



“Summary of article by John O’Neill: ‘Human Well-Being and the Natural World’ and ‘Nature, Intrinsic Value, and Human Well-Being’” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 3: Human Well-Being and Economic Goals. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 40-44.

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Much of the recent debate about the environment has centered on the extent to which human wellbeing should factor into environmental concerns. Two approaches have dominated the response, one based on traditional market-oriented evaluation of wellbeing, and a second that denies the validity of wellbeing as the basis of decision making, and instead insists on recognition of the intrinsic value of non-human entities. However, showing that natural entities have intrinsic values does not, in itself, entail any obligation on the part of humans, but at the same time, intrinsic value is not necessarily incompatible with a concern for human wellbeing. Both of these approaches should be rejected in favor of an Aristotelian conception of wellbeing based on the objective goods that a person may possess.

THE STANDARD RESPONSES

The neoclassical response to environmental concerns argues that they can be adequately accommodated by incorporation into existing decision-making procedures via the standard economic tools on which they are grounded, especially cost-benefit analysis. Within this paradigm, economic assessment is based on human wellbeing, interpreted in terms of the satisfaction of wants and willingness to pay (market prices). The market is seen as the best institutional framework for maximizing wellbeing, and cost-benefit analysis as the best tool for evaluation, particularly when markets do not function perfectly. Environmental values can be priced and incorporated into this framework, but human wellbeing remains the focus of analysis.

Proponents of the “deep green” or “deep ecological” approach, on the other hand, argue that anthropocentric efforts to incorporate environmental concerns into methods of analysis based on human wellbeing are inadequate. Neoclassical methods, and the ideology of science and industrial society in general, can only value the non-human world in terms of its instrumental value for enhancing human wellbeing. This does not give proper due to the non-human world or to the interests of future generations. The starting point must instead be an “environmental ethic” grounded in a belief in the intrinsic value of non-human entities.

Both of these responses can be rejected. Cost-benefit analysis is fundamentally flawed. It is difficult to incorporate the interests of entities (such as yet-unborn humans) that are unable to articulate their preferences, and preference-based interpretation of wellbeing is too narrow. These are neither arbitrary nor easily remedied mistakes of market systems. Rather, “different institutions carry with them different definitions of well-being,” (7) and the market system itself

institutionally fosters this self-understanding and a conception of wellbeing defined in terms of endless acquisition of material goods. The “deep” responses, meanwhile, are flawed in their assumption that a concern for human wellbeing is inherently incompatible both with recognition of the intrinsic value of non-human entities, and with concern for future generations.

An alternative Aristotelian conception characterizes wellbeing not in the welfare economist’s terms of preference satisfaction, but rather in terms of access to certain objective goods, such as friends, the ability to develop one’s own capacities and shape one’s life, or the opportunity to contemplate what is beautiful. This objectivist conception of human wellbeing, which is systematically undermined by the market, suggests that “the gap between well-being and ideals is narrower than is usually assumed, and more specifically, it reveals that the capacity to appreciate environmental goods is a component of human well-being.” (5) This view is thus entirely compatible with a concern for the good of non-humans and future generations.

DEFINITIONS OF INTRINSIC VALUE AND THEIR CONFLATION

Deep ecologists hold that an understanding of the intrinsic value of non-human entities is the proper centerpiece of an environmental ethic, but the term “intrinsic value” has several interpretations, and conflation of these interpretations confuses many of the arguments about environmental issues. One common use of the term is as a synonym for non-instrumental value, i.e., to describe objects that are valued as ends in themselves, rather than as means to other ends. A second use is in reference to the intrinsic properties of an object, properties that exist independently of its relation to other objects. Finally, intrinsic value can also be employed as a synonym for objective value, or the value of an object that exists independently of valuers.

The first and third of these definitions are often interchanged, confusing claims about the sources of value and claims regarding the objects of value. It is often assumed that if valuation is subjectivist (evaluations by humans are the only source of value) rather than objectivist (value is independent of human evaluation), then non-human entities can only be granted instrumental value. This is false; it conflates the source of value with its object. In fact, there is no reason why a subjective human evaluator cannot value non-human entities as ends in themselves, or future states as much as present ones. There is nothing in the subjectivist approach that dictates the content of what is valued. Nor does objectivist valuation imply that the non-human world does have non-instrumental value. “It does not follow from the claim that values do not have their source in humans that they do not have humans as their sole ultimate object.” (13)

Problems also arise from conflating the first and second meanings. Many environmental characteristics that are valued in practice, such as rarity and diversity, are clearly relational, so they are not intrinsic values in the second sense of the term. The mistake arises when this is taken to imply that these characteristics cannot have intrinsic value in any of the other senses either (e.g., in the sense of non-instrumental valuation), and that they therefore have no place in an environmental ethic. In fact, “We might value an object in virtue of its relational properties, for example its rarity, without thereby seeing it as having only instrumental value for human satisfactions.” (14) Moreover, an entity such as wilderness “might have value in virtue of its relation with human beings without thereby being of only instrumental value for humans.” (15)

OBJECTIVE VALUE AND THE NATURAL WORLD

An objectivist evaluation of value contends that evaluative properties are real properties of objects that they hold independently of valuation by evaluating agents. In the weak interpretation of this view, evaluative properties are simply properties that exist in the absence of such agents, while in the strong interpretation, these properties can be identified without reference to an evaluating agent.

One popular defense of an environmental ethic has been to establish the objectivity of evaluative properties or values by drawing an analogy between these and secondary qualities (e.g., color). Under the weak interpretation (but not the strong one), secondary qualities persist in the absence of observers and so are real properties of objects; by analogy, the same is said to be true for evaluative properties. However, this analogy is weak, and in any case the approach does not really get to the core of the debate about the nature of values.

It is more useful to show that objective values exist in the strong sense. Evaluative utterances about the natural world -- phrases such as "x is good for the greenfly" (or "x helps the greenfly to flourish") -- help to demonstrate this. Such phrases show that things that are capable of flourishing or being injured have their own goods independent of human interests and attitudes; these evaluative properties are therefore real properties in the strong sense. It can also be shown that the class of entities that can be said to have such goods includes not only individual living creatures, but collective entities as well.

INTRINSIC VALUE AND HUMAN WELLBEING

The next step in defending an environmental ethic is usually to argue that the very existence of goods that are independent of human interests or observations implies that they are worthy of moral consideration. However, this assumption is incorrect.

It is possible to talk in an objective sense of what constitutes the goods of entities, without making any claims that these ought to be realized. . . . One can recognize that something has its own goods, and quite consistently be morally indifferent to these goods or believe one has a moral duty to inhibit their development. . . . there is a logical gap between facts and oughts. (22-23)

The goods of the HIV virus provide one such example.

The failure of this argument raises problems in the discussion of environmental ethics, since showing the existence of objective goods is not in itself sufficient grounds on which to argue that non-human entities are legitimate objects of moral concern. One means of bridging this gap is a quasi-utilitarian objectivist approach that invokes a moral duty to maximize the amount of objective good in the world. This approach fails, however, for a number of reasons, especially its inability to account for the fact that some goods are not ethically desirable or acceptable, such as those that provide for the flourishing of sadists, viruses, or dictatorships.

The more productive alternative is an Aristotelian bridge. Human beings, as well as other types of entities, possess two types of goods, goods that are constitutive of our flourishing, and goods

that are instrumental to our flourishing. The Aristotelian ethic argues that we should promote flourishing of many other living things not because they are instrumental to our own flourishing, but because they are constitutive of our flourishing. This is more than a narrow anthropocentric ethic, because it does in fact value components of the natural world for their own sake, not merely as a means to serve our own interests. However, arguing that “care for the natural world is constitutive of a flourishing human life,” (24) does not finish our work. This claim still needs a detailed defense, a defense that should begin with the appeal that a good human life requires a broad, not a narrow, spectrum of goods.