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Reasons and Values in Environmental Ethics*

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ABSTRACT

Ever since environmental ethics (EE) began to take form as an academic discipline in the early 70's, the notion of intrinsic value has occupied a prominent position within the field. Recently, however, various types of critique have emerged within EE against invoking this notion. Contrary to these critiques, I argue that appeals to intrinsic value are not problematic, given the reason-implying sense of 'intrinsic value' that is most relevant to EE. I further argue that also those who criticize 'intrinsic-value-talk' in EE actually need this reason-implying concept of intrinsic value. However, once we realize that this is the sense of 'intrinsic value' that is most relevant to EE, it also becomes clear that it is the concept of a reason, rather than that of intrinsic value, that is most important to EE.

KEYWORDS

Reasons, intrinsic value, anthropocentrism, moral standing, environmental ethics

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since environmental ethics (EE) began to take form as an academic discipline in the early 70's, the notion of intrinsic value has occupied a prominent position within the field, and one of its most frequently debated questions has been that of whether some non-human, non-sentient natural entities have intrinsic value. (From now on I will simply write 'nature' to refer to any such natural entity that one may think has intrinsic value.) But, over time, this focus on intrinsic value has become the target of more and more critique. According to one line of this critique, often delivered by writers who regard themselves as anthropocentrists, it is not merely the case that nature does not have intrinsic value, but the very notion of intrinsic value is untenable and ought to be abandoned.¹ According to another line of critique, the notion of intrinsic value is not necessarily untenable (for instance, there is nothing peculiar about the idea of valuing something intrinsically), but it is not helpful for establishing that something is an object of direct *moral* concern; for that task we have to turn to the concept of moral standing.

This essay has three main objectives. The first is to characterize a concept of intrinsic value – *intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense* – that escapes these kinds of critique.² I will argue that this is the concept of intrinsic value that is most relevant to EE, and also the concept that most environmental ethicists have in mind when they attribute intrinsic value to nature. (At least it is one of the concepts they have in mind; one may intend to make several different claims when stating that nature has intrinsic value.) What is common to the environmental ethicists who call themselves non-anthropocentrists, I suggest, is that they take some non-human natural entities (or some states of some non-human natural entities) to have intrinsic value in this sense. The first objective will be carried out in the next section, and the discussions there provide background for the two subsequent points that I want to make.

Second, I will argue that also those who reject ‘intrinsic-value-talk’ in EE actually need the concept of intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense, even if they choose not to use the phrase ‘intrinsic value’ to refer to this concept. In particular, it is needed both by those who claim to be anthropocentrists, and by those who claim that certain beings possess moral standing. This second task will be divided into two parts. In section three I will attend to the critique – often delivered by anthropocentrists – according to which the very notion of intrinsic value is untenable and ought to be abandoned. In section four I will turn to the critique – often delivered by writers who focus on moral standing – according to which appeals to intrinsic value, even if they may be intelligible, are not helpful for establishing that nature is an object of direct moral concern.

Third, I will argue that once we realize that the sense of ‘intrinsic value’ most relevant to EE is ‘intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense’, it also becomes clear that it is the concept of a reason, rather than that of value, that is most important to EE – especially when we emphasize the practical character of the discipline. The concept of a reason that is at issue here is the concept of a *normative reason*, i.e., a consideration that counts in favour of doing something.³ This is the kind of reason that we need to appeal to when we want to justify our actions. The point of establishing that nature has intrinsic value must be that such values would lay claims on us; that they would supply us with reasons for action with respect to their bearers. Partly for this reason I recommend a shift in EE, from focusing on intrinsic value, to focusing on reasons. This is the objective of the fifth (and last) section of the essay.

2. INTRINSIC VALUE IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

One of the first writers to criticize intrinsic-value-talk in EE was Bryan Norton. In this section and the following I shall draw on his account, which I take to be representative of

much of this critique.⁴ At the end of the essay where Norton outlines his own position, weak anthropocentrism, he concludes:

The point of this essay [...] has been to show that one need not make the questionable ontological commitments involved in attributing intrinsic value to nature, since weak anthropocentrism provides a framework adequate to [...] account for the distinctive nature of environmental ethics. (Norton, 1984: 148)

Norton does not, however, explain why he believes that attributing intrinsic value to nature involves questionable ontological commitments. In order to assess that claim, we need to know how Norton intends for 'intrinsic value' to be understood, but unfortunately he does not say that either. However, we do get some guidance from Norton's later works. In his influential book *Toward Unity among Environmentalists* he contends that 'intrinsic value, being prior to human conceptualization, is [...] *discovered*', and that, 'existing prior to any worldview, [it] enforces itself on any adequate conceptualization of the world' (Norton, 1991: 235), and in a recent paper he equates intrinsic value with independent value, the latter meaning 'value independent of humans' (Norton, 2008: 9, 11). We can now begin to see why Norton believes that attributing intrinsic value to nature, or indeed to anything, involves questionable ontological commitments. According to Norton, *nothing* can have such independent, or objective, value.⁵

One question that we could ask here is whether attributions of independent value really have to involve questionable ontological commitments. However, this is not a question that I shall attend to in this essay. Instead I will focus on the question of whether environmental ethicists really have to attribute independent value to nature when they claim that it has intrinsic value. Why does Norton think they do? If we just look at the writings of various

non-anthropocentrists it certainly seems strange to ascribe to them the view that nature has human-independent value. Robert Elliot (1997: 16), for instance, defends an indexical theory of intrinsic value which ‘claims, roughly, that a thing has intrinsic value if and only if it is approved of (or would be approved of) by a valuer in virtue of its properties’, and J. Baird Callicott (1999: 259) suggests that ‘we base environmental ethics on our human capacity to value nonhuman natural entities for what they are’. Actually, not many writers in EE seem to believe in values that are altogether independent of humans. (There are of course exceptions, e.g. Holmes Rolston.)

Norton is of course aware of this fact. As he himself points out, non-anthropocentrists such as Elliot and Callicott, who do not want to acknowledge objective values, tend to define ‘intrinsic value’ negatively, as ‘non-instrumental value’. However, at this point Norton raises another worry. If the only thing we can say about intrinsic values is that they are non-instrumental, then our definition ‘is simply vacuous’ (Norton, 2008: 7); it does not give any substance to the idea of intrinsic value, which thus remains something of a mystery. We have not been given any information about what an intrinsic value is, only about what it is not:

Intrinsic value is defined negatively: it is value that ‘is left over when all its instrumental value has been subtracted. In other words, “intrinsic value” and “noninstrumental value” are two names for the same thing’ (p. 21). The definition provides no guidance in identifying objects that have this kind of value, how to recognize it, etc. (Ibid; the passage that Norton quotes is from Callicott, 2002.)

Hence Norton exposes non-anthropocentrists to a dilemma: either their concept of intrinsic value is objective, in which case it carries with it questionable ontological commitments, or else it is vacuous. The objectivist horn of this dilemma has been discussed at some length,

and several writers have cast doubt on the claim that an objectivist account of intrinsic value, if properly understood, must necessarily be untenable (e.g. Attfield, 2001). In this essay I will focus on the other horn of the dilemma; that concerning vacuousness.

I have to say that I find Norton's claims in the quotation above rather puzzling. To say that a value is non-instrumental is not uninformative. It is to say that the value is at the end of a value-chain (cf. Kagan, 1998: 279); that the thing in question is not only valuable as a means to something else, but also irrespective of any effects that it may have on other things: that it is valuable *for its own sake*.⁶ The 'negative definition' actually provides guidance concerning both how to identify things that have this kind of value, and how to recognize it. We get such guidance if we contemplate on whether we would take a certain thing to be valuable even independently of its positive effects on something else. If we would still take it to be valuable, then we must think that it is valuable, not only for the sake of other things, but also for its own sake.⁷ A definition of 'intrinsic value' should not, of course, say anything about which particular properties give rise to such value, since that is a substantive question on which philosophers disagree. A formal account of value should be able to cover all the various substantive views regarding what has value and why.

However, the negative definition is insufficient by itself; it does not say anything at all about what it means that a thing is *valuable* (to be fair, the environmental ethicists who tend to define intrinsic value negatively usually make separate claims about what it means that something is valuable). It does not help to say that we understand what 'valuable' means in the phrase 'instrumentally valuable' and therefore do not need a separate account of what 'valuable' means in the phrase 'non-instrumentally valuable'. The way that an instrumentally valuable thing is valuable is quite distinct from the way that an intrinsically valuable thing is valuable. Indeed, according to several philosophers, merely instrumentally valuable things are not *really* valuable at all. Roger Crisp (1998: 477), for instance, claims that "instrumental

values” are not in fact values at all, but merely non-valuable means to things which are valuable’. Thus we need an account of intrinsic value which captures both the meaning of ‘valuable’, and the idea of a thing’s being valuable *for its own sake*. For this task I suggest that we turn to *reasons*.

When moral philosophers pay attention to values, they do so because they believe that values are practically relevant; that they are important for our decisions concerning how to (re)act.⁸ Otherwise these philosophers would not be interested in values, and values would not belong to the field of ethics (which is concerned with *practical* questions: how we should live and how we should act). Hence, the point of establishing values (in ethics) is that values imply claims on us: they, or the properties in virtue of which they arise, give us reasons to (re)act with respect to their bearers. (Cf. Attfield, 2001: 153.)

Sometimes our reasons to (re)act with regard to a thing, *X*, are *indirect*: they are reasons that obtain only because the (re)action in question has effects on some other thing than *X*. Consider for instance the reaction of *not* throwing an ordinary stone from a bridge. Whether I have a reason for this reaction depends on which effects the reaction may have on other things than the stone. If there are people under the bridge, I clearly have a reason not to throw the stone, since doing so may harm someone. But this reason is indirect with regard to the stone. It only obtains because of the reaction’s effect on other things than the stone (the effect that human beings escape the risk of being harmed). Now, consider instead the reaction of *not* throwing a cat from the bridge. I have a reason for this reaction irrespective of whether there are people under the bridge. Throwing the cat will harm it (or at least be unpleasant for it), and this consideration provides a reason to refrain from throwing it irrespective of any effects that this reaction may have on other things.⁹ Thus my reason is *direct* with regard to the cat (or at least with regard to some of its states): it is a reason that obtains independently of the reaction’s effects on other things than the cat (or some of its states). This means it is a reason

to react with regard to the cat for *its* own sake (or for the sake of some of *its* states). It is this difference between the stone and the cat that one plausibly wants to capture by saying that the cat (or some of its states), but not the stone, has intrinsic value: if our actions may affect a cat, we ought to take these very effects into consideration, but we need not bother about the effects that our actions may have on ordinary stones.

Now, what is common to non-anthropocentrists (within EE), I suggest, is that they think there are *direct* reasons to care for some non-human natural things. That is, they think that some non-human natural objects are such that we have reason to treat them with care for their own sake (or for the sake of some of *their* states), independently of any effects that this careful treatment may have on other things. The way that most non-anthropocentrists express this thought is by saying that these natural things have intrinsic value. To be sure, some environmental ethicists who state that nature has intrinsic value intend to claim more with this statement than just that we have direct reason to (re)act with regard to it (e.g. that it has objective value, or that attitudes of a certain kind are appropriate towards it), but this has to be at least one of the things they intend to claim. It is what makes their statement practically interesting, and what accounts for the idea that nature is valuable *for its own sake*.

If ‘intrinsic value’ is used in a practically interesting sense, then ‘there is direct reason to (re)act with regard to *X*’ is the minimal meaning of the claim ‘*X* has intrinsic value’.¹⁰ The opinion expressed by it is what unites those who make this claim. I will refer to this minimal meaning of ‘intrinsic value’ – to which I believe that (almost) all environmental ethicists who ascribe intrinsic value to nature would commit (at least if we allow for more or less subjectivist accounts of reasons) – as *intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense*. To say that *X* has intrinsic value in this sense is simply to say that there is at least some direct reason to (re)act with regard to it. Conversely, if there is direct reason to (re)act with regard to *X*, it follows that *X* has intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense.¹¹ There is no need to put any

stronger requirements on intrinsic value than this; it captures both the idea of a thing's being valuable (that there is some direct *reason* to (re)act with regard to it), and the idea of this value being intrinsic (that the reason is *direct*) – and there is nothing vacuous about it. Even if some non-anthropocentrists want to imply more than this by saying that nature has intrinsic value, there is no reason to think that they have to imply more, and many of them (such as Callicott and Elliot) clearly do not want to imply more.¹²

There are several things to note about this characterization of intrinsic value. To start with, it captures a rather popular account of value according to which being valuable is to merit or deserve evaluative attitudes (e.g. McShane, 2007: 49-50), but it is wider in scope than this account. It leaves open whether the relevant reaction with regard to a valuable thing is to adopt an evaluative attitude towards it or to do something else. This is a good thing, because some of the entities that one may take to be bearers of value may be such that the kind of attitudes that are at issue here – such as admiration, love and respect – do not apply to them (this may be the case with states of affairs, for example: admiration and respect do not seem to be the kind of responses that could be appropriate towards states of affairs, whereas responses such as *bringing about* and *preserving* do). This takes us to the next point. The characterization is neutral with respect to what may be bearers of value. *X* can be an object, a state of affairs, an organic whole, and so on. It is also neutral as regards the question of where (at what stage) reasons arise: if they arise as a result of values or as a result of the properties in virtue of which values arise (or if there is some further alternative).¹³ Finally, the characterization works for negative as well as positive value. Whether a thing has positive or negative value relates to *how* we have reason to (re)act with regard to it.

Let us end this section with a possible worry. In order to establish that a thing has intrinsic value, it is necessary to establish that there is direct reason to (re)act with regard to it. The worry about questionable ontological commitments may thus reappear as a worry

concerning reasons. However, just like one may adopt more or less subjectivist accounts of value, one may adopt more or less subjectivist accounts of reasons. To the extent that a value is subjective, the reasons that are connected with it are also subjective (that is, they apply only to those for whom the thing in question is valuable). As I will argue in the next section, also anthropocentrists need to claim that we have certain reasons. Hence, as regards questionable ontological commitments, anthropocentrists and non-anthropocentrists are on the same footing.

3. ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND INTRINSIC VALUE

The term ‘anthropocentrism’ is not univocal; it is used in different senses by different writers. Here we are interested in anthropocentrism as the view that the only objects of direct moral concern are human beings or human states.¹⁴ I take this to be the standard interpretation of ‘anthropocentrism’ (within EE), and it is also at least one of the senses in which Norton (e.g. 1984; 2008) uses it. Moreover, it is anthropocentrism in this sense that non-anthropocentrists reject.¹⁵ My claim in this section is that people who are anthropocentrists in this sense cannot avoid the concept of intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense.

If anthropocentrism is supposed to be a practically interesting position, its claim that humans are of direct moral concern has to imply that we have reasons to (re)act with regard to human beings (or some human states). And these reasons have to be direct if we are to be able to distinguish them from the reasons that we have to (re)act with regard to other things, such as nature (even anthropocentrists of course believe that we have reasons to (re)act towards nature, albeit they take these reasons to be indirect). However, the claim that there are direct reasons to (re)act with regard to human beings (or some human states) is tantamount to the claim that human beings (or these human states) have intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense. It does not help to refrain from using the phrase ‘intrinsic value’ (that

move is open to non-anthropocentrists too); the question concerns which *concept* of direct moral concern that is relevant to anthropocentrism, and that is the very same concept which is relevant to non-anthropocentrism, namely intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense.

Indeed, if normative claims are taken to be (or imply) claims about reasons, then anyone who makes normative claims invokes the concept to which ‘intrinsic value’ refers when it is used in this sense. To say that we ought to do this or that, or that an action is right, is to say something about reasons, and not all these reasons can be indirect. At some point we have to encounter a reason that is direct with regard to some thing – a reason that would obtain even if the (re)action that we consider would not have any effects on any other thing –, or else we would get an infinite regress of reasons.

What kind of normative claims do anthropocentrists make? Again we can turn to Norton for examples. He writes: ‘The perpetuation of the human species is a good thing because a universe containing human consciousness is preferable to one without it’, and ‘I willingly accept the implication of this value claim that, in a situation of severely contracting human population, some or all individuals would have an obligation to reproduce’ (Norton, 1984: 143). If anthropocentrists would abandon the concept to which ‘intrinsic value’ refers when it is used in its reason-implying sense, they could not make claims like these; indeed, they would no longer be anthropocentrists. Their position would then not be that human beings or human states are the only objects of direct moral concern, but that nothing is an object of direct moral concern. But that view is not anthropocentrism (any more than it is non-anthropocentrism); it is rather moral nihilism. It is a mistake to think that abandoning intrinsic value leads to anthropocentrism; what it leads to is the view that *nothing* is an object of moral concern. It is only if one accepts this nihilist claim that one can avoid intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense.

In connection with this point it is important to note that questions concerning the objectivity/subjectivity of values and reasons are distinct from questions concerning anthropocentrism/non-anthropocentrism in EE (cf. Crisp, 1998: 476-77). One may of course think that a non-anthropocentric view which only acknowledges purely subjective values (such as perhaps Elliot's view) is quite uninteresting, or that it is even misleading to call it 'non-anthropocentrism', but in that case one should hold that an anthropocentric view which is built around an equally subjective concept of value is equally uninteresting, and that it is equally misleading to call this view 'anthropocentrism'.

If one thinks that even the concept of intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense is problematic, it does not help to turn to anthropocentrism. The claim that there are reasons, however that claim is understood (whether it is taken to be a subjective claim, an objective claim, a universal claim, or something in between), does not become less puzzling just because we restrict the amount of reasons that we are taken to have, or the set of things with regard to which we are taken to have reasons to (re)act. Nor does the idea of a reason get less puzzling simply because we claim that all reasons are provided by considerations concerning human beings. The substantive view that all of our reasons are provided by such considerations may be easier to defend than a view according to which we also have direct reasons to (re)act with regard to non-sentient nature, but that is beside the point. Any problems involved in reason-claims – and in attributions of intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense – will be shared by both views.

4. MORAL STANDING – AN ALTERNATIVE TO INTRINSIC VALUE?

Not all critics of intrinsic-value-talk in EE reject the notion of intrinsic value as such. Some believe that while this notion is not necessarily untenable, it is not helpful for establishing that nature is an object of direct *moral* concern. Instead they want to focus on moral standing,

or moral considerability (these phrases are used synonymously). Here is Harley Cahen's representative characterization of moral considerability:

I take moral considerability to be the moral status x has if, and only if (a) x has interests (a good of its own), (b) it would be prima facie wrong to frustrate x 's interests (to harm x), and (c) the wrongness of frustrating x 's interests is direct – that is, does not depend on how the interests of any other being are affected (Cahen, 1988: 196).

The point of departure of these critics is the observation that several environmental ethicists confuse 'moral standing' with 'intrinsic value', and wrongly use these phrases synonymously (which for instance may lead to the incoherent view that natural entities lacking interests have moral standing). Next these critics contend that objective values are untenable, and that a tenable concept of intrinsic value therefore has to be purely subjective: to be intrinsically valuable is, roughly, to be intrinsically valued. But such a subjective concept of intrinsic value is not directly morally relevant. The conclusion they draw from this line of reasoning is that it is moral standing, and not intrinsic value, that is important for settling our moral obligations. What we ought to do is to take the interests of creatures with moral standing into consideration, irrespective of any claims about value.

One philosopher who has very recently employed this line of reasoning is Erik Persson,¹⁶ who draws on the writings of Rick O'Neil (1997: 52): 'I agree with O'Neil who points out that sentience is a "criterion for moral significance not because states of consciousness have intrinsic value, but because there is no reason to consider x 's interests if x itself doesn't care about those interests"' (Persson, 2008: 229). At first glance, this may perhaps seem a way to establish moral significance without invoking any concept of intrinsic

value. But, on closer inspection, this passage turns out not to make much sense. The fact that there is *no* reason to consider the interests of a thing, *X*, if *X* itself does not care about those interests, cannot show that sentience (or indeed anything) *is* a criterion for moral significance. The intended claim must be that sentience is a criterion for moral significance because there *is* a (direct) reason to consider *X*'s interests if *X* itself cares about those interests (which, supposedly, only sentient creatures do) (that the reason in question has to be direct follows from the very idea of moral standing; see requirement (c) in Cahen's characterization above). But the claim that there is a direct reason to consider *X*'s interests (which I take to imply that, other things equal, there is a direct reason to at least not actively prevent *X* from having its interests satisfied) is tantamount to the claim that the satisfaction of *X*'s interests is intrinsically valuable in a reason-implicating sense. (Furthermore, this claim does not imply anything that excludes the possibility that other things than interests (of this kind) may give rise to direct reasons.) Hence the concept of moral standing seems to presuppose the concept of intrinsic value in a reason-implicating sense.

That this is indeed the case can be seen if we consider the supposed normative force of moral standing. We could ask: where does the 'moral' in 'moral standing' come from? Persson suggests that it comes from the fact that what happens to an object with moral standing is relevant for that object. He writes: 'That sentience is a criterion of moral standing is not because it is valuable [...] It is because when someone has it, what happens to that someone becomes relevant for that someone' (ibid.). But the last claim is not *sufficient* to establish the *moral* standing of an object. There is a gap to be bridged between the fact that what happens to *X* is relevant for *X*, and the supposed fact that it is relevant for *us*.¹⁷ That an object has moral standing should imply that *we* (moral agents) have (direct) reason to treat or refrain from treating it in certain ways (otherwise it is not *moral* standing, and it is not relevant to our decision-making). But in order to imply that, what happens to the object in

question must be relevant for *us*, and not just for the object itself. And if we have direct reason to (re)act with regard to an object (or with regard to some of its states), then this object (or these states) has intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense.

The point may be easier to grasp if we consider an analogy with ethical egoism. An ethical egoist believes that the only thing that is (directly) relevant for *her* is what happens to *her*. What we, non-egoists, must do if we want to convert this person, is to try to convince her that what happens to other people (and perhaps to other beings), is also relevant for *her*. We will win nothing if we try to convince her that what happens to other people is relevant for *them* – she has never doubted that. In a similar way, anyone who believes that *X* has moral standing must convince his opponents that what happens to *X* is relevant for them. And, as in the case of the egoist, it will not suffice to convince his opponents that what happens to *X* is relevant for *X* (it may, however, be an important step towards converting them, since realizing that what happens to *X* is relevant for *X* may be a step towards acknowledging that one has *reasons* to care about *X*).

Persson's failure to see the need to invoke any concept of value seems due to the failure of not recognizing intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense. Persson only discusses what he calls 'subjective end value' – by which he simply means 'value' ascribed to a thing by some subject – and what he calls 'objective end value' – by which he means some kind of valuer-independent value.¹⁸ The problem with subjective value, according to Persson, is simply that it is purely subjective; it cannot ground any moral obligations. The problems with objective value are (i) that there is no evidence for its existence, and (ii) that it is difficult to see how it could be practically relevant (i.e. connected to obligations or reasons) (Ibid: 232-8). These points may be warranted, but none of them applies to intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense. Even if such value may be more or less subjective on some accounts, it can never be the case that a thing has intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense just because it is valued. It

has such value (for the subject, or set of subjects, *S*) only if there is a direct reason (for *S*) to (re)act towards it. And if one wants to avoid subjectivity, the only option is not to turn to objective (valuer-independent) values. Instead one may look in the direction of universal values, i.e., values that apply to all moral agents. Many of those who defend the view that all sentient creatures have moral standing believe that each moral agent has direct reason to (re)act with regard to such creatures (e.g. to refrain from harming them). This is tantamount to believing that these creatures (or at least some of their states) have universal intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense. From the fact that a thing has universal value it does not follow that it has valuer-independent value.

That objective value and purely subjective value do not exhaust the set of possible types of value is actually good news also for moral-standing-theorists, for, as we have seen, they too need to invoke some notion of value. If all values would have to be either purely subjective or objective, then the value of the satisfaction of interests of sentient creatures would also have to be either purely subjective or objective.¹⁹ In the first case, no *moral* standing would be established, and in the second case, moral standing would depend on the existence of (supposedly untenable) valuer-independent value. Fortunately, then, there is also (more or less universal) intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense. Consequently, non-anthropocentric non-sentientist environmental ethicists do not need a more dubious concept of intrinsic value than the one needed by moral-standing-theorists. They need to argue that we have direct reason to care for nature, but, correspondingly, moral-standing-theorists need to argue that we have direct reason to care for the (interests of the) objects which they take to have moral standing (because without such reasons, there can be no *moral* standing). Again, the latter may be considered easier, but that is beside the point.

I think Persson and others reach their sceptical conclusions as to the prospects of intrinsic value in EE partly because they falsely presume that a theory in normative ethics

must be restricted to claims about our duties *towards* certain objects (Persson, 2008: 230-32). They then understand duties in such a way that it cannot make sense to say that we have duties towards objects lacking interests (i.e., objects for which things cannot be good and bad in a morally relevant sense). But this line of reasoning is question-begging. Many non-sentientist environmental ethicists think that there are reasons to care for things that do not have interests, and towards which we cannot have such duties. These non-sentientists hold that we can have moral reasons that are not connected to duties *towards* someone. It is not an argument against such views to simply state that we cannot have such reasons. Dale Jamieson (1998: 47) applies a similar question-begging line of reasoning when he simply postulates that '[n]onsentient entities are not of primary value because they do not have a perspective from which their lives go better or worse. Ultimately the value of nonsentient entities rests on how they fit into the lives of sentient beings'. The claim of non-sentientist environmental ethicists is precisely that non-sentient entities can have a value independently of how they fit into the lives of sentient beings (cf. Crisp's response to Jamieson (Crisp, 1998: 477)).

To sum up: moral standing cannot replace intrinsic value. They are different concepts that play different roles, and the concept of moral standing presupposes the concept of intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense. Some moral-standing-theorists may not want to use the phrase 'intrinsic value', but they cannot avoid the concept to which this phrase refers when it is used in its reason-implying sense.

5. THE SHIFT TO REASONS

In this essay I have argued that the notion of intrinsic value is not problematic, given a relevant, reason-implying, sense of 'intrinsic value'. Despite this, I think it would be to the advantage of environmental ethicists to turn their focus from intrinsic value to reasons in many contexts, in particular in the context of defining, or characterizing, environmental

ethical views or positions, such as anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism, which is usually done in terms of intrinsic value. But the practically interesting difference between these types of views is that they take our direct reasons to be grounded in considerations concerning different sets of entities.

The discussions above reveal that there is much confusion surrounding the notion of intrinsic value. This confusion invites misunderstandings and misinterpretations, some of which underlie much of the recent misguided critique of intrinsic-value-talk in EE. That is at least a weak reason to avoid a focus on intrinsic value. But there are also other reasons for environmental ethicists to turn their focus from intrinsic value to reasons. I will conclude this essay by stating what I take to be the strongest reasons for such a shift of focus.²⁰

The most obvious reason for making this shift is that *reasons* are what EE should primarily be concerned with. As I have already emphasized, EE is first and foremost a practical discipline. It is largely motivated by the insight that *action* is urgent if we want to reverse the current, alarming situation of the natural world. The point of establishing that nature has intrinsic value is that such values would lay claims on us – that they would supply us with reasons for action with respect to their bearers. If it were not for this connection to reasons, environmental ethicists and environmentalists would not have taken interest in the intrinsic value of nature in the first place. It is the practical questions about what we have reason to do that motivate the further questions that we may want to ask about value and moral standing. If these latter notions were not closely connected to reasons, they would simply not be interesting from an ethical point of view. What good would the value of nature be if it did not lay any claims on us? Once it has become clear that the non-instrumental value relevant to EE is intrinsic value in a reason-implying sense, it also becomes clear that it is the concept of a reason, rather than that of value, that is most important to EE. With our focus

turned directly to reasons we also avoid the worry, expressed by Persson and others, that we might be dealing with some practically irrelevant objective values.

Finally, some non-anthropocentrists seem to hide behind all too subjectivist theories of value, according to which, in their most extreme form, to say that nature has intrinsic value is just to say that at least some people value nature for its own sake (Elliot's view might provide an example). On such theories all kinds of objects have intrinsic value, and nature does not come out as very special at all. A focus on reasons reveals the shortcomings of such subjectivist views. What is normatively and practically interesting is not whether some people in fact value nature, but whether we (or at least they) have reason to do so. Thus a focus on reasons exposes the true challenge that faces non-anthropocentric, non-sentientist, environmental ethicists. What these ethicists need to convince us about is that there are direct reasons to care for nature – no more, no less.

NOTES

I want to thank Christer Nordlund, Jonas Nilsson and an anonymous referee for helpful comments and suggestions. An earlier version of this essay was presented in a seminar at my department. I am also grateful to the participants in that seminar.

¹ For an overview, see McShane, 2007. In the standard interpretation, ‘anthropocentrism’ refers to the view that the only objects of direct moral concern are human beings or human states. This is also how I intend to use the term. While I am not fond of the centrism-terminology (see Samuelsson, 2009: 18ff.) I shall use it here for pragmatic reasons.

² To clarify: I will not here defend the claim that nature has intrinsic value in this sense (for such a defence, see Samuelsson, 2009), but only that appeals to intrinsic value need not be problematic. While several writers before me have defended appeals to intrinsic value in EE (even by pointing out the connection between values and reasons (e.g. Attfield, 2001; McShane, 2007)), none of them has explicitly distinguished the concept of intrinsic value that I characterize in this essay. Unlike me, Robin Attfield (2001: 152), for instance, discusses a concept of intrinsic value which connects intrinsic value with intrinsic properties. And while I focus on reasons for (re)action in general, Katie McShane focuses only on reasons to adopt certain evaluative attitudes. Both these differences will prove important.

³ This formulation is borrowed from Joseph Raz (1999 [1975]: 186). It is also used by T. M. Scanlon (1998: 17). Personally, I believe that reasons are provided by facts (obtaining states of affairs) (cf. Raz, 1999 [1975]: Ch. 1; Scanlon, 1998: Ch. 1), but whether that is correct is not important to the points I want to make in this essay. Some believe that reasons are provided by propositions, or beliefs, and others think they are provided by desires. By using the term ‘consideration’ I remain neutral (in this essay) between different views about the

nature of reasons. However, it is important not to confuse normative reasons with motivating reasons, which are simply considerations that motivate us to do something, irrespective of whether they count in favour of doing it.

⁴ McShane (2007) identifies three versions of this critique, all of which she convincingly rejects. It is not my purpose in this essay to go through these different versions (although I deal with one of them; represented by Norton). Instead I want to make the ‘positive’ claim that even those who criticize appeals to intrinsic value in EE actually need the concept to which the phrase ‘intrinsic value’ refers when used in the sense most relevant to EE. McShane’s argumentation amounts to defending a specific concept of intrinsic value as being particularly important, and to showing that none of the versions of the critique of intrinsic-value-talk in EE applies to this concept. Her line of argument works just as well for the concept of intrinsic value that I characterize in this essay.

⁵ As an anonymous referee pointed out to me, in Norton, 1984, Norton seems to be concerned with the questionable ontological commitments of attributing intrinsic value *to nature*, rather than with questionable ontological commitments of attributing intrinsic value in general. However, since nothing Norton says in that essay explains why it would be particularly problematic to attribute intrinsic value *to nature*, I think his main concern – even in the 1984-article – is with the very notion of intrinsic value. In any case, in his later writings Norton makes clear that it is the notion of intrinsic value, as such, he is worried about.

⁶ Here we must be aware of an ambiguity of ‘intrinsic value’. This phrase may refer either (1) to the value a thing has solely in virtue of intrinsic (non-relational) properties, or (2) to non-instrumental value – the value a thing has *for its own sake* (e.g. Korsgaard, 1983; O’Neill, 1992; Kagan, 1998). The second interpretation is the one that moral philosophers have reason to take particular interest in, because (a) what is normatively important is whether a thing is valuable *for its own sake*, not on account of what kind of properties it is thus valuable (e.g.

O'Neill, 1992: 120ff.; Kagan, 1998: 290ff.); (b) there is nothing to exclude the possibility that things may be non-instrumentally valuable on account of relational properties. This latter point is particularly clear in the case of EE, since many environmental ethicists ascribe non-instrumental value to nature on account of some of its relational properties. Thus Callicott (e.g. 2002: 10) focuses on community-relations, Rolston (1988: 197-98) on the ability of nature to bring about valuable things, and Elliot (1997: 68ff.) on the property of nature of not having been designed/affected by humans. (See also Green, 1996: 34ff.) 'Intrinsic value' is hence misleading for the kind of non-instrumental value that is important to EE, and to ethics in general. For that reason, some writers (e.g. Korsgaard) have introduced the phrase 'final value' for such value. But since that phrase has not established itself in EE, and since writers in EE (and in ethics in general) usually mean *value for its own sake* when they write 'intrinsic value', I shall use 'intrinsic value' for this kind of value (even if I prefer the phrase 'final value'). It is obvious that the negative definition of intrinsic value discussed by Norton concerns value for its own sake, since it contrasts intrinsic value with instrumental value.

⁷ I use the term 'thing' broadly, to comprise anything that one may think could be a bearer of value: physical objects, states of affairs, organic wholes, etc.

⁸ While I think that the reasons most important to ethics are reasons for *action* (due to the practical character of the discipline), I write '(re)act' to leave open the possibility that some values may be connected merely to reasons for adopting attitudes (if that does not count as acting). Furthermore, values may be connected to reasons to *refrain from acting* (as for instance to leave a nature area alone), which also counts as a way of (re)acting.

⁹ Note that the reasons we are concerned with here are merely contributive; they may be outweighed by other reasons. Note also that 'effect' is used in a wide sense that does not commit to consequentialism. For instance, that a right of *X* is violated (or that a right of *X* is not violated) counts as an effect on *X*, etc.

¹⁰ And a non-practical sense of ‘intrinsic value’ would not be relevant to EE. Thus, when environmental ethicists do attribute objective value to nature, such value must also be reason-implicating in order to be practically relevant. When trying to figure out what to do, we have no use for objectively existing values unless these values imply reasons for (re)action.

¹¹ This characterization may need to be slightly modified in order to be able to handle some exceptional cases. These are possible cases where there may be direct reasons to (re)act with regard to a thing even though that thing does not have intrinsic value. This modification is easy to make, and it does not affect the discussions in this essay (see Samuelsson, 2009: 49-51).

¹² Elliot may even want to imply less, if he holds that *X* has value if *X* is valued. However, such a concept of value – which is entirely disconnected from reasons – would be rather uninteresting from a normative point of view (see my remarks at the very end of this essay).

¹³ Thus it is not a version of the so called ‘buck-passing account of value’ (Scanlon, 1998: 11, 97); but it is compatible with it.

¹⁴ Anthropocentrism is sometimes characterized as the view that only human beings have intrinsic value, but this fact is not by itself an argument for the claim that anthropocentrists need some concept of intrinsic value. Anthropocentrists can reject this characterization and claim that they take human beings to be morally important in some other way than by having intrinsic value (perhaps because they believe that the notion of intrinsic value is untenable). It is not until we have made clear which sense of ‘intrinsic value’ we are concerned with that we can ask whether anthropocentrists need this concept.

¹⁵ Sometimes ‘anthropocentrism’ is used to denote some view according to which all values are somehow dependent on humans (e.g. that they are values *for* humans). But, as we have seen, also many writers who call themselves non-anthropocentrists (such as Callicott and Elliot) would be anthropocentrists in this sense.

¹⁶ Another example is Dale Jamieson (1998: 47), although he uses the phrase ‘primary value’ in place of ‘moral standing’.

¹⁷ Cf. Nolt, 2006. I certainly think this gap can be bridged in the case of sentient beings (and perhaps it is because it may seem so obvious that this gap can be bridged in the case of sentient beings that some writers have failed to see that there is a gap to be bridged even in this case) (see further *ibid*: 362-64).

¹⁸ This failure is shared by Jamieson (1998: 49), who assumes that environmental ethicists need what he calls ‘mind-independent’ value in order to defend intrinsic value in nature that is not purely subjective.

¹⁹ Here someone might reply that, unlike proponents of intrinsic value in nature, moral-standing-theorists can avoid valuer-independent, or mind-independent, values, since all objects taken to possess moral standing have minds, and can be said to value things (in the sense that things can be good/bad for them). But this reply is mistaken, for, as I have argued, it is not *their* minds or values that are at stake here, but *our* minds or values (or, rather, our reasons to value these objects, or some of their states). The fact that what is valuable has a mind does not make its value depend on the minds of those who are supposed to value it.

²⁰ Note that I am not arguing that value-talk in EE is never warranted. Indeed, in the case of some views on the connection between values and reasons it is even unavoidable, namely views according to which reasons can be provided by considerations about values (there are reasons to be sceptical to such views, though; see e.g. Olson, 2006: 526-27). Often it may also seem much simpler and more ‘natural’ to talk in terms of value than to talk in terms of reasons. And, as I have explained throughout this essay, such value-talk is unproblematic given the reason-implying sense of ‘intrinsic value’ (but then it is important to be clear about what one means by ‘value’). My claim is merely that a *focus* on reasons is preferable to a focus on value in many contexts, since the latter may be misleading in various ways.

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