

Does Nature have Intrinsic Value

The issue of the intrinsic value of non-human entities, and nature in general, is central to environmental ethics. Many advocates of a truly 'environmental ethic' make crucial recourse to intrinsic (or inherent) value.

Two obvious questions arise:

- What is intrinsic value?
- Does nature (or non-human things) have intrinsic value?

Unfortunately, there are no clear answers to either question. Many give merely negative definitions of intrinsic value -- i.e., by drawing a distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value, and then saying that intrinsic value is what remains after eliminating any instrumental values. That is, if something is valued, but not because of its instrumental value (to humans, usually) then it has intrinsic value.

Regarding the second question, many seem to argue simply that the only way to properly account for the way we value nature is to assume that natural objects have non-instrumental value, i.e., intrinsic value. At best, this is a crucial unsupported assumption, and at worst, is straightforwardly circular reasoning (we ought to have moral regard for nature. Why? Because it has intrinsic value? But how do we know it has intrinsic value? Because ought to have moral regard for it.)

Theoretical Issues

One of the most important issues in moral theory is determining what is of intrinsic or ultimate value. The question to be answered is:

At what do our moral actions ultimately aim? (Or, What is the ultimate goal of moral action?)

Throughout the history of moral philosophy there have been many different answers suggested, including, the Just life, Eudaimonia (human flourishing), Self-Interest, Good Will, and Pleasure.

When looking at what things we value, from the moral perspective, we have to be careful to distinguish between what we value ultimately or in itself, and those things we value simply because they lead to something we value in itself. Most use the term "Intrinsic Value" to refer to the former (alternatively, "Inherent Value" or "Non-Instrumental Value"), and the term "Instrumental Value" to refer to the latter (alternatively, "Extrinsic Value"). We will often be led to ask the question "Why do we value such and such"? If we answer along the lines that we value A because it leads to B (some further thing we value), then A is instrumentally valuable because it leads to B. However, we might value B because it leads to C, and so on. Many think that because of this process, we must ultimately get to something we value in itself, or intrinsically -- that is, not because it leads to something else of value. In short, the chain of values must end somewhere.

It is important to understand the relationship between value and morality -- that is, the relationship between the relevant value judgements we make and moral judgements (of right and wrong). Some, e.g., Kant, claim that morally right actions are intrinsically valuable. The upshot here is that we act morally just to be moral, not for any other purpose or goal. Others, e.g., Taylor, argue that morally right actions are merely instrumentally valuable because they lead to some other (sometimes, intrinsic) value, e.g., pleasure, happiness, a Just society, etc. As we will see, answering the question of what is of ultimate value is crucial in environmental ethics.

The Fact-Value Problem

The so-called fact/value problem (often called the Naturalistic Fallacy -- or, Hume's Fork, the is/ought problem, or the fact/value lacuna) arises from the claim that we cannot deduce a prescriptive (i.e., moral or normative, or value) conclusion or judgement from a set of descriptive (i.e., factual) premisses. It should be fairly clear to see that if there really is a logical gap, as some say, between facts and values, certain moral theories must be false. For instance, any theory that makes crucial recourse to rights purportedly derived from natural origins must explain how the key moral claims are derivable from the factual claims. In environmental ethics, the issue is whether we can legitimately derive value merely from some natural fact, e.g., that pollution is destroying some ecological system.

Notes

Naturalizing Values: Organisms and Species **Holmes Rolston III**

Rolston is well known in environmental ethics circles as being a strong advocate of ascribing morally significant values directly to things in nature. In this paper, he attempts to show that we can legitimately assign intrinsic value to non-human natural entities directly. Further, to do so is simply another step in the philosophical programme of Naturalism. Naturalism is the view that everything is natural in the sense that it is physical, and so is susceptible to purely physical -- i.e., natural -- explanations. There is no such thing as the 'supernatural' (e.g., gods, souls, spirits, etc.). This has very important implications for our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live. Consider the example of knowledge. Most early attempts at explaining knowledge -- what it is, and how we get it -- involved some recourse to non-physical things, perhaps a soul or a mind (as independent of the brain). Naturalistic explanations, however, make no recourse to such things.

Rolston argues that we can undertake the same kind of investigation concerning values. This is contrary to many who regard value to be fundamentally distinct from natural or physical things (i.e., the fact-value problem). If anything, values arise merely from *human* needs and desires. Rolston finds this inadequate because it disallows ascribing value to any non-human entity.

As we have noted, we need to distinguish between instrumental value and intrinsic value. But we need a further distinction, between human generated and ascribed intrinsic value and non-human generated intrinsic value. There are then four positions occupied by those who discuss value in nature.

1. Only human beings have intrinsic value (Only anthropocentric value)
2. Only sentient things have intrinsic value (Only sentience-centered value)
3. Only humans can generate intrinsic values, and ascribe it to some non-sentient things (Only anthropogenic values)
4. Intrinsic values can arise independent of humans (Anthropogenic values in nature)

Traditional moral theories stop at 1. Animal rights/liberation theories stop at 2. Some environmental ethicists stop at 3. Rolston goes all the way to 4.

It's not entirely clear what Rolston takes to be his argument here. Part of what he seems to say is that those who argue that non-human things have no intrinsic value have the burden of proof. That is, people speak as if they are ascribing value directly to nature -- e.g., when a scientist says things that suggest that he or she think that there are human independent values and valuers -- so the burden of proof is held by those who claim otherwise. This, of course, is not especially convincing because it may well be that when scientists say such things they are merely using the term metaphorically. Rolston discusses this, and we will raise it in class. Also, Rolston seems to be motivated to argue for intrinsic value and valuers in nature on the grounds that any other way of arriving at values will inadequately protect nature. As it stands, this looks to be circular, but we will discuss this further too.

There is no doubt there is an issue here. There are several very difficult questions.

- How is it that something comes to have value?
- How does something come to have intrinsic value?
- Can there be value (both instrumental and intrinsic) without a valuer?
- What does it take to be a valuer?

Many think that to be of value, someone or thing must value that thing. Further, that to value something, one must possess consciousness, and perhaps even human consciousness (along with other related capabilities, e.g., rationally judged interest or preferences).

Rolston thinks that this is a kind of "value apartheid." The implication is that it is not warranted to exclude non-humans (or the non-conscious) from the realm of value. Why not? Because non-human things act as if they value things, and nature in general always seems to be striving towards achieving things. Rolston sees no reason why we should not consider this valuing. And so, he sees no reason why we should not consider that this valuing leads to intrinsic value. The upshot, not directly addressed, is that we now have moral obligations to uphold this valuing.

Further questions

If everything in nature has intrinsic value, how are we to act?

Is anything of value *to* a tree?

Comments on Holmes Rolston's "Naturalizing Values"

Ned Hettinger

Hettinger responds directly to Rolston's paper -- though is quite sympathetic to the main claims.

Recall, the key issue is whether intrinsic values can arise wholly independently of humans. Hettinger admits that there might be some non-human generated values -- e.g., a wolf valuing the deer it kills and feeds to her cubs. But this, if anything, is instrumental value. Can we say that the wolf has any intrinsic values? Hettinger seems to think so -- e.g., the wolf valuing certain pleasurable experiences.

Now, though, what about non-sentient things? Hettinger agrees that there seems to be no reason to think that there can be no instrumental *goods* in non-human nature. But we have to ask what this means. One thing of importance is that a machine also has instrumental goods -- it is not good for a car to be run without engine oil. This creates an apparent problem, for we would not want to be in the position of having to ascribe morally significant goods or intrinsic values to cars.

Rolston's answer is that wherever there is "positive creativity" in nature, there is intrinsic good. It's not entirely clear what this means, but the upshot is that Jupiter, for instance, has no systems in which positive creativity is displayed, whereas, ecological systems, and perhaps some others, do, so they have value. Further such a value is *objective* -- that is, is not dependent on subjective experience.

The distinction between subjective and objective values is useful. That there are subjective values is not controversial. But that there are objective values (in nature) is controversial. As Hettinger notes, Rolston argues for both subjective and objective values in nature. But here's the crux of the issue:

If instrumental goods are good only insofar as they are a means to some other good, and if we rule out an endless series or

loop of instrumental values (as some pragmatists would allow), then objective instrumental goods for insentient organisms entail the existence of objective intrinsic goods (p. 87).

This reflects the standard idea that positing a distinction between instrumental and intrinsic goods or values leads to having to accept that at least one thing is of ultimate or intrinsic value; the 'chain' of values has to stop somewhere. If we add that the instrumental goods are objective, then we are led to objective intrinsic goods or values. This is a key point of the discussion.

One final point is worth mentioning. Rolston runs an argument to the effect that it is arrogant of humans to think that there are no objective, indeed, no non-human values. A well known thought experiment is used: Imagine the Earth prior to humans, or even prior to any experiencing thing. Does this world possess value? If you answer "No", then you are on the side of the subjectivists. If you answer "Yes", then you are on the side of the objectivists.

Hettinger, notes, however, most would be reluctant to say that this world had no value, but that it might be thought that a subjectivist could get around this by allowing for an 'ideal observer' to take the part of absent subjects. Hettinger thinks this works, and so Rolston's argument, here, is not convincing (note, though, that this is not very serious for Rolston). I'm not sure Hettinger is right. Most would think that the introduction of the ideal observer brings in a kind of objectivity (that's usually the point of an ideal observer). It looks doubtful that any kind of subjectivism remains.

Nature

John Stuart Mill

Mill analyzes the concept of 'nature' in order to determine if it makes sense to think that we ought to govern our actions at least in part by what is natural.

There are many sense of the word "natural", but Mill concentrates on three supposed senses.

1. nature as the sum total of all things in the Universe
2. nature as that which is not artificial (i.e., artifacts of human beings)
3. nature as that which ought to be the case (a moral sense)

Sense 3 is nonsensical, or rather, cannot be a distinct sense. Surely it cannot be the case that when people say that you ought to do X because it is natural that they mean that you ought to do what you ought to do. This is so obviously circular that anyone who would propose this as a distinct sense of the word in this context need not be taken seriously.

Sense 1 and 2 are legitimate senses, but which one is being used when people link what we ought to do with what is natural?

Mill argues that it cannot be sense 1 because that seems to be quite unreasonable. That is, because sense 1 includes all of the laws of nature (gravitation, inertia, etc.) it makes little sense to say that we ought to do what we cannot avoid doing. For instance, we cannot avoid acting in accordance with the law of gravity; imagine someone saying to you "You ought not float off the seat in the classroom." Strictly speaking, it is not nonsensical, but it surely serves no purpose to makes such statements.

The only thing left, then, is sense 2. It seems most reasonable that when people say that what we ought to do is what is natural that they mean that we do that which is not artificial. This is still common nowadays, for instance, when people claim that we ought not clone people because it's unnatural. Or, that homosexuality is immoral because it is unnatural. Further, that natural food products are good -- with the direct implication that artificial food products are bad.

But, is it right to link morally right and good with natural?

Mill thinks not. For one important reason, if we copied nature as a guide to conduct, we would act in the most atrocious ways. All sorts of horrible killing and torture occurs in nature. Surely, just because it does it does not follow that we would be doing nothing wrong. Quite the contrary, in fact.

A further claim following from the above argument is that rather than imitating nature, we should attempt to override it, and correct it when we can. This view is not so common nowadays, but it is not uncommon to think that at least part of what it means to be moral is the controlling of natural inclinations. We might be naturally (or innately) inclined to act selfishly, but through our capacity to reason, we override this inclination. [There is an issue here -- namely whether we are in fact naturally inclined to be selfish, but the illustration is merely meant to serve as an example.]

The important question drawn from this for us is:

Should we derive any moral values or goods from facts about nature?