



Philosophy and the Human Situation

Environmental Values

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One of the good things about environmental philosophy is the way it forces us to try to get clear about a key topic that's always surfacing in our thinking and talking about the environment, that of value. There are lots of stories, on the radio, the TV, in the newspapers about environmental change, and for most of the time it seems simply to be assumed that it's important, that it matters, that these changes are taking place, and assumed as well that the environment is something we ought to be concerned about. But why is it important, and why does it matter? What we need to know, surely, is just what's bad about global warming, or why we ought to be pleased that ospreys are back, or why we should be bothered either way about what happens on Madagascar. What we want to know, in short, is how and why aspects of the environment, or the natural world, are valuable.

These questions about value can take on at least two forms. We can ask, first, just how good or valuable a certain thing is, or how bad or disvaluable it would be if some change came about, or we can ask, second, in what way a certain thing or change is good or bad, valuable or disvaluable. The questions are different. Think about food. They say carrots are good for you. You can ask, first, how good are they – will they make my life a lot better or just a little bit? And you can ask, second, in what way are they good – do they cure headaches, build bones, or help me see in the dark? I'm going to focus on the second sort of question, talking about the different ways in which the environment, or its parts, or change that happens within it might be valuable or disvaluable. But before this I'll make just a quick point about the first question, both because this point's important on its own, and because it has bearing on some of the comments I make later on.

You might agree that carrots are good for you but still never eat any. You might just hate the taste, or live hundreds of miles from where they grow, or decide that broccoli is that bit better. Though they're good for you, though there's some value in carrots, this - where eating them is concerned - might be outweighed by other considerations. Similarly you might agree that global warming is a bad thing, that it will make our lives worse, that there's disvalue in it, but still decide it's not bad enough to warrant all the fuss. The benefits of preventing climate change, though real, may not justify the costs involved. It's a mistake, then, to think that if something is valuable, we ought always to look after it, or preserve it, or regret it if it disappears or gets destroyed. We might think instead, 'admittedly there's *some* reason to resist such change, regret such loss, but that reason might be easily overridden'.

That's my quick point, then, about the different degrees of value a thing might have. My main focus, to repeat, is not on differences of degree, but differences in kind. And what I'm hoping to do is to distinguish between certain quite general ways in which it's been claimed that aspects of the environment can be valuable. Some of these kinds of value are relatively straightforward, and uncontroversial, while others are perhaps more difficult to understand and accept. I'll begin with the simpler kinds, and in order to help you identify the main distinctions I want to make, I'll number and title the different sections of my discussion. So:

1. *Instrumental Value*

Carrots are good for us. In moderation, they make our lives go better. And air pollution – smog, fumes, acid rain – is bad for us. It makes our lives go worse. But in what way are these things good or bad? There are differences of course, yet we can say, and I think usefully say, that these things are *instrumentally* good or bad – they cause or bring about good or bad effects, or they are means to good or bad ends, or they are like tools – things that we or others can use to bring about these good or bad effects or ends.

Instrumental or as it might be called, means-end value, is widespread. Most of us think that dentists, phones, vitamin pills, money are instrumentally good – we want, we use them to get or to bring about, a good effect. Most of us think, similarly, that cavities, viruses, blackouts and maybe also taxes are instrumentally bad – they stand in the way of our getting things that are, or at least that we think are, good. And a great deal of our concern about the environment, or parts of the environment, can be understood in such terms. Concerns about the built environment, noise pollution in cities and near motorways, litter in the streets, the proliferation of roads and urban and suburban sprawl, is fairly obviously a concern for the quality of our lives. So too for many of our concerns about the natural world – worry about climate change, about GM foods, over-fishing of the seas is all of it often a concern about the good or bad effects that changes and policies here will have on our lives. We might be concerned just for our own lives. But we might be concerned, as well, for the lives of people living in different parts of the world, or even for people who aren't yet born. Maybe there'll be no second Chernobyl, but much of the concern about nuclear power is about the long term risk of disaster, and how, if at all, we can be justified in imposing such risk on future generations.

So it is, I think, straightforward and uncontroversial that there's value and disvalue of this instrumental or means-end kind, involving things that make life better or worse for human beings. Should we think, though, that all value is like this, or are there other kinds still to uncover?

2. *Beyond Instrumental Value*

There's undoubtedly value of a further kind. If we think that stability over climate change is good, or valuable because of its effects on human beings, we think surely, that our living good lives is valuable just in itself. I'm not, and neither are you, to be seen as an instrument or tool for bringing about some good effect elsewhere. We're not living our lives just to make other lives better, and so on *ad infinitum*. So, it surely must seem that at least human beings are, in some sense, non-instrumentally valuable, or valuable just in themselves.

But maybe human beings are the only things that matter in this way, the only things that matter in themselves, for their own sake, the only things that have any degree of non-instrumental value. And perhaps all our concern for the environment is, in the end, to be understood in terms of its effects on the welfare, or well-being of human lives.

Many people defend, while many others object to, this anthropocentric, or human centred view of environmental concern, the view that grants that we matter, directly in ourselves, but insists that other things matter, have value only instrumentally, only insofar as they contribute to our welfare or well-being. But it seems to me that there's not really much room for a lively debate here, and that this anthropocentric view is one that's pretty obviously untenable.

For consider animals. Nuclear radiation, drought, ozone holes are bad for human beings, but they're bad for many animals as well. Similarly, many people will argue for GM foods, or the incursions into the countryside by yet more roads, parking lots and shopping malls, or more obviously for Foot and Mouth. Environmental change can make our lives go worse, but can just as easily lead to serious problems for animal lives. If human well-being or welfare matters in itself, non-instrumentally, then surely, so too does animal well-being or welfare. Remember what I said about questions of degree. We don't have to agree that animals matter just as much as human beings, so we might in the end decide to get rid of the elephants in order to make available more land for farming, but it's hard to see any reason for thinking that animals don't matter at all. And so it's hard to see any reason for drawing a line between human beings, on the one hand, and the rest of nature, on the other. This human-centred or anthropocentric view has to go.

But it may be that we're going too quickly here, and that we'll get ourselves in a mess if we agree, just like that, that the welfare or well-being of animals, like that of humans, matters just in itself. For then what about trees and plants? They too are damaged and destroyed in floods and storms, catch diseases, or get wiped out by new and invasive species, but though

some people think trees and plants also matter in themselves, most agree that this is in some ways a controversial view, and a great many think it's just wrong.

Why? The difference here, I think, is this. Even if we can talk about the welfare or well-being of trees and plants, what we need to recognise is that they don't suffer, don't feel pain, when their welfare or well-being is adversely affected. It doesn't hurt to kill them. And this *seems* to make a difference. We've got reason to worry about and try to prevent those things which have bad effects on human beings, just because, often at least, human beings will suffer or feel pain as a result. And where other animals are concerned again, plausibly, it's their suffering we should be concerned with. And again, plausibly, many animals are capable of suffering. Foot and mouth causes distress, at least to sheep, pigs, and cows. That in itself is a reason to be rid of it. Birds suffer in oil slicks. Again, there's reason because of this, to try to prevent tankers from going aground.

But then what about animals that don't suffer? Suppose, as I believe is true, that insects don't feel pain. And suppose that some environmental change will cause a species of insects to become extinct. Is there reason to resist such change?

There's a variety of positions we can adopt here. We might say, this change is certainly bad for these insects – after all it will cause them to die out – but because no suffering is involved, it makes no moral claim on us. Or we might say, as there's no suffering and no moral claim made upon us, so it isn't bad for these insects to die, and so in the end for the species to die out. I prefer the former position. I think something can be bad for an animal, or a plant or, for that matter, for a pond, or mountain, or a city, or a painting, even though none of these things can suffer. But though something can be *bad for* such things, it doesn't, I think, follow that it's *bad that* these changes occur. Though we've always some reason to prevent pain and suffering, there isn't always some reason, as I see it, to prevent damage to, or destruction of, things living or not.

Remember, I'm talking here only about the question of whether harms to animals and plants are bad in themselves. Often, of course, environmental change that brings about such harms is something we have reason to resist. For often of course, such harms are instrumentally bad. Insects die, and birds suffer. Crops fail, and people starve. There's reason to prevent damage or destruction to non-sentient life when, because of such damage or destruction, pain or suffering in sentient creatures will result.

One objection to the ubiquity of instrumental, or means-end value then, is that human beings, and at least some animals matter in themselves. Our well-being, and their well-being as well, ought not to be seen as important just insofar as it serves as a means or tool to some other good further along the line.

Are there now further objections, further ways in which the instrumental or means end view is incomplete? I'm pretty sure that there are. I'll go on to consider whether things other than human beings and sentient animals can matter just in themselves, non-instrumentally. But what I want to do first is to explain something of the way in which things can matter, or be of value to us, even though this mattering, this value, is not of the instrumental kind.

3. *Personal Value*

I'll go back to food. Carrots, for me, are not like raspberries. Carrots are okay, and I can see the point of having them from time to time, but raspberries are simply bliss. They just taste so good. Or think, say, about sport. A lot of people get a great deal of pleasure out of watching football, or Formula One racing. And it's the same, for some, with aspects of the environment. You might be particularly fond of the view from the back of your house, or care a lot for, and find value in, the mix of vegetation that springs up on waste ground, or the massing of storm clouds on a distant horizon, or the different sound things make in fog or snow.

It may seem that we're still talking of instrumental value here. We can eat carrots for the vitamins, or go running to exercise the heart, or we can eat raspberries or ice cream, and play

or watch football just for the pleasure they give us. So raspberries and football, like carrots and running, are still just instrumentally valuable, and matter only as means to an end. But there's something not quite right in this way of putting things. People who like football don't, I'm sure, think 'I'd like some pleasure tonight. And maybe football is the way to get it.' It's not like hunger – 'I'm starving, so maybe bread and cheese'. No, people just want to see the game. Certainly some sort of pleasure is often the result, but even so, that this is the result isn't the point of, the reason for, watching the game. Or think about children. A lot of people get pleasure from their kids, but they don't want, value kids as a means to getting pleasure. After all, if it's pleasure you're after, there are easier and cheaper ways. So the better way to think about such cases – raspberries, football, kids – is just to allow that there are things we care about, that matter to us, that we value just for their own sake, and not as a means to something else valuable, as a means to pleasure, or happiness, or whatever. What to call it? The philosopher Ronald Dworkin has talked about *personal value* in cases like this, and that seems to me appropriate, both because it's typically persons, rather than fish or rabbits or swallows, that value things in this way and also because the term brings out, what is at least often true, that such tastes, such valuing, vary from person to person.

Let me make this clear. This idea of there being personal values isn't intended to challenge, as the earlier point about animal suffering is intended to challenge, the link between value and human beings. But what it is against is the view that only human beings and some animals have anything other than instrumental value. There's value here, but of a non-instrumental kind.

4. *Objective Value*

But now this non-instrumental value takes different shapes. Here's one sort of case: I value the crunch of snow for what it is in itself, and not for what it can do for me, but I don't think it's valuable in itself. And I don't think it's something everyone ought to value. Or, I value my kids' paintings, again for what they are rather than for what they can do but, again, I don't think they are valuable in themselves. I don't, for example, think it important that they are preserved after my death.

But now other cases are importantly different. I can listen to snow or to Mozart. But my attitudes aren't the same. Mozart is, in some sense, valuable in itself. And there's some sense in which others ought to value it. There's some sense, that is, in which it seems to me that people make a mistake if they think Mozart is just muzak, and that some people dig him, others don't, and that's all there is to say. Similarly, there's a big difference between my kid's daubs and a painter like, say, Titian. It does matter that Titian is preserved after my death, and matters that others go on to appreciate his works. Like Mozart, there's a sense in which a Titian, or so I believe, is valuable in itself.

Some aspects of the environment figure in here. A widespread view is that animals like, say, pandas, or tigers - or closer to home, skylarks, or otters, or red admirals - are creatures which we ought to admire, to care for, to want to preserve. But there's no need to stop with animals. I could mention as well the magnificence of ancient oaks, or the complex web of life you'll find in and around even a small pond, or those few remaining wilderness areas – parts of Siberia, the Antarctic, and still as yet, the forests of Brazil with their echoes of a counter to our mechanised and urbanised world. It seems to matter that components within the natural world – maybe the ones I mention here or, at least, things similar – are not lost, or squandered.

A widespread view, that is, is that here too there are things that are, in some sense, again non-instrumentally valuable. And talk of personal value seems not altogether appropriate here. In some areas tastes vary, and legitimately vary, from person to person – it doesn't matter, and in some ways is quite a relief that not everyone values raspberries – while in others variation in taste, at least when it is pronounced, appears a matter for regret. Mozart, Venice, tigers, friendship – these things are in important ways, valuable in themselves.

What we've done here, in effect, is to find a space for notions of objective value, claiming that such things are really, genuinely valuable, independently of what particular people may happen to feel about them. It's just a fact, we might say, that these things are valuable. Now

one notion of objective value ought, I want to suggest, to be seen as utterly uncontroversial. It's just a fact, an objective fact, that water is good for, valuable for, trees just is it's a fact, and not a matter of taste or opinion, that nuclear radiation is bad for, among many others, human beings. Where instrumental values are concerned, then, this notion of objective value is one we surely have to allow. It may be less clear, I admit, where non-instrumental values are concerned, and I'm aware that some of you might think that my account, with its insistence that we ought to value, appreciate, think good, want to preserve, bits of music, famous paintings, some cities, aspects of nature, certain of our human relationships – you might think this account elitist, quirky, and so far under-supported. But don't worry about the particular examples. I hope you'll be able to agree with the general point – it's at least plausible to hold that there are things which we ought to value for their own sake, and the thorough-going neglect of which – brought about, perhaps, through an impoverishment of our own lives – is something we'd have reason to regret.

5. *Intrinsic Value*

One worry about this account of non-instrumental value is that it's already too ambitious. Another thought is that, particularly where the environment is concerned, it's not yet ambitious enough. For, the claim is, this is a highly selective, and still human-centred approach to the natural world, and one which still fails to acknowledge the kind of non-instrumental value which all of nature should be seen to have. Deep and deepish green environmentalists (and deep ecologists are prominent among them), insist that we need to get right away from anthropocentrism, from a concern with what is, from our human perspective, beautiful or moving, and to see that nature, all of it, is valuable in and of itself, and not simply because of the ways in which we happen, either as individuals or a species, to feel about it.

This is where, I think, intrinsic value has to come in. In his book, John Benson mentions such value on a couple of occasions but for the most part steers well clear of it. He has good reasons for this – as he says, the notion is complex, and getting clear can be hard work. But my hunch is that because it gets so bandied about, because in ordinary talk about the environment or in discussions in newspapers or on the TV, this term 'intrinsic value' gets widely used, we need to tackle it. And we need to decide whether, and where, and in what sense, there is intrinsic value in nature.

Let's take stock. It's clear enough, I've wanted to say that much in the natural world is of instrumental value, either to us, to other animals, or to trees, plants, and smaller and simpler life forms. Should we care about instrumental value, about the things or processes which function as tools or as a means to an end? If we should care about the end, then I've suggested we should care about the means. And where the end is pain or pleasure, either in our selves or in other sentient creatures, then care about the means is appropriate.

I've wanted to say also that there are things we value for their own sake, non-instrumentally and, as well, things we ought to value for their own sake, non-instrumentally. And certainly some parts of the natural world are included here.

How then, are non-instrumental and intrinsic values related? In the end, the labels themselves don't matter too much, but there's certainly a difference between claiming that something is valued *for* itself, on the one hand, and that something has value *in and of* itself, quite independently of human beings, or indeed any other creatures – cats, Martians, God – on the other. And because there's a distinction here, it will be helpful to use the term 'intrinsic value' in connection only with this latter category.

Is there anything that's intrinsically valuable in this sense? Let's do a thought experiment. Imagine a planet with rocks, stones, water, plants, trees. It's got a lot of nature. But there aren't, never were, and let us suppose never will be, either animals or humans, and so on this planet no possibility of pleasure or pain. And the planet is so far away that nothing that happens on it, or to it, can have any significant consequences elsewhere. And, to get complication out of the way, let's suppose as well that nothing about it is particularly beautiful. Does it matter at all if this planet is destroyed? Does a bad thing happen, something which, were we to know about it, we'd have reason to prevent, and which afterwards, if prevention fails, we'd have cause to regret? I'm supposing that such destruction happens naturally, say

because of asteroids or an exploding star, and not because men or Martians shoot it down. Men and Martians equally muddy the waters. If you think it would be a bad thing were this planet to be destroyed, then you believe in the intrinsic value of nature, in something like the deep ecologist's sense. If, though, you don't see how the fate of this planet could matter either way then you, like me, find this notion of intrinsic value somewhat hard to take.

6. *Summary*

I'll end by just running over, briefly, the ground I've tried to cover here in moving, as I promised I would, from less to more controversial claims about value. I started with two claims which I said were relatively straightforward and uncontroversial, first that many things, and many parts or aspects of the environment among them, are instrumentally valuable, and second that some things, notably human beings and sentient animals, are of value non-instrumentally, and matter not as a means to an end, but just in themselves. There's a bit of controversy here, for some people, as I noted, are stubbornly anthropocentric, and think that non-human animals don't, just in themselves, matter at all. But that, I insisted, is a view with little to recommend it.

I went on to discuss further varieties of non-instrumental value, and drew distinctions between three kinds of value which people have claimed to exist, both within the environment and without. First, there are personal values, the things that individually, we care about, not as a means to something else, but simply for their own sake. For some people raspberries have value of this kind, for others it might be tiddlywinks, or hunting mushrooms, or listening to owls. An objection here is that raspberries, 'winks, mushrooms, owls, are here valued only instrumentally, as a means to the end of pleasure. But this objection, I suggested, isn't convincing.

Second, I claimed that while many of the things we value are personal to us, and matters of taste or opinion, some are things we ought to value, things some engagement with which are, in John Benson's phrase, constitutive of the good life. Perhaps great art, and great nature, are both valuable in this way, things that we can expect and hope that future generations will continue to care for. The objection here that we can't move beyond taste and opinion, beyond the 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' type view is one that many people want to make. Nevertheless, I suggested, this objection can be met.

Third, there's the claim that not only human beings and sentient animals, but also other animals and plants, and glaciers, and stars all matter in themselves, quite independently of human and other creatures' concerns. Here, in this third species of non-instrumental value, we're encountering those claims about intrinsic value which deep ecologists, among others, want so much to defend. But the objections to value claims of this kind, I've wanted to suggest, are strong.

Finally, what of the value of this talk? I've wanted to help you clarify a number of positions on values in the environment. It isn't important that you agree with everything I've said here. But it is important that you can understand and describe these different positions, and say something about why you agree (if you do) and about where and why you disagree (if, in places, agreement between us runs out). I hope very much it's helped you to do that.