The Cost of Denying Intrinsic Value in Nature

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Many people who claim to genuinely care about nature still seem reluctant to ascribe intrinsic value to it. Environmentalists, nature friendly people in general, and even environmental activists, often hesitate at the idea that nature possesses value in its own right – value that is not reducible to its importance to human or other sentient beings. One crucial explanation of this reluctance is probably the thought that such value – at least when attached to nature – would be mysterious in one way or another, or at least very difficult to account for. In addition, Bryan Norton’s influential convergence hypothesis states that, from a practical point of view, it makes no or little difference whether we ascribe intrinsic value to nature, given the depth and variety of instrumental value that it possesses. In this paper, I argue that people who genuinely care about nature cannot avoid ascribing intrinsic value (in a certain sense) to it, if they want to be able to consistently defend the kind of claims about protecting nature that they arguably want to make, i.e., claims to the effect that we ought to protect for instance nature areas and species. The cost of denying intrinsic value in nature is the cost of giving up a crucial resource to philosophically defend such claims.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many people who claim to genuinely care about nature still seem reluctant to ascribe non-instrumental value – typically referred to as “intrinsic value” – to it. Environmentalists, nature friendly people in general, and even environmental activists – who put a lot of effort into defending nature and finding arguments for protecting it – often hesitate at the idea that nature possesses value in its own right, i.e., value that is not reducible to nature’s importance to human or other sentient beings.

Within the discipline of environmental ethics, in particular philosophers who self-identify as anthropocentrists have insisted that all value in nature ultimately derives from (in some sense) human values. A more recent trend in environmental ethics is to turn the focus from intrinsic value to a certain kind of relational value – what we may call “human-relational value” – which is a kind of value that (some) entities in nature are supposed to possess in virtue of their relations to human beings.\(^1\) While some authors consider such relational value

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\(^1\) For a recent literature survey and discussion, see Norton and Sanbeg (2021). This concept of human-relational value should not be conflated with the general concept of relational non-instrumental value, which simply refers to value that is non-instrumental but supervenes on relational properties (though not necessarily properties to do with relations to humans; for instance, relations between organisms and ecosystems could serve a case in point). Restricting one’s endorsement of non-instrumental value in nature to such general relational non-instrumental value need not be problematic from the point of view of the argument offered in
to have an intrinsic element (Deplazes-Zemp and Chapman 2021), it is still directly derived from the significance that these natural entities have for (some) human beings.

Even outside of environmental ethics, it is my experience from teaching, giving talks, and discussing with representants from various organizations and scientific fields, that many people who genuinely care about nature are reluctant to ascribe intrinsic value to it. One crucial explanation of this reluctance is plausibly that these nature friendly people – within and outside of environmental ethics – take intrinsic value, in particular when ascribed to non-subjects or states of non-subjects (such as species or nature areas), to be mysterious in one way or another, or at least very difficult to account for.\(^2\)

In addition, Bryan Norton’s influential convergence hypothesis states that, from a practical point of view, it makes no or little difference whether we ascribe intrinsic value to nature, given the depth and variety of instrumental value that it possesses (Norton 1991). Norton has expressed his convergence hypothesis as follows: “If reasonably interpreted and translated into appropriate policies, a nonanthropocentric ethic will advocate the same policies as a suitably broad and long-sighted anthropocentrism” (Norton 2003: 11).\(^3\) The idea is that if we vividly grasp the full width of nature’s instrumental value (for human beings) – now and in the future – we see that it gives us just as strong reasons for policies and actions for environmental protection as the reasons associated with any (at least fairly reasonable) attributions of intrinsic value to nature.

In this paper, I argue – against the gist of the convergence hypothesis – that people who genuinely care about nature cannot avoid ascribing intrinsic value to it (in a certain sense, which will be elaborated below), even if they can of course avoid using the term. They simply have to embrace such value in nature if they want to be able to consistently defend the kind of claims about our reasons to care about it that they arguably want to make, i.e., claims to the effect that we ought to protect for instance nature areas and species. The cost of denying intrinsic value in nature is the cost of giving up a crucial resource to philosophically defend such claims.\(^4\)

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\(^2\) Within environmental ethics, such worries have been expressed by, e.g., Norton (1991); Weston (1996); Light (2002); and Morito (2003). I will not address this kind of worry here; I have done that elsewhere and argued that there is nothing mysterious or particularly problematic about endorsing such value in nature (Samuelsson 2010; and Samuelsson and Lindström 2021: 11-14).

\(^3\) The terms “anthropocentrism” and “nonanthropocentrism” are used in several different ways in the environmental ethics literature, and their meanings are often far from clear (see Samuelsson 2013 for an account). In this case, however, I take it to be pretty clear that “anthropocentrism” refers to the view that only human beings (or states, or communities, etc.) are valuable for their own sake (i.e., intrinsically valuable, as the phrase is used here), whereas nonanthropocentrism is the view that at least some non-human (natural) entities possess such value.

\(^4\) One can of course defend them by for instance using rhetorical devices, but such a defense would not be philosophically sound, but rather an act of deception.
The argument developed in this paper is intended to apply to anyone who genuinely cares about nature, and its aim is to establish the need for such people to endorse intrinsic value in it. Even if we accept, for the sake of argument, something like the convergence hypothesis, relying on nature’s instrumental value for nature-protective purposes is risky business for environmentalists. The upshot is that we can easily imagine a scenario where some crucial instrumental value, that is now possessed by some protection-worthy natural entity (such as a species or a diverse and unique ecosystem), is absent. Yet, even under such circumstances, environmentalists would generally want to protect the entity in question. But in order to argue for protection in such a case, they would need to appeal to nature’s intrinsic value. Consequently, giving up on intrinsic value in nature means losing an important source for providing arguments to the effect that we ought to protect certain natural entities.

My argument is based on three cases, or thought experiments, that we may regard as hypothetical. They are designed to show that we can imagine cases where no instrumental values of nature can explain our supposed reasons to protect it. For the record, I believe that there actually are such cases in our world, but, importantly, my argument does not depend on this being the case. I hence call it a “counterfactual argument.” I will come back to the importance of this feature of the argument later, but the main point is that a counterfactual argument can allow us to disregard empirical questions about the utility of various natural entities (now and in the future).

Although arguments similar to mine have been provided by other environmental ethicists in the past, I believe that my approach adds something new to the debate about the need to appeal to intrinsic value in nature. I will use a section of the paper (section three) to briefly go through previous related approaches and explain how I take my approach to differ from them, and also state what contributions I believe that my paper makes to the debate. However, before doing that, I will provide some clarificatory remarks (in the next section), the purpose of which is to make the remainder of the paper clearer and avoid misunderstandings. Section four is devoted to carving out the concept of intrinsic value that is relevant to my argument. I then go on (in section five) to present the counterfactual argument, including the three cases. In section six I discuss and reject anticipated possible responses to my argument, and I also spell out the general structural problem of relying on instrumental reasons when defending the importance of a certain thing, or entity. Section seven concludes the paper.

II. SOME CLARIFICATORY REMARKS

I have used the terms “environmentalists” and “nature friendly people” to refer to the group of people that my argument aims to target (from hereon I will simply write “environmentalists”). I use these terms loosely, and take it that the

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5 Several arguments against the convergence hypothesis amount to trying to show that there are actual counterexamples to it (e.g., Katz and Oechsli 1993; Callicott 1995; Stenmark 2002; and Katz 2009).
argument largely applies to people who regard themselves as environmentalists, or who self-define as people who genuinely care about nature. In particular, the argument is directed towards people who (1) make claims or defend policies or actions that seem – on the face of it – to presuppose that nature is intrinsically valuable, but (2) are yet not willing to endorse intrinsic value (IV) in nature. From hereon I will refer to them as “IV-denying environmentalists.”

I have encountered several such persons myself, and in environmental ethics they are represented by some anthropocentrists (as mentioned above). However, if they are fewer than I believe, I do not consider this a big problem for my argument. The question of what costs are involved in denying intrinsic value in nature is important in its own right. It is important to be aware of the limitations of the available lines of argument for protecting nature – some people may for instance avoid appealing to intrinsic value in their arguments for pragmatic reasons, even if they themselves believe that nature possesses such value. Such a strategy may backfire if an appeal to intrinsic value in nature is indeed required for reaching the conclusion they want to argue for.

When I talk about nature, I am again deliberately using the term loosely. Different environmental ethicists focus on different natural entities, where common candidates for possessing intrinsic value are individual organisms, species, ecosystems, and nature as a whole (the biosphere), or nature areas, phenomena, or places more loosely construed. What I am after when I use the term “nature” are such entities in nature that are not sentient (wherever the line between the non-sentient and the sentient should be drawn, and however sentience, as a morally relevant feature, should be understood). These are the kinds of entities to which it has turned out to be (most) controversial to ascribe intrinsic value, and to which some environmentalists are reluctant to ascribe such value even though it seems – on the face of it – like they endorse it.

Relatedly, although I write in terms of nature possessing value, I do not, in this paper, take a stand on what kinds of entities that can be bearers of value. According to some philosophers, only states of affairs (like the state of affairs that X has its interests satisfied) can be bearers of value, whereas other philosophers (not least within environmental ethics) think that physical or abstract objects can be bearers of value (like an ecosystem, an organism, or a species). Other candidates for being value-bearers are properties and so-called organic unities (see Moore 1903: 27-29). For my purposes here, it is not important whether it is some natural object, some state of affairs involving that object, or some property of that object, that is valuable. When I talk about the value of nature (or the value of a “thing,” in general), I intend to capture all these alternative ways of understanding the precise location of this value.

The argument in this paper is framed in terms of intrinsic value. This is not unproblematic. As has been discussed at great length, in environmental ethics and elsewhere, this term is used in several different ways among philosophers and others. However, it is without doubt the most commonly used term for

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6 This is the strategy of some so called “environmental pragmatists” (see for instance McShane 2007: 46 for a brief account).
expressing the kind of concept that I have in mind in this paper. In section four I will elaborate this concept in detail, but let me provide some clarificatory notes already at this stage. I am not using the term “intrinsic value” in the “Moorean sense,” where a value is intrinsic if and only if it supervenes on intrinsic properties. Rather, I use it in the sense that John O’Neill refers to as “non-instrumental value” (O’Neill 1992: 119) (in section four I will discuss in what sense it is non-instrumental). Sometimes, such value is referred to as “end-value,” or “final value”; it is at the end of a value-chain (see Kagan 1998: 279). As there are quite a few examples of in the environmental ethics literature, such value may be taken to supervene on non-intrinsic, or relational properties, so the term “intrinsic value” may seem somewhat misleading.

But perhaps such value can still plausibly be said to be intrinsic in the following sense: When an object, X, possesses such value, X is valuable for its own sake, as opposed to being valuable (solely) for the sake of something else (something extrinsic to it). In the end, however, I take this to be merely a terminological matter. What is important is that we are clear about how the term “intrinsic value” is used in what follows, and I will devote section four to explaining that in detail.

Sometimes I use the expression “human or sentient values” when discussing reasons to protect nature. I use it as an umbrella phrase to cover the kinds of views according to which all values are somehow related to human or sentient beings. I take it that those who defend the protection of nature without ascribing intrinsic value to it do so by way of acknowledging some kinds of values relating to either human beings or sentient beings (for instance the value of them having their interests satisfied). While interests or welfare are typically invoked in such defenses, they need not rely on such concepts, but could instead (or also) focus on, for instance, respect, rights, groups of individuals, or phenomena exclusive to human or sentient beings, such as, perhaps, democracy or equality. I think it is safe, in this debate, to contrast such human or sentient values (understood this broadly) with intrinsic value in nature (given my broad understanding of “nature” in this paper), even if there theoretically could be other values to invoke for the purpose of defending environmental protection. I cannot see how any such other values could be used to convincingly respond to my counterfactual argument.

III. PREVIOUS ARGUMENTS

As noted in the introduction, arguments similar to the one I offer in this paper have been provided by other environmental ethicists in the past. In this section I briefly go through previous related approaches and explain how I take my approach to differ from them, and also state what contributions I believe that

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9 I am grateful to the reviewer who convinced me to use this term in the present context despite its associated problems.

10 See Samuelsson (2010: 532, n. 6) for a brief overview. See also footnote 1 above. Environmental ethicists defending such relational non-instrumental value typically refer to it as “intrinsic value,” just like I do in this paper.
my paper makes to the debate about the need to appeal to intrinsic value in nature.

Previous arguments have typically not been hypothetical but relied on empirical premises.\textsuperscript{11} These arguments have often targeted the convergence hypothesis directly, concluding, in one way or another, that it is false.\textsuperscript{12} However, whether the convergence hypothesis is false (in some or any formulation) is an empirical matter. As stated above, my argument aims to avoid such empirical questions, and I am even willing to grant the convergence hypothesis, \textit{as things currently happen to be in the world}, for the sake of argument. In relation to my purpose, the convergence hypothesis merely serves as part of the explanation of why it may be thought that environmentalists can avoid the notion of intrinsic value in nature.

In addition to the arguments that directly target the convergence hypothesis, Katie McShane (2007) has convincingly argued that whether or not nature has intrinsic value makes a difference to what kinds of attitudes it is appropriate to take towards it. My approach, however, takes quite a different form and goes beyond attitudes to target claims about actions, policies, and behaviors as well.

Some environmental ethicists have pointed out that acknowledging intrinsic value in nature shifts the burden of proof (Callicott 1995), or the onus of justification (Fox 1993), to those who want to interfere with the natural world. J. Baird Callicott (1995: §19), for instance, writes: “the burden of proof would be lifted from the shoulders of conservationists and shifted onto the shoulders of those who, pursuing other values, are – intentionally or unintentionally, knowingly or inadvertently – destroying nature.” The point is that if I want to justify destroying something that is valuable in itself, it is not sufficient to appeal to the interests of myself and others.\textsuperscript{13} This point is close to the point I want to make in this paper, but my argument is directed to those who want to defend nature: there are claims to the effect that we ought to protect nature that one cannot consistently defend by appealing only to human or sentient values.

Actually, the approaches that I think mine is most similar to were offered early in the history of modern environmental ethics. In a paper published in 1979, in the first volume of \textit{Environmental Ethics}, Eric Katz argues that utilitarianism is insufficient as a justificatory ground for environmental preservation (Katz 1979).\textsuperscript{14} Even if Katz’s argument is restricted to utilitarianism, he makes several

\textsuperscript{11} An exception is Steverson (1995), but his argument (which in my judgement is convincing) is quite different from mine and draws on the possibility that in the future we are in a better epistemic position to decide which species are crucial to ecosystem health and which are not. Another example of a hypothetical argument in environmental ethics is the famous “last man thought experiment” (Routley 1973), but that experiment is quite far-fetched, and even if one shares the intuitions it appeals to, there may be ways to debunk these intuitions (see for instance my discussion in Samuelsson 2009: 11-12).

\textsuperscript{12} For examples, see Katz and Oechsli (1993); Callicott (1995); Saner (2000); Stenmark (2002); and Katz (2009).

\textsuperscript{13} See also Fox (1993); and Westra (1997).

\textsuperscript{14} Another example is a paper by Alastair Gunn from 1980. Gunn (1980) argues that a theory ascribing intrinsic value to nature is needed to explain the wrongfulness of extermination of rare species. What I say about the similarities and differences between my account and Katz’s largely applies to Gunn’s approach as well.
general points resembling some of those I make in this paper (I will return to this later in the article). In particular, he convincingly notes the contingency involved in defending preservationist policies with reference to human needs, interests, or attitudes, concluding:

The simple fact of the matter is that the interests of mankind are not necessarily connected with the preservation of the natural environment. Any ethical theory which places its emphasis on the satisfaction of human needs can support a policy of preservation only on a contingent basis. (Katz 1979: 362)

Although my approach is similar to Katz’s in some ways, it also differs in important respects. As already noticed, the argument I employ does not rely on empirical premises about what the world is like now. Nor is it restricted to the shortcomings of utilitarian or anthropocentric reasons (but targets any version of anthropocentrism or sentientism). Moreover, my counterfactual argument is only one part of my approach. Another important part of it consists in carving out the relevant concept of intrinsic value (i.e., in showing what kind of value environmentalists need to endorse in nature in order to be able to consistently defend the kind of protectionist claims that they arguably want to make). This is not done in the other approaches attended to here (with the exception of McShane (2007), who – for her purposes – identifies a narrower concept of intrinsic value, although I take it to be compatible with the one that I distinguish).

To conclude this section, I take my paper to contribute to the debate about the need to appeal to intrinsic value in nature in the following ways:

1. I explicitly provide an argument that does not rely on empirical premises about what the world is currently like.
2. I carve out precisely what kind of value environmentalists need to endorse in nature in order to consistently defend the kind of claims about protecting it that they arguably want to make.
3. I provide a list of the initially at least fairly plausible responses to my argument (and similar arguments) that I can think of and show that they do not work.
4. I reveal the general, structural problem of approaches relying on instrumental reasons (see the next section) when defending the importance of a certain kind of “thing.”

IV. THE RELEVANT CONCEPT OF INTRINSIC VALUE

In order to understand and assess my argument, it is important that we are clear about what kind of value I claim that environmentalists need to endorse in nature. There are three crucial features of such value, and I will go through them one by one. First, it is reason-implying: claiming that a thing X has (positive) value in this sense involves claiming that there are reasons to (re)act towards X
in some positive way. Second, it is non-instrumental in a certain sense. And third, it is not entirely subjective, but more or less universal.

(1) The relevant value is reason-implying. Environmental ethicists would not regard the question about nature’s value as important unless they presupposed that such value would lay claims on us, that it is connected to reasons to protect nature. A major point of establishing that nature possesses value is to establish that we have reasons to care for it in one way or another.\(^\text{16}\)

(2) The relevant value is non-instrumental. This aspect of intrinsic value is at the heart of my argument: One needs to acknowledge non-instrumental value in nature to be able to defend the kind of protectionist claims that I take it that environmentalists in general want to defend. Purely instrumental value will not do. But in what sense should the value be non-instrumental? What we are after here is that our reasons to act towards nature should not depend on any effects on something else than nature. We want to be able to claim that our reasons to protect nature prevail even if these protective actions do not have any positive effects on something else than nature, e.g., human or other sentient beings (at least if we genuinely care about nature – or so I will argue in this paper). We can express this idea as follows: A thing \(X\) has (positive) non-instrumental value if there is some reason to re(act) positively towards it that prevails irrespective of any effects that this re(action) has (or may have) on other things than \(X\) (see further Samuelsson 2010).\(^\text{17}\) Let us call such reasons “non-instrumental reasons” with regard to \(X\), as opposed to instrumental reasons, whose occurrence does depend on some effect that our (re)action has (or may have) on something else than \(X\).

(3) However, we need to put a further requirement on the relevant kind of value in the present context, namely, that it is not entirely subjective. When environmentalists urge for the protection of a nature area or species, they typically do not restrict the scope of their claim to themselves or other environmentalists, but are rather addressing “us,” a collective of agents. They are saying that protecting this nature area or species is the sensible, appropriate, or reasonable thing to do.

There is a difference between valuing something and ascribing value to it (e.g., Scanlon 1998: 95). When we ascribe value to something (or say that it is valuable) we step outside our own psychology, as it were, and make the further

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\(^{15}\) I write “re(act)” to leave open the possibility that some values may be connected solely or primarily to reasons for other reactions than actions (in an ordinary sense of the term), e.g., reasons for adopting attitudes or for refraining from acting (see further Samuelsson 2010: 533, n. 8).

\(^{16}\) For a recent account in environmental ethics that stresses the connection between values and reasons, see Stabell (2021). Stabell defends a so-called “buck-passing account of value,” or “reasons first” view. Importantly, the concept of intrinsic value that I carve out here is compatible with such views as well as opposing views.

\(^{17}\) Note that this way of carving out non-instrumentality leaves room for the position that instrumental properties may give rise to non-instrumental value (see, e.g., Korsgaard 1983; Kagan 1998; Elliot 2005; and Samuelsson 2009: 174-97). The fact that nature has huge instrumental value may be considered a reason to react positively towards it irrespective of any positive effects that these reactions may have on anything else than nature (Elliot 2005; Samuelsson 2009: 174-97).
claim that the thing in question is an appropriate object of valuation, that there is reason to value it, or something along those lines. This is the kind of claim that I take it that environmentalists typically make when they express views about protecting nature areas or species. It is not generally plausible, I assert, to interpret such claims as statements merely reflecting their own personal preferences. Value claims are typically intended to have a more general scope: we should protect these nature areas or species – that is the right, appropriate, or sensible thing to do. Precisely what one takes the scope of the “we” to be, and what one thinks that one is doing or talking about when ascribing value to something, may differ widely, and what I say in the remainder of this paper is supposed to hold irrespective of how one answers such metaethical questions.18 Hence, in order to run my argument in a way that targets all those whom I want to target, I have to leave open precisely to what extent the reason for (re)action (and the corresponding value) must be non-subjective, but we should insist that it must not be entirely subjective. It has to be, to some extent, non-subjective.

We can now spell out the concept of intrinsic value that is relevant to our discussion:

A thing has intrinsic value if and only if there is some non-subjective non-instrumental reason to re(act) positively towards it.

I have previously argued that it is plausible to generally interpret environmental ethicists as having this concept of value in mind (perhaps alongside others) when they talk about the intrinsic value of nature (Samuelsson 2010). These three features guarantee that the value in question is practically relevant, that it does not depend on effects on other things than the value-bearer, and that it does not only apply to the agent doing the valuing. This is the kind of value that can ground non-subjective obligations to protect for instance a species for its own sake, obligations that can be reflected in policies and legislation.

Importantly, such value is not necessarily objective in a sense often discussed in relation to the value of nature, namely in the sense of being mind-independent, or valuer-independent.19 It may for instance be understood in terms of the responses that an agent would have under some ideal circumstances, or in terms of what some agents could reasonably agree upon. However, a question that arises at this point is if the environmentalists that I target in this paper really are reluctant to ascribe intrinsic value in the reason-implying sense to nature – is it not the kind of mind-independent value just mentioned that they are suspicious towards?

It may of course be that the reluctance that I have encountered among environmentalists to a large extent is a result of a certain understanding of what endorsement of intrinsic value in nature has to entail – that intrinsic value is conflated with mind-independent value. Indeed, such a conflation between different kinds of value has occurred among environmental ethicists and other philosophers as well, who are philosophically trained, and we cannot expect

18 See also my discussion in Samuelsson (2010).
19 Notably defended by Holmes Rolston III (e.g. 1988).
environmentalists in general to have a philosophically elaborated understanding of various value concepts. It may be that if the environmentalists in question had a proper understanding of what an ascription of the relevant kind of value involves, they would not be reluctant to ascribe such value to nature.

Whatever the answer to this question is, I do not take it to be very important to the aim of this paper, which is to show that one needs to ascribe intrinsic value in a certain sense to nature if one wants to consistently defend certain claims to the effect that we ought to protect it. Whether the reluctance to ascribe such value to nature is first and foremost a matter of conceptual confusion is not crucial to this aim. But it does, I believe, point towards an important issue for environmental ethicists to attend to: it is an important task to detail how nature can possess intrinsic value in the required sense in a way that is not mysterious or hard to explain. My contention is that there is room for a lot more work in this area within environmental ethics.

Before we leave this question behind, I just want to note two things. First, even within environmental ethics, some reluctance to ascribe intrinsic value to nature remains even when it is not conflated with mind-independent value (there are still environmental ethicists who identify as anthropocentrists or sentientists, and there is suspicion towards intrinsic value even when it is not presumed to be mind-independent20), so I think we should expect some suspicion towards intrinsic value in the reason-implying sense also among environmentalists who do not conflate it with mind-independent value. Second, even if we understand intrinsic value in the reason-implying sense that I have carved out in this section, ascribing such value to nature is far from trivial or non-committing. It implies that there are non-subjective reasons to re(act) towards nature. I think we should expect at least some reluctance to that idea, even among environmentalists – indeed, even among environmental ethicists.21

V. THE COUNTERFACTUAL ARGUMENT

Suppose that the convergence hypothesis is in fact true, as things currently happen to be in the world. That is to say, suppose it is true that: “If reasonably interpreted and translated into appropriate policies, a nonanthropocentric ethic will advocate the same policies as a suitably broad and long-sighted anthropocentrism” (Norton 2003: 11). Even so, I argue, there is reason for those who genuinely care about nature to endorse intrinsic value in it. Our moral

20 See for instance McShane’s (2007) account of different kinds of suspicion towards intrinsic value in environmental ethics.

21 One reason for this expectation is that there seem to be quite widespread suspicion towards the existence of such reasons, generally. For instance, many people – philosophers and others – have a hard time seeing how they can have normative practical reasons that are not somehow a function of their actual desires, interests, chosen projects, or the like (an example of a prominent philosopher representing such a view is Bernard Williams (e.g., 1981: 101-13)). Such desire-based reasons are not sufficient to ground intrinsic value in the reason-implying sense, since the relevant reasons for such value are not entirely subjective, and thus cannot be based on purely subjective desires (etc.).
guidelines are supposed to hold, not only given how things happen to be right now, but also given how they might be (at least how they might fairly realistically be). They are supposed to cover, not only actual cases, but also potential ones. Indeed, one of the main points of moral guidelines is that we can use them in new situations to figure out what we should do. Thus, one of the most common ways of arguing in ethics is to use – sometimes far-fetched – thought-experiments. The cases presented in this section show that even if the convergence hypothesis is true now, we might very well come to find ourselves in a situation where it is not. By altering things just slightly, we will get a scenario where it is not the case that “reasonably interpreted and translated into appropriate policies, a nonanthropocentric ethic will advocate the same policies as a suitably broad and long-sighted anthropocentrism.”

Perhaps my argument can be seen as one using thought-experiments. However, I prefer to call them “cases,” since the term “experiment” indicates an artificial situation, or a setting that could or would not occur naturally. But there is nothing far-fetched about the scenarios that I am about to present. I will provide three cases, but it does not require much imagination to come up with more. These cases are designed to illustrate situations in which protecting nature would not further any human or sentient values, but where I am convinced that many environmentalists would still advocate protection. Although these cases are here presented as merely possible scenarios, I actually think that they represent real scenarios – i.e., that there already are such cases in the world. However, we do not have to make that assumption in order to run the argument, so we need not get into the empirical debate about whether the convergence hypothesis (in some version) is true. I take this feature of the argument to be one of its merits.

The three cases below are intended to illustrate situations in which there are no instrumental reasons to protect nature, or no instrumental reasons that are strong enough to explain why we ought to protect the natural entities involved in the respective scenarios. In all three cases it is assumed that there are no deontological constraints involved, for instance: no human beings have a right to the protection of the entities in question, and not protecting them would not infringe on justice.

CASE 1: THE INSIGNIFICANT SPECIES

Imagine a highly endangered species, which is – in the eyes of human beings – insignificant. The existence of this particular species does not, and will not, if it continues, contribute to human wellbeing or flourishing, or to the wellbeing or

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22 Compare Katz (1979), and Katz and Oechsli (1993), who stress the contingency of human benefits of environmental protection.

23 As noted earlier, there are plenty of suggestions in the environmental ethics literature of real scenarios taken to show that instrumental reasons are not sufficient to ground adequate preservation policies (e.g., Katz 1979; Gunn 1980; Katz and Oechsli 1993; Callicott 1995; Stenmark 2002; and Katz 2009).

24 The three case descriptions that follow are slightly modified versions of cases that I have previously used in a “work-in-progress-publication” (Samuelsson and Lindström 2021).
flourishing of other sentient beings (or have any other positive effects – aside from effects on the species itself – that humans have reason to take into account in their decision-making). Suppose also that this species has not attracted the interest of researchers. Now, perhaps there are species of this kind that even the most nature friendly people would not bother about, but for many such species I am convinced that environmentalists would generally consider them worthy of protection – not that they should be protected at any cost, of course, but that there is some reason to devote resources to their protection. Indeed, environmentalists typically value biodiversity. Often, this is motivated with reference to human values, but I firmly believe that environmentalists generally prefer biodiversity even when it does not further human or sentient values, as in the present case. Since the species in this scenario does not contribute to any human or sentient values (now or in the future), if there is reason to protect it, there must be some non-human, non-sentient value involved, i.e., some intrinsic value in nature.

CASE 2: THE LOCALLY THREATENED SPECIES

Imagine a species that is not threatened globally, but whose occurrence in a certain location is threatened. Perhaps some lichen is threatened in a particular forest area, while it is abundant in other areas (say, in some other country). Suppose also that the local disappearance of this species would not affect other local species or organisms negatively. Often, environmentalists think that biodiversity, or the protection of a population of a species, is important even locally, despite there being no threat from a global perspective. If the species in this case is not insignificant (as assumed in the first case), it might be replied that people may take different kinds of interest in it, and that this provides reason to protect it locally for the sake of these people. However, if resources need to be devoted to protecting the local population of this species, these human interests must be strong enough to motivate this. In many cases, I submit, humans in

25 Compare Katz (1979: 361), who uses a real case of an “insignificant species” to make a similar point: “A good counterexample is the preservation of endangered species which are of little or no importance to mankind or the world ecological system. The preservation of the snail darter … cannot be explained rationally by the concept of utility.” However, it can always be replied to such real cases that the species in question may come to benefit humans in the future. However unlikely that is, we can block this kind of response completely by using a hypothetical example where we assume that the species in question will (or would) not provide any such future benefits.

26 If I am wrong about this, however, I do not think that would make my argument uninteresting or unimportant. As I stated in the introduction, the question of what costs are involved in denying intrinsic value in nature is important in its own right; it is important to be aware of the limitations of the available lines of argument for protecting nature. No doubt, there are some people (me, for instance) who think there are reasons for protecting insignificant species, and it is important that these people realize what is required to defend such reasons.

27 Both reviewers for this paper expressed worries about moving between talking about whether there are any reasons at all (instrumental or non-instrumental) for protection, and talking about the strength of reasons. However, such a move is not itself a problem, given the structure of my argument, but it may be appropriate to clarify why. If we look at only instrumental reasons to protect some natural entity, it is important for my argument, and unproblematic, to discuss
general do not take interest in a single species to an extent that can explain a reason strong enough to devote the resources needed to protect it. Again, I take it that such a protection policy can only be motivated on the assumption that there is some additional (sufficiently strong) value involved, besides any human or sentient values that might be present. In particular, I believe that for the typical environmentalist, the question of whether the local population of this species is protection-worthy does not hinge on the extent to which people in general happen to take an interest in it.

CASE 3: THE INACCESSIBLE ECOSYSTEM

Imagine an ecosystem that is very difficult to access for human beings, so that very few people will have the opportunity to experience it. Perhaps it is situated on an inaccessible mountain top, or deep under the sea. Suppose also, like in Case 1 above, that the existence of this particular ecosystem does not, and will not, if it continues, contribute to human or sentient wellbeing or flourishing (or have any other positive effects that humans have reason to take into account in their decision-making). Like in the case of the insignificant species, I contend that environmentalists in general would find even such an ecosystem to some extent protection-worthy, an assessment that requires an appeal to some non-human, non-sentient value, i.e., some intrinsic value in nature.

VI. POSSIBLE REPLIES

In order to respond to the three cases above and insist that we can defend the desired judgements without appealing to intrinsic value in nature, one would have to show that there is indeed some human or sentient value that would be frustrated if we were to fail to protect the natural entities in these cases.

The standard response to the kind of argument that I have offered is to object that my assessment of the three cases relies on an overly “shallow” understanding of “instrumental value.” Perhaps nature is instrumentally valuable in such a way that we cannot conceive (in whatever sense of “conceive” that is relevant here) of a break in the connection between the instrumental value of nature and whatever human or sentient value that it is instrumental with respect to when they do not, or when there are no instrumental reasons for protection, that we need to invoke non-instrumental reasons for protection (associated with intrinsic value in the reason-implying sense) in order to be able to argue consistently for protection. Such non-instrumental reasons for protection would provide an additional weight, which may tip the scales in favor of protection. Of course, as one of the reviewers pointed out, such reasons may be so weak that they do not make any practical difference with regards to which course of action that is justified in a certain case. But this only shows that the environmentalists who want to opt for protection not only need to endorse intrinsic value in nature, they need to endorse intrinsic value that is strong enough. This strengthens my point that intrinsic value in nature is crucial for making the kinds of protectionist claims that I take it that such environmentalists typically want to make. My point, remember, is that these environmentalists cannot get what they want by only acknowledging instrumental value in nature; they need to acknowledge strong enough intrinsic value in it.
to. So, in my three cases I am simply wrong to claim that there are no human or sentient values involved – by doing so I am just begging the question against the IV-denying environmentalist. But what kind of human or sentient value could it possibly be that persists in my scenarios as they have been described? There are some initially fairly plausible candidates that are worth considering. I will start by looking at two suggestions, then take a detour to illustrate the general problem of these suggestions before considering a final response that might be thought able to avoid this general problem. I argue that it is not.

**Scientific Curiosity and Aesthetic Appreciation**

It has been suggested that scientific curiosity and/or aesthetic appreciation can provide reasons to preserve more or less any species, or more generally, biodiversity. The idea is that every single species, no matter how simple or insignificant, has its own unique features that may contribute to stimulating curiosity or giving rise to positive aesthetic experiences. However, given the historically extreme rate at which species currently go extinct, and given how much life there still is left in the world to appreciate in various ways, I find it highly doubtful that for each and every single species (no matter how simple or ordinary), the scientific curiosity or aesthetic experiences associated with it can motivate the preservation of that particular species.

More importantly, however, even if it can, the associated reasons for preservation would only apply directly to those people whose curiosity or aesthetic senses would or might be stimulated by that species. Even if there would turn out to be very many such people, it is easy to think of countervailing individual interests that point at least as strongly in the opposite direction, i.e., in the direction of not diverting resources to protect the species in question (compare Gunn 1980: 26). For, on this picture, the reason for preservation is just a matter of subjective interests – unless, of course, the idea is that each and every species is in fact worthy of scientific curiosity and/or aesthetic appreciation. But that latter claim is tantamount to the claim that nature possesses intrinsic value in the reason-implying sense. To say that a certain thing X is worthy of positive responses is a way of saying that it is intrinsically valuable. Because: if all the

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28 One candidate that we need not consider, due to the counterfactual character of my cases, is the kind of future-oriented response mentioned in footnote 25, according to which the natural entities in question may come to have importance in one way or another in the future. We have assumed that future humans and other sentient beings will not benefit from protecting the entities discussed in the cases. It can still be worth noting that it has been pointed out, by, e.g., Katz and Oechsli (1993: 51), that natural entities might also prove harmful in the future – so this kind of response may actually point in the opposite direction of protection.

29 E.g., Arler (2009: 280-85); Cf. Callicott (1995: §14); and Gunn (1980: 26). As for aesthetic appreciation, I think this response is actually blocked with respect to Case 1, because in that case the species is assumed to be in every way insignificant to human beings (and it would not be that if it gave rise to aesthetic experiences).

30 Compare Callicott (1995: §12-§13). Even if it would provide some reason, that reason would have to be strong enough to justify protection (see footnote 27 above). That is even more dubious with respect to each and every species. As for scientific curiosity, there is also the worry that it may be just as stimulated by investigating what happens when species go extinct.
reasons to have positive responses towards X were instrumental with regard to X, it would not be correct to say that X is worthy of these responses.

At this point it might be suggested that we all have reason to care indirectly about things that some people care about, for the sake of those people. So if environmentalists care about for instance insignificant species, the rest of us have reason to do so as well, for the sake of these environmentalists. Unfortunately, however, many people care about environmentally detrimental “things” as well (“things” that may not be bad in themselves, but that require environmental damage to be brought about), so, again, unless the things that environmentalists care for are actually worthy of being cared for (i.e., possess intrinsic value), subjective interests simply stand against subjective interests (although now, on each side, backed by the rest of us, who care for them for the sake of the people who have them).

I conclude that neither scientific curiosity nor aesthetic appreciation can justify any sufficiently strong reasons for protection of the natural entities in my three cases.

HUMAN-RELATIONAL VALUE

The second candidate for response to my argument invokes the notion of human-relational value that I mentioned in the introduction. Perhaps it is some relation to nature that is instrumentally valuable or that makes nature instrumentally valuable (to, e.g., living a meaningful/good life)? Suggestions of such relations could be affinity, belonging, historical relations, or reciprocity – that may prevail between us and various natural entities.

However, the response to this kind of suggestion should already be clear from the discussion above. Any reasons associated with such a relation would only apply directly to those who stand in that relation to the natural entity in question, and the reasons for protection that such relations might give rise to would only comprise natural entities to which people stand in such relations. In at least Case 1 and Case 3, it is clearly assumed that no such relations prevail. Thus, although I am sympathetic to the idea that my relations to various entities in nature may provide (additional) reasons for me to care for them, this suggestion does nothing to show that there are some human (or sentient) values involved in these cases.

Now that we have considered what seems to me to be the initially most promising straightforward responses to my argument, and seen that they do not work, we are in a good position to lift our gaze and identify the general problem for the IV-denying environmentalist.

THE GENERAL PROBLEM

We can call this problem “the problem of indirect justification,” and it can be expressed as follows: If it is built into a moral view that only things of a certain kind (with certain features) are ultimately important – that is, important

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31 One of the reviewers raised this possibility.
in their own right – this view cannot guarantee that some other kinds of things (that lack these features) will always be important too.

The problem of indirect justification is not unique to the issue of protecting nature. Consider for instance classic hedonistic act utilitarianism (hereafter referred to simply as “utilitarianism”). It is easy to come up with counterexamples to utilitarianism where an intuitively wrong action is the action that would maximize pleasure over pain. A classic example is that of a surgeon who can save the life of, say, four patients by killing one innocent patient and give her organs to the other four.\footnote{For an elaborate version of this counterexample, see Timmons (2013: 144-45).} If the utilitarian wants to try to justify not killing the innocent patient, she cannot do that directly by referring to, e.g., respect, rights, or what we owe to other persons. Instead, she must do it indirectly by appealing to the maximization of net pleasure, since that is the only thing that ultimately matters according to her theory (the only thing there is non-instrumental reason to care about). She has to argue that somehow, in the long run, killing the innocent patient will in fact lead to less total net pleasure than letting the four patients die (perhaps because people in society will learn about the surgeon’s action, or because it will corrupt the surgeon or the hospital). As the literature on counterexamples of this kind has shown, such indirect justifications are bound to fail. This is because we can always refine the counterexamples to rule out whatever bad consequences of killing the innocent patient that the utilitarian comes up with (we can for instance simply postulate that people in society will not learn about the action and that it will not corrupt the surgeon or the hospital; this, again, is the advantage of using hypothetical cases).

The reason why we can always provide a counterexample of this kind to utilitarianism is, of course, that there is no necessary link (in any sense of necessity) between the sacrifice of an innocent life and the maximization of net pleasure. To paraphrase my formulation above: “If it is built into a moral view that only pleasure/pain is ultimately important – that is, important in its own right – this view cannot guarantee that some other kinds of things – such as innocent human lives – will always be important too.”\footnote{See Katz (1979) for a similar line of reasoning directly targeting the relation between utilitarianism and environmental preservation.} Instead of trying to accommodate our commonsense intuitions in the surgeon case and similar cases, what the utilitarian has to do in order to be consistent is to accept that her view comes with certain costs, and then try to show that these costs are acceptable. More bluntly put, the utilitarian has to bite the bullet.\footnote{For an example of utilitarians who do just that, see de Lazari-Radek and Singer (2010: 40), who respond to an elaborate surgeon case by biting the bullet and arguing that the surgeon indeed ought to kill the innocent patient in order to save the other patients.}

Now, returning to our discussion about the intrinsic value of nature, those who deny such value analogously need to accept that this denial comes with certain costs. Just like the utilitarian, they have to bite the bullet and accept that there are no reasons to protect the natural entities in my three cases. For most of us, the utilitarian bullet is a tough bullet to bite, and I suggest that for people who genuinely care about nature, the bullet that comes with denying intrinsic value...
in nature should be at least as tough. But if one denies intrinsic value in nature there does not seem to be any other option than to bite this bullet. This, again, is because there is no necessary connection between human or sentient values and the protection of natural entities (compare Katz 1979). Hence, it will always be possible to construct counterexamples of the kind represented by my three cases. To once again paraphrase my own formulation from above: “If it is built into a moral view that only human or sentient values are ultimately important – that is, important in their own right – this view cannot guarantee that some other kinds of things – such as species or ecosystems – will always be important too.”

At this point, there seems to be only one option left to try for the IV-denying environmentalist, namely, to insist that there is an even more intimate connection between human or sentient values and the protection of nature.

**Perfectionist Prudential Value**

A successful response to my counterfactual argument (to the three cases) would have to show that the connection between the protection of nature and some human or sentient value is so strong that we cannot imagine it being broken, even in cases like those I have presented. Let me begin by just noting that it is far from obvious that a view proposing such a connection should be considered easier to defend (or less problematic) than a view according to which nature has intrinsic value – after all, it has to contain a controversial ontological claim about a necessary connection (of some kind) between, on the one hand, either protecting nature or protected nature, and, on the other hand, some human or sentient value which the former is supposed to further. What could the argument be for thinking that there exists such a connection?

Actually, the only plausible suggestion I can think of is a perfectionist view on prudential value, according to which leading a good human life involves valuing or caring for the right things for their own sake (where not doing so means living in some form of deception, which is taken to make a human life less good). Taking such a perfectionist view as a point of departure, one could then argue that the natural entities in my cases are among the right things. However, at this point some explanation is needed as to why certain things are the right things to care about – e.g., the natural entities in my cases – whereas other things are not – e.g., a pile of garbage. Here, the only plausible explanation I can think of is that the right things are those that are actually worthy of being

35 For an account of perfectionist views, see, e.g., Wall (2021: §1). In environmental ethics, this kind of position may be found in some versions of environmental virtue ethics, a line of thought that has gained popularity – and of which several versions have emerged – during the recent decades (see, e.g., Cafaro 2015).

36 Norton has expressed a view that bears some resemblance to the kind of view I outline here: “Thoreau ... believed that his careful observation of other species helped him to live a better life. I believe this also. So there are at least two people, and perhaps many others, who believe that species have value as a moral resource to humans, as a chance for humans to form, re-form, and improve their own value systems” (Norton 1988: 201). But notice that this view does not provide reasons to protect all species – that would require that what helped us to live better lives was caring for all species. And that is the view I am targeting here.
cared for or valued for their own sake.\textsuperscript{37} That is what could explain why not caring for them would mean living in deception, or living an imperfect life. But to say that a thing is worthy of being cared for, or valued for its own sake, is just another way of saying that it is intrinsically valuable in the reason-implying sense. In other words, the only plausible view that I can think of, which upholds the connection needed between human values and protecting nature, actually presumes that nature is intrinsically valuable. Thus, even this final kind of response fails to show that it is possible to both deny intrinsic value in nature and consistently argue for protection of the natural entities in my three cases.

VII. CONCLUSION

I conclude that my cases reveal that unless one endorses intrinsic value in nature, one cannot consistently maintain that the natural entities in these cases should be protected.\textsuperscript{38} That is the cost of denying intrinsic value in nature. Now, why should environmentalists worry about these cases? First, there are probably already such cases in the world (e.g., Katz 1979; Callicott 1995: §12–§13), but, as explained above, that is not the argumentative route that I have chosen to take in this paper. Second, the mere risk that such cases may occur should be worrying for these people. If environmentalists reject intrinsic values in nature, there is only one (plausible) argumentative strategy open to them, namely, to argue – in every case where they want to protect some natural entity – that doing so would further human or sentient values. And even that is not sufficient. In fact, they need to argue that the protective actions or policies they favor would further human or sentient values \textit{to a larger extent} than alternative actions or policies. This is why I stated in the introduction that relying on nature’s instrumental value for nature-protective purposes is risky business for environmentalists. In other words, there is a purely empirical burden of proof on IV-denying environmentalists: to show that the best way to further human or sentient values (understood in some way or other) is by protecting the natural entities that are at stake. And if a scenario like those described in my three cases should occur, these environmentalists have nothing to fall back on, no further argumentative resources to employ. They would simply have to accept that, in such cases, we should not protect the natural entities at stake. I think that should be considered a very tough bullet to bite!

I believe that environmentalists in general do not want to bite this bullet. More elaborately: typically, I do not think that their position – on reflection – hinges on such empirical matters. This is perhaps the main point of my three cases: to evoke the intuition that the question of whether there are reasons to protect the natural entities at stake is not exhausted by considering human or

\textsuperscript{37} In relation to environmental virtue ethics, it is hard to see why a fully virtuous agent would care, intrinsically, for something that it is not appropriate to care intrinsically for.

\textsuperscript{38} Of course, one can still want them to be protected because one simply has such personal desires or wishes, but, as explained in Section IV, I take it that the people I want to target with my argument subscribe to something stronger than this, namely, that it is appropriate to protect these natural entities, that there is reason to do so.
sentient values. Rather, I think that on reflection environmentalists typically want to protect natural entities because they find them *protection-worthy* in themselves; because they take there to be something about these entities that makes them worthy of protection. However, to say that there is something about an object $X$ that makes it worthy of protection is (again) tantamount to saying that $X$ is intrinsically valuable in the reason-implying sense. So, here we see how endorsing intrinsic value in nature endows environmentalists with argumentative resources that go beyond those associated with mere human or sentient values. Of course, they still need to argue that *all things considered* the reasons for protection are stronger than the opposing reasons. But the intrinsic value of nature provides an additional weight to put on the scales when evaluating the alternatives.

It may well be that it is easier to defend certain human or sentient values than to defend intrinsic value in nature – there is certainly more consensus about some of the former – but, as the counterfactual argument shows, if we think that we ought to protect natural entities even in cases where doing so would not further any human or sentient values, then we simply need to defend such value (compare Katz 1979: 364). There just is no way around it. However, environmentalists should not despair in the face of this fact. To the contrary, I think they should embrace it. After all, people who genuinely care about nature should be eager to investigate the possible bases of such value. And if they cannot find any such basis which they consider plausible, then they simply have to accept the conclusion that we should not protect nature in cases where doing so would not further any human or sentient values. Luckily, the field of environmental ethics is full of intriguing suggestions about what may provide the basis of intrinsic value in nature. Hence, there are many possible views for environmentalists to exclude before they need to accept this pessimistic conclusion.

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39 See footnote 27.
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