



## Letter to the editor

## Defending the value of intrinsic value: A reply to Schaubroeck (2018)



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Dear editor,

[Schaubroeck \(2018\)](#) suggests intrinsic value is not a suitable basis for conservation of nonhuman nature, and other (indirect and unknown) values may be more relevant. We appreciate his interest in our review, and are pleased that scholars across the conservation community are increasingly attending to the ethical dimensions of conservation. However, care is warranted in traversing perhaps unfamiliar terrain, and we would like to take this opportunity to clarify some key conceptual distinctions.

First, intrinsic and instrumental values are not mutually exclusive. [Schaubroeck \(2018\)](#) suggests indirect and unknown values as “alternatives” to intrinsic value, but it is not clear why alternatives would be necessary, since these types of value are entirely compatible. A schoolteacher, for example, may be valued indirectly for the education he provides his students, while schoolchildren may be valued for their potential to make as yet unknown contributions to society. But both teachers and children are also valued intrinsically, for their own sake, regardless of and alongside any benefits they provide or may provide in the future.

Second, humanitarianism is not anthropocentrism. [Schaubroeck \(2018\)](#) mentions universal human rights as an example of widespread anthropocentrism, but moral concern for humans does not necessarily signify lack of moral concern for nonhumans. In fact, altruistic values (expressing concern for human welfare) and biospheric values (expressing concern for the environment) tend to be positively correlated ([De Groot and Steg, 2008](#)). Further, a growing body of work suggests the belief that at least some nonhuman entities have intrinsic value is relatively common ([Vucetich et al., 2015](#)). That we have institutionalized human but not nonhuman rights (although exceptions could be cited) is a legal observation and, while legality arguably is (or should be) a reflection of morality, laws also reflect broader social, economic, and political forces, and cannot be regarded as precise proxies for prevailing ethical norms.

On a related note, intrinsic value is distinct from rights. Rights are specific entitlements of a rights-holder to pursue particular actions or exist in particular conditions. Intrinsic value, on the other hand, is an acknowledgement of basic and irreplaceable good in the world - no more and no less. Attributions of rights are generally stronger ethical claims than attributions of value. While we maintain that intrinsic value is relevant to the realization of a sustainable future, and that it is appropriate and indeed morally imperative to acknowledge intrinsic value where there is reason to believe it exists, we do not suggest intrinsic value enjoins any specific human actions or behaviors.

Finally, intrinsic value need not be considered a “non-human value.” Arguments for subjective intrinsic value recognize that value implies a valuer. Thus conceived, to acknowledge intrinsic value is to recognize, albeit subjectively and from a quintessentially human perspective, that an entity is good not just as a means to some other end, but also for its own sake. This in no way precludes positive valuation or care, as [Schaubroeck \(2018\)](#) suggests. To the contrary, in most cases intrinsic value is defined as an attribution of positive value (although, as noted in our review, some philosophers also posit negative intrinsic value).

[Schaubroeck \(2018\)](#) questions the existence of “absolute values,” against what he mistakenly interprets as our claim that intrinsic value in nonhuman nature is an “objective” ethical truth. We suspect the deeper underpinning of this critique hearkens to the challenging and somewhat pernicious idea of moral relativism. Moral relativism - which posits, loosely, that right and wrong can only be defined relative to an individual or culture - arose as an answer to moral objectivism - which posits that moral truth exist objectively and independent of human subjects. While we agree with many arguments against moral objectivism, we reject moral relativism as a viable alternative. From a philosophical standpoint, relativism implodes upon recognition that relativists themselves are committed to a relativistic stance. On what grounds can this commitment be upheld? If you are a moral relativist and I am a moral objectivist, you cannot contest my position or defend your own without at least conditionally abandoning your relativistic stance to appeal to a higher (meta-ethical) claim. From a more practical standpoint moral relativism is also problematic. Functioning within a complex globalized society requires, at times, that we make and act upon cross-cultural moral judgments. Subscribing to moral relativism deprives us of this ability. For a relativist, even acts that are obviously and intuitively abhorrent, such as genocide, slavery, or terrorism, cannot with any authority be called “wrong,” potentially undermining the perceived legitimacy of policies enacted against them.

But perhaps we still have not answered to the core of the question raised by [Schaubroeck \(2018\)](#), namely, what if I believe nonhuman nature has intrinsic value, and you do not? On what grounds can we resolve the disputation to know who is right? Our answer is that there are no such grounds

– but we suggest it is altogether preferable to err on the side of inclusion and moral expansiveness. We also point out that there are no definitive grounds to “prove” the value of a human being or human welfare. Arguments for the conservation of nonhuman nature based on direct, unknown, and other instrumental values recognized in the ecosystem services framework are predicated on the claim that human wellbeing is good as an end in itself. Do we know this for sure, objectively or absolutely? No, and yet we proceed as if we did. Uncertainty is a fact of life. If even science, among the most sophisticated and broadly legitimized forms of knowledge achieved thus far in human history, can accommodate uncertainty, why should ethics be held to different standards?

We do not suggest intrinsic value necessarily subsumes or overrules all other types of value, and we do not propose it as a decision-making framework. Rather, we advance intrinsic value as a critical part of an enduring conservation ethic; a basic orientation toward the world, and a belief to which we can hold ourselves and others accountable. To acknowledge intrinsic value is to remember that human interests, financial or otherwise, are not the sole bottom line, and the bottom line is not all that matters.

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