic linguistic capacities.

To reach the conclusion in (5) is thus to achieve an epistemic victory that, if modest, is nonetheless important. The inference applies a norm, by spelling out the relationship between what is characteristic on the one hand, and what is actually the case with an individual on the other. No doubt in the course of everyday life we usually perceive things like sulking in an instant, effortlessly piecing together a rich combination of characteristic-based assessments to comprehend our situation without any laborious reasoning. The ease with which we use characteristics as norms and perceive their evaluative implications can, however, efface them, or

³ Gavin Lawrence proposes that a ‘call for explanation’ indicates the presence of something normative in his “Human Good and Human Function” (Lawrence, 2006). Here, I take Lawrence’s notion of a call for explanation to apply more broadly than Lawrence does in that paper. He connects the call for explanation with *telos*, whereas I think explanations are often called for (in a way that indicates the presence of a norm), even where there is no clear *telos*, either in the sense of ‘purpose’ or in the sense of ‘culmination of a goal-oriented process’.

render them invisible, leading us to believe that our knowledge that someone is (e.g.) sulking is ‘purely factual’ in a way that it is not.

Once we are aware of the evaluative implications of characteristics, we can easily see that characteristic-based evaluation is not limited to social or human contexts, or even to thought about what is alive.⁴ For example, think of a volcano that does not erupt. It ought to erupt; it is a volcano, and volcanoes erupt. Its stillness is a falling away from a norm (the norm of characteristic volcanic activity). That there is a norm here is shown by the fact that stillness in a volcano calls for explanation, as stillness in a mountain does not.

When one grasps that stillness in a volcano calls for an explanation, one is then in a position to learn, e.g., that this is an extinct volcano, or that it is dormant, or that the heretofore ongoing eruption is over – or even that, contrary to one’s previous, naïve belief, volcanoes don’t just sit around continually erupting. Just as one cannot see a silent mouse as sulking, one cannot intelligibly conclude any of these things about what one takes to be a mountain.

Characteristics are ineluctably, if narrowly, value-laden. They are also a very common, basic feature of the world around us. There are undeniably such things in the world as sulky children, dirty snow, diseased rabbits, dormant volcanoes, and sharp knives. And we could not comprehend such things without first understanding many relevant facts about what is characteristic of things like children, snow, rabbits, volcanoes, and knives. Wherever there are characteristics of things, some distinct corresponding possibility of evaluation arises. This is one way in which value is ‘in’ nature; it is found in the characteristics of things we experience.

⁴This is a point of contrast with Michael Thompson’s account of Aristotelian categorical statements. See his *Life and Action* (2008).

II. Complex characteristic-based evaluations

Characteristics and the standards they instantiate are minute fibers of a thicker and strikingly varied fabric of natural value. In imagining the move from ‘Anna is being uncharacteristic in her silence’ to something like ‘Anna is sulking’ or ‘Anna is asleep’, we saw already that characteristics provide a starting-point for further, more complex assessments. Let’s now consider one such complex evaluation.

Suppose an ornithologist or other expert is evaluating potential nesting sites for reintroducing an at-risk species of bird to a given region – say, the Common Loon.⁵ To do a good job of selecting sites, the evaluator must bring to bear the best information she has about the relevant characteristics of the environment, and the relevant characteristics of the birds concerned. For example, it will be important for her to know that loons are heavy-boned, deep-diving water birds, who cannot walk upright on land, and who nest in sheltered areas right at the water’s edge, directly on the ground, in places with easy access to deep, open water.

If the ornithologist knows what is characteristic of loons, their nests and nesting practices, and the local environment, and if she is not stupid, she will be able to infer various ought-claims from these characteristics that will help her to identify good nesting sites. Based on the fact that loons characteristically nest near deep water, she may decide, for example, ‘If they behave like loons characteristically do, these loons ought to prefer location A over location B’.

⁵ The Common Loon is a very ancient species of water bird that is native to North America. Loons have suffered from severe habitat decline, and they are classified as a ‘species of concern’ in some regions.

She will know that, to be viable, her selected sites must be no more than a certain number of inches from the water's edge. And she will be able to notice certain things that call for explanation, as in: 'The fact that the loons have stopped nesting in certain locations that seem to have all the desirable characteristics is a fact that calls for explanation.' These and other building-block evaluations will help the ornithologist to develop a maximally subtle and comprehensive picture of things in the vicinity of concern, by alerting her to things which call for explanation, and by thoroughly acquainting her with the normal behavior and circumstances of the birds in question.

Characteristics and their implications will be crucial to a sound assessment of potential nesting sites. But the ornithologist's site-evaluations are not simply aggregates of characteristic-based evaluations. They require various comparative and contextualizing assessments, and will inevitably involve many other facts in addition to facts about characteristics. For example, because loons are incapable of walking on land, if humans manipulate the water level of the lake, a nesting site that seems perfect to a loon in the spring may be several feet from the water's edge by the time the eggs hatch, and the parents may be forced to abandon the nest. If the ornithologist's evaluation of prospective nesting sites is to be sound, she must take into account the possibility that there is a dam on the lake she is considering. The fact that there is a dam is not a characteristic of a kind, type or group of thing. But it is certainly an empirical fact that is pertinent to her evaluation of a prospective nesting site. In general, complex evaluations go beyond the simplest characteristic-based evaluative inferences, depending crucially upon them without being exclusively constituted by them. A really excellent evaluation will take into account all that is salient, to develop a sound conception of the pertinent standard, and what it takes to meet it.

The evaluation of nesting sites, though well within the capabilities of a human being, is a vastly more complex affair than the extremely simple characteristic-based evaluative inferences that we considered above. Nonetheless, both the standards of assessment (the characteristics of suitable nesting sites) and the assessments themselves (the evaluation of particular sites against what is suitable), are answerable to experience; answerable to facts about the loons and their habitat. It is likely that no one nesting site will have all of the good-making characteristics to an absolutely perfect degree. But some sites will be clearly better than others, measured against the complex of characteristics that would make a location suitable. A competent evaluator will be able to make this sort of determination by a careful consideration of the facts.

In part because this is an empirically grounded, contingent process of assessment, there are many ways for things to go awry. The ornithologist might have a false or overly simplistic conception of what would be a suitable location for nesting loons, or she might do a poor job of assessing particular sites against the nexus of characteristics that she has identified as important. Perhaps she is in the dark about something important; perhaps she has been deceived by local officials about their latest plans for a new dam. Or, perhaps she has the skills and information to make maximally auspicious nesting-site assessments, but because she is in the pay of the fishing industry, her assessments will not be a good-faith application of what she believes to be the true characteristics of a suitable nesting site.

But the very fallibility of the ornithologist's evaluations only serves to underline their fundamentally objective, empirical standards of success. The ends, aims, and priorities of the evaluator are distinct from the standards of evaluation that she employs in determining which sites are better and which are worse. No doubt her choice to assess nesting sites for an endangered bird can be traced to something she finds practically important. Perhaps her aim is to

stabilize the local ecosystem, which depends upon the continued presence of the birds in question. Or perhaps she simply thinks loons are cute. But what's of value to the human evaluator in this sense is irrelevant to the accuracy of her evaluations. It does not affect whether a particular nesting site is well-suited to an endangered bird.

III. Evaluation of ends

This brings us to the question of whether and how a person's choice of ends can be based on natural values, or subject to natural norms. Unlike the suitability of a nesting site, or the question of whether someone is sulking, what a person thinks she ought to do is determined, often quite straightforwardly, by what she cares about, or what she takes to be of value (setting aside cases of weak will, self-destructiveness, and other sources of practical malfunction). Suppose that, based on her nesting-site evaluations, the ornithologist chooses to block off certain regions of the lake for the reintroduction of breeding loons. (Let us assume that she has the authority to do so.) Now, if someone asks her "Why did you block off this region and not that one?" we have no problem saying what the basis of her answer will be. She will explain her choice by an appeal to the facts, including the many different characteristics of loons, humans, and the local terrain, which figured in her original decision. Her choice of locations for nests is supported by a complex, expert, thoughtful – and of course fallible – assessment of how things are in the vicinity of concern.

But suppose the ornithologist is asked to explain why she thought it best to protect the loons (perhaps she is confronted by an aggrieved kayaker). There is a value-judgment implicit in her decision that the loons and their nests ought to take priority over certain human ends, or interests, in a way that impinges on her own actions and those of other people. She takes the

loons' well-being to be of greater practical importance than, for instance, human recreational interests in the lake. Can her evaluation of different possible courses of action (protect the loons or leave the lake open) be explained in terms of natural value or characteristic-based norms?

To justify her action, the ornithologist cannot simply elaborate on the characteristics of loons, and demonstrate the impressive instantiation of those characteristics by the local specimens. The question is about the birds' practical significance for humans (one sort of value). The question is not whether the birds are good or lousy specimens of their kind (another sort of value). Nor can the ornithologist justify her choice by remarking, "Protecting water birds is my passion, and I will do whatever it takes to promote their well-being". This may be some sort of explanation of her actions and their motivation, if a rather opaque one, but it is not a justification.

The question of whether the lake closure was the best choice must be settled, like the other evaluative questions we have been considering, by the facts in the vicinity of concern. The ornithologist's task in giving a justification (for instance to the aggrieved kayaker) is to publicize those facts, and her understanding of their practical significance. In doing so, she submits her evaluative stance and its grounds to other human beings for review.

There are different ways of going about such a task. We can imagine an ornithologist who says, 'It's difficult to explain in words', and who invites the hypothetical aggrieved kayaker to observe the loons with her, attempting to convince him of their value by teaching him to see what she sees. She may point out the loons' intelligence, their beauty, their role in the local ecosystem; their parenting methods and practices of ritual display. In this way, the ornithologist might strive to literally open the kayaker's eyes to certain characteristics of reality, that give rise to a kind of value with which he has been hitherto unacquainted.

If, instead, the ornithologist opts for an oral defense of her choice, she will also invoke various characteristics – of human beings, of the Common Loon, of the local and global ecosystems that humans and loons co-inhabit; perhaps of the activity of kayaking. She might point out that to be healthy, ecosystems must be simultaneously stable and dynamic, capable of sustaining a delicate sort of systemic equilibrium. She might then claim that in fact the continued presence of the loons will tend to promote the health of this particular ecosystem, so that a healthy ecosystem ought to include a critical number of loons. She may point out that the technologically sophisticated construction of kayaks permits them to intrude very easily on the otherwise-sheltered lakeside areas that are of particular importance to the loons. The kayaker, then, ought to be able to pose a significant threat to the peace of the loons, were he permitted in the restricted area. This is why he has been kept out.⁶ She might also point out that humans are characteristically capable of controlling their behavior in a very sophisticated and self-conscious way that puts them in a unique position to manage their impact on their environment. As a human being, the kayaker ought to be able to conduct his life in this kind of sophisticated, reflective, deliberate way. And if he in fact has this capacity, then he ought to be able to follow the ornithologist's line of reasoning, and accept or reject it on its merits.

I assume here that the kayaker comes to his conversation with the ornithologist in good faith. But the ornithologist may need to invoke facts about characteristics to unearth any covert anthropocentrism that might affect the kayaker's ideas about the pertinence of the loons' well-

⁶ Perhaps the kayaker in question, *qua* kayaker, ought to be able to intrude easily on remote shoreline areas of the lake, but he cannot in fact do so, because he is such a supremely unskilled kayaker. In that case, he fails to meet the norms set by characteristics of his kind ('kayaker'). If so the ornithologist *might* conceivably tell him to paddle away then to his heart's content.

being to human actions. She might point out similarities that obtain between humans and loons: both humans and loons depend upon the continued viability of the ecosystem for health and survival, both are animals with a finite life span, both often mate for life, both engage in complex social interactions including parenting, and so forth. And, she might point out that differences between humans and loons do not necessarily indicate the superiority of humans, or human interests. To be sure, humans can speak and walk on land and record histories, but then, loons can fly, migrate without technology, and lay eggs. And if humans seem to be in some colloquial sense more “highly evolved” than loons, it should be noted that the loon is indubitably a far more ancient species, which has managed to persist for many thousands of years in a stable, sustainable state. Loons are thus more ‘highly’ evolved than humans in at least some crucial dimensions.

This comparison of loons and humans puts the ornithologist in a position to ask: what grounds there are other than bald human bias for privileging the recreational concerns of a small number of human beings, over the survival of a vulnerable avian population? Perhaps in some cases recreational concerns might trump the survival of another animal population. But here there do not seem to be grounds for this sort of prioritization. The lake is not being destroyed, for example; the particular features of the place which give rise to any human sentimental attachment are not threatened by the closure. Nor is anyone being prevented from pursuing recreational activities in a different region of the lake.

Myriad characteristic-based evaluations, together with many other facts – the number of loons in the area, the square miles of lake available for kayaking, and so forth – will help the ornithologist to paint a complete, informed, and genuinely illuminating picture of the bit of reality – and the relevant actions – whose value is under consideration. The lake closure is

justified, to the extent possible, by appeal to facts whose significance for action the ornithologist has interpreted as carefully and thoughtfully as she can.

As an empirically grounded decision, the conclusion reached by the ornithologist is certainly fallible. At each step in her rationalization, she is vulnerable to error due to bias, lack of information, limitations in her powers of reasoning, lack of imagination, and many other failings. For example, I have described the ornithologist's case as resting in part on the claim that human recreational interests are frivolous compared to the continued survival of a whole species. But it is conceivable that there is a good-faith case to be made that the true pleasures of human beings are of greater value than even the continued existence of another sort of being. Assuming that such a proposal is offered in good faith, the deliberating ornithologist and any interlocutors she might encounter must do their best to determine whether this assessment or the original one does more justice to the facts of the matter.

Above, we saw that nesting site evaluations are more complex than simple characteristic-based inferences. But we also saw that the complex and the simple evaluations have in common that they are answerable to the world, and not dependent upon the desires, preferences, or values of the evaluator. Evaluating possible courses of action adds a further layer of complexity. When one is deliberating about what to do, one is considering how to respond to, and interact with, features of the world that one has already evaluated in other ways (like nesting sites or sulking children). But we can see that even when it comes to a practical value-judgment like 'We should close this region of the lake' or 'I must not encourage this childish reaction', there remains a difference between one's ends, priorities, and values, and the standards that one uses to determine the best course of action. Just as the ornithologist cannot justify the lake closure by explaining that protecting water birds is her passion, so the kayaker cannot defend a choice to

violate the closure simply by explaining that he wants to go there. A justified value-judgment is based on truth gleaned from experience. Perhaps not all truths so gleaned can be fully communicated to other human beings under all circumstances. But if one is attempting to give a justification, this is the sort of thing that one must be trying to get across.

IV. The contingency of values in nature

We have now discussed a number of different evaluations, including ‘Anna’s silence is uncharacteristic’, ‘Anna is sulking’, ‘This volcano ought to erupt’, and ‘It is best to protect this region of the lake for use by nesting loons’. These evaluations vary in complexity, in degree of defeasibility or vulnerability to error, and in degree of transparent significance for human action. But they are all equally world-answerable. They all aim to respond in good faith to the facts in some vicinity of concern – facts which include characteristics and the associated values and norms, as well as ‘ordinary’ particular facts like the presence of a dam on a lake, or the frown on the face of a child. In this section, I want to draw out certain implications of treating this array of values and norms as empirical phenomena.

One might have supposed that the only way for values to be explained in terms of empirical facts would be if values could be reduced to value-free or ‘purely descriptive’ facts. Given the foregoing discussion, if something as descriptive as the characterization ‘Snow is white’ can function as a norm, one might begin to doubt that there is any meaningful distinction between facts and values left, in the terms of which this sort of reduction might be conducted. But setting this aside, it’s important to see that any sort of reduction along these lines would

require a lawlike, regular relationship between characteristics and other sorts of facts, that just doesn't exist.⁷

Consider, for instance, that Aristotle is rumored to have believed that female humans have only 28 teeth. The characterizing claim 'Female humans have 28 teeth' is false because it does not accurately capture what is characteristic of human female anatomy. It is not false because it fails to reflect statistical norms about the population, though presumably it fails to do that too. Nor would it be true if it did accurately reflect statistical facts about the population. Suppose the majority of women in Aristotle's time had exactly 28 teeth. This would not make Aristotle's characterizing claim true, any more than the reality of tooth decay would explain why it is false. The facts about statistical preponderance are simply not the sort of facts that characterizing claims aim to capture. Characterizing claims directly and irreducibly concern facts about what is characteristic.

By the same token, characteristics must be understood for the contingent phenomena that they are. Characteristics are not essences, if an 'essence' is something that is necessary, and immune to change. Characteristics are simply not immutable. But this doesn't in the least prevent them from functioning as norms. For example, imagine that sometime in the future, humans begin to be born without wisdom teeth. At some point in this process, no doubt it will be very unclear whether a given characterization of the human species is accurate, not because of any epistemic limitation, but because a characteristic of human anatomy is itself in flux. Perhaps the best one will be able to say at a time like this is 'Humans characteristically have from 28 to 32

⁷ Here, I am particularly indebted to Michael Thompson's discussion of Aristotelian categorical statements in "The Representation of Life" (Thompson, 1996).

teeth, with the number being determined by whether the person is born with or without the wisdom tooth mutation'. And at some point, perhaps the number of babies born without wisdom teeth – the frequency of the mutation in the population – might warrant the claim 'Humans do not have wisdom teeth (though their ancestors did)'. These qualified or complex characterizing claims are capable of being true or false, just as much as 'Humans have 32 teeth' or 'Humans have 28 teeth' are capable of being true or false.

There's nothing threatening about the idea that it might one day be false that 'this human adolescent ought to have 32 teeth'. But could what is just evolve in a similar way? The idea that shifting, contingent characteristics are the basis of our most vital ethical value-judgments seems to have more frightening implications. If characteristics can change, might it follow that some terrible human practice, such as slavery or the subjection of women, could become (or has previously been) in fact a good or practically advisable policy or course of action?

It is generally true that values, even moral and more broadly practical values, can develop and change. But no, slavery and the subjection of women will not be and have never been good practices. First, concerning the development and permutation of values: new questions of justice will certainly arise as new possibilities for human action arise. For example, it may soon be possible for same-sex female couples to conceive children who have two mommies, genetically speaking: a baby from two ova, not from an egg and a sperm. The possibility of technology-assisted same-sex conception raises a host of interesting moral questions that could not have been posed about the world before now: should same-sex conception be covered by health insurance? Do same-sex couples have a civil or human right to (try to) conceive in this way, or is this a luxury option for affluent parents? These are not merely questions that we didn't consider

in the past; they are questions about something that was not previously a real practical possibility for creatures like us.

Certainly, what is considered just can shift without a corresponding shift in what is characteristic. Often when what is considered just does shift, the shift can be explained by the fact that people are assenting to different characterizing claims than they did previously, based on experiences whose implications became, in different ways, impossible to ignore. Consider the characterizing claim ‘Women are inferior to men’. Belief in a statement like this one ought to be subject to revision in light of experience. It is, after all, a statement that purports to be about some aspect of what we experience (namely, the relative qualities of men and women). One ought to reject it because it is a false characterization of men and women. Rejecting this characterization of human beings would certainly occasion a major change in one’s conception of just social institutions and practices, but this should cause no anxiety. The change is well-founded in objective facts about value. Or what about ‘Humans are the only living creatures whose interests must be taken into account by human agents’? If one begins to seriously ‘consider the lobster’ and other sentient foodstuffs, one may find one’s dietary practices changing considerably.⁸

What the foregoing conception of natural value tells us is that things like slavery and the subjection of women are inherently wrong, not because it is a necessary truth that they are wrong, but rather because it is a fact about the world that they are wrong. This is a way of establishing the objectivity of a claim like ‘Slavery is unjust’, not undermining it. For slavery or the subjection of women to be good human practices, they would have to have quite different characteristics than they do. They would have to be just, not cruel, not oppressive, not coercive,

⁸ The title of an essay by David Foster Wallace, originally published in *Gourmet* magazine in August of 2004.

not debasing, and so forth. Slavery, in particular, is, at least in part the heinously unjust, violently coercive and subjugating appropriation of one human being's labor and physical person by another human being for a perceived pecuniary or other social advantage. If the human practice called 'slavery' changed so profoundly that these were no longer its characteristics, then even if the practice happened to go by the same name, or happened to be historically continuous somehow with the original practice, it would not be the empirical phenomenon that we call 'slavery' that could no longer be accurately described as 'heinously unjust' and 'subjugating', and that would no longer have the same moral status. But this is not at all the sort of thing one has in mind when one worries that slavery might someday be morally acceptable if we allow that values are empirically contingent.

V. The pervasiveness of natural value

While there are obviously many human-pertaining norms and values, the many examples we have considered tell us plainly that norms and values in general should not be thought of anthropocentrically. We have considered some norms of human behavior, health, and anatomy, but we have also considered the value of other species and its bearing on human actions. In addition, we can see that there would still be characteristic-based value in disease or injury of living things, even if human beings were not among them. There would still be the possibility of dormancy in volcanoes, even if there were no human beings to conceive of dormancy, or to describe it as such. Enslavement of humans would still be a terrible human practice, even if no human being ever understood it for what it is. A step back shows us that we as evaluators are simply not that important to the general phenomenon of value. Would there be the particular kinds of value that have to do with better or worse human actions, if there were no human agents

to perform actions? No there would not, just as there would be no such thing as a dormant volcano if there were no volcanoes. But this does not affect the point that values and norms are a general phenomenon that exists independently of human valuers.

I have tried to suggest a point of entry into a new way of thinking about value. The alternative perspective I am proposing can be summed up in terms of a contrast drawn by John McDowell. He once observed that “it is a commonplace that modern science has given us a disenchanted conception of the natural world.” This disenchanted conception of nature replaces a “common mediaeval conception of nature as filled with meaning, like a book containing messages and lessons for us”.⁹ My argument has been that we don’t have to choose between disenchantment, and a conception of reality as ‘enchanted’; imbued with the glow of significance from without by a divine creator or by the human mind. We can try, humbly and with care, to see the world as it really is: as never enchanted to begin with. Thus construed, nature (ourselves included) is quite a remarkable, mind-boggling thing. The never-enchanted natural world is replete with value. And real value is fully as diverse, varied, and many-layered as reality itself.¹⁰

⁹ McDowell introduces this contrast in order to call the ‘disenchanted’ conception of nature into question, as I have tried to do in a different way (McDowell, 1996: 174).

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