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Nature is not a resource for humans

Beyond anthropocentrism



29th October 2021



Michael Paul Nelson |

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The climate crisis is in many ways the consequence of having treated nature as a resource for the benefit of humans. Yet even environmentalists can find it hard to break away from this instrumental framework of thought. They talk of the benefits that wild animals can bring to the ecosystem, or the wonder of renewable sources of energy. Western thought has been all too happy to attribute intrinsic value to humans. It's about time we recognised that nature is also valuable in itself, not just in the ways in can benefit us. Doing so would make available a whole different approach to the climate crisis, writes Michael Paul Nelson.

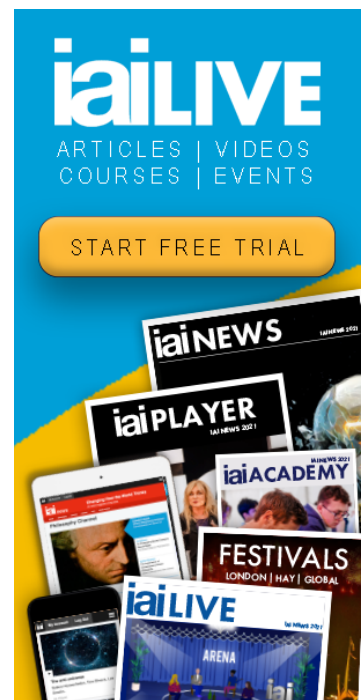
"You say that I use the land, and I reply, yes, it is true; but it is not the first truth. The first truth is that love the land; I see that it is beautiful; I delight in it; I am alive in it." - N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa)

What does it mean to say that nature is intrinsically valuable? Most generally, to say that nature is intrinsically valuable is to say it is valuable beyond its use or instrumental value, or merely as a means to some end. To suggest, for example, that wolves possess intrinsic value is to suggest they have value even beyond what they can provide as ecosystem engineers or eco-tourism revenue generators. In other words, they have value in their own right, in and of themselves, they merit direct moral standing, as ends in themselves

Intrinsic value is, therefore, not a negation of instrumental value, it is rather an accretion, an addition, another layer. For example, while we believe our children are intrinsically valuable, taking the tax deduction for them or having them mow the lawn does not negate their intrinsic value. Historically, the attribution of intrinsic value and direct moral standing in humans has been premised upon the possession of some morally relevant quality (e.g., rationality, language use, self-consciousness, autonomy, or sentience).

How is that intrinsic value grounded? There are several ways to answer that question.

For some it means that nature itself possess some quality that makes it valuable in and of itself, quite apart from how it is valued by humans. This, sometimes called "objectivist" view of intrinsic value, implies that intrinsic value is to be discovered in nature. An objectivist might assert that intrinsic value is bestowed in nature by a divinity, or they might see in nature some quality that we already believe bestows intrinsic value to

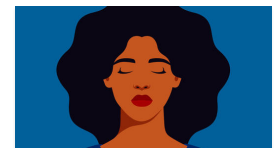


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humans. Echoing Spinoza's assertion that all things are "animate, albeit in different degrees," Jane Bennett, for example, writes "If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated...The ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such."

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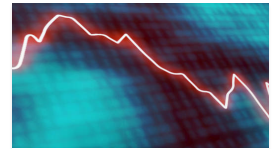
For others, all value is attributed, not discovered, by valuers. This, sometimes called "subjectivist" view of intrinsic value, implies that intrinsic value ought to be attributed to nature, by those capable of such attribution, namely humans. Recognizing that we intrinsically value ourselves, but rejecting any clear metaphysical distinction between human selves and nature, Deep Ecologists, for example, believe this implies that nature ought to also be attributed intrinsic value.

While the suggestion that nature or some part of nature should be considered intrinsically valuable has a long history in arguably all past and current Indigenous cultures, it might be less familiar in the Western world for the past few hundred years, exceptions like Spinoza notwithstanding. It only has a half-century long history in environmental philosophy and ethics, and about a seventy-year history in some branches of Western conservation (e.g., American conservationist Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic).

Mike Manfredo and colleagues recently demonstrated that, at least with regard to wildlife, American culture has indeed become less dominionistic ("wildlife should be used primarily to benefit humans") and more mutualistic ("wildlife are part of one's social network and worthy of care and compassion") in recent decades. Similarly, studies published in 2015 and 2019 demonstrated that more than 80% of the general public (in Ohio and the US, respectively) were willing to attribute intrinsic value to wildlife.

More pragmatically, attribution of intrinsic value shifts the burden of proof. If something is recognized to possess intrinsic value then it is "innocent until proven guilty," to use a more legal expression. While instrumental value arguments for, say, wolves are contingent (subject to being overridden, for instance if we find out they do not generate much revenue or if we find some other way to engineer ecosystems),

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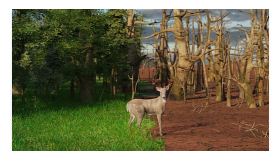


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overriding something with recognized intrinsic value is difficult. It would mean, for instance, that if someone wished to kill wolves for some reason, they would have the burden of proof to justify that killing.

An instrumental-value-only approach underpins an *anthropocentric* (human-centered) ethic wherein nature is only valuable to the extent to which it benefits humans or something humans value. On the other hand, a *non-anthropocentric* (non-human-centered) ethic follows from the attribution of intrinsic value to nature. One might wonder, since a non-anthropocentric ethic requires humans to either recognize or attribute intrinsic value in nature, does that imply that a non-anthropocentric ethic is paradoxically anthropocentric. No. The fact that humans are required to recognize or attribute intrinsic value does not mean that the *object* of moral inclusion is therefore only humans. The concern that non-anthropocentrists have with anthropocentrism is not that humans are the valuers, but that with anthropocentrism only humans possess intrinsic value and are therefore thought to be worthy of direct moral consideration.

An instrumental-value-only approach underpins an anthropocentric (human-centered) ethic wherein nature is only valuable to the extent to which it benefits humans or something humans value.

It is sometimes suggested that only wealthy or privileged people can afford to attribute intrinsic value to nature, that non-anthropocentrism is an ethic of luxury. First, since wealth and privilege are often the result of exploiting nature and other humans (i.e., only seeing and treating them as instrumentally valuable), ethical inclusion seems more a threat to wealth and privilege than a result of it. Second, it is common to see the poor and disenfranchised leading the way here. It is, after all, the White Earth Band of Ojibwe Indians in the US who, in 2018, recognized the personhood of wild rice (Manoomin) with “inherent rights to exist, flourish, regenerate, and evolve.” That Manoomin is now suing to stop a pipeline. It is the government of Ecuador (not the US or the UK) who in a constitutional adjustment in 2008 suggested that nature “has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution,” and that “Persons and people have the fundamental rights guaranteed in this Constitution and in the international human rights instruments. Nature is subject to those rights given by this Constitution and Law.” It is the government of Bolivia (not France or Germany) who in 2011, passed the “Law of Mother Earth,” which articulates rights of nature, including “the right to life and to exist;

Renewal



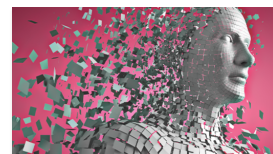
Scientific freedom



The technology trap



How to live forever



Technology in trouble

the right to continue vital cycles and processes free from human alteration; the right not to be polluted.”

Consider how different a world is when all human beings are granted intrinsic value, than a world where some are only instrumentally valuable.

So, how might the world change if a non-anthropocentric ethic guided us?

First, an exercise in imagination. Consider how different a world is when all human beings are granted intrinsic value, than a world where some are only instrumentally valuable. Think of the institutions that cannot be tolerated in the former (e.g., slavery, colonialism, genocide). Now apply the same logic to nature as a whole.

Second, an exercise in vision. We already have in our world cultures that believe and enact a non-anthropocentric ethic. Their lifeways are different: plants and animals are kin, permission is asked of the non-human world, gratitude is given for the gifts of the world that support human lives, reciprocity is owed for those gifts, those gifts are to be shared and never squandered.

Our sense of inclusion would change: extending outward to future generations of humans; to the two-legged and four-legged, scaled and winged; to the species and ecosystems of our living planet. We would see the world as “all my relations,” to borrow a common Indigenous phrase.

Our language would change: our campus’s might have a College of Earthly Gifts rather than a College of Natural Resources. Vague notions like sustainability would be clarified: rather than meaning exploit as much as you can without infringing upon the ability of future generations to exploit as much as they can, it would mean only take what you need for a meaningful life.

The dominant Western worldview, asserting humans as separate from nature, superior to it, and reducing nature to valuable only to the extent it serves humans and human interests, still has a hold on us.

Our questions would change: we would not. Instead of asking, how many ancient forests are enough?, we would ask how much forest now serving narrow human interests is enough? too much? How much human impact on the world is enough? How much greed is enough?

Among so many other harms, the dominant Western worldview stunts our imaginations. In the words of philosopher and writer Kathleen Dean Moore, our practices are “embedded in a set of assumptions about the nature of the world in which the practice takes place...these assumptions control what questions we ask about our practices, shape the arguments we use to justify our acts, determine which outcomes we can hope for and which we can never imagine.” The dominant Western worldview, asserting humans as separate from nature, superior to it, and reducing nature to valuable only to the extent it serves humans and human interests, still has a hold on us.

It is easy to appreciate our own intrinsic value and to therefore infer the intrinsic value of other humans. For some, it might be challenging to infer the intrinsic value of sentient animals, plants, species, and ecosystems. Possibly, however, an inability to perceive the world as imbued with intrinsic value is not the fault of the world, but our own.

Michael Paul Nelson
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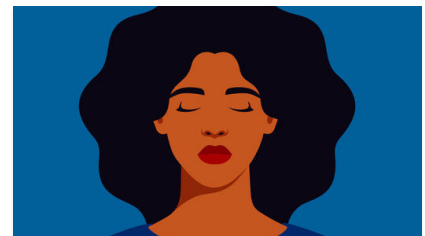
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