

A QUASI-REALIST ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC?

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Does nature have intrinsic value, or is it valuable only insofar as it benefits humans? Thanks to the efforts of philosophers such as Richard Sylvan, Paul Taylor, Tom Regan, and Holmes Rolston, among others, many philosophers and non-philosophers alike nowadays regard nature and natural items as having intrinsic value. Unfortunately, however, it is difficult to give an account of what intrinsic value is, and how it is possible that non-human individuals or systems can possess it. Furthermore, it is difficult to give an account that grounds the normativity of ethical judgments concerning our responsibility to nature.

J. Baird Callicott has criticized the efforts of the others I have named, and for the most part I am in accord with Callicott's criticisms, and I shall not review them here. In his positive picture, Callicott provides a Humean-slash-Darwinian account of environmental value which, he claims, grounds a genuinely normative environmental ethic. In this paper, I shall first discuss Callicott's effort, and I shall argue that while there is much good in it, it contains a serious flaw. Then, I'll argue that a quasi-realist account of environmental value, an extension of the meta-ethical work of Simon Blackburn, is able to solve the problem facing Callicott's view. After discussing some objections to the quasi-realist account, I'll conclude by noting items of practical import that the quasi-realist account of intrinsic environmental value might provide for us.

1. Callicott's Humean/Darwinian account

I shall focus on Callicott's recent account that he elaborates upon in several essays in his *Beyond the Land Ethic*.¹ Callicott argues that once humans understand environmental processes, we will have sentiments in favor of preserving the environment. Callicott bases this optimistic view upon a Humean meta-ethic and Darwinian moral psychology. Rolston makes a helpful distinction between *anthropocentric* and *anthropogenic* value that Callicott's account depends upon.² Something has anthropocentric value when it is good *for a* human subject. Foods and other goods used by us have anthropocentric (and instrumental) value. Anthropogenic value, on the other hand, is value that is attributed by a human subject, but not *necessarily* value *for a* human. So, for example, many people take an old-growth forest to have value whether or not it is actually used or appreciated firsthand by a person. On Callicott's view, there is no mysterious natural (or super-natural) property of goodness contained in the forest; rather, it is merely a subjective attribution.

Callicott does recognize the concern that a subjectivist account of intrinsic value, as such, may lead to relativism. Certainly, not everyone values old-growth forests. Some see no value in an old-growth forest except for its lumber value – one might say that they miss the forest not for the trees, *per se*, but for the board-feet of timber. However, if value is based upon human reactive attitudes, then on what grounds can one say that it is wrong to miss the forest for the board-feet of timber? Callicott responds to this kind of criticism by claiming that differences over attributions of intrinsic value are due to differences in individuals' factual understanding of ecological processes. Not everyone has read and understood Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*; those who have will, Callicott might suppose, regard biotic communities as having

¹ Especially "Can a Theory of Moral Sentiments Ground a Genuinely Normative Environmental Ethic?", "Just the Facts, Ma'am", "Rolston on Intrinsic Value", and "Intrinsic Value in Nature: a Metaethical Analysis". All Callicott citations are from *Beyond the Land Ethic*.

² On p. 224, Callicott goes on to call anthropogenic value *truncated intrinsic value*, but I shall continue to use Rolston's terminology.

value, and will regard acts as right only insofar as they preserve the sanctity of the biotic community. So those who believe that biotic communities have no value are in error in some way, and this is why Callicott takes his account to be genuinely normative. Callicott concludes a central essay on this topic: “The remaining normative problems attending a sentiment-based environmental ethic are in essence epistemological. And that, I take it, is a clear advance.” (115)

At some length (101-106), Callicott argues that the demand for a Kantian *normative force* is not an appropriate demand for an ethical theory. Callicott claims that ethics must depend upon human sentiment, and not merely be based in rules grounded in dispassionate reason. He agrees that his account does not provide for normative force as fully grounded in reason, but claims that this is not a flaw for his account – it is merely an indication that such normative force is not a desideratum for an ethical theory. I think Callicott is right about this.

Callicott’s view requires considerable convergence of human judgment under circumstances of good understanding of natural ecological processes, and this might be overly optimistic. If appreciation for nature is a natural feature of all humans, then why has there been such enormous variation between different people in different places, or different epochs, concerning their valuing of nature? To respond to this, Callicott invokes a Darwinian moral psychology. The basic idea is that individuals in the far past who destroyed their natural environments would have been unable to pass their genes down through the generations, and so those who have the greatest reproductive fitness are those who did not destroy their environments.

But I wonder: How could selective pressures have encoded into our genes an appreciation for untrammelled biotic systems? There seem to be three problems for this account. First, it is highly controversial to claim for evolution that it could have provided us with genetic

predispositions for such a complex attitude as an appreciation for the functioning of biotic systems. Desire for food and sex, most likely, but desire for a sustainable ecosystem seems very difficult to reduce to our genetics. And even if it were the case that there were selective pressures for not destroying one's local environment, this would have little to do with more current global issues of nature preservation. It is doubtful that our genetic dispositions are be strong enough to give us the kind of very long-term, global ecological consciousness that would lead us, out of our nature, to, say, want to reduce global warming.

Secondly, the conditions upon which Callicott believes there will be convergence are ones where we have achieved an understanding of the complex scientific field of ecology. But certainly these are conditions that had no antecedent in our evolutionary history. Even if something in our genes disposes us to value natural harmony, how is it possible for selective pressures in the Pleistocene to have shaped our reactive attitudes in cognitive situations so far removed from anything in that epoch? Our actual affective attitudes were selected for under conditions of extremely limited information about the world.

Thirdly, there may be grounds for questioning whether selective pressures indeed worked against those who destroyed their local environments. It's possible that our ancestors achieved success by degrading local environments, and then moving on to a different environment when they had to. This is, of course, a highly speculative evolutionary hypothesis, but it seems no less speculative than Callicott's own Darwinian claims. I think Humean ethics is alright, but Darwinian ethics opens up a large can of highly evolved worms.

A further note that is independent of these evolutionary issues is a technical point concerning convergence. What exactly is it? It might be thought that two individuals converge in their evaluative judgments when they both value the same item. You like old-growth forests? I

like old-growth forests! You dislike polluted waterways? I dislike polluted waterways! Certainly, that is a kind of convergence. But evaluative judgments are necessarily more rich than this kind of thumbs up/thumbs down judgment. Moral judgments are necessarily comparative in a way that these examples do not bring out. Though two individuals may both value old-growth forests, they may differ dramatically about the relative value of old-growth forests when compared to, say, human economic growth, or designer wood trinkets. Underlying what might seem like convergence may be a huge amount of divergence once we start considering these kinds of comparative evaluative judgments. Even if it were plausible that humans all share a disposition to value the same things in nature, it is highly implausible that humans all share a disposition to value the same things *approximately equally*, and it is this more robust convergence that an account like Callicott's seems to require. Callicott uses an analogy (108) that just as there is a range of normalcy of human height, there is also a range of normalcy for human moral sensibility. But is there any evidence that the range of human sensibility is limited enough such that there won't be radical disagreements upon good information? Given the role that one's upbringing, as well as one's social and economic class, play in forming one's mature outlook towards the natural world and towards other things of value, it seems doubtful. Further, it seems doubtful that there will be any evolutionary or biological basis that shows that those who understand ecology but are not moved to any considerable extent to sacrifice short-term human interests on behalf of the environment are 'abnormal'.

Despite all these problems for Callicott's view, I do not believe that they undermine a Humean ethic in a similar spirit. Callicott's account of environmental value has many close similarities to the meta-ethical views of Michael Smith, Peter Railton, and David Wiggins. All three philosophers base an account of value on a view that there will be convergence of

sentiment under certain idealized conditions. Among the three, only Wiggins³, as far as I am aware, has attempted to extend the account to an account of the value of nature. But it is notable that Wiggins's account looks remarkably similar to Callicott's, and some of my criticisms of Callicott apply to all three. The problem for these accounts is that it seems like if it turns out that robust convergence cannot be achieved even under conditions of good information, then judgments one individual obtains under such conditions cannot be truly objective or normative. Otherwise, a judgment that something is of value is still going to be relative to the particular individual making the judgment, and is not strictly speaking a demonstration that the object has non-anthropocentric, albeit anthropogenic value.

2. The quasi-realist alternative and preliminary criticisms

It is this very last point that Simon Blackburn would deny.⁴ On his quasi-realist account, there can be normativity even without convergence, even on a neo-Humean, anti-realist, projectivist metaphysics of morals. Much of the Humean groundwork for the quasi-realist's account has already been laid in my presentation of Callicott's account. Though Blackburn accepts arguments such as those given by J.L. Mackie that evaluative properties such as *good* and *bad* are not real, objective properties possessed by items in the natural world – and neither are they non-natural properties – Blackburn rejects the claim that human moral judgments are intended to be property-ascriptions. Rather, they are expressions of sentiment. We do, as Hume says, project our sentiments onto items in the world, but this involves no error, contrary to Mackie. Blackburn's goal is to vindicate the continued use of moral vocabulary, just as a moral realist might want, while rejecting the realist metaphysics. There was nothing wrong with our having invented right and wrong.

³ See "Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values".

⁴ See especially "How to Be an Ethical Quasi-Realist", "Securing the Nots: Moral Epistemology for the Quasi-Realist", "Is Objective Moral Justification Possible on a Quasi-realist Foundation?", and *Ruling Passions*.

Let me attempt to summarize quasi-realism by jumping into some objections to it. (Blackburn's own examples tend to be human cases – though he does have an example about the wrongness of torturing a kitten for fun – but I'll present his account using my own examples from environmental ethics.) It may be objected that under quasi-realism, the truth of a moral judgment *depends* upon the sentiments of the individual making the moral judgment, for if a moral judgment is merely an expression of an attitude, then the truth of the judgment *depends* on the attitude, and that seems wrong. But Blackburn denies such dependency claims. He argues (cf. 1993, pp. 172-173) in effect that the *content* of a moral claim leaves no room for the truth of the claim to *depend* upon the sentiments of the individual making the claim. What does the wrongness of destroying old-growth forests for fun depend upon? The quasi-realist can still say something to the effect of “it is my opinion that destroying old-growth forests for fun is wrong, and that's my opinion *because* it involves the destruction of a complex ecosystem containing many and varied organisms (or whatever)”. And Blackburn insists that one should not be apologetic that one is expressing one's opinion; what else is there to express? Sure, it is just my opinion, but that does not entail that others' opinions are better than mine, or that I should not insist on maintaining my own opinion.

Quasi-realism is based on a distinction similar to the helpful distinction between anthropocentric and anthropogenic value. On Blackburn's view, one can claim that something has value without claiming that it has value just 'for me', even though the value ascription is based upon sentiment. When I say that the old-growth forest has value, I am not saying that it is valuable-for-me. It is valuable in itself. Secondly, Blackburn would agree with Callicott's claims concerning “normative force”. If one is looking for an ethical theory which provides reasons for

any rational person to act, one will not find it in Blackburn's theory. But this should not be taken to be a flaw with the view.

But the quasi-realist and Callicott part ways over questions of convergence, and this seems to leave Blackburn open to the charge that his account is relativist and does not give us what we really need for there to be normativity. Recall that on Callicott's account, if you fail to appreciate the value of an ecosystem, you are either in factual error, or perhaps, you have some other unusual pathology. (Wiggins, in informal discussion, said something to the effect of, if you fail to appreciate the value of the environment in Northern Scandinavia, it is a real *failure* of your *perception*.) But no such route is available for Blackburn. Blackburn accepts that there may be cases where there is a difference of judgment about moral issues reducible only to difference in sentiment, with there being no *rational/cognitive* grounds for resolving the difference. Of course there may be rational/cognitive issues, too, but they don't fully explain moral disagreement.

Blackburn himself phrases the objection with a nice metaphor:

'Truth' must be relative to whatever set of attitudes is grounding our ethical stances; since these may vary from place to place and time to time, truth must be relative....

The image is plain: a projectivist may inhabit a particular ethical boat, but he must know of the actual or potential existence of others; where, then, is the absolute truth?

(1993: 177)

But Blackburn has a crafty response to this objection: "To 'see' the truth that wanton cruelty is wrong demands moralizing, stepping back into the boat, or putting back the lens of a sensibility. But once that is done, there is nothing relativistic left to say" (1993: 178). The relativist might claim that it is better for us not to get back into our own boat, as opposed to some other boat, but that is, Blackburn asserts, itself a *moral* claim, and likely a bad one at that. The goal, similar to a

view held by Ronald Dworkin, is to regard most such debates as first-order debates. As *philosophers*, we must do the best we can from within some boat. Ultimately, in deciding to call a forest valuable or not, one has to begin from one's own initial sentiment-based moral framework. One should never say "destroying old-growth forests for fun is wrong according to me, but not wrong according to you, and neither of us is right or wrong." That is a recipe for disaster, if you really believe that old-growth forests have value. One should attempt to provide further reasons for one's position, and one should listen to considerations from the other side, but if these reasons fail to change anyone's mind, then one ought, in the face of the disagreement, act on one's conviction. Blackburn's account replaces the collective 'we' from Callicott's assumption of convergence under good information, and replaces it with judgments from the first-person perspective.

Although to my knowledge, Blackburn himself has not extended his account to environmental ethics, I think the quasi-realist account is very well-suited for judgments about environmental value, and judgments for why we should in many cases act to preserve nature. To recap, one projects value onto the natural world, and there is nothing wrong with this projection. Given that the content of the projection is of the form "that old-growth forest is good in and of itself", this allows for non-anthropocentric value. If I make the judgment that "that old-growth forest is good in and of itself", and you disagree, it is likely that you just have the *wrong* set of sentiments. (Where the judgment that you have the wrong sentiments is an expression of my sentiments about your sentiments.) There is no difference between my projecting value onto the old growth forest and my claiming that it does have intrinsic value, and anyone who disagrees is either misinformed or simply has the wrong sentiments. Now, if that sounds a bit snooty, stay tuned, for I will return to this issue shortly.

3. Deeper potential problems for quasi-realism

Blackburn's position often leaves people with the feeling that something is amiss. My own suspicion is that quasi-realism has not caught on precisely because no one has yet come up with the best possible objections to it, and so in what follows, I'd like to discuss what I take to be the most pressing difficulties with the account, and then respond on the quasi-realist's behalf.

One problem for a quasi-realist account of environmental value is that it is questionable exactly what sentiments play the proper role in determining one's moral judgment. Many natural processes are distasteful to many humans in many ways, and many humans take delight in many natural processes. But exactly which sentiments should be identified as the particularly normative, value-bestowing ones?

For example, a UNC philosophy graduate student, Meg Wallace, has a website⁵ articulating a position that she calls "acutetarianism". Acutetarians do not eat things that are, or at one point in their lives were, *cute*. So, although chickens aren't cute, all chickens were once chicks, and chicks are of course very cute. Little piggies are really cute, and little calves often are as well. So, chicken, pork and beef are no-nos. Rabbit is definitely right out. But fish aren't cute, and never were cute, so fish are OK. Especially shellfish.⁶ Wallace's website shouldn't be taken in full seriousness – she doesn't actually take cuteness to be the moral determinant of what one can and cannot eat – but of course one can see the danger for any position, like Blackburn's, which is anthropogenic: human sentiments are influenced by a lot of peculiarities, and many of them seem too ad hoc and contingent upon which to base an ethical theory.

⁵ <http://www.unc.edu/~megw/Acutetarian.html>

⁶ As a side-note, I've had a garden at several points in my life, and I suggested to Wallace that little zucchinis and other vegetables in the garden are quite cute. So I think she probably needs to add a sentience criterion – or cease eating many vegetables.

This concern plays out in many important real-world situations. Both sides of debates concerning the preservation/destruction of natural areas put to use such kinds of (what I take to be) ad hoc sentiments. For example, Interior Secretary Gale Norton drew a lot of criticism when in arguing in favor of developing the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for its oil resources, she called the area “an area of vast nothingness”. But it strikes me that the methods used by mainstream environmental organizations leave them open to just this kind of response. Materials for the Nature Conservancy and Sierra Club often depict very adorable animals or majestic mountains to support their goals of preserving wilderness. The World Wildlife Fund’s logo has a panda bear. But the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge doesn’t have any pandas. The refuge does have a huge herd of caribou, but it seems that the caribou may not be cute enough to have rallied public opinion in their favor. I think that those interested in preserving natural areas should be worried if their defenses of the areas in question are dependent upon the area containing some kind of overt natural beauty with which we humans can easily identify.

One response for a subjectivist is to actually take these judgments at face value, and claim that for these very reasons, we really shouldn’t eat bunny rabbits, and we should take very special care to preserve those natural areas in which magnificent or adorable animals live, and less care to preserve natural areas with animals or features that aren’t so adorable. But a view held by many is that such human-response-relative judgments about non-human things are highly problematic. Is this something that a quasi-realist account of value in nature, with its strongly subjectivist components, can accommodate?

I think it is. Though we do have these quirky sentiments, we do have other sentiments that can correct these quirks after a process of reflection. First of all, the quasi-realist can make use of considerations that Callicott brings up concerning greater ecological awareness. Though

we should not be as optimistic as Callicott is that ecological awareness will lead to anything like convergence, it is still plausible to think that if people were better informed about ecological processes, many would have attachments even to features of the natural world that aren't necessarily cute or majestic looking. Secondly, if preferences for cute and majestic things endure the process of ecological awareness, it still does not entail that those things thereby have more intrinsic value. We seem to have positive sentiments toward the moral claim "something's appearing cute to a human is not a sufficient basis upon which to act differently towards it than toward other similar things that happen not to appear cute to us." And those sentiments can be put to work for a quasi-realist. This last point is in the spirit of Alan Gibbard's contention in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* that our sentiments are responsible for us endorsing norms, and not simply for responding to particular cases.

There is, however, a more general issue here. We can tell an historical story, as Nietzsche does, of the origins of our moral sentiments. Our sympathy for other creatures may be the result of, in this case quite literally, a morality of the herd. Why should we keep our sentiments if they are cast into doubt as Nietzsche does? I cannot fully answer this here, but it seems that there is more to the story than Nietzsche admits. Bernard Williams employs the notion of *confidence*,⁷ and we might say that for many, if not most of us, our confidence in our evaluative judgments survives even a Nietzschean critique. This form of response accords with the argument I gave earlier, that upon seeing the multiplicity of boats in the water, it is probably better to remain in a boat, and make moral judgments from there, rather than risk the open waters. I don't think this is a complete response to the Nietzschean challenge, but it forms the beginnings of one. It is also worth noting that environmentalist values, beginning thirty-five or forty years or ago or so, were

⁷ In his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 170-171.

genuinely revolutionary and transvaluative, in a way that Nietzsche, that famous lover of mountains and wildness, might have appreciated.

A second potential problem for a quasi-realist account concerns an implicit individualism. It is reasonable on the quasi-realist account to say “It is my opinion that we should preserve this natural area, and, even though your opinion differs, my opinion is the right one.” But this seems to be lacking in *humility*. What I’d like to show is that there are two aspects to this – an epistemic humility and a moral humility, and I’ll discuss them in turn.

The objection concerning epistemic humility can be brought to light by considering a typical passage in which Blackburn discusses how it is a cause for regret if a person has deformed moral sensibilities. He writes: “In saying these things [he’s just made some moral judgments] I am... voicing some elements of my own ethical stances, but, as I promised, it is only by doing this that ethical truth is found” (1993: 178). Let me rephrase this quote, substituting co-referring terms, to make the problem with quasi-realism most apparent: *It is only by Simon Blackburn’s voicing of elements of his own ethical stances that ethical truth is found.* Surely this is problematic. Blackburn really must include his own name in that clause—he cannot advise each of his readers to appeal to our own sentiments, because he doesn’t know what our sentiments are; perhaps we have sentiments contrary to his. An explanation is needed of why Blackburn himself is best situated to express moral truths—otherwise it would be an amazing coincidence. If I claim that I am the very best person in the world to express the truths of microbiology, I would need to demonstrate (to myself and to others) that I possess, for example, the best training and aptitude for that kind of knowledge. But how could one demonstrate that one is the best person to judge ethical truths about what should and should not be done, or about what does or does not have value?

On behalf of the quasi-realist, some accommodations can be made. First, there seems to be some room for moral *deference*⁸: We often seek out the advice of others, because others often know more than us: they often have better judgments than me about how people, the agent herself included, may react in different situations. But deference is not merely confined to when one believes that others know more facts about the world. One can recognize oneself as sometimes having the wrong reactive attitudes – of being cold-hearted, or immature, for example. And we can recognize in some others a more coherent, consistent set of desires or sentiments, and we can aspire to have another’s sentiments. So we may add a clause to Blackburn’s account, noting that in many cases, we might defer to another’s moral judgment.

Furthermore, moral judgments are not formed and made by independent individuals, but by groups of individuals. In many cases, our moral judgments aren’t mere self-involved judgments, but are formed on the basis of the wisdom of communal practice passed down through the ages. Further, there may be a specific environmental aspect to this, too. One of Leopold’s points in his section on “Thinking Like a Mountain” is that often, we can learn about right and wrong behavior from learning about nature. There is something dramatically humble in Leopold’s abandoning his wolf-hunting after considering what the mountain might think about such activities. Though one should not always simply accept the morals that one is taught by others, moral judgments still are largely shaped by decidedly external things. And so to more charitably interpret Blackburn’s comment, we should take it as being a judgment that my opinions are how I find moral truth, with the proviso that my opinions have been formed in accordance with the opinions of others or perhaps even my entire community, and I may at times defer to other individuals. I hope that these considerations take some of the sting out of the change of epistemic lack of humility.

⁸ A notion used by Laurence Thomas in a somewhat similar way in his “Moral Deference”.

The other side to the problem of humility is a specifically moral side. If I have a moral judgment, and you have a different one, and we can explain our differences as based in sentiment and nothing else, it seems wrong for me to make a claim upon you based just upon my sentiment. David Wong expresses this in what he refers to as the “justification principle”, and he expresses its origin from Kant.

The possession of a rational nature is the basis for the status of human beings as ends in themselves. Permissible ends are rational ends – those that accord with the nature of human beings as rational beings. This implies that one should not interfere with the ends of others unless one can justify the interference to be acceptable to them were they fully rational and informed of all relevant circumstances. To do otherwise is to fail to treat them with the respect due rational beings. Let us call this implication of Kant’s formula the ‘justification principle’. (1984: 181)

This principle carries some weight as a plausible ethical principle – Wong himself is no Kantian, but he accepts it. Callicott’s view seems to satisfy this criterion, and that feature seems to be the primary benefit of his account over the quasi-realist’s. The quasi-realist ethic violates it, and so it is something a quasi-realist should take seriously. More generally, it is likely because of this very principle that we desire that there be moral objectivity and not mere subjective expressions of sentiment.

The response here on behalf of the quasi-realist is that the intuitive reasons for accepting the justification principle do not show that it is an inviolable principle, even though there are many good reasons for having the justification principle and adhering to it in most contexts. First, there are epistemic issues as noted above. When there is a moral difference between myself and another, I should listen to the other to see if the other is taking some facts into account that I have neglected. Second, we need to establish durable relationships with others with whom we disagree; this is a reason why we should strive to *compromise* in the face of irresolvable differences rather than impose one’s value on another. However, this does not mean that one

should never violate the principle. If one has the power, say, as an environmental regulator, to impose one's moral judgments over someone who is causing enormous damage to the environment because of pollution, one should probably do so even if one cannot fully rationally justify it to the polluter. The harm done to the polluter's autonomy would be less than the harm the polluter will do to the natural environment. So there are cases where the justification principle should be violated, though these should probably be ones where the harms of not enforcing one's judgments are severe. So, while in general one should exercise moral humility, it is not something that one must always adhere to.

4. Practical import of a quasi-realist account of intrinsic value

A movement in contemporary environmental philosophy, led by Bryan Norton, Anthony Weston, and others, is to not care about these meta-ethical issues. There are more pressing real-world problems for us to be concerned about. In this spirit, Norton posits his *convergence hypothesis*⁹. According to this view, the

interests of humans and the interests of nature differ only in the short run. If we recognize the extent to which the human species is an integral part of the community of life, long-term human interests coincide with the 'interests' of nature. To protect the fullness of life is to protect the far-distant future of the human species and its evolutionary successors; and vice-versa. (1996: 99)

So it doesn't really matter if nature has intrinsic value or not. What matters are the considerations one can bring to persuade the public for political purposes, and according to Norton, this will involve only making anthropocentric appeals. Elsewhere, I have argued against this view¹⁰, and Callicott himself argues against it (successfully, by my lights, pp. 30-33). I would like to say here a couple further things that have not yet been noted or that pertain specifically to the quasi-realist account.

⁹ See especially "Integration or Reduction: Two Approaches to Environmental Values"

¹⁰ In my "Norton, Callicott, and Leopoldian Environmental Pragmatism".

One note about instrumental value is that it is highly relative to context. For example, it is not difficult to concoct situations in which Sarin gas can be instrumentally good, and in which nature is instrumentally very bad. So, should we say, “nature: sometimes good for us, sometimes bad, just like Sarin gas.”? It seems like there is a difference here, and not just a difference in that Sarin is more likely to do instrumental harm. This can be brought out in the form of a dilemma. Either natural items are always instrumentally valuable, or they are not. If the latter, the good they provide may often be trumped by other goods. The worry here is that if we take appreciation of the natural world as just another commodity, we will lose what is special about it. A walk through the forest will be on a par with watching TV. Norton himself is sensitive to this concern, but the point is that, according to many who support environmental preservation, that there seems to be a special kind of value one gets from nature experiences, and this is shared by many.

And so this leads to the other horn of the dilemma. If natural items always have some positive instrumental value, then the best way to describe this is by crediting it to a specific intrinsic value that natural items possess. A comparison with TV might be helpful. Does television as a medium have intrinsic value? I would argue that it does not. But if somehow it were always pleasing because of its constitutive features, then maybe we should then ascribe it as having intrinsic value. The same should be said for the intrinsic value of nature.

Another way to look at this issue is as being analogous to the paradox of hedonism.¹¹ Norton takes great care to acknowledge that humans derive pleasure from experiencing nature. But if one pursues nature experiences on the grounds that they tend to give pleasure to humans, that misses part of the point of nature experiences. Just as one can’t pursue happiness directly by saying to oneself “doing this will make me happy”, one can’t enjoy nature by saying “nature is

¹¹ Thanks to Leonard Kahn for this way of phrasing the objection, though I am unsure if Kahn accepts my account here.

enjoyable to me". In appreciating nature, one needs to appreciate the actual features of nature, and for this reason, an account of intrinsic value seems more appropriate than an account that claims that there is only instrumental value in nature. However, this might seem to count against quasi-realism as well, given that the quasi-realist's account of instrumental value is so subjective. But the quasi-realist's account is entirely consistent with claims that nature is valuable because of its beauty, complexity, and diversity. Of course the quasi-realist tells a story about human psychology in explaining *valuing*; but this is consistent with taking the *content* of our ascriptions that the natural world has a specific kind of good as independent of the human ascriptions. And a quasi-realist account places the good of the natural world potentially on par with the good for humans, even if long-term interests of humans do not converge with long-term environmental good.

Another issue concerns monism/pluralism. Callicott argues for a moral monism: there is one moral value, and that is the value of communities. I think we need to distinguish between a meta-ethical and normative pluralism: there may be a single correct meta-ethical account, but this is compatible with value-attributions being made at different levels. Because we have sentiment for the well-being of other people, other individual animals, other species, other ecosystems, this provides a grounding for a pluralism of values. I take it to be a good feature of quasi-realism that it would allow for judgments at all these levels.

A related point is that there is a movement now in environmental ethics to focus on a virtue-based approach to ethics. Appreciation of nature promotes the virtues of studiousness, moderation, and self-sufficiency, and a life involving appreciation of nature may help promote good character. Virtue ethicists use these considerations to promote behavior that conforms with

nature. An argument Thomas Hill, Jr., gives is the following¹². What does one say to someone who covers over the landscape surrounding his or her house with pavement. According to Hill, there aren't strong deontological or consequentialist reasons why this is such a bad thing. Rather, the only thing that can be said is: "What kind of a person are you?" I think there is something right about Hill's argument, and it accords perfectly well with quasi-realism. Reasons often run out, but sentiments about behavior remain. This is an example of the kind of pluralism the quasi-realist should endorse: we take many things to be valuable, including what we take to be good human character.

Another point relates to the role this kind of environmental meta-ethics can play within academic philosophy. Environmental ethics is not a zero-sum enterprise: the better theoretical work done in it, the more philosophers not initially disposed to give heed to environmental ethics will pay attention, and this could potentially have a significant impact on the future of the discipline of philosophy as a whole. Perhaps more ethicists will include units on environmental ethics in their ethics classes, and this can filter down into a larger public environmental sentiment.

A quasi-realist account might help ground the kind of public discourse environmentalists might want, although there are some related dangers attending to it. I've come across students who say things like to the effect of, "it's my opinion that we should preserve natural areas, but that's just my opinion and I don't have a place to tell anyone else what to do", and hence they don't act upon their sentiments. A quasi-realist account may embolden them – even though it is only their opinion, and others have different opinions, they should still act in accord with their opinions. Quasi-realism seems to ground a kind of integrity, of acting in accord with one's opinions. Additionally, the quasi-realist account leaves normativity as based in sentiment, and

¹² In his "Ideals of Human Excellence".

this validates some appeals to sentiment, such as those sparked by Ansel Adams photos, even though they may be abused in ways discussed earlier. Callicott discusses increased understanding of the science of ecology, but historically it appears that more direct artistic appeals to our sentiments have been even more effective at motivating environmental activism.

However, the flipside of that is that there is a danger that those in power will use their sentiments against the sentiments of others, and questions of environmental preservation will be answered just by those in power. This, of course, is a danger. And it is of course happening as we speak, independent of quasi-realism. Our political system in this country, insofar as it works, is set up to accommodate ineliminable ethical differences, and a quasi-realist account seems to fit as well as any as a description of the origins of these differences and as a prescription for action. Admittedly, as a meta-ethical theory, it doesn't provide for all the normative implications that one might like. It doesn't solve all the problems of this land or of the Earth. But, as far as I can see, it's the best we can do.

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