

Beyond Holism and Otherness: On the Metaphysical Basis for Environmentalism

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I. Philosophy and the Value of Nature

- Western thinking struggles to accommodate the idea that Nature can be valuable in-and-of-itself - it is treated either as an instrumentalised resource or as an 'externality' in calculations of value.
- Philosophy has a role in providing an underlying theory of the value of Nature, grounded in a new metaphysical picture of the relationship between humanity and the rest of Nature.
- My project surveys, compares and attempts to move beyond two historically opposed traditions in environmental philosophy:
 - (1) **Holism** - which argues we must abandon the human/nature distinction and act on the basis that we are inseparable from Nature, such that our interests are identical
 - (2) **Otherness** - which argues that we must maintain the human/nature distinction and respect Nature on the basis of its autonomy from humanity, which entails that Nature has its own, distinct interests

II. Anthropocentrism

- Anthropocentrism is the view that human beings are separate from and above Nature.
- This paradigm *instrumentalises* Nature, which is conceived a set of resources to be directed toward human ends.
- This limits any environmental ethics to an ethic of *managing* Nature to maximise our long-term utility, since we cannot conceive of Nature as valuable in itself.
- I argue that the anthropocentric view is rooted in two key Enlightenment ideas:

(1) Mechanical Atomism

- Sees the world as being made up of separate, discrete objects
- Any entity can be reduced to its parts
- Leads us, as a 'conceptual power structure' to see Nature as a passive resource to be exploited
- Cannot make sense of how an 'ecosystem' could be a distinct entity

(2) The Cartesian Mind

- Humans are the only entities with minds, minds are the only source of value, hence only what humans value is valuable
- Minds are *internal and discrete* - leads to a subject/object dualism
- *Hence humanity is the mind of the world, and Nature merely the body*

III. i. Holism

- Emphasises the *indiscernibility* of humanity from the rest of Nature.
- Argues that ecological science has revealed the conceptual inseparability of individual organisms from the wider network of environmental interactions - sees Nature a systematic, indivisible *whole*.
- Understanding our inseparability from Nature leads us to 'ecological consciousness' - we identify ourselves with the whole of Nature.
- Hence, we value Nature by the same token that we value ourselves
- Thus:
environmentalism = self-interest
(Where the 'self' is identified with all of Nature)

Problem:

- The ethical implications are vague.
- E.g., we could identify with Nature while believing the whole exists *for the part that is human*.
- Therefore, may not imply an ethic of protecting the natural world.

III. ii. Externalism

- Based on an "environmental model of the mind"² - cognition can take place not just in the body of the thinker, but also in the manipulation of external environmental structures.
- One kind of information embodied in the natural world are 'affordances' - capacities of an environment to be valuable to particular organisms (e.g. the suitability of a particular tree top for an eagle to make its nest).
- Affordances, then are an *objective basis for value in the environment*
- Human beings are predisposed to value certain features - including diversity, integrity and stability.
- Therefore, there is an objective basis for human beings to value healthy natural environments, and this value has an objective basis *in the environment itself*, not in the valuer.

Problem:

- Still rooted in *what humans value* - remains anthropocentric.

IV. My Proposal: A Complexity-Based Account

- We need a metaphysical account of *Nature valuing itself*
- I propose that such an account can be provided by two paradigm shifts:

(1) Process metaphysics

- reality is better described as being made up of processes, rather than separate, atomic objects.
- Anything which acts collectively to produce a particular effect is an individual entity
- Not all processes can be reduced to their parts - some exhibit 'downward causation' where the whole organises its sub-systems

(2) Panpsychism

- 'Mind' is fundamental, not emergent, and varies in degree, not in kind.
- Any individual entity has a mind, and any mind values itself and its interests
- The strength of a mind (and hence its capacity to value) corresponds to the physical complexity of the entity

- An 'ecosystem' is a distinct entity with a mind that confers value upon itself and its interests, corresponding to its ecological complexity
- Hence, a more ecologically complex ecosystem confers more value than a simpler one. The value-claims made by ecosystems are of the same kind as our own - we ought to respect their interests when their claim is stronger than ours.
- Thus, there may be a moral duty to protect and enhance ecological complexity

V. Otherness

- Proposes that Nature is intrinsically valuable because it is *autonomous* in its genesis and continued existence - its exists because of and for itself.
- Argues it is necessary to maintain a human/Nature conceptual distinction in order to ground environmental ethics in *refraining from qualifying Nature's otherness* - its autonomy is a valuable feature to be preserved.
- I believe this can be synthesised into the complexity-based account: complexity can be one source of value, while otherness provides a reason to refrain from replacing natural ecosystems with artificial ones even if the latter is more complex.

VI. Conclusions

1. **Anthropocentrism is rooted in (1) mechanical atomism and (2) the Cartesian model of mind.**
2. **Approaches based on extending human self-concern or cognition into Nature are insufficient - what is needed is an account of *Nature valuing itself*.**
3. **A complexity-based account, grounded in (1) process metaphysics and (2) panpsychism, may offer a promising direction for this movement.**
4. **Some elements of the Otherness tradition - respect for autonomy, the value of natural genesis - can be incorporated into the complexity-based account.**

References

1. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1983), p. 216.
2. Mark Rowlands, *The Environmental Crisis*, (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 157.

Images:

- "Mycelium RH (3)", by Rob Hille, *Wikimedia Commons*
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