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# Assessing the Landscape: In Search of a Coherent Value Theory for Environmental Ethics

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**Assessing the Landscape:**  
**In Search of a Coherent Value Theory for Environmental Ethics**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to The Faculty of the Environmental Studies Program

Bates College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

Alex J. Hamilton  
Lewiston, Maine  
21 March, 2014



## Acknowledgements

I went into this endeavor not knowing a lot of things. I definitely didn't know that I would end up spending the better part of a year working on it. I didn't know that, in some places, I was treading into uncharted territory. I didn't know much anything about metaethics. And, most importantly, I didn't know how thoroughly I would find myself invested, learning, and enjoying the process.

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**Introduction:**  
**Derivation of Value in Contemporary Environmental Ethics**

Environmental ethics, as a philosophical subdiscipline, concerns itself with prescriptive principles and worldviews. How are we to understand the natural world—and behave within it—as rational moral agents? An environmental ethic hinges upon two key pieces: an explanation of what has intrinsic value and a derivation of our moral duties predicated upon the knowledge of that conception of value. Few environmental ethicists, however, develop a metaphysical basis for their claims of what does or does not bear value; instead, many make normative declarations and attempt to derive duties from those declarations.

An environmental ethic is only as defensible as its conception of value, and so I propose that before any duties or oughts are considered in depth, it is necessary to assess the current, varied metaethical approaches to the problem of value. What, who, or on which level do things in the natural world bear value, and why? It would be arbitrary and unfounded to proceed with environmental ethics until we clarify the underlying value theory; Holmes Rolston is perceptive in his suggestion that “the ultimate challenge [of environmental ethics] is a value theory profound enough to support that ethics” (2001, 243).

With this in mind, I will begin with a survey of what I consider to be the two major schools of thought in environmental ethics. The first is Neo-Kantian individualism, where the goal of a value theory is typically a description of objective intrinsic value in a given kind of being or beings. Value, under this view, is attached to the individual living

beings which constitute the environment, and our duties are derived from our understanding of the natural world as such. The second—a response to the first, more or less—is the holistic or “land ethic” approach, which holds that value is systemic. That is (depending on whose account), species, ecosystems, or collectively “the land” bears or bear value, and the value of individual beings is contingent upon their relationship to the functioning, interconnected whole.

Theorists on both sides articulate promising positive accounts of environmental ethics; they also confront serious problems in describing and defending a value theory which can support their own claims. By assessing each of these value theories and confronting their shortfalls, I intend to demonstrate that none supply us with a robust enough foundation for their ethical systems. In the first chapter, we will consider the Neo-Kantian individualist approach; in the second chapter, the holists. Both the individualist and holist theories, we will find, are inadequate.

What follows in the third chapter is my own attempt to conceive and argue for a positive value theory for environmental ethics. Taking a new approach, I first defend the Buddhist metaphysical doctrine of “codependent origination” (and its corollary, the “doctrine of emptiness”), which, in very simple terms, seeks to argue for the constitutively interrelated nature of reality. The doctrine of emptiness leads us to a metaphysical conception of individual things as lacking a distinct intrinsic essence or an essential nature, and to the realization that our understanding of reality is based in the use of semantic conventions. I then incorporate Simon Blackburn’s quasi-realist approach to establish the conventional “truth” of the existence of value. From these arguments, I

develop a value theory which incorporates the idea of constitutive interrelatedness to argue that value is inherent to the constitutive system of relationships.

This new value theory is not susceptible to the individualist/holist dichotomy, as it can account for value on *all* levels: individual, species, and systemic (including non-living parts of the system). While I won't go so far as to construct an entire environmental ethic, this alternative approach, I am confident, could serve as the first step in the articulation of an ethic which is coherent with its own value theory.



**Chapter One:**  
**Objective Intrinsic Value and the Problem of Individualism**

*a. Kant: Value-Conferrers as Value-Possessors*

For Neo-Kantian environmental ethicists, the Holy Grail of sorts is the idea of objective intrinsic value. The deontological theorist attempts to construct a rational basis for a lowest common denominator of unconditional value. The units of consideration are individual beings, and we extrapolate duties from our recognition of these beings as valuable. *Which* beings are valuable, however, varies with each Neo-Kantian account.

For Kant himself, objective intrinsic value is the rational solution to Humean subjective preference-satisfaction. Hume suggests that value is related to sentiments; Kant demands a level on which value is unconditional and objective. According to Kant, one type value is conditional upon the subjective preferences of each rational being—this is *subjective* or *instrumental* value. The instrumentally valuable is valuable *solely* because a rational moral agent values it. The other kind of value is *intrinsic* value, the only possessor of which is *the teleological rational being itself*. That is, rational nature is the only source of conferred (instrumental) value, and so the capacity to be an agent—a valuer—is the only intrinsically valuable end in itself. A value-conferring rational being, then, has intrinsic and unconditional moral value and demands moral consideration from other rational beings. Kant uses the phrase *absolute worth*; that is to say, their very existence is primary and cannot be reduced to subjective ends, or means to some other, absolute objective end (2002, 408). The capacity to choose ends is not contingent, and thus its value is unconditional and intrinsic. According to Kant, then, one must value

rational nature as an end-in-itself. Kant says that, as a rational being capable of choosing ends or assigning instrumental value, one must value one's own rational capacities and the rational capacities of other agents equally. All other value is contingent; it depends exclusively upon the subjective preferences of rational moral agents.

Non-rational beings—animals, plants—are not self-conscious, cannot confer value, and cannot set their own ends or have a *telos*. The lack of a capacity to recognize their own status and the status of others as rational moral agents automatically indicates that they are *not* rational moral agents, and for Kant, this means that they cannot be ends in themselves. Non-rational beings can only have *instrumental* value as means to the ends set forth by humans—that is, by value-conferring rational moral agents.

According to Kant, our only duties to those non-rational beings are secondary, indirect duties to humans. Someone cruel to animals does no explicit wrong in their actions towards that animal; the wrongness of such an action comes from its damaging effect to one's humanity and the risk that such behavior will effect one's interactions with other humans (Kant 2002, 410). Our actions towards other living beings cultivate the ways in which we interact with other humans, says Kant, and so respectable, sensitive action as a child will likely pave the way for such tendencies as a responsible adult.

For the environmentalist as much as for the environmental ethicist, the idea that all value is contingent upon value conferred by an intrinsically valuable rational agent is all but impossible to accept. What about non-rational human beings, such as the mentally disabled, or infants? What about sentient animals? Non-sentient animals? Can these beings not hold value as objective ends? Intrinsic-value-based environmental ethics is

more or less based upon the assertion that Kantian value theory is insufficient as a basis for our duties to the natural world. Intuitively, it seems that non-rational beings have *some* sort of non-instrumental value; ecologically, it seems an anthropocentric pretension to suggest that within the community of life, humans alone are intrinsically valuable.

The theorists discussed in the following sections all attempt to construct a value theory for environmental ethics upon a framework of Neo-Kantian individualist value, asserting the existence of objective intrinsic value of individuals. Value-ownership is expanded to varying degrees in an attempt to encompass nonhuman—and for some, non-sentient—living beings. These constitute valuable (pardon me) efforts to establish a value theory that evades the strict anthropocentrism implied by Kant, the sort of anthropocentrism that seems to validate the necessity of the very existence of an environmental ethic. However, derivation of an environmental ethic from a Kantian individualist value theory is complicated. Such an attempt must accept not only Kant’s metaethical framework but his metaphysics as well.<sup>1</sup> And as I will argue, none of these metaethical accounts is comprehensive or ecologically perceptive enough to serve as a foundation for a robust and coherent system of environmental ethics.

***b. Tom Regan: Moral Patienthood and Radical Animal Rights***

Tom Regan rejects the claim that non-rational beings can only be subjectively valuable. According to Kant, rational moral agents can both directly do right or wrong actions and be directly on the receiving end of right or wrong actions. Kant’s view—

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<sup>1</sup> The importance of a coherent metaphysics to a value theory for environmental ethics will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapter Three.

which Regan describes as an “indirect duty view” for environmental ethics—is characterized by a small moral community in which “all and only moral agents belong” (2004, 152). But in addition to the community of moral agents, our society is home to *moral patients*: beings who lack the traits that make them morally accountable. These beings are conscious and sentient and many possess cognitive and volitional abilities, but do not have a rational nature; moral patients can be subjects of wrong or right action by a moral agent, but they themselves cannot do right or wrong. Regan suggests that human infants, the mentally disabled, and young children are paradigm cases of moral patienthood (2004, 153). These humans have a sort of preference-autonomy, experiential welfare, and can act intentionally.

As discussed, Kant’s indirect duty view holds that membership within the moral community is limited exclusively to moral agents *and only moral agents*.

Thus, moral patients, even paradigm moral patients, are of no direct moral significance; we have no *direct* duties to them. Rather, if...we have duties involving moral patients...these are indirect duties that we have to moral agents. (Regan 2004, 154)

It’s clear, under this view, why in Kant’s formulation of value the nonhuman falls beyond the realm of moral consideration: all animals are moral patients.

Of course, Regan explains,

This does not mean that there are no moral constraints on what we may do to animals, any more than it means that there are no moral constraints on what we may do to those humans who are moral patients. It is simply to say that the grounds for why we may treat animals in some ways but not in others...are *not* to be located in how our actions directly affect them. It is only if or as what we do to them affects *moral*

*agents* that we can have a moral basis for deciding that some ways of treating animals [and human moral patients] are permissible while others are not. (2004, 155)

This succinctly introduces the next key piece of Regan's argument: the fact that there are nonhuman animals which possess *the same exact traits* as these human moral patients, and so the denomination "moral patient" in itself is non-species-specific: we subject both humans and animals to the classifications and descriptions of behavior and rationality which we use to determine moral agency. "Assuming that we have...reasons for denying that the human in question has the abilities necessary for moral agency [i.e. rational nature], we have reason to regard that human as a moral patient on all fours, so to speak, with animals" (Regan 2004, 154). Kant must be prepared to disqualify *human* moral patients just as readily as he disqualifies animals from the moral community on the basis of their non-rationality and incapacity for moral judgment.

Kant can't concede that "mistreating" an inanimate object is any different from mistreating a moral patient: both have only consequences in relation to how they effect moral agents. Kant suggests that someone cruel to animals does no direct wrong in their actions towards that animal; as discussed, the wrongness of such an action comes from the "damaging effect to one's humanity" and the risk that such behavior will affect one's interactions with other humans (Kant 2002, 410). To Kant, "cruel" action to an inanimate object (Regan uses the example of wanton destruction of a set of art supplies) could or would be wrong *for the exact same reasons*.

For Regan, this exposes the arbitrariness of Kant's position. Suppose that, in fact, that a moral agent is so satisfied from causing the suffering of human moral patients—

*things*—that they in turn become a sadist, which in turn leads them to cause a human moral agent agony in order to derive pleasure:

In order for the causal story to be at all plausible, we must suppose that human moral patients, like human moral agents, can suffer *and* that they can manifest their anguish behaviorally in ways that resemble the ways human moral agents behave when they are made to suffer. If their behavior is similar, however, as it must be if I am to be led from causing the one to suffer to causing the other to suffer, it is reasonable to believe that their suffering also is similar. (2004, 183)

Within Regan's system, the distinction between moral agency and moral patienthood is rational nature, *not* basic behavioral and/or experiential factors of autonomous conscious beings (such as the experience of pleasure and pain). This leads Regan to the conclusion:

If the suffering is similar, and if causing it in the case of moral agents violates a direct duty owed to them (as Kant allows), then how can we *nonarbitrarily* avoid the conclusion that causing suffering to human moral patients violates a direct duty to them?...The issue concerns [moral agents' and moral patients'] *shared* capacity for suffering, not their differing abilities. If the duty not to cause moral agents gratuitous suffering is a duty owed directly to them, the same must be true of the duty not to do the same to human moral patients. Otherwise we flaunt [Kant's] requirement of formal justice: we allow dissimilar treatment of *relevantly* similar cases. (2004, 183)

If we are to distinguish *all* human beings as ends in themselves and set a special status for humanity, we are again reduced to arbitrary judgement. Denial of direct duties to animal moral patients with experiential welfare and affirmation in the case of human moral patients, claims Regan, would be symptomatic of an arbitrary and “unsupportable” value theory. He suggests that if we are to our consideration of value is to encompass

non-rational humans, we must either draw a new “lowest common denominator” *or* conclude that non-rational humans lack a moral status entirely. Clearly, there are animal moral patients which hold equal or greater mental capacity than some human beings; how can we make the human/animal distinction without being arbitrary? Regan bites the bullet: we cannot make such a distinction.

Rather than reverting to a utilitarian metaphysics based in pleasure/suffering (which, based upon his argument above, seems to be the angle which he would pursue), Regan presents a restructured deontological value theory. He claims that we must draw a new common denominator for our moral community if we are to avoid excluding human moral patients, even though this means broadening the community to some animals. The expanded criterion for moral consideration is status as a *subject-of-a-life*. According to Regan, individual beings are subjects-of-a-life if they have:

...beliefs and desires; perceptions, memory, and a sense of the future, including their own future; an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain; preference- and welfare-interests; the ability to initiate action in pursuit of their desires and goals; a psychophysical identity over time; and an individual welfare in the sense that their experiential life fares well or ill *for them*, logically independently of their utility for others and logically independently of their being the object of anyone else’s interests. (2004, 244)

Human and animal moral patients, as defined by Regan, fit these criteria, and so ought to be considered members of the moral community of subjects regardless of their rational nature.

Regan claims that all subjects-of-a-life are irreducibly valuable as objective ends in themselves. He claims that his criterion for classification as a subject-of-a-life avoids

arbitrariness by (1) affirming that all moral agents and patients who are subjects-of-a-life have an existence that can be better or worse for *themselves* regardless of their subjective utility to others; (2) asserting that inherent value is categorical (i.e. not subject to gradation), and that all those who are subjects-of-a-life have inherent value and have it *equally*; and (3) our having direct duties to some (subjects-of-a-life) and lacking direct duties to others (non-subjects) can be based in the relevant similarity between moral agents and moral patients, and the failure of other living beings (towards whom we do not have direct duties) to qualify for subject-of-a-lifeness (2004, 245).

Our direct duties towards those with categorical inherent value are not contingent upon their species, and so all subjects-of-a-life—human or animal—are ends in themselves, are owed equal consideration and, as Kant requires, may not be treated as though their value were reducible to their utility for others. For Regan, this has concrete, obvious and far-reaching repercussions for duty (which, having already discussed his value theory, will not be elaborated in great detail here): animal subjects-of-a-life must be considered members of the same moral community as all human subjects-of-a-life and may not be used as means to a subjective human end. Some of the more obvious duties would be obligatory vegetarianism, an end to hunting and trapping, and prohibition on the use of animals in scientific testing.

However, these duties are contingent upon Regan's normative conferring of disvalue upon the experience of suffering or agony *as such*. This complicates his deontology: Regan asserts that our duties are derived from the moral standing of beings as subjects-of-a-life. Consideration as a subject-of-a-life, though, is contingent upon the

existence of suffering, and Regan's duties reflect an assumption that such suffering is inherently disvaluable. Are subjects-of-a-life objectively valuable? Or is suffering inherently disvaluable, and our moral obligations to subjects-of-a-life exist only in recognition of the reality that subjects-of-a-life *can experience* suffering?

For Kant, reason is the only activity which is inherently valuable, and reasoners (i.e. value conferrers) are objective ends-in-themselves. The Kantian structure, which Regan uses to frame his theory, is incompatible with his idea that suffering is inherently disvaluable and that *sufferers* are objective ends-in-themselves. Subjecthood-of-a-life is a condition determined by a certain experience *inflicted externally*, and so by nature value cannot be intrinsic to a given individual being. Regan's account only allows us to conclude that suffering is normatively, inherently disvaluable; therefore, non-suffering is normatively, inherently valuable.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine a scenario in which a human moral agent has a debilitating experience—a severe concussion, for example—which leaves them incapable of rational thought, while retaining the capacities as a moral patient which would qualify them as a subject-of-a-life. Kant would claim that in losing their rationality (and hence their status as value conferrers) they are disqualified from consideration as a moral agent. Whether Kant would hold that we have continued moral duties to that human is an argument for another time, but let us follow the same strict interpretation which Regan takes and suggest that for Kant this human could no longer be considered an inherently valuable, objective end-in-itself. Perhaps a moral agent—a family member, for example—values the continued

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<sup>2</sup> The disvalue of suffering and value of non-suffering will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapter Three.

well-being of this moral patient, but that value can only be instrumental and contingent upon the preferences of the rational value conferrer. In other words, the injured human can now only have externally conferred value.

For Regan, with capacity for suffering as the baseline for moral consideration (perhaps the moniker “subject-of-a-suffering-life” is more apt), we find that an account of objective intrinsic value is predicated upon the experience of externally inflicted, subjectively experienced disvalue. The internal condition of rationality or non-rationality in the human mentioned above has no bearing on their status as an inherently valuable subject-of-a-life; if their value comes from the experience of suffering, our duties come based upon the assumption that suffering should be avoided.<sup>3</sup> Regan’s expansion of inherent value from moral agents to subjects-of-a-life dissolves his very assertion that such subjects-of-a-life have objective inherent value in that it shifts the criterion for moral consideration from an objective to a subjective condition, which directly conflicts with the Kantianism he embraces.

One likely response is that for Kant, nonexistence of rationality equally implies the nonexistence of objective or unconditional value. Inarguably, this is so. For Kant, without rationality there would simply be no inherently valuable entity capable of valuing other goods. No categorical duties could or would exist between non-rational beings; the very idea of unconditional value and duty would be null. But if *capacity for suffering* is the basis of value, and suffering is normatively disvaluable even for non-rational beings,

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<sup>3</sup> Nonexistence of suffering, in this situation, seems to imply nonexistence of value. While Regan doesn’t address this issue, it will be considered in the positive account of value in Chapter Three.

then do non-rational subjects-of-a-life have duties regarding the suffering of other non-rational beings?

This is impossible: duty implies a will, a will implies autonomy, and autonomy implies rationality. Non-rational beings *cannot* have duties. Regan is explicit in his explanation that moral patients cannot do right or wrong moral actions, and so cannot have duties. It would seem, though, that Regan is suggesting that a moral patient causing another moral patient to suffer is inflicting a wrong. In our imagined non-rational world, there would exist inherent *goods* (e.g. non-suffering) and *bads* (e.g. suffering), and there would exist situations in which one being would cause goods or bads to another being, but paradoxically there could be no *rights* or *wrongs* in these interactions. Understanding suffering as an inherently negative condition seems to imply that it should be avoided—i.e. *that there are categorical duties regarding its avoidance*. Even in the real world—where rational actors do exist—it seems that not only is a non-rational being causing another non-rational being suffering “wrong,” but a rational being *failing to prevent this situation if they have the capacity to* is wrong as well. Duty is reduced to prevention of suffering (or promulgation of non-suffering), and Regan is reduced to utilitarianism.

My analysis may appear reductionist—Regan does not explicitly state that capacity for suffering itself is the sole criterion for a position as an inherently valuable subject-of-a-life, instead defining subjecthood-of-a-life as a state of being which includes possession of a number of traits, most critically “an experiential life [which] fares well or ill *for them*, logically independently of their utility for others and logically independently of their being the object of anyone else’s interests” (2004, 244). But experiential welfare,

preference-satisfaction and all of the other traits which Regan mentions as indicative of subject-of-a-lifelihood are susceptible to the same argument at suffering. A subject-of-a-life has no condition which makes it internally, objectively, inherently valuable *in and of itself*; it is only the perception of external conditions which give them value. And since non-rational subjects-of-a-life cannot confer value on their own ends, it must be the experiential goods or bads to which Regan refers which have some sort of inherent normative value—*not* the subjects-of-a-life themselves.

The Kantian concreteness—the justification of unconditional and objective value which Regan strives for—loses its clear depictions of value and duty when Regan strips it of its basis in the internal condition of rationality, and Regan finds himself in a philosophically incoherent grey area between Kantian rationalism and a broader subjective value theory. In addition, all of this ignores the utilitarian or consequentialist implications of Regan’s inherent valuation of non-suffering or other external conditions (a full discussion of Regan and utilitarianism is a very legitimate angle of criticism which is unfortunately beyond the scope of my own analysis).

Important to our later discussion is Regan’s consideration of the *breadth* of his value theory. But Regan is firm in that his view *is explicitly regarding the moral rights of individuals*, and so any broader holist or collectivist view which espouses species-centric or ecosystem-centric rights and value is inherently incompatible with his value theory. “Species are not individuals,” he asserts, “and the rights view does not recognize the moral rights of species to anything, including survival” (2004, 359). Regan charges such attempts to frame value on a broader scale than the individual unit—particularly J. Baird

Callicott's holism, which we will come to later—as “ecofascism,” in which the individual is sacrificed for the sake of the whole (2004, 362).

***c. Holmes Rolston, III: “Anthropocentric Biocentrism” and Organismal Value***

Rolston envisions a natural world which is fantastically, objectively value-laden, and every level of value—individual, species-based, systemic—has a corresponding value theory.<sup>4</sup> His value theory is multilayered and complicated, and can't be reduced to an elegant maxim such as Regan's or Paul Taylor's (to be discussed below). He isn't bothered by this: “a discriminating ethicist will insist on preserving the differing richness of valuational complexity, wherever found” (1988, 66).

Unlike Regan and Taylor, Rolston provides a positive account of environmental ethics which is open to a consideration of humans as morally distinct from other living beings. Humans exist in the world *ethically*, *cognitively* and *critically* as no other beings are. That is to say, humans are distinctive in their capacity to *consider*, *reflect*, and *do right and wrong in the world*.

“Ducklings,” for example,

...do not cause ecological crises as a result of mistaken world views. Bats are in the world as nothing else, with superior auditory senses. But humans can reflect on how bats are in the world; bats cannot reflect on how humans are in the world. The bat way of being does not have the scope that the human way has. (1988, 71)

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 2, *b*.

Humans have a unique metaphysical status in that they alone can do metaphysics, claims Rolston. Ecologically speaking, other animals are closed to surroundings outside of their own niche; we can take an interest in sectors remote from ours, or espouse a view of the whole. Humans, with this capacity for a transcendent overview, find themselves to possess a type of superiority which imposes explicit and complicated duties upon us, both within the human community and throughout the broader community of living beings.

Human superiority isn't a groundless prejudice to Rolston—each natural kind has equal fitness within its niche, but “equal fitness or goodness in differing niches does not imply equal value or goodness in the differing lives-in-context” (1988, 68). Humans, with their reason and their cultural capabilities, experience a greater range of values in their lives than “lower” organisms; Rolston suggests that the difference between two culturally valuable humans (his examples are Einstein and Jesus Christ) can be greater and “more interesting” (he doesn't clarify what he means by this) than the difference between two entirely distinct plant species. That is to say, some expanded capacity for higher-order reason leads to a greater number of possible experienced instrumental goods. For Rolston, a researcher performing experiments upon the least sentient animal possible—a rat rather than a chimpanzee, for example—is making a correct and permissible choice in recognizing that value is *subject to gradation based upon the range of possible life experiences*.

Human richness is holistic and can't be reduced to one integrated principle, says Rolston, but even though there are “transitional zones” between animal and human skills—in Regan's terms, moral patients—we don't assert that there is *no difference in value*

between humans and other sentient or even self-conscious animals. The fact that some humans lack the capacities which distinguish them from, say, chimpanzees, does not disqualify humankind as a whole from a distinctive status in their level of self-awareness. Again, in Regan's terms, we *do* recognize moral agents and moral patients as different, just as readily as we recognize "higher" moral patients (with greater self-consciousness and cognitive abilities, among other traits) and "lower" moral patients as distinct. In Rolston's world of valuation we find no hard lines, "no neatly specifiable, philosophical essences in evolutionary theory; what we find is a valued gestalt of features present in our species and absent in other species" (1988, 70).

Like Regan, we see that Rolston makes normative claims regarding these inequalities in value. The assertion that a broad range of life experiences somehow corresponds to greater values is to place positive value upon number of life experiences. Perhaps we do accept that life experiences are valuable, and maybe we extrapolate from this that that a greater number of valuable life experiences is yet more valuable. This *still* doesn't explain Rolston's assertion that value is dependent upon breadth of *possible* life experiences—that is a standalone normative claim.

Still, Rolston claims that his gradated value theory, despite its outward appearance of anthropocentrism, finds value in *all* beings, and his threshold of value ownership is far lower than Regan's. Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, perhaps one of the earliest animal rights advocates, claimed that "the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?" (2004). For Rolston, "The question is not, Can they suffer? but, Are they alive?" (1988, 96). Humans aren't distinct in that they have value where other

organisms do not; they are distinct in that they have *greater levels of the same value* which every living thing bears. This raises a potential slippery slope: if all beings have value, but there are no hard lines in our valuation, what distinguishes living organisms, even the most simple prokaryote, from nonbiotic matter? Rolston responds that there is no single characteristic to which we can point, only a “gestalt of features” such as the status of organisms as self-maintaining, reproducing, negentropic systems which “suck order out of their environment,” “pump out disorder” (1988, 97), resist dying, and internalize and maintain order.<sup>5</sup>

Rolston’s primary thesis is as follows: organisms are *teleological normative systems*, with their ends coded in their genetic information. That is, a living thing has “*information* superintending [its] causes” (1988, 98)—its ends exist evolutionarily, whether or not those ends are immediately apparent (even to the organism itself). The organism is like a book in that it internalizes all of its “written codes” (nucleotide bases). It is unlike a book in that it self-actualizes this information. Even “objective organisms”—non-sentient living beings—are “objects-with-will;” their lack of subjectivity has nothing to do with their capacity to flourish or be harmed in their “pursuit” of their *telos*. A Rolstonian organism, in his words, is a *projective system*.

Rolston’s description of living organisms is contingent upon the supposition that all beings are teleological, and so even the simplest living beings are “objects-with-will.” The first problem with this is diction: “objects-with-will” suggests agency. A non-subjective organism can, perhaps, be an object-with-*aims*—it has an “interest” in its own

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<sup>5</sup> What, exactly, constitutes a living organism is discussed in Chapter 3, *b*.

flourishing, and aims, consciously or not, to flourish. If Rolston is correct, then the being has evolutionarily predetermined ends and an evolutionarily predetermined behavior which *aims* to fulfill those ends. But to describe an object-with-*will* is to say that the non-sentient (certainly non-rational) organism in question can *set those ends for itself*. We deny that non-sentient beings have such a capacity, even if they are indeed teleological organisms.

The assertion that all living beings are teleological, however, is difficult in itself. Non-sentient beings—if we are to say that they have ends—obviously cannot set their own ends. But possession of ends can't be the criterion for intrinsic value; even if a sentient being is setting its own ends, those would be subjective instrumental ends, and so any *telos* would be rooted in subjectivism. The sadist would be realizing his or her good by causing others to fail to do just that—in this case, by suffering. Neither sentient nor non-sentient beings can be said to set their own ends in a way which appeals to Rolston's desired objectivity in teleological ends.

In this case, we find that we must either draw a distinction between rational or sentient beings and non-sentient beings, or appeal to some broader norm which governs what the ends of a given organism or set of organisms are. *From where* does the “information which superintends the causes”—and, by extension, the ends—of each living being come? Rolston claims that each being's good is determined evolutionarily (1988, 98). But it is biologically and ecologically fallacious to assume that the product of evolution is an array of discrete individuals, each with a good of their own, and Rolston knows this. What we find instead, if we are to stay within Rolston's framework, are

norms which governs each *species*' ends as predetermined by evolution. Each being is normatively teleological *according to its species kind*.<sup>6</sup>

Rolston, in fact, suggests just this, compounding species ends upon individual ends, and hence species value upon individual value. An individual's ends are based in kind upon the evolved norms of its species, each individual is defined as a teleological projective system, and Rolston claims that *each teleological projective system is intrinsically valuable*. A paradox: for Rolston, individuals *are only teleological* insofar as they are members of a species which has norms which govern that species' ends, and therefore *are only valuable as individuals* based upon the existence of species-centric normative ends. This complicates Rolston's claim that individuals are intrinsically valuable, as that value seems, at least in part, derived from their place in a species as a whole. In maintaining that each being has a *telos*, Rolston must concede that viewing the individual as a discrete teleological system is inconsistent with evolutionary biology and the value theory he derives from it<sup>7</sup>.

As touched on previously, Rolston (like Regan) claims that these individual normative organisms have intrinsic value in and of themselves, despite their embedded existences as members of distinct species within interconnected ecosystems.

We want to affirm...that the living individual, taken as a "point experience" in the web of interconnected life, is per se an intrinsic value. A life is defended for what it is in itself, without necessary further contributory reference...The organism has something that it is

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<sup>6</sup> Species kind, and its role in Rolston's holistic account of value, is discussed further in the next chapter.

<sup>7</sup> Supposing that a species has a teleology presents a number of problems, particularly the essentialist nature which belies the assumption that each species has a static, cohesive, coherent teleological end. Again, I will address this further in Chapter 2.

conserving, something for which it is standing: its life...There seems to be no reason why such own-standing normative organisms are not morally significant. (1988, 100)

Unlike Regan, Rolston's lowest common denominator for individual possession of objective intrinsic value isn't sentience; it's *that which defends itself*, external subjective reference notwithstanding. Furthermore,

Being an organism is sufficient to [command our moral attention]... Whether or not there is *Nature-as-a-whole*, there evidently are specific *natures* programmed into each species, exemplified in individual organisms, so that each organism has its own good. Such goods are value that claim our respect. (1988, 100-101)

Rolston's account of value is broad, confusingly so. He argues that living individuals have intrinsic value; he also asserts that such value is gradated based upon the range of possible life experiences, with a broader range of possible experiences corresponding to greater value in a given organism. Rolston uses the term "value" comprehensively, but it seems like here he is describing two types of value. The first is the intrinsic value of individual organisms—of life—which Rolston derives from their teleological self-perpetuation. The second is species-specific value (for humans, this includes "cultural value"). Rolston uses the latter *to determine the former*: in his example of Jesus Christ and Albert Einstein, he suggests that humans have greater (type-one, intrinsic) value than other species because of the fantastic variety of (type-two, culturally) valuable experiences which they may realize in their lives.

When we sort through it, Rolston's individual value theory is somewhat self-contradictory. For him, there exists a minimum of objective intrinsic value which every

being, even the simplest prokaryote, possesses. But the *amount* of this value which a being has is based upon instrumentally—non-intrinsically—valued experiences.

Therefore, greater possibility for instrumentally valuable experiences equals greater intrinsic value. Rolston makes the objective contingent upon the subjective, the concrete upon the contextual. In this picture, intrinsic value seems reducible to subjective instrumental value.

A broader range of possible life experiences suggests a broader range of things that can be instrumentally valuable, but—Rolston says—this range is variable from species to species, with rational humans at the top of this inverse pyramid. Rolston uses this to justify his claims of human superiority, despite the existence of human moral patients. Humans *as a species*, he says, can experience a greater range of (instrumental) values in their lives. But he goes on to say that each individual organism must be taken as a “point experience,” with a good of its own that is distinctive and not contingent upon its ecology. The slippery slope is evident: by gradating value by possible valuable life experiences, we imply that not only distinct species but distinct *individuals* can be ordered, top-to-bottom, by amount of intrinsic value. This creates an unsettling image of a fantastic hierarchy in which every living thing has more or less intrinsic value than any other. We would find a supremely rational and culturally attuned human at the pinnacle of value; the most debilitated prokaryote would be at the bottom.

This all comes back to the idea that range of possible values determines overall instrumental value, a framework that simply doesn't function. There is no coherent manner in which we can make the leap from individually valuable goods—instrumental

values—to intrinsic value. The two exist in different spheres: the former subjective and the latter objective. Rolston’s attempt to combine these domains leads not to a “profound” value theory but to convolution (2001, 243).

To summarize Rolston’s claims: his value theory for individuals grants a minimum of intrinsic value to everything with a life, subject or not, and a gradient of value based—seemingly—upon the number of goods which a being can actualize. The baseline is continued existence; the pinnacle is reason, complex thought, removed interest, and the whole gambit of human-specific cognitive experiences. Rolston’s value theory, however, suffers from internal inconsistencies as well as serious metaphysical concerns—particularly regarding his classification of what constitutes “life” and his conception of value as linked to teleology and “projective systems.” We will consider these issues, along with his holistic account of “Nature-as-a-whole” and its value, in the next two chapters.

#### ***d. Paul Taylor: Biocentric Egalitarianism***

Paul Taylor, like Rolston, claims that all living beings are teleological systems or entities, and can experience benefits or harms. And like Regan, to Taylor individuals are the only units which can be considered as such:

If individual organisms have a good that can be furthered, then *statistically* it is intelligible to speak of furthering the good of a whole species-population. The population has no good of its own, independently of the good of its members...whenever the good of an entire species-population is referred to, we must always keep in mind that it is individual organisms that alone comprise the actual entities

that have a good definable independently of the good of any other entities.” (1986, 69)

Any teleological being with a good of its own—anything living—has what Taylor defines as *inherent worth* (1986, 72). This isn’t equivalent to *intrinsic value*, which Taylor defines as a positive value placed upon that which conscious beings pursue *as* an end in itself. *Beings* don’t have intrinsic value; *activities* carried on for their own sake do. Inherent worth is also distinct from *inherent value*, which is *value conferred upon an object*. The existence of inherent value is contingent upon the existence of Kantian value conferrers. Such value is only “inherent” in that it is independent of any instrumental value. Both intrinsic and inherent value, according to Taylor, “must be relativized to the subjective valuing of conscious beings”; both exist only in relation to sentient subjects (1986, 74).

Taylor’s *inherent worth* is distinct: to say that a thing—a being, rather—has inherent worth is to say that a state of affairs in which that being’s good is realized is better than a similar state of affairs in which its good is not realized, *independently* of its being valued intrinsically, inherently or instrumentally by a sentient being. Inherent worth in Taylor’s system, however, is defined as some “mysterious sort of objective property belonging to living beings” which is distinct from a teleology (1986, 75). While Taylor seems to be a Kantian, we can contrast his conception of value to Kant’s: Kant states that inherent value/worth is unconditioned and all other value is conferred and thus conditional. Only the source of all value can be unconditional and inherent—for Kant, this source is rational nature itself. But isn’t Taylor normatively conferring value

(“inherent worth”) upon living beings? Taylor doesn’t provide a firm argument for his assertion that all living beings have inherent worth, although he mentions in a footnote that his definition of “inherent worth” is structurally analogous to Regan’s account of “inherent value” (1986, 75).

J. Baird Callicott, to whom we will return in Chapter 2, briefly critiques Taylor’s value theory. Taylor claims that inherent *worth*, unlike intrinsic value or inherent value, can only be “attributed” to beings with a good of their own. Callicott sees the same issue as I do here, and he draws attention to Taylor’s obfuscating language: “attribute” implies that there are attributing subjects, without which there would be no inherent worth. But Taylor goes on to state explicitly that inherent worth has no dependence upon a valuer. He is reduced to a dogmatic defense of the idea that beings with a good of their own have objective inherent worth, using Kantian reasoning to derive *is* and *ought*: a being with a good of its own has inherent worth, and hence we have duties to it (1999, 255).

Taylor goes on to state that the existence of living things—and therefore of inherent value—in itself entails a pair of duties:

(1) That the entity is deserving of moral concern and consideration... that it is to be regarded as a moral subject...(2) that all moral agents have a prima facie duty to promote or preserve the entity’s good as an end in itself and for the sake of the entity whose good it is...not only are we disposed to give the respectful consideration to its existence in nature as a wild creature, but we also see ourselves as bearing a moral relation to it such that we acknowledge the claim-to-be-respected which its existence makes upon us. (1986, 76)

Although it isn’t articulated as such, for Taylor the lowest common denominator of moral consideration seems to be those beings *with a good of their own*. Rolston

proposes something like this as well, but for him the *amount* of value is variable based upon the number of realizable goods which each being can experience.

Taylor, though, does not discriminate, gradate or hierarchize based upon number of possible goods—or upon anything, for that matter. His moral principles for environmental ethics are established through direct extrapolation of a Kantian ethical structure, replacing “moral agents” with “beings with inherent worth.” Kantian moral agents are equally and unequivocally valuable between one another; Taylor claims that all living beings have a good of their own, and therefore all living beings are *equally* intrinsically valuable. It follows from this that all living beings, equally valuable, are due *equal consideration*.

Taylor’s value theory and environmental ethic, he claims, follow from a “biocentric outlook.” This biocentric outlook is multilayered: those who take such an outlook believe that humans are members of the Earth’s biotic community “in the same sense and on the same terms in which other living things are members;” we believe that all species are integral pieces of an interdependent system, such that the survival of any one thing is determined by its relationship to other living things; we believe that all organisms are teleological centers of life; we believe that humans are not inherently superior to any other beings (1986, 99-100). Rational moral agents will accept these beliefs, says Taylor, based solely upon their “rationality, factual enlightenment and reality-awareness” (1986, 100).

Some of these “beliefs” can be validated as empirical ecological truths. Indeed, the first tenant of ecology is that *everything is connected* within an interdependent

system, and it seems impossible to debate whether a factually enlightened moral agent would accept this. We could, reasonably enough, claim that it is ecologically consistent to say that humans are members of the biotic community in the same sense as all other members. We could even extrapolate this claim to say, as I imagine Taylor would, that *all* organisms are *equally* members of the biotic community and so equally subject to its norms and processes.

The other ideas which Taylor's biocentric outlook demands, however, cannot be considered ecological norms. Like Rolston, Taylor claims that all organisms are teleological centers of life. Rolston provides a metaethical defense—albeit a flawed one—of why this would be so. Taylor doesn't attempt this. We are left with the positive, arbitrary claim that moral agents who are rational, factually enlightened and reality-aware will simply *recognize* that all organisms are teleological. The same holds for the claim that humans are not inherently superior to other living beings. It is a bold and intriguing statement, made by a number of environmental ethicists, but in this case Taylor makes no effort to explain *why* this would be so. I presume that his defense would be a function of the equal consideration clause of his value theory, but it seems just as plausible to me that equal value (“inherent worth”) does not implicitly mean nonsuperiority of one being or another. Unfortunately, Taylor's lack of elaboration, as well as the dearth of ethicists who defend a biocentric egalitarian standpoint, makes it difficult to consider these assumptions and assertions in full.

Biocentric egalitarianism is deeply attractive in its radicalism. It is an example of an environmental ethic which in application would make humans dramatically reassess

their standing in the natural world, particularly in its equality clause. The notion that the life of a human being holds no more worth than the life of a fish, tree or microbe is profound—and profoundly complicated—in its implications, and a well-articulated biocentric egalitarian theory could precipitate a vastly different worldview and set of duties or obligations. The difficulty with Taylor’s theory is that it simply *isn’t* well-articulated. Biocentric egalitarianism lacks weight as a theory in part because it lacks a good defense. Perhaps it is indeed indefensible, or maybe just tremendously complicated. Regardless, Taylor’s account is shot through with gaps and inconsistencies that go beyond the major problems of individualism which we’ve addressed.

***e. Conclusion: Individualism and Ecology***

Each of the preceding theories faces its own specific problems in conceptualizing and defending a robust value theory. Despite the fact that some have finely articulated positive accounts of what an environmental ethic should look like *if* their value theory were correct, none of the theorists discussed so far seem to have a value theory coherent enough to serve as a firm foundation for their own environmental ethics. None are able to escape Kant’s world in which there can be no objective intrinsic value in non-rational things, despite Regan’s (I would say obvious) intuition that human moral patients are intrinsically valuable, and Rolston and Taylor’s (again, intuitive) sense that other living beings have *some sort* of intrinsic value. Kant is able to establish a rational requirement to value rational moral agents; Taylor can’t seem to achieve a rational requirement to value all “teleological centers of a life.” Whereas Regan, Rolston and Taylor are all

looking for an account of objective intrinsic value, all of their accounts are, from Kant's point of view, reducible to subjective value.

The reason that none of these value theories can supersede Kant's is that *they all rely upon Kant*, or at least upon the paradigm which Kant embodies. Such deontological systems are inherently reductive in that their units of concern are and *can only be* individual beings. This ethical—and arguably political and spiritual—framework has defined nearly the past two centuries of western philosophical thought.

But environmental ethics is a rather new and burgeoning philosophical field with roots in our rather new ecological knowledge. Environmental ethicists cannot afford to disregard this fact in an attempt to fit a pre-established ethical system. The individualist paradigm, it could fairly be said, hasn't been a beneficial guide for our actions towards and interactions with the world in which we are embedded. This last part is the key point: ecology presents an image of the world vastly different from a Kantian collection of individual organisms. The ecologically perceptive worldview, which envisions all living beings as members of a dynamic system, is inherently incompatible with intrinsic-value individualism.

Drawing the sciences into the realm of ethics is controversial, to say the least.

Michael Thompson articulates this issue:

In employing such [scientific] notions...we introduce something *foreign*, in particular something 'biological', into ethical theory. Any such view, one thinks, must involve either a vulgar scientific dissolution of the ethical, tending maybe towards and 'evolutionary ethics', or else the substitution of an outdated metaphysics for what we know to be empirical. Each path leads to its own absurdities. Together they may be thought to betray a yearning to view our practices 'from

outside' or 'from sideways on' in hope perhaps of providing them with a foundation of an external grounding. (1995, 252)

Acknowledgement of empirical ecology, I believe, is not in the least an “external grounding” for environmental ethics but a necessary internal condition for environmental ethics to exist *at all*. At risk of “absurdity,” then, I assert that a substitution of a Kantian individualist metaphysics in exchange for a metaphysics consistent with ecological understanding is the *only* way in which we can articulate a defensible environmental ethic, or *any* environmental ethic for that matter. Our metaphysics—and the value theory and environmental ethic which follow from it—must be coherent with what we can observe, and this includes ecology. Individualist value theories do not and cannot succeed in this regard. In the following chapter, I will consider the holist response to the problems presented by individualism.





## Chapter Two: Holistic and Systemic Value

### *a. Aldo Leopold and J. Baird Callicott: The Land Ethic*

As discussed in the previous chapter, individualist value theories are faced with a twofold problem: their only proponent who presents an internally consistent account of individual value is Kant, and Kantian value theories are explicitly *not* consistent with non-instrumental natural value. All of the Neo-Kantian individual value theories presented limit us to an account of value which must be purely instrumental. Holism seems to be the natural response to the individualist paradigm. Its roots, however, predate Regan, Rolston and Taylor's attempts to articulate a Neo-Kantian individualist value theory.

Aldo Leopold, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was perhaps the first to express on a broad scale and in layman's terms the concept of a biotic community (nowadays taken for granted in ecology, as well as environmental ethics) in his normative description of—and plea for—a “land ethic.” Ethics, says Leopold, have their origin in “the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of co-operation” (42). A land ethic would mandate an expansion of the boundaries of human ethics to the human environment in its totality. Leopold states that humans, as members of the biotic community, must holistically consider all living beings *as well as* the natural non-living structures with which they interact (“the land”) in their moral system.

Leopold asserts that we recognize our place within the biotic community. This community, says Leopold, is characterized by energy flows, intricate internal

connections, a systematic nature, and an indispensability to human survival. For these reasons, the biotic community is intrinsically valuable. For Leopold our prescribed moral code is simple: “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the land [i.e. the biotic community]. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (2001, 48).

Leopold’s normative vision of what a land ethic *would look like* is philosophically tantalizing but has lacks any sort of metaethical defense, and not until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did J. Baird Callicott attempt to formalize Leopold’s ideas as an environmental ethic.

Callicott offers a sharp critique of individualist value theories. He blames the prominence of such thought upon the “antiquated” and “atomistic” conception of the natural world promulgated by Kantian metaphysics. Understanding the world as such presents us with a picture in which moral issues concern inevitable clashes between the interests of separate, irreducibly intrinsically valuable beings (1989, 22). Intrinsic-value theories are remnants from prior to the expansion of ecology as a discipline, says Callicott, and by extension from the holistic vision it embodies in its study of relationships. Callicott says that we can, in a philosophically consistent and scientifically rational manner, express our understanding of the “landscape”—the biotic community—as an “articulate unity” (1989, 22). The biotic community is integrated in that each of its participants (individuals) are interdependent to the point where distinct systems in distinct biomes develop distinct characteristics.

Even if we are able to derive intrinsic value for each individual being, it does not follow that *species* can be valued, or *systems*. That is to say, avoiding actions which will lead a species to extinction—something which we intuit as valuable—can only be incidental and instrumental if based upon a solely “life-respecting” ethic (1989, 146). An ecologically encompassing ethic would be inconsistent if its metaethical basis were exclusively a life-valuing ethic and not a systemic one, says Callicott.

Callicott points out that the common thread between most intrinsic-value theories is that they both seem to draw a sharp distinction between the morally considered and the morally inconsequential, shaping a sort of all-or-nothing view of our duties to living beings. Callicott finds himself concerned with these firm lines between the morally worthwhile and the morally irrelevant (1989, 20). The problem, he claims, is the fact that environmental ethicists are attempting to formulate a moral system by applying antiquated ethical theories and frameworks—theories, says Callicott, which spring from the same antiquated, anthropocentric, atomist, pre-ecological worldview mentioned earlier. We find a reapplication of the very theories which have dominated the ethical foreground throughout the progression of anthropogenic ecological destruction.

Prior to the emergence of the science of ecology...nature was perceived as a mere collection of objects....Natural things, thus, had either an indifferent value, a positive utilitarian resource value, or a negative value....Ecology has...brought into being a new natural paradigm. The natural world is now perceived as a living whole. The myriad species, previously conceived as haphazardly scattered upon an inert landscape, relating catch-as-catch-can, are now conceived as intimately conjoined, specifically adapted to one another, to types of soil and parameters of climate....We human beings exist within the natural or biotic community; certainly we cannot exist outside it... (1989, 126)

From this *is* of ecological knowledge and environmental science, Callicott derives the moral *ought* of a land ethic. Callicott, incidentally, appeals to David Hume: “As Hume observed, not only have we sympathy for our fellows, we also are naturally endowed with a sentiment, the proper object of which is society itself” (1989, 126). The ecological point of view changes our values (i.e. our sympathies) by changing our concepts of our relation to the world (i.e. the objects of our sentiments).

Callicott proposes “bio-empathy” as an alternative metaethic, a Humean-Darwinian system which Leopold suggested, less formally, in describing an ethic as “a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence” (1989, 149). We find an ethic derived from a Humean common sentiment, but arisen from natural selection—more specifically, “group selection.” In an evolutionary context, the most viable and successful groups (of humans) were those who held sympathies or altruistic tendencies, and as those groups extended so did their social instincts. Callicott says that we can see this in application in today’s global society—for example, in the concept of “human rights” (1989, 149).

Callicott argues that a value theory derived from such a bio-evolutionary perspective provides the basis for an extension of the idea of human rights and value to other species; indeed, it is the basis for a modern, non-anthropocentric ethical system. The evidence is biological: we feel certain sympathies for other living beings, which indicates that we have evolved at the least a basic “kin tendency” towards the other members of our biotic community. Rational humans all have the evolutionary capacity for disinterested altruism, he says, but the objects of these affections are variable. For that

reason, in conjunction with our evolved moral sentiment, there must be a rational, cognitive expansion in the interpretation of “community” to accommodate the systemic, Leopoldian “biotic community.”

In this account, what bears value in Callicott’s Leopoldian ethical model is the biosphere itself—the biotic community—as a functioning system. The worth of any discrete being is not static and intrinsic; it varies according to that being’s function within the system and contribution to the system: “the preciousness of individual [beings]...is inversely proportional to the population of the species” (1989, 22). We encounter the law of diminishing returns when considering the value of individuals: the lives of two dozen white-tailed deer may be incredibly valuable to preserving the integrity, stability and beauty of a prairie biome, but two hundred deer may be incredibly detrimental; each additional deer lowers the value of every deer in the population beyond a certain threshold.

Callicott’s move away from an individualist account of value is, I think, a reasonable and perceptive one. However, the metaethic he uses to structure his holistic account of value is problematic, to say the least.

First, Callicott argues that the antiquity of the Kantian paradigm—and its pre-ecological development—is to blame for the impossibility of its integration into an environmental ethic. But he responds with a value theory that is explicitly Humean. This complicates his “antiquated” claim by virtue of the fact that a) Hume’s ethics *precedes* Kant’s chronologically, and b) Kant’s ethics were in large part a response to Hume.

Leopold's attempt to articulate a distinct holist value theory in turn forces us to revisit Kant/Hume and reason/sentiment distinctions (as we will below).

Callicott (and Hume) argues that we human beings naturally feel a sympathy towards other human beings, a feeling of care and empathy, to which the natural reaction is altruism. But Callicott, going beyond Hume, defines the origin of this sentiment as evolutionary. Though he doesn't enumerate it specifically, Callicott refers to an oft-discussed topic in both moral philosophy and evolutionary biology: biological altruism. This is a field, like environmental ethics, in which scientific understanding and ethics intersect, and I think it merits some discussion.

Biological altruism is the understanding of altruism not as an intrinsic sentimental capacity, but as an evolved biological mechanism to ensure the propagation of a given species or gene. That is to say, its structure is analogous to a Humean conception of sentimental altruism, but its basis is distinct. Unlike other theories of altruism, the biological conception suggests that there is not actually an emotional or rational aspect to the act of helping another being—the action is defined as altruistic if it decreases one's own potential reproductive fitness for the sake of improving that of another.

Biological altruism is confronted by the “paradox of altruism:” natural selection must be responsible for passing down altruism, a trait which lowers its possessor's reproductive fitness. So, shouldn't this trait have eliminated itself through natural selection? A standard example is the Vervet monkey:

[Some] Vervet monkeys give alarm calls when they see predators, but others do not....By selfishly refusing to give an alarm call, a monkey can reduce the chance that it will itself be attacked, while at the same

time benefiting from the alarm calls of others. So we should expect natural selection to favour those monkeys that do not give alarm calls over those that do....How did the alarm-calling behaviour evolve in the first place, and why has it not been eliminated by natural selection? (Okasha 2009)

Vervet monkeys—like any species which displays altruism—are subject to what is known as the “free rider” problem: a number of selfish individuals reap the benefits of the altruistic actions of others, thereby increasing their own reproductive fitness at the expense of others. Shouldn't the selfish genetic material, then, be the most prominent?

A solution to this is known as *kin selection*, which Callicott uses to refer to biological altruism in general. Animals (like humans) that are raised in familial groups have a predilection towards the well-being of that group. Altruism, then, serves to benefit one's own “kin” group—family and friends—and by extension the continuation of the species within such a group. Our self-interest is limited by the interests of our kin. This implies that, despite an ability to self-sacrifice, our actions are not motivated by benevolence but the well-being of our kin. In this way, proponents of biological altruism can avoid the paradox of altruism:

When an organism carrying the altruistic gene shares his food, there is a certain probability that the recipients of the food will also carry copies of that gene....The gene causes an organism to behave in a way which reduces its own fitness but boosts the fitness of its relatives - who have a greater than average chance of carrying the gene themselves. So the overall effect of the behaviour may be to increase the number of copies of the altruistic gene found in the next generation, and thus the incidence of the altruistic behaviour itself. (Okasha 2009)

The theory of kin selection has been sharpened by biologists to focus more directly upon genes over groups. Richard Dawkins terms it the “selfish gene” theory (1981, 556). Genes aren’t selfish in the way we imagine humans, as a demeanor or type of action: genes are universally selfish and seek their own propagation. Selfish gene altruism is as intrinsic and as disinterested as Hume would imagine it. However, it only involves sentiment insofar as we have genetic predilections towards certain sentiments, and such sentiments are evolutionary mechanisms for the propagation of a given genome.

The proponent of biological altruism can account for altruistic behavior towards immediate genetic relatives, then, but what of those outside of our circle of kinship? The solution proposed by most biologists is “reciprocal altruism:” altruistic behavior appears in circumstances in which it is likely to be reciprocated. The monkey picks lice off the backs of others because this provides them with the assured benefit of receiving the same (Okasha 2009).

But how, for example, can we explain adoption in human societies? Imagine that I adopt a child from an orphanage on the other side of the country. I would be altruistic to this child just as I would to my biological child - imagine that I have one, in fact, and that I treat them the very same. Shouldn’t my selfish genes predilect me to favor my biological child, the bearer of my genetic code, and to act (at best) altruistically to the child only if guaranteed reciprocal benefit? Certainly, it can be argued that our hereditary altruism is imperfect and would cause me to act the same to both children simply for seeing them both as my children. This, however, dodges the greater factor at play: namely, that the adopted child is not actually related to me, regardless of how I act

towards it. Biological altruism fails at the cultural level to explain our altruistic actions to non-kin.

On that same line, what about close friends, the type whom I would take a bullet for? Surely my selfish genome cannot benefit from this sort of action either. Even if, as the earlier objection would probably assert, my genetic altruism mistakes this friend for a brother – in fact, even if he is my brother - dying for him would not do my genome as much good as letting him die and living on to reproduce. Besides, how would this sort of mistaken altruism have survived natural selection in the first place? Surely this altruistic error is worthless from a selfish gene standpoint? Peter Singer cites a joke by J.B.S. Haldane, who said that he would be ready to lay down his life for “two of his brothers, four of his nephews, or eight of his first cousins” (1982, 48). This, he says, would do no harm to his own genes’ potential for survival. The fact is, selfish gene altruism can only go so far in justifying benevolent actions, and is almost impossible to reconcile with total self-sacrifice without the sort of absurd biological calculations which Haldane makes.

Even if we were to concede that altruism to friends or adopted children is just grossly misdirected selfish gene altruism, we still can’t explain inter-species altruism. In a real-world example, my friend once came across a bird with a broken wing which had clearly been hit by a car as it was flying across the road. The bird couldn’t fly at all. My friend, generally a very caring and benevolent person, scooped the bird up, brought it home, and set it in a shoebox in the garage. He made a splint for the wing with a popsicle stick and string and bought some fishing worms from the hardware store to feed it. Once it was again healthy, he released it onto his deck and then checked on it until it flew away.

He never saw it again. Biological altruism cannot explain why he went through all of this for the sake of a bird from which he can be guaranteed of absolutely no reciprocal benefits, no increased possibility of genetic survival.

To return to Callicott's value theory: when we take a deeper look at biological altruism and the issues to which it is susceptible, we come to see the problems with its application to Callicott's metaethics. In considering our empathetic, valuing sentiments evolutionary, Callicott tries to give them an alternative grounding, similar to but distinct from Hume. For Hume, things are valuable *because we feel certain sentiments towards them*. For Callicott, we have *evolved sentiments regarding things of value*, and feel certain sentiments for evolutionary reasons. In this respect, Callicott says that value is "humanly conferred but not necessarily homocentric" (1989, 151). It seems that Callicott is suggesting that, rather than responding to objective value, we—humans—confer value upon the biosphere itself.

According to biological or selfish gene altruism, any sentiment of valuation which we feel *can only* exist in relation to some evolutionary predisposition to propagate the individual gene.<sup>8</sup> It seems clear to me that if this is our value theory then there is only one intrinsic value: the propagation of that gene.

Basing value on sentiment makes value entirely subjective. Callicott talks about a "rational expansion" of our kin-altruistic sentiments based upon our scientifically enlightened notion of "community." But given Callicott's theory of value, which is based upon natural sentiments, it isn't clear how we can achieve anything more than a

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<sup>8</sup> There are also "mistakes" which float free from their original target; consider sex divorced from procreation. Still, these mistakes are products of an evolutionary predisposition linked to propagation of a given genetic code.

subjective, instrumental valuation of the biotic community. The biotic community may be instrumentally valuable to me and my kin in terms of its enabling the propagation of my genome. However, there is *no rational requirement* to “expand our sentiments” and care about the biotic community itself—and if we have no bio-empathetic sentiment to do so, then what reason do we have to consider the biotic community valuable? Kant can use an account of objective intrinsic value to establish rational requirements; Callicott’s bio-empathy can’t lead us to an account of value in which the biotic system itself is to be valued intrinsically.

Callicott appeals to Hume, but this only complicates things further. Both sides of Callicott’s bio-empathy confront the same problems: Humean value is based upon sentiment, and Hume’s sentimental value is susceptible to the problem of its *internal* grounding in our personal emotional reactions. Biological altruism is grounded internally as well, in our very genome. But what of those who simply *don’t experience certain sentiments*—Hume’s “sensible knave” (1998, 192)? The Humean sadist feels no affection for human life, just as the biological (non)altruist can abandon its kin, sacrifice its own life, or simply be the Vervet monkey which doesn’t make an alarm call. That is to say nothing of other living beings or of systems. Some of us feel certain sentiments towards other beings; others do not. Callicott doesn’t admit that kin sentiment *isn’t universal*, he just assumes that we *ought*, evolutionarily, to hold such a sentiment.

Suppose that we ignore the problems of putting Hume in an evolutionary context and simply accept that, yes, we humans feel affection towards both other humans and (some) other living beings. It’s still not clear how Callicott can articulate a value theory

which can assign intrinsic value to systems. First, if sentiment is conflated with value, why is a *rational* expansion of what we feel sentiment towards necessary? If the biotic community itself is valuable, shouldn't we feel some specific, evolved sentiment towards it? Second, how do we get from ecological knowledge to the value of systems? Suppose that we *can* make the direct jump from ecology to metaethics. We still cannot find intrinsic value in systems themselves. Per Leopold—and Callicott, by extension—that which is intrinsically valuable is the “integrity, stability and beauty” of the biotic community, *not* the community itself.<sup>9</sup>

Leopold's promise of a land ethic and Callicott's account of intrinsic value are distinctive, exciting, and lacking metaethically. Though a promising idea, there is no compelling defense of *why* the biotic community bears intrinsic value. The value theory which Callicott presents seems to have been hastily conceived and added after the fact to serve as a justification—rather than a basis—for his environmental ethic. In the next chapter, I will give an account of holistic value which could potentially fill this gap and serve as a coherent value theory for a holist ethic like Callicott's.

### ***b. Rolston: Projective Nature and Systemic Value***

Holmes Rolston III's account of systemic value is more or less a direct expansion of his individualist value theory. Rolston's metaethical approach is distinctive in that his valuation takes on *simultaneously* an individual and a systemic view, with the latter based upon the former. That shouldn't be taken to mean that broader value or values are

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<sup>9</sup> We could make a claim here that, given the goods of “integrity, stability and beauty,” a land ethic would be a consequentialist account of value. I won't go any further than to simply draw attention to this consideration.

reducible to individual value, as Regan and Taylor suggest, or that individual value is contingent upon systemic value, like Callicott argues. Rather, Rolston's intends to grant *simultaneous* value to individuals, species, and systems, and the structure of his value theory is similar for all three.

For Rolston, species meet the same criterion for value as individual objective organisms: they are teleological, objectively informed processes with evolutionarily predetermined ends (1988, 150).<sup>10</sup> The genetic code which each individual possesses is the "property" of that individual's species. We can understand species, then, as individuals in a metasystem, each with their own distinct *telos* and form of life. Biologically asserted identity, says Rolston, is collective: we define individuals in terms of their species, not the other way around.

Rolston, though he doesn't say it explicitly, can derive his claims of human value superiority from this approach. The human species *as a whole* would be considered *an individual in the metasystem* with a complex form of life, regardless of the existence of human moral patients with capacities equivalent to those of some sentient animals. According to Rolston, we distinguish kinds according to species, according to not mental capacities; the existence of humans with diminished mental abilities does not suggest that the species, *homo sapiens*, does not have a complex form of life with a great range of possible goods. In this sense, the vast hierarchy of individual living beings (which Rolston's individualist theory implies) would not exist when understood in conjunction with his theory of species value.

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 1, *c*.

We can expand the breadth of his theory yet further, Rolston claims, but prior to that we must reassess how we understand value itself. Individualist environmental ethics, he says, traditionally recognizes two sorts of values: intrinsic and instrumental, in some circumstances tantamount to objective and subjective value. The former signifies that which is an end in itself; the latter can only be a means of the former. Rolston says that an ecosystem is a non-centered, projective, objective, orderly system composed of a matrix of interacting, *intrinsically* valuable parts.

Organisms defend only their selves, with individuals defending their continuing survival and with species increasing the numbers of kinds. But the evolutionary ecosystem spins a bigger story, limiting each kind, locking it into the welfare of others, promoting new arrivals, increasing kinds and the integration of kinds. Species increase their kind, but ecosystems increase kinds, superposing the latter increase onto the former. Ecosystems are selective systems, as surely as organisms are selective systems. The natural selection comes out of the system and is imposed on the individual...The system is a game with loaded dice, but the loading is a pro-life tendency, not mere stochastic process. Though there is no Nature in the singular, the system has a nature, a loading that pluralizes, putting natures into diverse kinds: nature<sub>1</sub>, nature<sub>2</sub>, nature<sub>3</sub>...nature<sub>n</sub>...though it is not a superorganism, it is a kind of vital field.” (2001, 242-243)

The two traditional understandings of value (intrinsic and extrinsic) are not sufficient to construct an environmental ethic which encompasses ecosystems, says Rolston. The ecosystem has value *within* itself; it does not have value *for* itself. The intrinsic/instrumental dialectic which applies to organisms is unfitting for a dynamic, pluralizing “vital field.”

Rolston’s solution is a recognition of *systemic* value. In a projective system, the products are laden with intrinsic and instrumental values, which cannot be decoupled.

The system produces both value and value-laden interactions and does not distinguish between the two:

Things do not have their separate natures merely in and for themselves, but they face outward and co-fit into broader natures. Value-in-itself is smeared out to become value-in togetherness. Value seeps out into the system, and we lose our capacity to identify the individual as the sole locus of value. (2001, 246)

Intrinsic value comes with “leading and trailing *and*’s” (2001, 246), and organismal intrinsic value is splintered in an attempt to isolate it from its point in the matrix of the ecological community.

Rolston suggests that we view nature (systemic nature, organismal *and* non-living) not as bearing intrinsic value but as an intrinsic *source of values*—again, a projective system. “The inventiveness of nature is the root of all value, and all nature’s created products have value so far as they are inventive achievements” (1988, 198). According to Rolston, the non-living “thing” has no will, interest or teleology; it can, however, be a product (i.e. a “project”) of teleological, projective, systemic nature, a quality-possessing locus of value. Values exist “not in a natural void but in a natural womb” (1988, 205), from which living subjects, “living objects” and non-living objects have all evolved.

To briefly discuss the duties which Rolston derives from this value theory: “Our model of reality implies a model of conduct,” he states (2001, 246), and Rolston’s model of reality is one in which nature projects its own fundamental values. We shift to “metaecology:” ecological research alone of the *is* of systemic nature cannot verify that

*the good or the right* is an optimum biotic community. However, *embedded within the system itself*—in “the field” of projective nature—an ecological description of the value-producing system can only affirm its “systemic rightness” (2001, 247).

An *ought* is not so much derived from an *is* as discovered simultaneously with it. As we progress from description of fauna and flora, of cycles and pyramids...of stability and dynamism, on to intricacy, planetary opulence and interdependence...organisms evolved within and satisfactorily fitting their communities, and we arrive at length at beauty and goodness, we find that it is difficult to say where the natural facts leave off and the natural values appear...the sharper *is-ought* dichotomy is gone; values seem to be there as soon as the facts are fully in, and both values and facts seem to be alike properties of the system. (2001, 247)

Rolston rejects the “denial of ecology” put forth by radical animal rights theorists—Regan included. Suffering is an integral feature of sentient life in ecosystems, he says, and despite the intrinsic values of each individual, no being has a right nor a welfare claim to avoid natural selection (1988, 57). A “benevolent” prevention of suffering is meddling and out of ecosystemic context. A moral obligation to avoid inflicting innocent suffering is both impossible and unnatural. Suffering characterizes the web of competing sentient and non-sentient life (1988, 59). Rolston prescribes a system in which

...when humans enter...an environment, they may continue to inflict innocent suffering, particularly in the regimens of securing food, shelter and basic physical comforts. Human predation on nature, more or less within the natural patterns, cannot be condemned simply because humans are moral agents, not if nonhuman predation has been accepted as a good within the system...what should happen morally in an encounter with nature (distinguished from what happens within culture) is a function of what has happened naturally...an ethic of nonaddition [of suffering] but not of subtraction. (1988, 59)

In Rolston's system, the same applies to non-sentient beings such as plants and insects in our refusal to be sentimental and sacrifice human needs within ecosystem patterns:

As in hunting, there is no reason for humans to deny their ecology. We eat plants, as we eat animals. But there is every reason for humans to affirm their ecology, and this means nonsentimentally and objectively to affirm the standing of the member components of Earth's biological communities. We want to affirm all life, not just sentient life. Being nonsentimental means valuing life that flourishes without sentiments. (1988, 120)

Here, however, the idea of "nonaddition of suffering" cannot function as there is no capacity for suffering; we substitute this principle for that of the "nonloss of goods." Rolston says that to be justified in any given action which causes destruction of plants (in this example) there must be some comparable human good to be achieved.

Rolston's value theory constitutes an intuitive, bold attempt to counter the individualist paradigm and the dichotomous thinking which often goes along with it, and his conception of duty is intriguing. Still, in articulating his value theory, Rolston leans upon metaphysical conceptions without an explicit defense of their basis. Specifically, I refer to Rolston's incorporation of the idea of teleology in his description of "projective nature."

Rolston argues that all beings are teleological, and that this has something to do with their status as possessors of intrinsic value, which I have discussed already.<sup>11</sup> By

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 1, c.

suggesting that species, too, are teleological, Rolston more or less defeats his own argument: the ends of individual beings are genetically predetermined by the species. That is, beings are teleological *according to their (species) kind*. So, rejecting Rolston's defense of individual value (as he inadvertently seems to) we should assess his claim that species and systems have ends as well.

Rolston's idea of "projective nature" hinges upon the notion of genetic predetermination: the existence of distinct species implies the existence of distinct ends. All have self-replication as one—in fact, for many or most species, that may be their only end, their only flourishing. Regardless, Rolston claims that species can flourish (whatever that may entail) or fail to do so. But what makes the *telos* of one species distinct from that of another is *exclusively* a product of its DNA.

While the genetic predilections of each species kind may determine their ends, Rolston also suggests that the *system or systems which produce these kinds* are teleological as well. If we determine that the flourishing of each species (in part) is the perpetuation of that kind, then the flourishing of the system is *perpetuating the perpetuation* of those kinds. Rolston argues that non-sentient individual living beings (he calls them "objects-with-will;" I would say "objects-with-aims") can flourish or be prevented from doing so, regardless of their non-subjective nature.<sup>12</sup> He makes the same claim with regards to species and systems. But Rolston determines that non-sentient living beings would have aims or ends according to their kind; what of the kinds

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<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 1, *c*.

themselves? How are the ends of each species determined? What if those ends change? How do we know that the *telos* of “the system” *is*, in fact, the perpetuation of kinds?

Putting aside for the moment the other facets of Rolston’s value theory, there are a number of issues facing his idea of teleology. Unlike Taylor, Rolston doesn’t explicitly claim that teleological nature is the source of value. His phrasing is that value is held by the *projective system*, be that an individual being, a species, or the value-producing “system” itself. But this seems to be the same teleological claim in different clothing, as it’s unclear what Rolston means by “projective system.” Rolston says that value is contingent upon projectivity; projective nature implies self-perpetuation (among other things). Self-perpetuation is an aim, an end, and a projective system is flourishing when it is self-perpetuating. It seems, then, that possession of a *telos*—at the very least, the aim of self-perpetuation—is an integral piece of Rolston’s consideration of value.

Suggesting that a subjective individual being is teleological seems fairly defensible (though Taylor makes no attempt to do it). Suggesting that “objects-with-will” are teleological, however, forces Rolston to argue that species are as well. This is problematic for Rolston’s individualist conception of value, but it is equally problematic for his species-centric and system-centric formulations. To suppose that a species—a compendium of individuals, which Rolston wants the right to understand as a singular thing—has a unique teleology is to suppose that it has *some kind of essential nature*.

As cited above, Rolston claims that “Things do not have their separate natures merely in and for themselves” (2001, 246). But he appears to directly contradict this: it seems to be a logical feature of teleological nature that anything with a given end has that

end *as a result of* or *in relation to* a certain way which that thing is. If that thing is to change, or if that thing is constantly in flux, there is no reason to assume that what constitutes that thing's flourishing will stay the same. The essentialism which Rolston's teleological account of species value demands hinges upon the notion that we can effectively and universally define a species or a kind. It seems ecologically apparent that this is not the case, given the constant evolution and great variation which takes place within species. Given the dynamic state of what we classify as "a species," we are hard-pressed to define what a species *is*, let alone claim that a certain species has a certain intrinsic identity, as we'll discuss later.<sup>13</sup>

We confront a number of similar issues in trying to sort through Rolston's account of systemic value in light of its teleological nature. Suppose Rolston can reconcile his claim that teleological things—species, organisms—do not have individual, essential natures. We still are faced with his idea that the projective system itself is teleological, and so we must ask if the system itself has an essential nature. But what is "the system?" Do we consider the system to be a unified whole—be it global or even universal? Is it the sum total of all possible reified discrete ecosystems? Just as in defining a species, what frame of reference are we to use to define the boundaries of a Rolstonian system?

Rolston, like Callicott, presents an intriguing holist vision for environmental ethics. Unlike Callicott, he goes to some lengths to articulate a value theory. I have by no means exhausted Rolston's account—his overall view is intricate, and another thesis could be dedicated to a thorough study of Rolston's ideas. But the objections which I

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 3, *b*.

have raised—especially to the teleological claims which are crucial to Rolston’s value theory—are serious enough that we should welcome an alternative grounding and justification of the inherent value of systems. In the next chapter, I will articulate such an alternative, based upon the doctrine of codependent origination.

***c. Conclusion: Ethical Promise and Metaethical Missteps***

Though significantly different, Callicott and Rolston’s value theories share some major problems. The most serious of these is that, despite holistic approaches, neither one successfully argues for an account of *why* systems are valuable. Callicott’s account entangles biological altruism with a Humean sentimental value theory, but cannot achieve his goal of establishing a value theory which explicitly encompasses the biotic community. Instead, he is limited to an account of subjective value in which the biotic community as a whole can only bear instrumental value. Rolston argues for a conception of a “projective system” which is the *source* of intrinsic and instrumental values, but itself bears no value. However, there is no clear account of the nature of such a projective system nor of why, as a source of value, it should be valued. Rolston’s value theory also leans heavily upon the difficult notions of species and systemic essentialism. While both Callicott and Rolston can account for a plurality of values, they cannot account for the value of a system or the system *as such*, which seems to me to be a crucial facet of a holist ethic.

And, perhaps most importantly, both Callicott and (to a lesser extent) Rolston must confront the main objection of individualists: that a holist ethic is forced to ignore

the value of individual beings. Regan directly accuses Callicott of “ecofascism,” claiming that a holistic ethic is *obligated* to ignore the value, rights or well-being of the individual (2004, 362). To re-quote Callicott: “the preciousness of individual [beings]...is inversely proportional to the population of the species” (1989, 22). His example in this case is the white-tailed deer, but for consistency his claims must apply to humans—an unsettling idea for the individualist. While perhaps there is something to be said for the ecological strictness of a holist ethic, it seems like it would be ideal if we could articulate a holist ethic in which there is also *some sort* of value inherent to individual beings which is not contingent upon their contribution to some other superseding holistic value. Rolston attempts this, albeit unsuccessfully.

Callicott makes an inspired attempt to formalize Aldo Leopold’s classic vision of a “Land Ethic;” Rolston’s environmental ethic is a complex expansion of the principles which he uses as a basis for his individualist ethic. The conclusions which they draw—that is, their visions of what an environmental ethic should look like—present great promise as ecology-minded approaches to duty. Their value theories, however, fail to give an adequate basis for their normative ethics. This is a shame, as I imagine that a thoughtfully articulated value theory could potentially lead to the same conclusions which Callicott or Rolston find.<sup>14</sup> In the chapter that follows, I will present a positive argument for a value theory which is holistic, can tolerate the valuation of individual beings, and is ecologically coherent—and perhaps, if applied properly, could serve as a foundation for a holistic environmental ethic very similar to Callicott’s or Rolston’s.

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<sup>14</sup> Though this won’t be considered in great detail, there is a possibility that the value theory which is positively argued for in the following chapter could serve as a basis for a set of duties very similar to Rolston and/or Callicott’s.





**Chapter Three:**  
**Codependent Origination and a New Value Theory for Environmental Ethics**

***a. Introduction***

As we've seen, each theory in the individualist/holist spectrum is subject to its own specific objections. The major issues, however, are paradigmatic. Individualist theories are reductionist and not ecologically perceptive; holist theories can't give value to individuals and are lacking in terms of metaethics.

How do we articulate a value theory which is not subject to objections from either side? The current structure of value theories in Environmental Ethics (and, I grant, the structure of this thesis so far) leads to a sort of dichotomous thinking, an individualist/holist divide which seems irreconcilable. In this chapter, rather than focusing on criticism of current value theories, I will construct and defend a positive account which is holistic in terms of value—which can be systemic, species-based and attributable to the non-living parts of systems—and capable of valuing individual beings. This value theory is derived from and informed by a Buddhist metaphysics; it is coherent in terms of ecology and the reality of interdependence; it does not fall to the objections raised in the preceding chapters.

My ultimate goal, as I've mentioned, is to articulate an alternative value theory which is ecologically intelligible, philosophically coherent, and not susceptible to the numerous problems which we confront when assessing other environmental metaethics. I will even briefly consider what an environmental ethic extrapolated from this value

theory would look like. Prior to this, however, I must introduce the metaphysics upon which this value theory is based: the Buddhist doctrine of codependent origination.

***b. Codependent Origination as a Metaphysics for Environmental Ethics***

This use of a “Buddhist doctrine” in developing a value theory for environmental ethics may appear to strip my argument of philosophical validity, to be an appeal to religion. This is assuredly not the case. Buddhism and Buddhism-as-philosophy are distinct: the latter is focused *solely* upon that which can be defended through argumentation. That is to say, we can freely reject any Buddhist idea, practice or doctrine which finds its basis in an appeal to tradition or to the authority of the Buddha.

Mark Siderits suggests that we think of Buddhist philosophy in the same way that we think of Ancient Greek philosophy (2007, 12). Greek philosophers like Aristotle developed theories of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics in conjunction with a religious worldview, but today we reject the religious aspects and focus exclusively on their rational analyses.

Does this mean that Buddhist philosophy can be dismissed as an outdated, pre-scientific view of the world? No. Here we can learn from what we find when we study ancient Greek philosophy...What we have learned to do in studying ancient philosophy is simply set aside those parts that conflict with our modern scientific knowledge, and focus on what remains. This is a legitimate approach. (Siderits 2007, 12)

Callicott argues that Kantian individualism fails to articulate a coherent value theory for environmental ethics in part because of its roots in an “antiquated” and “pre-ecological” worldview. Perhaps this is so, but I think that the metaphysics which

individualism embraces is more important than age in terms of its insufficiencies.

Antiquity has little to do with it: codependent origination, as an early Buddhist doctrine and a contemporary metaphysics, is fully understandable in terms of ecology. This I will argue shortly.

What, then, *is* codependent origination? The Dalai Lama eloquently explains it—in secular, philosophical terms—in his *Ethics for the New Millennium*. He points out that in our day-to-day experiences, we cannot separate any specific experience or phenomena from the context of other phenomena. That is, our understanding of reality is contingent upon *relationships between things* (1999, 36).

There are three critical facets of codependent origination, as the Dalai Lama describes it. The first has to do with our understanding of cause and effect. No single thing comes into existence by itself, and the continued existence of that thing is, in fact, an effect of a series of other things, all of which are, in turn, simultaneously causes and effects. To say that *x* is the cause of *y* is not to say that *x* is essentially a cause and *y* is essentially an effect. Rather, *x* is both a—but not *the*—cause of *y* and an effect produced by a web of causation. (Dalai Lama 1999, 37). We can say that “the thunderstorm caused the Douglas Fir to fall,” but here the relationship we establish between the perceived cause of a thunderstorm and the perceived effect of the tree falling is a conventional one (I will discuss conventional definitions in greater depth below). The causal web of conditions which led to both the storm and the tree falling can be expanded indefinitely: the storm was the effect of certain wind speeds, barometric pressure, humidity, ocean temperatures, and so on; likewise, the tree’s falling was the effect of its age, height, where

its seed initially fell.... The isolation of a single cause for a single effect is a convention relative to a given frame of reference. As Jan Christoph Westerhoff explains:

Cause and effect cannot be substantially distinct. This is because the effect depends existentially on the cause (if the cause did not exist the effect would not exist) and cause depends at least notionally on the effect (if there was no effect the cause would not be called 'cause').  
(2010)

The second piece of codependent origination is the mutual existence of parts and wholes. The idea of a "whole" is predicated upon the existence of parts which compose it. Without a whole, "parts" cease to be related to one another; the concept of "parts" becomes unintelligible without the contributory reference of a whole (Dalai Lama 1999, 37). But again, it is not so simple: all parts can be considered wholes, composed of their own parts, and all wholes can be considered parts of other wholes. As with cause and effect, the dichotomy between parts and whole exists only conventionally.

These first two parts of codependent origination are vast in their metaphysical repercussions. For the most part, the nature of Western (and Kantian) metaphysical thought is to isolate and distinguish, to dichotomize, to define and assign meaning to individual things. Codependent origination challenges the notion that we can separate  $x$  from  $y$ , such that one is *composed of* the other—not to mention  $z$ ,  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$ ... (this is especially apparent in the third part of codependent origination, which will be addressed shortly).

But while large-scale existential interdependence may be a difficult notion metaphysically, on a smaller scale it is a fundamental and long-accepted understanding, the basis of an entire field of scientific inquiry: ecology.

The realization that all things are interdependent, historian Donald Worster writes, is the upshot of all our knowledge of human and natural ecology...The "interdependency principle," Worster maintains, "is as fundamental and as objective a truth as we are capable of attaining" (Worster 1994, 429). Because we live in an interdependent world, most of our actions come back to reward or haunt us in one form or another. Caldwell agrees with the ecological dictum, made famous by Barry Commoner in the early 1970s (but apparently coined by Garrett Hardin a decade earlier), that "You can't do just one thing." This dictum, Commoner argued, followed logically from the "first law of ecology," which states that "everything is connected to everything else" (Commoner 1972, 29). John Muir, the father of the preservationist wing of American environmentalism, offered a similar maxim a century earlier, observing succinctly that "everything is hitched." *The first law of ecology, in other words, is that the fundamental relationships of our world are interdependent.* (Thiele 1999, 257; emphasis added)

These "fundamental relationships of our world," in the context of ecology, are understood to be the relationships between living beings and the non-living systems with which they interact. In the context of codependent origination, the fundamental relationships are those which are responsible for existence. This expansion from a scientific notion of interconnectedness to a metaphysical one seems to be both straightforward and logical. The structures of ecological interdependence and codependent origination are analogous in their interpretation of cause/effect and part/whole.

The third—and most important—part of the doctrine of codependent origination is also the piece which isn't encompassed by the first law of ecology, or really even

considered by ecologists at all. However, as the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist philosophers argue, I am convinced that it logically follows from the first two parts. This, in turn, means that we must adjust our understanding of the first law of ecology to accommodate its accompanying metaphysics.

This third piece is the idea that there is *no independent identity*—oftentimes this is called the “doctrine of emptiness.” Let’s assume the first two claims and that all things and events are dependent upon other things and events. All individual identity is conventional and conceptually designated, and in this sense all of existence is contingent. The major implication of this is that no thing has an “essence” which makes it one way or another. As William Edelglass and Jay Garfield describe, “to have an essence is to exist independently, to have one’s identity and to exist not in virtue of extrinsic relations, but simply in virtue of intrinsic properties. Because all phenomena are interdependent, all are [devoid of essence] in this sense” (2009, 27). *Things do not exist in and of themselves*. That is, no existence is self-explanatory; everything must be defined in relation to other things, and so *these relations* are what constitute the existence of any given thing.

There is no phenomena which is not contingent; nor are things definable by “kind.” A California Condor is considered a California Condor and not an Andean Condor or an Osprey by virtue of its extrinsic relations and the many different features which it holds simultaneously—its wingspan, its markings, its habitat, its diet, etc.—not because there is some essence which constitutes “Condorness.” So what *is* “a California Condor”, then? A member of the species *Vultur californianus*?

The better question is, “What is a species?” This a confusing and contentious issue, and it’s evident that there is no singular definition of what does or does not define a species (Mayr 1996, 262). Every definition is subject to its own exceptions, regardless of whether we try to classify a species morphologically, genetically or reproductively. A good example of this confusion was presented in a recent New York Times Magazine article about the prospect of “de-extinction;” i.e. the revival of extinct species through tinkering with DNA. Many propose this as a surefire way to reintroduce extinct species to an ecosystem for conservation purposes. Regardless of the ethics or consequences of this—positive and negative—it is incredibly difficult or impossible to claim that de-extinction involves the resurrection of a certain species. For one, *we don’t really know* how to define “species.” Second, as the article discusses, there is Theseus’ Paradox,

A reference to the ship that Theseus sailed back to Athens from Crete after he had slain the Minotaur. The ship...was preserved by the Athenians, who “took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place.” Theseus’ ship, therefore, “became a standing example...one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same. (Rich 2014, 48)

The paradox, just like the doctrine of emptiness, shows us that a given thing is in constant flux. If the ship has no essence, if there is nothing that intrinsically constitutes “shipness,” then *of course* the ship is not the same. It is constituted by its relationships, by a dynamic series of causes/effects.

The same can be said for species. Not only is the dynamic nature of species metaphysically apparent in light of codependent origination, it is biologically apparent.

While this is not the place to delve into evolutionary biology, the mutations and distinctions within a single species—and oftentimes the difficulty in distinguishing between species—makes it clear that this, too, is a conventional category. There is no essential kind, no singular property to define a given species in its totality.

We can continue to carry this line of reason beyond species. A species is a dependently originated phenomenon which is constituted by a web of relations; even in our conventional definitions of a species, we note that they are constituted (in part, of course) by individual living beings. But just as a species has constitutive causes/parts, so too do individual organisms. And just as a species does not have singular defining essence, *nor do individual living organisms*. Living beings exist interdependently and have constitutive parts, which can include both other living beings (like symbiotic bacteria or parasites) and non-living things. Individual living beings *exist only conventionally*.

This reconsideration of what exactly constitutes “life” may seem dramatic—but again, we must consider how we usually define life. As with species, it is problematic to pin down a singular definition for what it means to be a living being. NASA’s exobiology program is responsible for what is likely the most commonly used working definition: “a self-sustaining system capable of Darwinian evolution” (Jabr 2013). But even in the scientific community, this definition is contentious. What does “self-sustaining” mean? Consider the virus: “A virus is a chemical system capable of undergoing Darwinian evolution, but if you think of it in terms of a system, a virus isn’t able to undergo self-sustained Darwinian evolution. The viral genome only evolves in the context of the host

cell,” says Gerald Joyce, a member of the NASA program itself (Mullen 2013). If, by NASA’s definition, we must consider viruses to be non-living (i.e. incapable of being self-sustaining), then so too we must consider *all* parasitic beings which cannot evolve without a host to be non-living.

We find that there is no one definition for life because life, like ships and species, is dependently originated. Life itself is subject to the doctrine of emptiness; there is no essential nature which can define it. Our conception of life is a conventional one, and so considering the doctrine of emptiness, living beings and non-living/non-living things are distinguishable only conventionally.

Why have scientists and philosophers failed for centuries to find a specific physical property or set of properties that clearly separates the living from the inanimate? Because such a property does not exist. Life is a concept that we invented....In trying to define life, we have drawn a line at an arbitrary level of complexity and declared that everything above that border is alive and everything below it is not. In truth, *this division does not exist*...There is no threshold at which a collection of atoms suddenly becomes alive, no categorical distinction between the living and inanimate...We have failed to define life because there was never anything to define in the first place.” (Jabr 2013, emphasis added)

So we return to our initial question of what a California Condor is. How do we approach such a question? “There is no single characteristic which can be said to identify it” (the “it” in this case could be a species, living being, or non-living object),

Nor indeed does the totality of its characteristics...because we can only really speak of its existing in relation to a complex nexus of causes and conditions...it has no one defining quality. In other words, it does not exist in and of itself, but rather it is dependently originated. (Dalai Lama 1999, 38)

A summation of all of the possible relational characteristics of a California Condor—or of a given species, or an Osprey, or a virus, or a strand of RNA—does not yield a singular product; the relations *are* the product. The corollary to the doctrine of emptiness is the doctrine of “no-self.” If independent beings are in themselves conventions, then it follows that those beings do not have any intrinsic identity. Characteristics are constantly in flux: to add or sacrifice one does not compromise the convention of an individual being, but each being is constituted by those characteristics.

We shouldn't reject classification entirely. Again, our definitions are *conventional*, and they are tremendously useful for our own purposes. Distinguishing between a California Condor and an Andean Condor (*V. gryphus*) isn't some grand metaphysical misinterpretation; nor is distinguishing between *table* and *chair*. What we must recognize, however, is that, out of its conventional context, “a California Condor” or “the species *V. californianus*” is meaningless. The meanings of these things are a jumbled compendium of *other conventional definitions*: “black coloration” and “three-meter wingspan” don't have any meaning, either, except in relation to other, similar conventions, and so it goes. This isn't to say we can't interpret by way of convention, since such conventional definitions are never irreducible; indeed, we have no other way to communicate but through convention. We accept such conventions when “they do not contradict knowledge acquired either through empirical experience or through inference, and when they serve as the foundation for a common discourse within which we situate such notions as truth and falsity” (Dalai Lama 1999, 43).

But where we understand definitions to be conventions, the essentialist imagines that each thing has some sort of definable property which it *must* have; otherwise, it ceases to be that thing. For example: what is not hot is not fire. What is not wet is not water. Specific descriptive properties allow us to distinguish “fire” from other hot things and “water” from other wet things, but both fire and water have *one attribute* which makes them so. That is their essence, their identity. Thinking in these terms, anything which has such an essence can be said to exist in the world. It can even be argued (and was in early Buddhist metaphysics) that such essentialism is compatible with codependent origination. Anything which exists with an *essence*, an irreducible constituent, would serve as the “end-point of a chain of ontological dependence relations” (Westerhoff 2010). This would mean that such essences arise independently of any causal process. In refuting this,

...we have to argue first of all is that the objects we usually interact with are causally produced so that speaking about them involves essential reference to causality. We further need to appeal to the principle that if some object essentially involves a property that is conceptually constructed then the object is conceptually constructed too. Chess games are conceptually constructed, and since “the book describing the longest chess game ever played” essentially involves chess games it is conceptually constructed too. But...since the causal relation does not exist from its own side, is conceptually constructed, and therefore empty, each causally related object must be so constructed and therefore empty in the most profound sense of being conceptually constructed. (Westerhoff 2010)

Causation is but one example to which we can apply the doctrine of emptiness. Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (to whom we will return shortly) also uses the example of motion: “movement” is a conceptual definition, a convention which we use to define

one thing which existed in the past and another thing which exists at a different location. If everything is constantly in flux, then no single thing can exist in one place in one time and in another place in another time. Motion cannot be an intrinsic nature; it is a conventional link between two distinct times and places. Movement from *a* to *c* is not contingent upon a “locus of going,” *b*, since such a thing only exists in dependence to the act of going, but the act of going from *a* to *c* is what creates *b*. Through arguments such as these, we come to see that all phenomena are identityless, and so we must accept that any existence cannot be independent but must be interdependent, causally produced, and conceptually constructed. There is no such thing as a Cartesian subject; nor, as it were, is there a “Cartesian object” in the sense that any one thing is indivisible or essential in nature.

However, if we are to say that “everything is empty,” doesn’t it seem that we are conflicted in our interpretation? If we suggest that emptiness itself has an ultimate reality or identity—or is *the* ultimate reality, not subject to codependent origination—then the doctrine of emptiness is false. If we suggest that emptiness is subject to codependent origination, then emptiness has no ultimate reality and itself must be contingent upon *something*. The inverse to this reductionism would be a nihilist conclusion: the contention that nothing exists at all.

We can perhaps avoid the reductionist argument by acknowledging that emptiness *is not a thing*. The state of emptiness is the state of lacking intrinsic identity: emptiness is just the predicate that says things don’t have thingness in any deep sense. So emptiness itself, being of a different type than ‘things,’ does not itself fall to the same deconstructive logic that all things do” (Flanagan 2011, 128).

Emptiness, as defined by Flanagan, *has no need for* an ultimate explanation of the type which reductionism demands.

However, we still face the problem of metaphysical nihilism. An examination of the nihilist thesis would give us a statement to the effect of *Everything is empty, and emptiness itself is empty. Therefore, nothing ultimately exists*. But—and Nāgārjuna makes this point—both the reductionist and the nihilist theses depend upon the assumption that there *is* an ultimate reality, and in this regard both of their interpretations of the doctrine of emptiness are metaphysical. The reductionist argues that things must have some ultimate identity; the nihilist argues that things are ultimately unreal.

Like Nāgārjuna, Flanagan and Siderits do, we can interpret the doctrine of emptiness *semantically*, as a rebuttal to the idea that there are *both* ultimate and conventional truths (Siderits 2007, 182). We discussed conventional definition above; the reductionist and the nihilist contrast these conventions with the ultimate reality, dichotomizing “conventional truths” and the “ultimate truth.” If we approach the doctrine of emptiness from a “semantic non-dualist” perspective, we can contend that the doctrine is not a description of the way the world is *per se* but an account of how we interpret what is true. In this light, the doctrine of emptiness is an insight which tells us that what we understand as existence *is itself* conventionally constituted; there is no underlying reality or truth. Even if we are to say that “reality is ineffable,” we are contending that *by nature* reality cannot be conceptually understood—this is the same problem which reductionists and nihilists both face (Siderits 2007, 191). The doctrine of emptiness is the idea that, just as all things are only conventionally definable, so is reality. A claim that it

has an essential nature of any sort (reducible, nonexistent, unknowable) is subject to the same difficulties as claiming that fire or water or California Condors have essential natures.

Here I've laid out the general arguments for codependent origination and the doctrine of emptiness. It should go without saying that this is not an exhaustive account; there are millennia of scholarship on the topic. Hence, I will not go so far as to explicitly claim that codependent origination and the doctrine of emptiness are *true*. What I will say is, based upon a broad assessment like the one above, a conception of reality based upon codependent origination and the doctrine of emptiness seems like a *plausible* metaphysics, as well as a very interesting one. I think that the arguments I've given are sufficient basis to consider it as such. What follows, then, is a consideration of the implications of this plausible metaphysics—were we to accept it—on a value theory for environmental ethics.

### ***c. Emptiness, Interdependence and Compassion: A Metaethical Framework***

It may seem unclear at this point how we may be able to extrapolate a metaphysics which *appears to be* coherent with our ecological knowledge into a value theory *and* an environmental ethic. It goes beyond the classic is/ought conundrum: should we accept the *is* of codependent origination and the emptiness of reality, we are still faced with defending the *is* of a value theory, not to mention the *ought* of what that value theory demands of us.

Fortunately, an example of a move from codependent origination to applied value and ethics already exists in the Buddhist conception of compassion, a framework which can serve useful in our attempt to articulate the form of a value theory and environmental ethic based upon existential interdependence.

In fact, the conception of codependent origination and the thesis of emptiness with which we are operating was first articulated by Nāgārjuna in the second century CE. His move was to generalize codependent origination, using the doctrine of emptiness to explain all natural things—before, it had explicitly referred to persons. Nāgārjuna pressed for metaphysical clarity, says Owen Flanagan, “with the aim of having this clarity gain moral motivational bearing and force” (2011, 126). That is, Nāgārjuna was convinced that a clear metaphysical understanding of codependent origination and emptiness—in terms which encompassed the entire natural world—would give at least clear one reason for moral unselfishness.

But how are we to move from an understanding of things and processes as empty to a value theory, or to an ethic? In terms of the Buddhist approach to compassion and Nāgārjuna’s argument, the first step is, as discussed, coming to realize the contingently constituted nature of reality. The claim that follows is that seeing the true nature of things produces “the best psychological environment” to disregard egoism. In this sense, Nāgārjuna uses codependent origination to enable personal virtue: I should not cling to earthly possessions or desires, nor to emotions such as guilt or anger.

If I think that I am at all times in my earthly career the selfsame self, then I am gripped by an illusion that makes it psychologically sensible to powerfully attach all things, pleasant and unpleasant, to MY SELF. If

I can loosen the grip of this illusion about the self and thus gain wisdom, I will find it easier not to try to appropriate the world to myself, to hold and lock experience in me-ness....The world is in flux and so am I. So are you. So are we all together. (Flanagan 2011, 130)

In Buddhist ethics, compassion is synonymous with prevention of suffering.

Flanagan frames the effect of an acceptance of codependent origination upon ethics in terms of psychology and virtue. This can also be put forth as an argument which establishes a rational obligation to be moral, an argument which purports the irrationality of egoism.

The argument is formatted something like this: *a)* suppose that we are only obligated to prevent our own suffering. It would be true that *b)* in the case of preventing future suffering, it is one “self” which does the preventing for another future self’s suffering and *c)* in the case of present suffering, it is one “self” which does the prevention of suffering for another self which is experiencing the suffering. Understanding and accepting the doctrine of emptiness, we recognize that *d)* the sense of “I” which leads us to identify distinct future and present “selves” as a cohesive “me” is a fiction. Hence, *e)* it cannot be true that some suffering is one’s own and some is that of others, and so *f)* the claim that we are obligated to prevent only our own suffering is ungrounded. Therefore, *g)* there is either an obligation to prevent suffering regardless of where it occurs, or there is *no* obligation to prevent suffering at all. If we accept that *h)* suffering should be prevented, then we are led to conclude that *i) there is an obligation to prevent suffering regardless of where it occurs* (Siderits 2007, 82).

The argument is structured in a way that is contingent upon acceptance of the doctrine of emptiness—the fact that causal interdependence and temporariness, rather than continuous individual identity, is the basis of being. We do not have an obligation to prevent only our own suffering because “our own suffering” is an illusory, conventional expression. A desire to prevent “one’s own suffering” is a desire to prevent suffering, period, as we are led to conclude by (e). Based upon the doctrine of emptiness, it seems that the argument for compassion (prevention of suffering) is coherent.

***d. Subjects of Suffering, Constitutive Relationships, and an Argument for Systemic Value***

Can we apply this argument to an environmental ethical value theory? The entire argument hinges upon (h): the normative disvalue of suffering. To put it differently, the value theory which underlies Buddhist ethics assumes that *non-suffering is valuable*, i.e. that it is good. If we are to stick with this account of value, it seems that moral consideration/value possession ceases with sentience. The capacity to experience suffering becomes the exclusive signifier of value. Buddhist value theory leads us to an obligation to prevent suffering *in general*, because suffering is inherently disvaluable for sentient beings. As (c) and (d) make clear, there is no essential “self” which experiences suffering, but the only *conventional* “selves” which can experience suffering as such are those which are sentient. Our obligation to prevent suffering *exclusively* applies to beings which can experience it, and so our obligations are inherently restricted to sentient beings.

This conception of the argument for compassion doesn't seem to meet our needs in terms of articulating a value theory for environmental ethics which goes beyond sentient beings. At first glance, it seems incompatible with really *any* kind of holistic account of value—rather, it appears to be similar to a utilitarian account of value with a modified perspective of *what* or *whom* can experience the good of non-suffering. However, it seems to me that the argument for compassion via the doctrine of emptiness can lead to a value theory which goes beyond sentient beings and even non-sentient beings. We can accomplish this by further extrapolating the value theory which lies behind the argument itself.

Suffering is a normative experience for sentient beings (moral patients, as Tom Regan would describe them). The Buddhist argument for compassion is based upon this, along with the assumption that suffering is to be prevented. But what happens when we consider the codependently originated nature of sentient beings, and of suffering itself? If suffering is disvaluable, and sentient beings are capable of experiencing suffering, then there seems to be some importance to those objects of suffering: the sentient beings themselves. Suffering has no value or disvalue, it seems, *except in relation to those who experience it*.

But codependent origination tells us that there is a constitutive relationship between subjects and objects, such that their existence is interdependent. When we frame this in terms of suffering, we cannot conclude that sentient beings are the only beings of importance because they can experience suffering; nor can we conclude that suffering is the only value or disvalue. This is because both sentient beings and suffering itself are

*conventional conceptions* which have no distinct identity or essence. There is no “suffering” as such and are no “sentient beings” as such; these, too, are the products of constitutive relationships.

In the argument above, (*h*) manifests inherent value in terms of suffering, or the prevention of such. But in the same argument, we find that (*d*) objects of suffering lack inherent identity and so (*e*) the experience of value or disvalue, suffering or non-suffering, cannot be attributed to any one being. But given what we know about the contingent nature of suffering and sentient beings, when we say that “suffering is normative for sentient beings, and prevention of suffering is valuable,” what we are really saying is that “a contingent experience is experienced by contingent beings, and within this contingent experience there is potential for both value and disvalue, which also exist contingently.” We can accept the Buddhist argument that intrinsic value is manifested as non-suffering, but a corollary to this is accepting that suffering and its objects *are in turn* indistinguishable from other reality as singularly identifiable phenomena. This should lead us to ask: if intrinsic value lies in non-suffering, and non-suffering is a dependently originated phenomenon which is indistinguishable from other phenomena, which phenomena bear intrinsic value?

Here, at long last, we have found our way back to the interdependent nature of ecology. There is no such thing as an isolated, suffering, value-bearing subject. Suffering and value-bearing are conventional descriptions for a given subject, and are themselves conventional descriptions for certain dependently originated phenomena. Sentient beings have a constitutive relationship with the natural world; sentience and living beings, like

all conventions, are constituted by a web of relationships, and the most immediately apparent of these are *ecosystemic relationships*. It's not simply that sentient beings are the effects of the natural world's causes: sentient beings are themselves ecosystemic part/wholes. Sentient beings are the only beings which can experience suffering, but sentient beings themselves are constitutively inseparable from the rest of the natural world, both non-sentient *and non-living*.

It is possible to expand the Buddhist argument for compassion in a way which leads to the conclusion that value is *inherent in interconnected systems*. Here—in a clearer form—is the argument as Siderits formulates it (2007, 82), and as we have discussed previously:

- a) Suppose that we are only obligated to prevent our own suffering.
- b) In the case of preventing future suffering, it is one “self” which does the preventing for another future self’s suffering.
- c) In the case of present suffering, it is one “self” which does the prevention of suffering for another self which is experiencing the suffering.
- d) If we accept the doctrine of emptiness, the sense of “I” which leads us to identify distinct future and present “selves” as a cohesive “me” is a fiction.
- e) It cannot be true that some suffering is one’s own and some is that of other sentient beings.
- f) (a) is false.
- g) Hence, there is either an obligation to prevent all suffering, or there is *no* obligation to prevent suffering at all.

*h)* Suffering is a normative experience for sentient beings and is inherently disvaluable, and hence should be prevented.

*h<sub>i</sub>)* Non-suffering is inherently valuable.

*i)* *There is an obligation to prevent suffering (i.e. promote non-suffering) regardless of where suffering occurs.*

Our repurposing of the argument is identical in premises (*a*) through (*e*). Since we understand the dependently arisen nature of both suffering and of sentient beings, we can continue:

*f<sub>2</sub>)* Suffering is a normative experience for sentient beings.

*g<sub>2</sub>)* Both suffering and sentient beings are dependently originated, and have a constitutive relationship to the rest of the natural world.

*h<sub>2</sub>)* Suffering does not exist exclusively in sentient beings, because those beings are dependently originated and have no individual identity.

*i<sub>2</sub>)* Both suffering and non-suffering permeate the constitutive system of relationships.

Both (*f<sub>2</sub>*) and (*g<sub>2</sub>*) are easy to accept. From them, (*h<sub>2</sub>*) and (*i<sub>2</sub>*) follow with relative simplicity. If suffering and sentient beings are dependently originated, then those things have no discrete identities which are capable of experiencing suffering. When we say that “sentient beings alone can experience suffering,” we must take note of the fact that sentient beings are constituted of relationships, and so suffering exists *throughout those relationships*. Suffering, we can say, is dynamically embedded within the interrelated system.

So, as stated in (*i*<sub>2</sub>), suffering permeates the web of relations and does not *exist* solely within the experiences of sentient beings; however, suffering does *manifest* itself in the experiences of what we conventionally define as sentient beings. Here, again, we can take a piece of the original argument—the claim that suffering is inherently disvaluable—to make a push towards finding systemic value. Hence, the critical facet of this argument is (*j*):

*j*) Suffering is inherently disvaluable; non-suffering is inherently valuable.

There are a number of issues which must be addressed before we conclude the argument, most of which hinge around the clarification of (*j*).

Firstly: if we claim that suffering is inherently valuable, aren't we supposing that it has a distinct, identifiable essence? The answer is no, and the reasons are very similar those which I presented in arguments surrounding the doctrine of emptiness and the problem of nihilism. We don't say that suffering and value have a universal, ultimate link, and that it is the nature of suffering to bear disvalue; rather, the link between suffering and value is a semantic convention. The *conventional concept* of value may be linked with the *conventional experience* of suffering in sentient beings; we can know that value exists because we know that suffering exists.

Here is another, simpler objection: if suffering as an experience is empty, then isn't suffering an illusion? Again, we can return to our discussion of the doctrine of emptiness. Siderits uses the classical Buddhist example of King Milinda: when the king is asked "How did you get here?" he responds "by chariot" (2007, 52-53). In this case, if I

am asked, “What kind of raptor is that?” I can respond by saying “A California Condor.”

The existence of the condor isn’t illusory. I am correct in my response *because I am speaking conventionally*. There is an inherent semantic error in my answer—or any answer—which prevents me from giving a nonconventional answer, because it refers to a *singular essential thing*, which, as we’ve seen, cannot exist. Our conventional conception of reality is a “common-sense ontology” which is very useful but semantically misleading simply because describing a given thing in its entirety is impossible (Siderits 2007, 55).

We can approach suffering in the same way. There is no homogeneous experience of suffering or non-suffering; perceptions and attitudes modify the nature of suffering. The Dalai Lama gives the example of two people with an identical form of terminal cancer. Both have the same physical symptoms (and associated pain), but one may have internalized suffering—*anxiety, fear, bitterness*—and the other may not (1999, 138). Suffering, as well as non-suffering, is a heterogeneous experience. Suffering and non-suffering aren’t tantamount to pleasure and pain. The sentiment has a *constitutive relationship to the experience*: breaking a leg, losing a child, falling in love, and getting a massage are all distinct experiences. Suffering, non-suffering, pleasure and pain are all conventions we use in our common-sense ontology to describe a vast class of experiences.

So we have established that suffering is, conventionally at least, real. But what about value? Since suffering is heterogeneous, how can we establish a link between value and suffering? Besides, at least suffering is an *experiential* convention; how can we say that something so enigmatic, so *unexperienced* as value exists, even conventionally?

The simple answer is that the claim that value exists is true in the same way that claiming King Milinda's chariot exists is true. Value, one might argue, isn't observable in the same way that a chariot is—you can see a chariot, touch it or ride in it. But the chariot is dependently originated, which means that it is empty, and so even though we can experience or observe a chariot in front of us, what we would consider a “true” definition of a chariot is a semantic convention. Value is no different. We can't interact with value like we can with a chariot. But, for pragmatic purposes, we hold that the disvalue of suffering, or the positive value of other normative goods conventionally real—just like a chariot—and so we can make “truthful” statements regarding value.

It is clear that value is a legitimate semantic convention, just as suffering is, and the “truth” of its existence is predicated upon its conventional legitimacy. This is why statements like “suffering is disvaluable” don't strike us as untruthful, like the statement “suffering is a chariot” does. We value non-suffering and other normative goods like flourishing (I'll discuss this again below), notwithstanding the fact that those things, like value, are conventions. But conventionality is not the same as cultural relativity. The disvalue of suffering is a universal characteristic of sentient experience. The doctrine of emptiness informs us that in saying “suffering is disvaluable” we are disvaluing *suffering itself*, rather than making the claim that “*my* suffering is disvaluable.” And since we have established that suffering is dependently originated, we know that value, like suffering, is non-isolatable as a dependently originated phenomenon.

We can further inform our conception of the nature of moral claims—like “suffering is disvaluable”—by considering cognitivist and non-cognitivist metaethical

approaches to such moral statements. The cognitivist maintains that moral statements and judgments can be *true or false* and are *beliefs*. Moral realists, for example, are cognitivists. The non-cognitivist, however, asserts that there are no moral facts. A moral statement, says the non-cognitivist, is not a belief but is more similar to an expression of attitudes, of approval or disapproval, or the expression of norm acceptance, and such statements are not firmly “true” or “false” in the same way that statements of belief are true or false.

Non-cognitivism should not be confused with cognitivist subjectivism:

When a non-cognitivist says that a sentence conventionally expresses an attitude, she means to contrast the *mode of expression* with *saying* that one has the attitude...One can express dislike of something by saying that one dislikes it. This is the way that a cognitivist subjectivist thinks we express moral attitudes. But one can also express dislike of something by booing or hissing. This is much like the way some non-cognitivists think we express moral attitudes. The latter way of expressing an attitude is different from the way cognitivist subjectivists think we express moral attitudes because *it expresses the attitude without saying that we have the attitude*. (van Roojen 2013; emphasis added)

The cognitivist subjectivist insists that a moral statement, for example, “suffering is disvaluable,” is a belief statement about my attitudes, that “I dislike suffering.” The non-cognitivist, in contrast, relies on *semantic conventions* to express acceptance or endorsement of norms. Phrases such as “suffering is disvaluable” express a given attitude, and the interpretation of that attitude hinges upon its conventional nature. The statement “suffering is disvaluable” is a legitimate phrase because it expresses the normative disvalue of suffering.

For our purposes, a non-cognitivist understanding of the semantics of value claims is more plausible. Our conception of value isn't an ultimate claim regarding the way that the world is. The cognitivist suggestion, that we should understand value claims as beliefs about some natural property, seems incoherent with how we understand the non-essentialism (i.e. emptiness) of value. If we take a non-cognitivist stance, we see that a value claim is a conventional attitude which, in conjunction with our metaphysical understanding, can constitute a rational basis for an environmental ethic. Many of the theories of environmental ethics, which I've discussed in the prior chapters, seem incapable of establishing a rational requirement to value their intended object of value—be it an individual, species or ecosystem. Problematically, it seems that a crucial facet of an environmental ethic is that it must have a value claim that can provide motivational reason. We need a connection between the values of individuals and the value of sentient suffering, of species, and of ecosystems.

A conception of value based upon codependent origination can do just this. Our non-cognitivist value claim expresses a certain attitude about reality, and these claims are “true” (in the sense that there can be conventional truth) insofar as they are conventionally legitimate. A legitimate moral claim like “suffering is disvaluable,” by demonstrating a certain attitude about reality, implies the conventional existence of both suffering and value. And a metaphysical understanding of reality based upon codependent origination leads us to understand that “my suffering is disvaluable” is incoherent. *All* suffering must be disvaluable, as suffering and its disvalue permeate the constitutive system of relationships, and so—as Buddhists would argue—we have a rational

requirement to promote non-suffering. The same holds true for any positive account of value. Any conventionally legitimate moral claim “y is valuable,” in light of codependent origination, is not a claim that “this y is valuable.” It is that y, a product of codependent origination, bears value, and since the constitutive elements of y and their associated value permeate the constitutive system of relationships. This means that we have a *rational requirement to value the system of relationships* which constitutes y, or z, or a, or any other thing about which we can make a conventionally legitimate value claim.

As we’ve established the conventional existence of value, this is a good place to further clarify the conception of “intrinsic” value with which we are operating. In discussions of value theory in environmental ethics, the phrase “intrinsic value” is thrown around with great frequency, both by individualist value theorists and holists. While the fine details vary, most all theorists use “intrinsic value” in the sense of “value that is within the thing itself”—regardless of whether such a “thing” is a sentient being, a living organism, or an ecosystem. All of these accounts of value are dualist by nature: a given thing having intrinsic value presupposes the existence of *extrinsic* value. Here lies the dichotomization which exists in nearly every value theory in environmental ethics, in which value can either be intrinsic to a thing itself or separate from that thing<sup>15</sup>.

The metaphysical conception with which we are operating, however, cannot be compatible with a dualist value theory. To suppose that there is intrinsic value, “value that is within the thing itself,” we must also accept that there *is* a “thing-in-itself.” Codependent origination and the doctrine of emptiness show us that this cannot be so.

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<sup>15</sup> This is discussed at much greater length in the other two chapters.

Intrinsic value—in application to environmental ethics—is by nature an essentialist construct. In our attempt to articulate a value theory, we are looking for something which is comparable to intrinsic value in terms of capacity to generate rational moral obligations, but a) does not depend on an essentialist metaphysics and b) does not force us to dichotomize intrinsic/extrinsic value.

For now, I will use the term *inherent value* to define what we are trying to find with this argument. This may seem to be the same thing as intrinsic value. However, we can define inherent value such that it does not exist *within* things-in-themselves, as intrinsic value would. Intrinsic value has an opposite: extrinsic value. But if we consider value to be *inherent to the natural world* then it has no opposite, and it simply becomes an element of reality, a product of constitutive relationships.

Back to the main argument: we see that both value and suffering are inextricable from the constitutive system of relationships. We have established that suffering and value are, conventionally at least, real. We have distinguished what we mean when in saying “value,” namely inherent value. Following these clarifications, (i<sub>2</sub>), and (j), we are—at long last—led to our conclusion, (k):

*k) Value is inherent to the constitutive system of relationships.*

From here, we can coherently articulate a conception of value which is both individual and systemic—I’ll come back to this shortly. First, there is a major objection to the argument as a whole which must be addressed. Namely: if we associate value with non-suffering, and suffering only manifests in sentient beings, then once again we crash

into the problem of nihilism. Wouldn't suffering cease to exist if sentient beings ceased to exist? And since suffering is disvaluable, wouldn't the most value exist if suffering didn't? It seems that if we stick to a negative account of value—i.e. the disvalue of suffering—then we must confront the paradoxical idea that existence (of sentient beings) *only is valuable* when suffering exists, but that suffering is itself a manifestation of disvalue.

I won't delve into the doctrinal Buddhist responses to this issue; it's possible to counter the nihilist argument without them. In fact, it's fairly simple. We avoid a nihilist conclusion by presenting a positive account of value, articulated in the exact same manner which we have already in defending the claim "suffering is disvaluable." As an example, let's use something that is often associated with non-suffering, but to which positive value is ascribed: flourishing.

Flourishing, like suffering, is a heterogeneous experience which has no singular essence, but is a convention in our common-sense ontology. Flourishing, like suffering, is *manifested* in sentient beings, but given our understanding of the doctrine of emptiness we realize that flourishing is dynamically embedded in the constitutive system of relations, and so to speak about "my flourishing" or "your flourishing" is only a semantic convention. And if we take a non-cognitivist approach to moral statements, we can accept "flourishing is valuable" conventionally legitimate value claim.

Of course, a positive account of value isn't limited to flourishing. There are an array of conventional experiences which can be valuable "states"—Buddhists usually point to mindful awareness, compassion, and inner peace—and I won't go into a defense

of which of these are or aren't valuable, as that, too, is a matter of convention. What I will note is that, unlike the standard Buddhist view maintains, I hold that any positively valued conventional experience which we approach in the same way as suffering must be normative for sentient beings. Otherwise, we would need to reformulate the argument in application to experiences which only sentient moral agents can be subject to certain valuable experiences, which I won't attempt here.<sup>16</sup>

To say that any of these states are valuable is not tantamount to saying "x is valuable because it promotes non-suffering." While some of them may mitigate suffering, some, like flourishing, seem to go beyond simply the absence of suffering. What is important is that each of these normative, semantically conventional, positively valued experiences demonstrate the existence of value as a constitutive element of the system of relationships *just like suffering does*.

The argument for systemic value can be clarified so as to address this issue (modifications are in bold type):

- a) Suppose that we are only obligated to prevent our own suffering.
- b) In the case of preventing future suffering, it is one "self" which does the preventing for another future self's suffering.
- c) In the case of present suffering, it is one "self" which does the prevention of suffering for another self which is experiencing the suffering.

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<sup>16</sup> Another serious objection to consider is the claim that both the cognitivist and non-cognitivist approaches are human-centric, and that moral conventions in general are anthropocentric cultural constructs. Does value exist because humans construct it as a convention? While Blackburn points out that a non-cognitivist account such as quasi-realism can account for cultural moral pluralism without reduction to relativism (Joyce 2009), the notion of human-centrism in a conventional account of morality is a difficult one to reject outright, and must be addressed before we can have a complete theory.

- d) If we accept the doctrine of emptiness, the sense of “I” which leads us to identify distinct future and present “selves” as a cohesive “me” is a fiction.
- e) It cannot be true that some suffering is one’s own and some is that of other sentient beings.
- f<sub>2</sub>) Suffering is a normative experience for sentient beings, **though not the only normative experience.**
- g<sub>2</sub>) Suffering, **normative experiences like suffering**, and sentient beings are dependently originated, and have a constitutive relationship to the rest of the natural world.
- h<sub>2</sub>) Suffering **and other normative experiences** do not exist exclusively in sentient beings, because those beings are dependently originated and have no individual identity.
- i<sub>2</sub>) Both suffering and non-suffering permeate the constitutive system of relationships.
- j) Suffering is inherently disvaluable; non-suffering is inherently valuable; **other normative experiences are inherently valuable as well.**
- k) *Value is inherent to the constitutive system of relationships.*



**Conclusion:**  
**Constitutive Holism: A New Value Theory for Environmental Ethics**

This new account of value—which for simplicity’s sake I’ll call *constitutive holism*—is an approach which is not susceptible to the major problems which both the individualist and holist value theories we’ve discussed do. Unlike individualist accounts, constitutive holism avoids the problems presented by Kant himself and by Neo-Kantian environmental metaethics. It is ecologically coherent in its recognition of constitutive interdependence, and can accommodate the valuation of species and ecosystems holistically (including non-living components of the ecosystem). And unlike Rolston and Callicott’s holistic accounts of value, constitutive holism can value individual living beings *along with* systems, is not sentimental or “humanly conferred” in Callicott’s sense, and doesn’t depend on teleological essentialism.

It would be another endeavor entirely to reconsider all of the theories presented in order to demonstrate how a constitutive holist account of value evades all of the objections discussed. However, with a value theory based upon codependent origination in mind, a careful reading of the individualist and holist value theories discussed is sufficient to note their insufficiencies and the relative strengths of constitutive holism. With this, we come to a conception of value in which there is value in *everything* in the natural world, on *every level*, because value is inherent to the constitutive system of relationships. And given the doctrine of emptiness, there is no thing that is essential, i.e. not part of the constitutive system of relationships.

I am convinced that, if we embrace codependent origination as a metaphysics, then a value theory for environmental ethics which is very similar to the one which I've formulated will follow logically. Of course, a value theory does not constitute an environmental ethic. Rather, it is the foundation upon which an ethic can be constructed, and while the shape of the value theory dramatically affects the form of the ethic itself, the nuances of the environmental ethic can't be extrapolated directly from a value theory. What would be the shape of an environmental ethic with constitutive holism as its value theory? How would we derive oughts or duties from a rational requirement to value the constitutive system of relationships? I won't launch into a full description and defense of what such an ethic would look like, as that is an entirely distinct project. I will provide some brief conjecture, however.

Perhaps the most concrete thing I can say about a constitutive holist ethic is that it would look quite different from the individualist ethics of Regan, Rolston, and Taylor in terms of obligations to species and systems. This much is obvious. But what of a more Rolston-holism or Callicott-esque approach? I am not adverse to suggesting that a holist ethic like those discussed in Chapter 2 could more or less maintain its same structure were it based upon constitutive holism. Our new environmental ethic might look something like Leopold or Callicott's land ethic, in which we substitute "the land" or "the biotic community" for "the constitutive system of relationships."<sup>17</sup> It might have some commonalities with Rolston's holist approach, focused upon the nonaddition of suffering to the system; we might even be able to imagine some sort of stratification of moral

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<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 2, *a*.

concern in the manner which Rolston does, but for different reasons—human beings are due the most consideration because of their capacity to recognize the nature of reality and value and to act upon it, sentient beings hold less weight but still hold special concern for their capacity to experience suffering and other normatively valuable or disvaluable experiences, and so on.<sup>18</sup> Maybe our new environmental ethic is entirely distinctive from those we've discussed: a consequentialist account with a constitutive holist conception of the grounds of value, for instance, or a modification of Buddhist virtue ethics with a refined conception of value.

I don't pretend to claim that any one of these is more plausible than another, and I don't intend to argue for any one vision in particular. Rather than move forward in articulating an entire new environmental ethic, my motive has been to critically eye an important and oft-overlooked facet of environmental ethics, and to conceptualize and defend what I see as a potential remedy to this issue. While a normative environmental ethic itself has the most direct effect upon our actions, a coherently presented and defended value theory is indispensable. Even if the doctrine of codependent origination was dealt a terminal blow—though hopefully this is unlikely—I would continue to hope that environmental ethicists give greater emphasis to arguing for and elucidating their value theory. An ethic is empty without a metaethic, and Environmental Ethics is no exception.

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<sup>18</sup> See Chapter 2, *b* and Chapter 1, *c*, respectively.



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