MUSINGS ON ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

PERSPECTIVES ON OUR RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE

by

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ABSTRACT:

In the face of the existential threat posed by climate change, this paper explores various perspectives on environmental ethics and their implications for fundamentally reconsidering humanity's relationship with the natural world. It examines the dangers of disenchantment arising from a positivistic scientific worldview, the proposal to grant legal standing to natural entities, the deep ecology movement's relational view of humans as "knots" in the biospherical web, and Aldo Leopold's visionary land ethic that expands the boundaries of the moral community to include the land. Recognizing the merits and limitations of each approach, the paper argues for a pragmatic yet transformative path forward - one that integrates nature into our legal frameworks in the short term to protect its interests, while cultivating a deeper sense of connection, reverence and responsibility towards the environment in the long run. It contends that whether motivated by anthropocentric or biocentric considerations, humanity must urgently chart a new course in its relationship with the natural world - embracing a plurality of approaches to ultimately create a more harmonious, sustainable and just future for all life on Earth.

Keywords: *environmental ethics, climate change, disenchantment, legal rights of nature, deep ecology, land ethic, anthropocentrism, biocentrism*

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We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.

Introduction

Climate change is currently our most pressing existential issue. Leaving aside the sceptics on the matter, this paper seeks to discuss what it means for humans to live in an era of environmental turmoil, and its impact on how we should be acting. There are a plethora of perspectives on how to approach human behaviour in this context, the most relevant splits lie in the instrumental/non-instrumental value dichotomy, and the anthropocentric/biocentric views. Regarding instrumental and non-instrumental value, the discussion revolves around whether there is intrinsic value in nature in general. Is a tree valued for its intrinsic worth, i.e. for being a tree, or is it valued because of the utility it brings for humans? Many would agree that a person is intrinsically worthy of living, there is no need for an argument as to why we shouldn't kill every human being, but can the same be said for nature?

Adding to this, the anthropocentric versus biocentric debate concerns our starting orientation when discussing nature, questioning whether human needs are more important than those of other living things. The latter view posits that the needs of human beings are not, thus "evening out the playing field".

Perspectives and problems

To begin with, in this section I explore various perspectives on environmental ethics, highlighting the challenges and problems associated with our interaction with the natural world. I examine the concept of disenchantment and its impact on our perception of nature, discuss the proposal to grant legal standing to natural entities, delve into the deep ecology movement and its relational view of the world, and finally, present a very brief summary of Aldo Leopold's land ethic theory, which advocates for extending ethics to include the land and the entire biotic community.

Through this exploration, I seek to provide a rich understanding of the human-nature dynamic, laying the groundwork for a more thoughtful and engaging discussion to follow.

The dangers of disenchantment

Before examining various ethical positions, it's crucial to address the concept of *disenchantment*[1]. The term is used to describe a particular effect of positivism in science and technology, how it tends to remove the mystery, fear, awe and wonder associated with many aspects of human experience. In the context of environmental ethics, it is focused on how it affects our perception of and relationship to nature (Brennan and Lo 2024, p. 21). For instance, the shift from seeing a forest as a sacred space to viewing it merely as timber resources exemplifies disenchantment. At a larger scale, disenchantment represents a shift in the relationship, turning away from seeing nature as a source of wonder and reverence to a collection of resources for exploitation. The advances in knowledge and material well-being due to science are not problematic per se, but the disenchantment produced as a byproduct of this understanding is. When applying an objective lens, the person does all in her power to distance herself from the object of study, thus straining the relationship. Horkheimer and Adorno[2] posited that the result of this positivistic spirit was an alienation of our own humanity.

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[1] Originally popularised by Max Weber.

[2] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno were influential German philosophers and sociologists associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory. They co-authored the seminal work "Dialectic of Enlightenment" in 1947, which critically examined the concept of enlightenment and its impact on modern society. Horkheimer and Adorno were key figures in developing critical theory, analysing the relationship between social structures, culture, and human consciousness. Their work significantly influenced 20th-century philosophy, sociology, and cultural criticism.

> According to the critical theorists, the oppression of "outer nature" (i.e., the natural environment) through science and technology is bought at a very high price: the project of domination requires the suppression of our own "inner nature" (i.e., human nature)—e.g., human creativity, autonomy, and the manifold needs, vulnerabilities and longings at the centre of human life (Brennan and Lo 2024, p. 21-22).

Their solution to disenchantment was a reconstruction of rationality, away from the narrow-focused positivistic take toward a less discriminatory one, including more layers of human experience. This way the emotional aspects of life such as aesthetics and morality gained more importance.

Finally, I do not believe this is THE solution, but A solution. The reality of the matter is that we are to a large degree speaking of psychological factors, and as long as different human beings experience life differently, there will be a need for a plurality of solutions for these issues. While most might agree on the problem, the path to changing one's values and perspectives is often a personal one[3].

Integrating nature in our legal system

In the early 70s, Christopher Stone proposed a peculiar way of dealing with the issue of damaging the climate, without having to rebuild major societal structures. The law professor argued that natural entities like trees, forests, and mountains should be granted a legal standing similar to that of corporations. Doing this would enable environmental organizations to take the side of nature on legal grounds, instead of through actions such as public demonstrations, and so provide a more legitimized and powerful platform to fight back against damage on nature (Stone 2010). Although this solution is more realistic and less radical, it still has its own minor issues. If we integrate nature into our societal framework to bestow moral value upon its entities (in terms of our treatment of them), doesn't it follow that these entities need to be similar to us in some way to fit in?

Joel Feinberg (1974) specifically raised the issue of nature's *interest*. The whole idea of a legal standing is that there is an interest to defend against other entities interests. Only entities that have an interest can be regarded as having legal standing. But does nature have an

[3] This is not a hint to relativism, there are most certainly better and worse ways to understand our role in the relationship to nature. I am saying that the persuasiveness of the arguments is not solely dependent on the underlying logic, but also of the reader's psychological background.

interest, and even if it did, how could we ever understand it? One might be able to make a case for the interest of certain animals, but it becomes harder the more passive the entity is, such as trying to understand the interest of a rock, or of a river. Furthermore, if we are unable to provide an answer to "what is nature's interest?", that would not only strip it off its legal status, but also its moral one.

Are we "knots" in the biospherical space?

There is also the *deep ecology movement*. This is a movement that in contrast to weak ecology movements[4], takes nature and humans to be of equal importance, and so is clearly biocentric. Moreover, they see the same intrinsic value that humans possess mirrored in nature.[5] Just as the critical theorists mentioned earlier, deep ecology sees a damaged relationship between nature and humans, with the main culprit being atomistic individualism[6]. And so, inspired by Spinoza's metaphysics, philosophers of the movement tried healing this relationship by rejecting atomistic individualism, and instead providing an alternative metaphysical theory with a relational focus. This relationalism captures our being in the world in a way that is best pictured as organisms being "knots" in the biospherical space, always linked together. Deep ecologists posit that viewing the world in such relational terms would result in humans taking better care of the totality of life (Brennan and Lo 2024, p. 14-15).

Another effect of this shift in worldview is the integration of nature in our larger (capital "S") Self. When the borders created by atomistic individualism break down, it is easier to see oneself as a drop in the ocean, a leaf on a tree, or as a human in the overarching natural ecosystem. A form of nature spiritualism appears which I believe is very persuasive due to the pleasurable feelings that accompanies it.

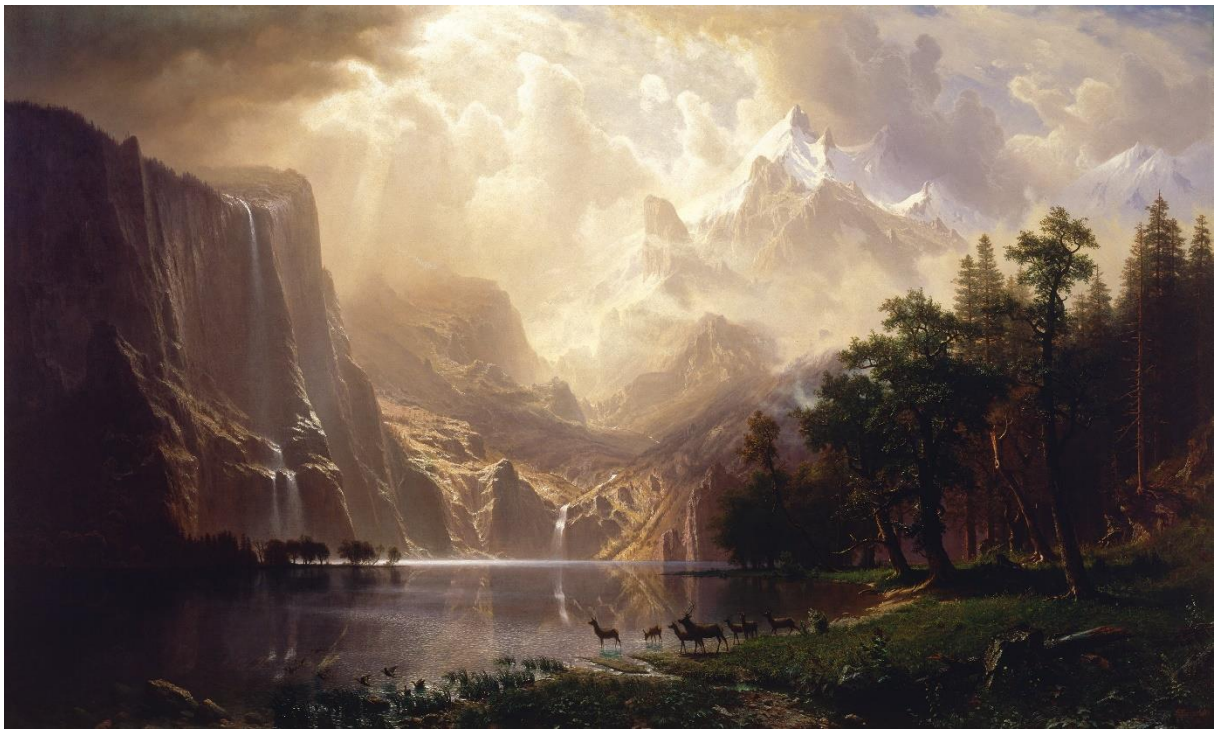
[4] Here I am referring to green movements whose primary focus is to fight pollution and resource exploitation/depletion.

[5] In this chapter I focus on the original deep ecology movement, articulated by Arne Næss *et al.* Today the movement has split in several different directions which will not be covered here. The purpose is to give a simple introduction of the key characteristics of original deep ecology, not a comprehensive account.

[6] Atomistic individualism, also known as social atomism, is a sociological and philosophical theory that views individuals as the fundamental units of society. This perspective posits that society is essentially a collection of self-sufficient, self-interested individuals who operate independently, much like atoms in a physical system.

Expansion of the moral sphere through the “land ethic”

At last, one cannot discuss environmental ethics without mentioning Aldo Leopold (2020) and his *land ethic* theory. While vague in its structure (as many critics point out) Leopolds contribution is a landmark chapter in the history of environmental ethics due to its radical, commanding and totalitarian tonality. His famous maxim being: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold 2020, p. 211).



Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California, 1868 – by Albert Bierstadt

The land ethic meant a new way of viewing and relating to the natural world. Leopold argued that ethics had evolved over time, from governing relationships between individuals, to relationships between individuals and society. The next necessary evolution was to extend ethics to include the land and the entire biotic community. At the core of Leopold's land ethic is the idea that the land is not merely soil, but "a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals" (Leopold 2020, p. 203). He believed that we are all part of this energy circuit, not separate from it. Therefore, we have a moral responsibility to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.

This represented a radical departure from the dominant view of land as property, as a resource to be exploited for human benefit. He advocated for a shift from humans as conquerors of the land to plain members and citizens of it. It suggests that we should

prioritize the health of the entire ecosystem over short-term economic gains. It means that we have a responsibility to future generations to leave the land in a better state than we found it, implying that we need to develop a *reverence for all life,* not just human life.

Ending this chapter instead of starting it with Leopold might seem an odd choice, since he can easily be seen as an essential starting point of the environmental movement. At the same time, while the movement is superficially splintered, they all converge to one key message the end of the day, one which Leopold articulated in the very beginning.

> Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect (Leopold 2020, xxii).

At the heart of environmental ethics, I believe lies a yearning to reconnect with the primordial unity we have forgotten, but long for in our psyche's unconscious realm.

Discussion: which path is the right one?

While it is tempting to pick sides, reality is too complicated to support a single “right” plan of action. The closest we may get to “right” is by attacking the problem from several directions at once. That being said, there is a fundamental notion to be entertained. Namely that we need to save nature from ourselves, from humanity.

Integrating nature — similarly to how Stone (2010) proposed — into our society is a sobering first step. Our modern world is at the moment too entrenched in individualistic and materialistic views to be implementing any more radical changes.

For instance, consider a scenario where a local environmental group, acting on behalf of a nearby river, files a lawsuit against a polluting factory. Under the current system, the group would need to demonstrate that the pollution directly affects human interests, such as drinking water or recreational activities. However, if nature were granted legal standing, the group could argue that the river itself has an interest in maintaining its ecological integrity, regardless of human impact. This could lead to a court-ordered injunction requiring the factory to adopt more sustainable practices, not just to protect human interests, but to preserve the river's inherent value as a living entity. In 2008, Ecuador became the first country to recognize the rights of nature in its constitution. This legal framework allows nature to be a subject of rights, enabling citizens to legally defend the environment. In practice, this means that if a river is being polluted, citizens or organizations can file a lawsuit on behalf of the river, arguing that its rights to exist and flourish are being violated. This approach shifts the legal paradigm from viewing nature as property to recognizing it as a rights-bearing entity, similar to how corporations have legal standing. Such a model should be adapted and implemented in other countries to ensure that natural entities have a voice in legal proceedings, thereby protecting them more effectively.

Though the issue of how to represent nature’s interest remains complicated, we can still act today. Just as when a patient in a coma is unable to give consent to a procedure, we can, and I argue are obliged to, convene an ethical committee to discuss and agree on what action best serves their interest. This investigation need not be complex in our case, as it is analogous to deciding whether to perform a life-saving surgery on a patient who will die without it. The answer is clear, the surgery would almost always be carried through, since the most basic interest of any patient is living. In the same way, the most basic interest of nature must be so too. Not because I am somehow claiming that I know the interest of

nature, but because we overrule it temporarily through organized ethical discussion. This then is how we should be relating to nature at large in the short term. If we are to integrate nature into our own society, and bestow it with the same moral value we possess, it follows that nature be treated the same as humans in the matter of interest.

After having reached an adequate integration of nature's entities in our society, it will be easier for the human psyche to move closer to cohesion with nature. This cohesion, I argue, does not need to be presented in radical form, for that would result in a bureaucratic breakdown. While spiritual unity with nature, as articulated by deep ecologists, can be comforting on an individual level, it is challenging to translate this into large-scale bureaucratic procedures that govern modern societies. The personal sense of connectedness to nature might inspire individual conservation efforts, but implementing such a holistic approach in policymaking requires more structured and universally applicable frameworks. One could extract static values from spirituality, and form bureaucracy through these "spiritual principles", however I fear that such a system would fall prey to dogmatism and blind obedience[7]. At the same time, we need to identify with nature more to foster true cohesion and caring, and by establishing these conditions we encourage the organic emergence of ethical and moral frameworks that place nature at the forefront in the long term, while actively protecting it through our legal system in the short term.

This approach can be appreciated from both anthropocentric and biocentric standpoints. Anthropocentrists may argue that safeguarding nature is essential for human well-being and survival, while biocentrists may contend that nature possesses inherent worth independent of its utility to humans. Regardless of the underlying motivation, the outcome remains the same: a more harmonious and sustainable relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Instrumentally, protecting nature can yield tangible benefits such as clean air, water, and a stable climate, all of which are essential for human flourishing. Non-instrumentally, recognizing the intrinsic value of nature and granting it legal rights affirms its moral

[7] Zygmunt Bauman was concerned with this happening in any modern bureaucratic society, for him the issue was bureaucracy itself. He saw how individuals within the bureaucracy follow orders and rules without questioning their moral implications. This blind obedience is facilitated by the hierarchical and rule-based nature of bureaucracies, which prioritize efficiency and adherence to procedures over ethical considerations. I am not as sceptic to bureaucracy as Bauman was, for me it seems an essential tool for large scale operations, something we do want in society. Yet, I believe it is a critique worth considering here, and therefore suggest to the interested reader his work *Modernity and the Holocaust*. His analysis of the issue is particularly well-articulated there.

standing and encourages a more respectful and reverential attitude towards the environment.

Conclusion

Due to the threat of climate change, we need to fundamentally reconsider our relationship with the natural world. The perspectives explored in this paper all point to the urgent need for humanity to move beyond seeing nature as mere resources for exploitation.

Moving forward, a pragmatic stance is necessary. In the short term, integrating nature into our legal and societal frameworks, as proposed by Christopher Stone, offers a tangible and immediately actionable step. This approach provides a platform for defending nature's interests within our existing systems, even if we cannot fully comprehend them. Just as we make medical decisions on behalf of patients who cannot advocate for themselves, we have an ethical obligation to act as stewards for the environment. All this while simultaneously paving the way for a deeper shift in our collective consciousness.

In the long term, however, we must aspire to foster a more profound connection with nature. This doesn't necessitate a radical overhaul of our societal structures, but rather a gradual evolution of our values and perceptions. By encouraging a sense of unity with the natural world, we can cultivate an ethic of care and responsibility that extends beyond mere legal obligations. Over time, we will organically cultivate a deeper sense of connection, reverence and belonging with the natural world.

Ultimately, whether motivated by anthropocentric concerns for human wellbeing or biocentric recognition of nature's intrinsic worth, we must chart a new course in our relationship with the environment. This will likely require a plurality of approaches, from personal spiritual practices to global policy frameworks. But the destination is clear - a world in which humanity lives in greater harmony with the natural systems upon which all life depends. As Aldo Leopold so powerfully articulated, only when we begin to see the land as a community to which we belong, will we treat it with the love and respect it deserves. Our future depends on it.

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