Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics

Anthony Weston*

In this essay I propose an environmental ethic in the pragmatic vein. I begin by suggesting that the contemporary debate in environmental ethics is forced into a familiar but highly restrictive set of distinctions and problems by the traditional notion of intrinsic value, particularly by its demands that intrinsic values be self-sufficient, abstract, and justified in special ways. I criticize this notion and develop an alternative which stresses the interdependent structure of values, a structure which at once roots them deeply in our selves and at the same time opens them to critical challenge and change. Finally, I apply this alternative view back to environmental ethics. It becomes easy to justify respect for other life forms and concern for the natural environment, and indeed many of the standard arguments only become stronger, once the demand to establish intrinsic values is removed.

I. INTRODUCTION

"Pragmatism" sounds like just what environmental ethics is against: shortsighted, human-centered instrumentalism. In popular usage that connotation is certainly common. Philosophical pragmatism, however, offers a theory of values which is by no means committed to that crude anthropocentrism, or indeed to any anthropocentrism at all. True, pragmatism rejects the means-ends distinction, and consequently rejects the notion of fixed, final ends objectively grounding the entire field of human striving. True, pragmatism takes valuing to be a certain kind of desiring, and possibly only human beings desire in this way. But neither of these starting points rules out a genuine environmental ethic. I argue that the truth is closer to the reverse: only these starting points may make a workable environmental ethic possible.

One charge of anthropocentrism should not detain us. 1 Pragmatism is a form of subjectivism—it makes valuing an activity of subjects, possibly only of human subjects—but subjectivism is not necessarily anthropocentric. Even if only human beings value in this sense, it does not follow that only human beings have value; it

---

* Department of Philosophy, State University of New York, Stony Brook, NY 11794. Weston’s research interests include pragmatism and perspectivism in ethics and theory of value, environmental ethics, and social philosophy, especially issues involving philosophy and technology. The author is indebted to Holmes Rolston, III, and to an anonymous reviewer for Environmental Ethics for extensive comments on earlier versions of this essay. It has also benefited greatly from a colloquium discussion at the Vassar College Department of Philosophy and from several careful readings by Jennifer Church.

does not follow that human beings must be the sole or final objects of valuation. Subjectivism does not imply, so to say, subject-centrism: our actual values can be much more complex and world-directed.

Pragmatism insists most centrally on the interrelatedness of our values. The notion of fixed ends is replaced by a picture of values dynamically interdepending with other values and with beliefs, choices, and exemplars: pragmatism offers, metaphorically at least, a kind of “ecology” of values. Values so conceived are resilient under stress, because, when put to question, a value can draw upon those other values, beliefs, etc. which hold it in place in the larger system. At the same time, though, every value is open to critical challenge and change, because each value is also at stake precisely with those related values, beliefs, etc. which on other occasions reinforce it. We are thus left with a plurality of concrete values, in which many different kinds of value, and many different sources of value, can be recognized as serious and deep without requiring further reduction to some single end in itself. And there is every reason to think that respect for other life forms and concern for natural environments are among those values. The problem is not to devise still more imaginative or exotic justifications for environmental values. We do not need to ground these values, pragmatists would say, but rather to situate them in their supporting contexts and to adjudicate their conflicts with others—a subtle enough difference at first glance, perhaps, but in fact a radical shift in philosophical perspective.

II. INTRINSIC VALUE AND CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

We seem to be compelled to distinguish means and ends almost as soon as we begin thinking about environmental values. Nature has certain obvious appeals: recreational and aesthetic satisfactions, “ecosystem stabilization” values (seemingly useless species may play a role in controlling pests, or fixing nitrogen), research and teaching uses, the attraction of natural objects and lifeforms simply as exemplars of survival, and so on. In making these appeals, however, we value nature not “for its own sake,” but for a further end: because it is necessary, useful, or satisfying to us. Even aesthetic appreciation does not necessarily require valuing nature for itself, since we might be tempted to say that only aesthetic experience is valued intrinsically. Beauty is in the mind of the beholder: aesthetic objects are only means to it.

The familiar next step is to ask whether nature could also be valuable in its own right. Could nature have intrinsic value, could it have worth as an end in itself, and not just because it serves human ends? This question, of course, frames much of

---


3 I am equating intrinsic values with ends in themselves, instrumental values with means to ends. For present purposes I think that subtle distinctions between these concepts can be ignored.
the debate in contemporary environmental ethics. If human beings, or some particular and unique human characteristics (e.g., a certain kind of conscious experience), are the only ends in themselves, then we have, for better or worse, "anthropocentrism." If some broader, but not universal class of beings has intrinsic value, and if, as usual, this class is taken to be the class of sentient or (even more broadly) living beings, then we have what might be called "sentientism" or (more broadly) "biocentrism." If all ("natural") beings, living or not, have intrinsic value and must not be treated merely as means, then we have what might be called "universalism." There is a continuum of possible ethical relations to nature, then, ranging from views which limit the bearers of intrinsic value strictly to human beings through views which progressively extend the franchise until finally it is (nearly?) universal. 4

This much seems perfectly innocent. No views are actually endorsed, after all: only a range of possibilities is set out. In fact, however, I think that this "frame" is far from innocent. This seemingly uncommitted range of possibilities is in fact narrowly restricted by the underlying notion of intrinsic value itself.

Consider, after all, how that range of possibilities is determined in the first place: each option is defined precisely by the set of beings to which it attributes intrinsic value. Richard and Val Routley, for instance, argue that anthropocentrism represents a kind of moral "chauvinism," as egregious as the egoist's blindness to values beyond his or her self or the racist's failure to look beyond his or her race;5 they insist upon the existence of other intrinsic values besides conscious human experience, values which deserve similar respect. Tom Regan defines an environmental ethic as a view which attributes "inherent goodness" to at least some nonhuman natural objects, where "inherent goodness" is an "objective property" of objects which compels us to respect its bearers.6 That notion of intrinsic or "inherent" value, however, is itself extremely specific and demanding. A great deal of philosophical baggage comes with it. Regan already weighs in with some of it, as Evelyn Pluhar points out, by construing inherent value as a "supervenient," "nonnatural" property, notions whose Moorean ancestry and problematic metaphysical commitments are plain to see.7 But there is more to


6 Tom Regan, "The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic," Environmental Ethics 3 (1981): 30–34. Frankena, C. I. Lewis, and others use inherent value to refer to objects or actions the contemplation of which leads to intrinsically valuable experience. Regan, however, clearly means by inherent what Frankena and Lewis mean by intrinsic. "If an object is inherently good," he tells us, "its value must inhere in the object itself" (p. 30). Its value does not depend upon experience at all.

come. Let me try to set out the traditional requirements for intrinsic values more systematically.

(1) To qualify as intrinsic a value must be self-sufficient. G. E. Moore—the patron saint of intrinsic values—wrote that “to say that a kind of value is ‘intrinsic’ means . . . that the question whether a thing possesses it . . . depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the thing in question.” In his famous thought experiment in *Principia Ethica*, Moore says that to decide what things have intrinsic value “it is necessary to consider what things are such that, if they existed by themselves, in absolute isolation, we should yet judge their existence to be good.” While everything else is dependent and, by itself, valueless, intrinsic values hold the sufficient grounds of their worth within themselves.

Moore appears to find it conceivable that anything at all could be valued intrinsically. In practice, however, self-sufficiency may not be such a neutral requirement. Even Moore came in the end to the conclusion that nothing but an experience can be intrinsically good; his argument turns on the claim that only experiences can be “worth having even if [they] exist quite alone.” Here Moore invokes a fundamentally Cartesian outlook. Consciousness is aloof from, not implicated in, the failures and ambiguities of actual objects and states of affairs in the world. Descartes argued that while my beliefs may or may not correspond to something in the world, I am sure at least that I have them. Perhaps Moore is arguing that while my acts too, in the world, may be incomplete, damaging, or uncertain, at least my conscious enjoyment of them, taken by itself, is solid and unquestionable. Just as Descartes’ way of setting up the problem of knowledge made consciousness the natural and necessary standard-bearer against skepticism, so the demand that intrinsic values be self-sufficient may make consciousness the natural and necessary standard-bearer of the intrinsic. Only a commitment to a philosophical “paradigm” of this sort, I think, can explain the strikingly unargued insistence, even by such careful writers as W. K. Franke, that “[n]othing can have intrinsic value except the activities, experiences, and lives of conscious, sentient beings, . . .” Franke just “cannot see” that “we ought morally to consider unconscious animals, plants, rocks, etc.”

(2) Philosophical tradition also demands, at least by implication, that intrinsic values be abstract. Intrinsic values are, after all, special: not everything can be intrinsically valuable. But the distinction between special ends and ordinary

---

12 Ibid., p. 15. My emphasis.
means, perhaps innocent enough at first, sets in motion increasingly radical

demands. Everyday values are integrated as means under fewer and somewhat

more general ends. On the next tier these still proximate ends become means

themselves, to be unified in turn under still fewer and more general ends. Already

this is a kind of “slippery slope”—upward, as it were. The supercession of each

proximate end seems to deprive it of any independent value at all: now they are

only means to the ends on a still higher tier. But these ends too may be superceded.

Nothing will stop this regress, we say, except the most general, not-to-be-
superceded ends in themselves: traditionally, values like “happiness” or respect

for persons. Having reached this point, moreover, there is a familiar and strong

impulse toward erecting a single end on the first and highest level. Traditional

value theory tends toward a kind of monism. We are not inclined to leave two or

five values at the top of this pyramid when we might abstract down to one: on the

most general level we want unity. Respect for persons might be reinterpreted as

another source of happiness; happiness might be reinterpreted, as in Aristotle or

Rawls, as valuable insofar as it represents the self-actualization of autonomous

persons; but in any case, as Kenneth Goodpaster puts it, “one has the impression

that it just goes without saying . . . that there must be some unified account of our

considered moral judgments and principles,” some sort of “common denomina-
tor.”

This monism too, moreover, may not be so neutral in practice. Conscious

experience is supposed to be a single, unified sort of thing, abstract and self-
sufficient enough, given Cartesian presuppositions, to be a bearer of intrinsic

value. Adding a second sort of thing as another bearer of intrinsic value would

destroy this tight unity. Thus, the implicit demand to reduce intrinsic values to a

single common denominator may incline us once again toward the anthropo-
centric-sentientist end of the range of possible environmental ethics. Goodpas-
ter reminds us, for instance, that many philosophers have been tempted to

underwrite environmental values by extension from familiar “interest” or “digni-
ty” ethics, respectively Humean or Kantian. Both are monistic models, tied at least

historically to human beings as exemplars, and therefore run the risk of “constrain-
ing our moral sensitivity to the size of our self-wrought paradigms,” just as they

gain plausibility from the very same appeal.

On the speculative side, some metaphysical consciousness monisms have

become attractive. Some environmental ethicists want to attribute conscious

experience even to the seemingly inanimate world: Po-Keung Ip, for example,

---

13 K. E. Goodpaster, “From Egoism to Environmentalism,” in Goodpaster and Sayre. Ethics. p. 25

and p. 34, his emphasis. Strictly speaking the claim here is only about ethics in the Humean tradition,

but he soon allows that the Kantian tradition has still stronger monistic tendencies.

14 Ibid., p. 32.
uses a panpsychic Taoism to vindicate the intrinsic value of nature; Jay McDaniel uses a Whiteheadian reading of quantum mechanics.Christopher Stone suggests that we regard the whole planet as a conscious entity. Nature itself is thus animated, and all of us can enter the Kingdom of Ends together. At this extreme, then, a monism of intrinsic values is perhaps compatible with a powerful environmental ethic after all. The cost, however, is a radical revision of our metaphysics—in itself not unattractive, perhaps, but in the process we must also reaffirm, rather than escape, the absolute ethical centrality of sentience.

(3) Intrinsic values demand special justification. Given their supposed self-sufficiency, they cannot be justified by reference to other values. Given their abstractness, they are too special, too philosophically fragile, to exist unproblematically in the world. But merely to assert them is insufficient: that would make them arbitrary, or condemn us to speechlessness about them, and so would cast our whole system of values adrift. Justification, we say instead, must take a special form: a "grounding" of intrinsic values is called for. Value as such must be derived, ontologically, from something else. Thus, intrinsic values have been construed as God’s commands, as a priori truths about a special moral world revealed by intuition, as deliverances of Pure Reason, as aspirations fundamental to “human nature,” and so forth. It is not surprising, then, that when Regan tries to ground his “inherent values,” he feels driven to an ontology of “nonnatural properties”—despite the irony of appealing to “nonnatural” properties precisely in order to vindicate the value of nature! Some such ontology seems necessary. David Ehrenfeld holds that only the religious tradition will do: only a transcendent perspective can transfigure nature into “the present expression of a continuing historical process of immense antiquity and majesty.”

Many philosophers, however, no longer accept any of the traditional ontologies of values. Once again the result is to make some form of anthropocentrism or sentientism seem the only live option. Human concerns can always be counted upon to motivate, and the intrinsic value of conscious experience is often accepted without a fight. Thus, the temptation is to eschew the traditional ontology and to try to “build out” from these readily available anthropocentric starting points. Bryan Norton, for instance, proposes what he calls “weak anthropocentrism,” a view which countenances not only current human desires but also “ideals,” like living in harmony with nature, which represent patterns of considered desire. Norton explicitly “avoids attributing intrinsic value to nature” because of the

---


17 Ehrenfeld, Arrogance of Humanism, p. 208.
“questionable ontological commitment” that attribution would involve.\textsuperscript{18} “Strong” anthropocentrists are often similarly motivated. Some utilitarians argue that cost-benefit analysis can accommodate environmental values more effectively than they have so far.\textsuperscript{19} Here dubious ontological claims are avoided because only human interests are considered: utilitarianism is the epitome of an ontologically unadventurous theory of values. Mark Sagoff holds that we may value in nature expressions of things we value intrinsically in our own lives: freedom, nobility, etc.,\textsuperscript{20} and, in a similar way. Thomas Hill, Jr. argues that the best moral attitudes toward persons—humility, self-acceptance, gratitude—are mirrored and promoted by more respectful environmental values.\textsuperscript{21} Both Sagoff and Hill, however, are still “building out” from human-centered value systems, from expressions or personal qualities which we value in our own and other human lives.\textsuperscript{22}

Regan has argued effectively that no strong anthropocentrism can vindicate environmental values to the extent that our convictions demand.\textsuperscript{23} Sagoff, Hill, and others may well disagree, but all the same they often convey a sense that they consider even their own approaches somewhat “second best.” Hill writes at one point that “even if there is no convincing way to show that [environmentally] destructive acts are wrong, . . . we may find that the willingness to indulge in them reflects an absence of human traits that we admire and regard as morally important.”\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Even if . . . we may find:} the suggestion seems to be that modified anthropocentrism is the best we can do, though definitely not the best we might wish. Regan, meanwhile, according to Pluhar, draws the opposite conclusion from the same premise: Regan, she says, “seems to find it preferable to make the commitment to dubious property instances and thus salvage the possibility of the kind of ethical justification he wants. The possibility is remote, but he may reason that it is better than nothing.”\textsuperscript{25} So “better than nothing” is the bottom line on both sides. We are in a sorry state indeed.

\textsuperscript{19} J. V. Krutilla and A. C. Fisher. \textit{The Economics of Natural Environments} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1975).
\textsuperscript{22} See Hill, “Ideals,” p. 223, or p. 220: “It may be that, given the sort of beings we are, we would never learn humility \textit{before persons} without developing the general capacity to cherish . . . many \textit{[other] things for their own sakes}” (my emphasis). Sagoff speaks of our obligation to nature as finally an obligation “to our national values, to our history, and, therefore, to ourselves” (Wasserstrom, \textit{Today’s Moral Problems}, p. 620).
\textsuperscript{24} Hill, “Ideals,” p. 215.
\textsuperscript{25} Pluhar, “Justification,” p. 58.
Only occasionally are there hints of anything truly different. Some of these are attempts to formulate a new language for values in nature. Holmes Rolston's essay "Values Gone Wild," for instance, is striking in this regard for its plays on "source" and "resource," "neighbor," etc.\(^{26}\) Later I will suggest that Rolston's promising start too is partially undercut by his attempts to meet the demands of intrinsic value: what is promising, I hold, is precisely the part that has worked free of those shackles. So far I am only trying to show how confining those shackles are. In short, not only has environmental ethics taken over from philosophical ethics an extremely specific and demanding notion of intrinsic value, rooted in various ways in Cartesian metaphysics and in time-honored philosophical temptations to abstraction and special justification; those very roots in turn put extraordinary constraints on any attempt to demonstrate intrinsic values in nature. At the deepest level, nonanthropocentric environmental ethics may simply be impossible within the inherited framework of intrinsic values. In itself, of course, this is not necessarily an objection to the tradition: maybe environmental ethics finally is impossible. But it is time to ask whether that tradition has any compelling defense.

III. AGAINST INTRINSIC VALUE

Moore argues that some notion of "valuable for its own sake" or "valuable in itself" is required simply to understand the notion of "valuable for the sake of something else," the everyday notion of instrumental value which we usually take for granted. If we speak of means, then logically we must also be able to conceive of ends, since an end seems to be implicated in the very concept of a means. Thus, Moore reads the phrase "good as a means" as equivalent to "a means to good," where the "good" in the second case seems to be intrinsic.\(^{27}\)

This rationale fails, however, for a simple reason. We can also understand the notion of instrumental value by reference to further, but nonintrinsic values. Values may refer beyond themselves without ever necessitating a value which must be self-explanatory. The value of a day's hike in the woods need not be explained either by the intrinsic value of my appreciation of the woods or by the intrinsic value of the woods themselves; instead, both the appreciation and the woods may be valuable for further reasons, the same may be true of those reasons, and so forth. Appreciation may be valued, as Hill points out, partly because it can lead to greater sensitivity to others; but greater sensitivity to others may in turn make us better watchers of animals and storms, and so on. The woods may be valued not only as an expression of freedom and nobility, but also as a refuge for wildlife, and both of these values may in turn be explained by still other, not necessarily human-centered values.


\(^{27}\) Moore, Principia Ethica, p. 24.
Someone may respond that explanations such as these must still have stopping points somewhere. If $X$ is valuable because it leads to or enhances $Y$, we might seem to be required to say that $X$’s value is “passed on” from $Y$. $Y$’s value in turn may be passed on from $Z$. But—the argument goes—there must be some origin to the value which is thus “passed on.” Like a bucket of water in a fire chain, it must have started in some reservoir which is not merely another bucket. Monroe Beardsley likens this argument to the first cause argument for the existence of God: “... the existence of any instrumental value [is supposed to] prove the existence of some intrinsic value just as the occurrence of any event is said to prove the existence of a First Cause.”

Beardsley’s analogy, however, suggests an initial objection. The “first value” argument may beg the very question it is trying to answer. Just as the first cause argument must assume that the chain of causes it invokes cannot be infinite, so the “first value” argument assumes that the long process of tracing means back to ends must have a final stopping point. But actually this is just what it was supposed to show.

Most importantly, however, there are many ways of not having a stopping point. We need not think of an endless series of means each necessitating the next like a long line of falling dominoes. It is more appropriate to think in quite different terms. Consider a more holistic picture conception according to which values are connected in a weblike way, so that any value can be justified by referring to those “adjacent” to it. On this model there is no ultimate reference or stopping point simply because the series of justifications is ultimately, in a sense, circular: to justify or to explain a value is to reveal its organic place among our others. These justifications need not wind their way only in a single direction or even toward a single type of value. If sometimes I value the mountain air because in it I feel (and am) healthy, other times I value health because it enables me to reach the mountains. If sometimes I value the melancholy glory of the autumn because it mirrors the closure of my own year, other times I value the rhythms of my yearly schedule because they mirror the glories of the seasons. The web image also emphasizes the multiple “adjacencies” of most values. To explain why I climb mountains may take hours; Henry Beston took a whole book to chart the riches of a year spent living alone on Cape Cod. By extension we may think of multiple circularities and feedback loops, multiple arcs returning to completion, so that the summation of those arcs is a rough map of one’s whole system of values. To explain why I climb mountains may take hours, but it is not an endless task: although the story has no final stopping point or ultimate appeal, it is complete when I have articulated the manifold connections between mountain climbing and the other values, beliefs, etc. which make up my self.

---

Conceiving values in this holistic way undercuts the very center of the traditional notion of intrinsic value. Self-sufficiency, in the first place, is just what we should not want in our values. Beardsley argues that the notion of “intrinsic value” is almost a contradiction precisely because it insists on cutting values off from their relations with others in order to consider them “just in themselves.” Following Richard Brandt’s suggestion that the statement “X is desirable” means something like “desiring X is justified,” Beardsley argues:

What “desirable” adds to “desired” is this claim to justifiability. But the only way this claim can be made good is by considering X in the wider context of other things, in relation to a segment of life or of many lives. Thus the term “intrinsic desirability” pulls in two directions: the noun tells us to look farther afield, the adjective tells us to pay no attention to anything but X itself.29

What would it actually be like, after all, to value a conscious experience for itself, “in absolute isolation”? Clearly it could qualify only insofar as it approximates the Cartesian self-sufficiency of dreams or visions: it could not matter whether the experience is connected to anything else in the world. But it is not obvious that this self-sufficiency makes an experience good at all, let alone good intrinsically—and the reasons are precisely the considerations that the self-sufficiency criterion requires us to rule out. What can exist and attract in isolation from everything else may be, for just that reason, bad: like the dream world of the drug user, it seduces us away from the complexity of our lives, substitutes solipsism for sociality, divides certain parts of our lives from the rest. We should prefer a conception of values which ties them to their contexts and insists not on their separability but on their relatedness and interdependence.

Beardsley himself has a somewhat different line of response to the “first value” argument. It is not so much a challenge to the alleged self-sufficiency of intrinsic values as a challenge to their abstractness. He begins by recalling Hume’s response to the first cause argument. In ordinary life, Hume points out, we are not only familiar with specific causal relations, but are entirely capable of dealing with them concretely. The ultimate nature of causality, by contrast, is neither knowable nor important: it is “merely speculative,” as Hume put it, both in the sense that it is endlessly debatable and in the sense that it is irrelevant to practical purposes. Beardsley makes just this argument with respect to intrinsic values. “We have a good deal of sound knowledge about instrumental values,” he writes, “but we are in considerable doubt about intrinsic values.”30 In ordinary life we are not only familiar with specific values, but are eminently capable of dealing with them concretely. We know that it is better to be healthy than to be sick, better to live

29 Ibid., p. 13.
30 Ibid., p. 7.
amidst beauty than monotony or ugliness, better to walk in a virgin forest than
along the median strip of Interstate 84, and so on. But we do not know whether
these things are good because they maximize our net hedonic quality, or good
because they cultivate a good will, or what. So far from being the absolutely
central project of any philosophy of values, the search for an ultimate end seems
"merely speculative." It is better to think of values more concretely, in all their
richness and plurality.

Besides, why should there be something which all values have in common? It is
more plausible to deny that there is any final end from which all the others flow and
which plays end to all the others’ means. We have instead an irreducibly pluralistic
system of desires. Some are straightforwardly biological, others culturally rooted,
others more personal, and many are mixtures of all three. If anything we are
doomed to hopelessly conflicting desires. Neither our biological predispositions
nor our cultural heritage are even self-consistent, let alone fully compatible with
the other.

These last points, however, may lead us to a third and final argument for
intrinsic values. It may be urged that, in fact, intrinsic values can be concrete,
plural, and possibly even inconsistent. This is Holmes Rolston’s view, and a
version of it has been held even by some pragmatists, such as C. I. Lewis. There
are times, Rolston or Lewis would say, when we apprehend value concretely and
directly, without having to look farther afield or into the future in order to
recognize it. Lewis echoes Moore by comparing this recognition to the way we see
redness or hear shrillness. Rolston speaks of the intrinsic value of “point
experiences,” like the warmth of the spring sun, calling it “as fleeting and plural as
any other kind of value.” Rolston’s intrinsic values need not be abstract, then,
and they need no justification at all, let alone “special” justification. A day’s hike
in the woods is worthwhile even if it does not contribute to peace of mind or
animal-watching ability or job performance: the experience, as well as the woods
itself considered even apart from my experience, is simply good “for what it is in
itself.”

Undeniably, Lewis and Rolston are pointing to a real kind of experience; the
question is what this kind of experience shows. It is, at least, an experience of what
we might call immediate value. John Dewey argued, however, that “to pass from

31 C. I. Lewis, An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1946), pp.
374–75.
32 Rolston was generous enough to comment extensively on an earlier draft of this paper, and I am
quoting from his comments. Obviously he should not be held to these exact words, though I think
his position here is a natural completion of what he has said in print. See Rolston, “Values Gone Wild.”
125–52; reprinted in Robert Eliot and Arran Gare, eds., Environmental Philosophy (University Park:
33 Rolston, “Are Values in Nature Objective or Subjective?” in Eliot and Gare, Environmental
Philosophy, p. 158.
immediacy of enjoyment to something called ‘intrinsic value’ is a leap for which there is no ground.”

When we do endorse something in an immediate and non-inferential way, according to Dewey, we do not usually make a judgment of value at all, and so a fortiori do not make a judgment of intrinsic value. Instead, that endorsement is a “statement to the effect that no judgment is required, because there is no conflict of values, no occasion for deliberation and choice . . .”

Even obviously instrumental activities—doing the dishes, driving the highways—are sometimes appreciated in this immediate and non-referential way. Even something that destroys, a virus or a tornado, can sometimes be arrestingly beautiful. Arresting is the right word, too: our response to them precisely disconnects the frame of reference in which value questions even arise.

When values do become problematic, when choice is required, then they need articulation and defense. But to call them “intrinsic,” in Rolston’s sense, now offers no help. Since we have to disconnect objects and actions from their contexts in order to value them just “for what they are in themselves,” what they are in relation to everything else is pushed out of focus. If I lose myself in the beauty of the tornado, I may not reach shelter in time. Rolston insists that immediate values must be put in context, like any others, and that they are sometimes ambiguous or even downright bad when contextualized. The upshot, however, is that the attribution of intrinsic value, in his sense, carries no special force in the real world. A thousand other “point experiences” of values press in upon us from every side, just as ordinary values have always pressed in upon us, and what we do will and should be determined, just as it has always been determined, by the balances and synergies and tradeoffs between them. By all means let us remember that this is a world lavish with its moments of beauty and preciousness—but let us honor those moments without cutting them off from the practical living of our lives.

Earlier I called into question the traditional demands for self-sufficiency and abstractness in intrinsic values. Here, finally, the task of justification too is reconceived. It is not the task of “grounding” values: what Rolston’s defense of the notion of intrinsic values may finally illustrate, in fact, is the way in which the project of “grounding” natural values (or, perhaps, any values) finally cuts itself off from the real-life task of assessment and choice. For assessment and choice we must learn, again, to relate values. Any adequate theory of valuation must recognize that valuation involves desires with a complex internal structure, desires interlinked, and mutually dependent with a large number of other desires, beliefs, exemplars, and choices. Love, for example, interlinks with a wide range of...

35 Beardsley, “Intrinsic Value,” p. 16.
desires and beliefs, from the tenderness of “being with” to sexual desires, from one’s complex understanding of the other person to the culture’s images and exemplars of love, and so on. Justification draws on these interdependencies. We justify a value by articulating the supporting role it plays with respect to other values, which in turn play a supporting role with respect to it by referring to the beliefs which make it natural, and which it in turn makes natural by reaffirming those choices and models which link it to the living of our lives. Precisely this is Beardsley’s “wider context of things.”

Interdependent values are not closed to criticism: it may actually be this sort of interdependence, indeed, which makes the most effective criticism possible. Criticism becomes an attempt to alter certain desires by altering something in the constellation of other desires, beliefs, choices, etc. to which they are linked. Some of the beliefs in question may be false, desires artificial or shallow, and so forth. Norton is right to point out that “felt preferences” exploitative of nature can often be criticized on the basis of “considered preferences.” Too often we are simply thoughtless, or not thoughtful enough. But the power of this sort of criticism goes far beyond the dialectic of “ideals”: only Norton’s wish to set up shop on the edge of the concept of intrinsic value. I think, leads him to conceive considered preferences on the model of ideals, thus making them seem far more marginal than they are. As Pluhar writes:

> It is amazing how much prejudice and ignorance fuel ethical disputes. not to mention bad reasoning. . . . How much lack of impartiality and empathy underlie common attitudes toward animals . . . ? How much greed (a prime source of partiality), ignorance, and muddled thinking fuel common attitudes about ecosystems and natural objects?

As she points out, visiting a meat factory makes many vegetarians! Although Pluhar, oddly, regards this pragmatic sort of criticism as an alternative way of defending Regan’s “inherent values,” she offers no argument that the values which might emerge from this procedure are in any sense “inherent” or intrinsic. I suspect that no such arguments can be found. It is time to abandon the old preoccupation with intrinsic values entirely: let practical criticism be practical. Not even radical criticism is excluded. The culture to which we owe so many of

---

38 Norton ends up arguing that having ideals need not presuppose the intrinsic value of the things or states of affairs idealized: see Norton, “Weak Anthropocentrism,” p. 137.
40 Ibid., p. 58. This curious inference also mars J. Baird Callicott’s otherwise fine survey: see Callicott, “Non-anthropocentric Value Theory,” p. 305.
our explicit desires and their interlinkings also includes an attic full of latent ideals, inconsistent perhaps with its main tendencies, but still there waiting to be drawn out. God may have given us dominion over land and sea, but He also gave us St. Francis; against the swashbuckling exploitation of the Industrial Revolution we have the romantic poets, landscape painting, Rousseau, Emerson, Thoreau; against factory farms we have the still compelling image of the solitary farmer close to the soil. The wide-ranging recent debates about Christian and Judaic attitudes toward nature underscore this fundamental dissonance. It is a mistake to try to find the Christian (or the American, etc.) attitude toward nature: there are many. Our traditions, I want to suggest (I have tried to argue this general point elsewhere41), contain their dialectical opposites within themselves. Even our biologically rooted desires are far from monolithic and static. Sometimes criticism simply needs the time and the patience to draw these latent elements out.

IV. PRAGMATISM IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

The real power of the pragmatic approach lies in what it does not say, in what it has removed the need to say. Thus, my concern here is emphatically not to devise new arguments for environmental values, but instead to show that the familiar ones are laboring under needless constraints. Still, this may be a modest, if unexotic, bit of progress, and I expect that it will be controversial all the same. I think that if values are conceived along the lines just sketched, then the case we can already make for environmental values—and in quite simple terms—is far stronger than most environmental ethicists themselves seem to believe.

We know that the experience of nature can awaken respect and concern for it. We know indeed that these feelings can become deep and synergistic desires in some lives, and we have before us exemplars of such lives in Muir, Thoreau, Leopold, and others. Most of us are not so single-minded, but we, nevertheless, know how essential a return to nature can be, how Thoreau felt returning to Walden Pond from town, and why Yeats yearned for the bee-loud glade. While there are varied motives behind the recent boom in backpacking, cross-country skiing, canoeing, camping, and the like, at least part of the cause is surely a growing appreciation of nature, not just as another frame for our exercise and relaxation, but for its own unique voices, from the silence of the winter woods to the roar of waterfalls in spring.

These feelings are essential starting points for a pragmatic defense of environmental values. They are not "second best," "weak" anthropocentric substitutes for

41 See Robin Attfield, “Western Traditions and Environmental Ethics,” in Eliot and Gare, Environmental Philosophy, pp. 201–30.
the intrinsic values philosophers want but cannot find. They do not need a philosophical "grounding." The questions that arise for us are of quite a different sort. Again, we need to know how to articulate, to ourselves and to others, the relation of these values to other parts of our system of desires, to other things that are important, and to the solution of concrete problems. For ourselves we want to understand and strengthen these values; in others we want to nourish and extend them. Nor, finally, need we start by trying to assimilate environmental values to our other values. Even our respect and concern for each other may be of quite a different type, and have entirely different sources, from our respect and concern for the environment.

The articulation of these values is not the province of philosophy alone. Poetry and biography are just as vital. Think of Wordsworth:

> And I have felt  
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
> Of something far more deeply interfused,  
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
> And the round ocean and the living air . . .  
> Therefore let the moon  
> Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;  
> And let the misty mountain winds be free  
> To blow against thee. . . .

We must not read this as an incomplete statement of pantheism, in need of philosophical clarification. Maybe Wordsworth was a closet metaphysician, but the possible linkage to Spinoza is not what makes us ache to feel those winds. Wordsworth offers a way to begin to describe a kind of experience which for our purposes may not need a stricter formulation. It is not a "grounding": it is a kind of portrait. Likewise, what is finally important in Walden is not Thoreau's misanthropic philosophizing, but the way in which he shows us, in his own person, how a human being can meet the evening, between the squirrels and the shadows, or how to look at a lake:

> A lake is the landscape's most . . . expressive feature. It is earth's eye, looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature. The fluviate trees next to the shore are the slender eyelashes which fringe it, and the wooded hills and cliffs around are its overhanging brows. . . .

---

Nietzsche suggests more than once that philosophers are too clumsy to handle real values. He may exaggerate, but all the same we do know that philosophy has too long failed to take seriously what it cannot itself fully articulate. By rejecting the demand to “ground” these values, then, pragmatism also begins to undercut the demand that we articulate them in philosophy’s peculiar, epistemically oriented way.

Still, on the whole, many philosophical arguments fare well in terms of the new set of questions I am advancing. Indeed many of them fare better when measured against this new set of questions than against the set of questions that they are actually trying to answer. Let us first return to Rolston’s “Values Gone Wild.” Rolston begins with a critique of the idea of nature as a “resource.” The idea that “everything is a resource,” he argues, like the idea that “everybody is selfish,” becomes simply trivial at the extremes, “eating up everything, as if humans had no other operating mode vis-à-vis wilderness.” In fact, we must enter wilderness “on its own terms”—not, or not primarily, as a means to “high quality experience.” In this way, he argues, “one is not so much looking to resources as to sources, seeking relationships in an elemental stream of being with transcending integrities.”

At this point, however, Rolston goes on to suggest that nature is intrinsically valuable because it is a source, in this sense, of whatever (else) we intrinsically value. This seems to me to add nothing; it only weakens the evocative force of the notion of “sourcehood.” Although “elemental . . . transcending integrities” make a certain ecosystemic sense, trying to make their value transcendental either introduces an extremely problematic ontology, as I argued in part two, or represents only one way of talking, as I argued in part three, with no special force in actual moral thinking. “Sourcehood” is a perfectly understandable and powerful model of value in its own right: why force it into the mold of intrinsic values?

Consider one other example. Rolston writes of “sympathetically turning to value what does not stand directly in our lineage or underpinning”—our “kin” and “neighbors” in the animal world. This too is genuinely perceptive: we do have a latent sense of community with animals which close acquaintance may bring out. But here too Rolston tries to wring intrinsic values out of facts which are better left alone. He argues, for instance, that the similarity between our reactions and those of animals suggests that we should take their reactions to express imperatives—values—as well, presumably including intrinsic values. Why these imperatives also bear on us, however, is not clear, and the claim that they do bear on us involves analogic arguments problematic in both philosophy of mind and moral theory. Once again Rolston’s concrete notions, here of “kinship” and of being “neighbors,” capture the values at stake much more freshly and directly than the

46 Ibid., pp. 188, 191.
philosophically problematic analogies necessary to make them over into intrinsic values. Moreover, as Rolston also points out, even within the animate world the notion of kinship eventually stretches beyond the breaking point: certainly we have little kinship with spiders. If another kind of value must be invoked for such “aliens,” then it is not clear why this should not be so even for “neighbors.” There is no need to fit all values into a single model.

Even more standard philosophical arguments—or at least their basic intentions—fit naturally into this framework. Recall Sagoff’s argument that we may value in nature expressions of things that we value intrinsically in our lives: freedom, nobility, etc. Critics have pointed out that this cannot demonstrate the intrinsic value of nature itself. Pragmatists, however, want to know simply how this value relates to others and can form an organic part of our lives. This is exactly what Sagoff helps to show us, locating it partly in the orbit of the desire for freedom. Or again, the persistent inclination to attribute “rights” directly to nature might now be reapproached and understood. In part, certainly, that attribution is a straightforward political attempt to state environmental values with enough force that others will take them seriously. But it is also an attempt to articulate a specific and familiar attitude toward nature. Alone in the woods we find ourselves feeling a sense of gratefulness, of “awe,” finally almost of intrusion, a feeling which probably has its closest parallel in those responses to other people which make us want to attribute *them* rights. But how closely these feelings are actually parallel remains an open question. Here we first need a careful phenomenology. This may be true even of human rights: real respect for others comes only through the concrete experience and finally “awe” of the other. It is the conditions and nature of this feeling which we really need to understand. Reversing the usual deduction entirely, we might even take rights talk itself as a first and rather crude attempt at just such a phenomenology—but surely we can do better.

Let me conclude by returning to the level of practical problems in environmental ethics. Why, for instance, should we value wilderness? What sort of justification can we give for keeping exploitable land and resources in their natural state? Not surprisingly, it is necessary to begin with a reorientation. Notice that this question is already posed in abstraction from any specific situation. This may itself give rise to absurdities. If we answer that wilderness indeed has intrinsic value, then presumably we are required to go to any lengths to support as much of it as possible, and wherever possible, at least consistent with other intrinsic values. But too many other things of equal or greater importance in the *situation* will not be captured by a hierarchical scheme of intrinsic values. Of course, there are other ways out, perhaps invoking intrinsic principles of such generality that they can be used to justify anything. The response I am urging, however, is the abandonment

---

of these very ways of posing the question. The important questions for pragmatism are the ones posed by specific situations, and while the answers across different situations will probably bear a strong family resemblance, they will not always be the same.

Why should we protect the new Alaskan national parks, for example? Now the answers are much easier: because the new parks are both exceptionally wild and exceptionally fragile; because the nonpreservationist pressures in at least this case are exceptionally unworthy, tied largely to the exploitation of energy resources to which there are any number of more intelligent alternatives; perhaps because their protection is still possible. These arguments do indeed seem to dodge the original question. They do not say why wilderness as such should be protected. On the other hand, one certainly does not have to be an anthropocentrist to doubt whether it should be protected "as such." This is why the exceptional nature of the Alaskan wilderness makes that particular case so powerful. These "practical" arguments are precisely the kinds offered by the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, and most of the other environmentally oriented organizations. Are these arguments offered merely for lack of better (philosophical?) ones? Or might those organizations actually have a more reasonable position after all?

"What about those people, though, who simply could not care less about wilderness? What about the many cases in which such values simply cannot be assumed? Tame rivers are much nicer than wild ones if one owns a motorboat; exploitation in Alaska might lower our fuel bills and make America more self-sufficient in some vital resources; and so on." Let me respond in several ways.

First, even these cases may not be real cases of "could not care less." Nearly everyone recognizes some value in nature; think of how often natural scenes turn up on wall calendars and church bulletins. Even motorboaters like to see woods. Wilderness values may just seem to them less significant than other values at stake in the particular situation. Common ground remains. If we begin by treating others as absolutists, we run the risk of turning them into just what we fear. But this is only a caricature. and we can instead approach them from a standpoint of complex mutuality. Then, though, if some shared values can indeed be agreed upon, the real issue shifts to the question of alternatives, and this is a recognizably factual issue on both sides, and also negotiable. Motorboats don't have to go everywhere.

The pragmatic approach defended here forswears the search for knockdown arguments that will convince absolutely everyone that natural values are important. We cannot defeat the occasional extremist who sees no value at all in nature. But if this is a defect, it is certainly not unique to pragmatism. No other approach has knockdown arguments to offer either; otherwise, environmental ethics would not be a problem. The real difference is that pragmatists are not looking for knockdown arguments; we propose to concern ourselves with defending environmental values in other ways. It is striking, actually, that the search for a proof of the intrinsic value of nature is almost always post hoc. Even if someone were
finally to discover a knockdown proof, it would not be the reason that most of us who are in search of such a proof do in fact value nature, since our present accounts of natural values differ so markedly. We learned the values of nature through experience and effort, through mistakes and mishaps, through poetry and stargazing, and, if we were lucky, a few inspired friends. What guarantees that there is a shortcut? It is wiser to accept the fact that many of our contemporaries, even our most thoughtful contemporaries, hold deeply different, probably irreconcilable, visions of the ideal world.48 Pragmatism, indeed, celebrates a wide-open and diverse culture: it is the prerequisite of all the central Deweyan virtues: intelligence, freedom, autonomy, growth. What we have yet to accept is its inconclusiveness and open-endedness, its demand that we struggle for our own values without being closed to the values and the hopes of others. The search for intrinsic values substitutes a kind of shadowboxing for what must always be a good fight.