

WHY ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHERS SHOULD BE ‘BUCK-PASSERS’ ABOUT VALUE

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Abstract

The value of nature has been extensively debated in environmental ethics. There has been less discussion, however, about how one should understand the relation between this value and normativity, or *reasons*: if something in nature is seen as valuable, how should we understand the relation between this fact and claims about reasons to, for example, protect it or promote its existence? The ‘commonsense’ view is that value gives rise to reasons. The *buck-passing account* of value (BPA), on the other hand, implies that for an entity or state of affairs in nature to be valuable *just is* for it to have properties (other than that of being valuable) that provide reasons to promote or have a pro-attitude towards it. BPA has been extensively debated, but has received little attention in environmental philosophy. In this paper, it is argued that the view suggests a ‘reasons first’ approach to environmental ethics, and that it should be preferred to competing accounts of value in the context of environmental ethics.

Introduction

A central project of environmental philosophy is to examine whether and in what way nature can be said to have *intrinsic value*, in the sense of being valuable in itself, and not simply as a means to obtain some other valuable thing or state of affairs.¹ A main motivation for this

¹ The term ‘intrinsic value’ can be understood in different ways (see John O’Neill, ‘The Varieties of Intrinsic Value,’ *The Monist*, no. 75 (2) (1992), but it is commonplace in environmental philosophy to understand it as non-instrumental value, as I understand it here. A more apt term for the type of non-instrumental value discussed in environmental ethics might be ‘final value’, see e.g. Ronald L Sandler, *The Ethics of Species: An Introduction*

project is that if one can show that nature has such value, this is an important step towards showing that it has – or at least is a candidate for – *moral status*: if nature is intrinsically valuable, it may be morally problematic to destroy or fail to protect it, regardless of whether doing so is in the interest of humans.

There has been extensive debate over which parts of nature that can have such value – whether it is sentient creatures or all living beings; ecological wholes or individuals; entities or states of affairs.² However, there has been less discussion about how one should understand the very concept of value in environmental philosophy. Understanding the concept of value, however, is crucial for understanding claims about nature's intrinsic value, or nature's value in general. Not least, it is of essential importance in environmental ethics to understand the relation between value and normativity, or reasons: if something in nature is seen as valuable, how should we understand the relation between this fact and claims about reasons to, for example, protect it or promote its existence?³ Helpful discussions have been provided on certain aspects of the relation between values and reasons in environmental ethics.⁴ However, these debates have not addressed the issue of whether values should be understood to *give rise to* reasons, or whether they should be understood *in terms of* reasons.⁵ The difference is subtle, and I will explain it in more detail below. It is an important issue, however, because –

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), or 'inherent value', see e.g. Paul W Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). However, I stick with the conventional term 'intrinsic value' for simplicity.

² For a collection of influential essays, see Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston, eds., *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002). When speaking about 'nature' in this paper, I mean non-human nature. I treat 'nature' and the 'environment' as synonyms.

³ When speaking of 'reasons' in this paper, I mean normative – as opposed to (mere) explanatory – reasons, unless something else is indicated. A normative (practical) reason is understood as a consideration that (for an agent) counts in favour of an action, cf. Thomas M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998); Derek Parfit, *On What Matters: Volume One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). On the distinction between normative and (merely) explanatory (for instance, motivating) reasons, see Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1994) and Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴ See, notably, Lars Samuelsson, "Reasons and Values in Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Values* 19, no. 4 (2010) and Katie McShane, "Why Environmental Ethics Shouldn't Give up on Intrinsic Value," *Environmental Ethics* 29, no. 1 (2007).

⁵ While McShane (op. cit.) does not consider the issue of where (at what stage) reasons arise at all, Samuelsson (op. cit., p. 523) remains explicitly neutral on it.

as I will try to show – the position one takes on it has implications for how one should approach questions about value and normativity in environmental ethics.

I focus on two views that have received much attention in the metaethical literature: the *commonsense view* and the *buck-passing account*. The so-called commonsense view, which is inspired by G.E. Moore's theory of value, implies that the fact that some X – for example, the welfare of an animal or the existence of an ecosystem – is valuable or good, provides agents with a reason to act in some way – for example, to protect or promote – or to have some kind of pro-attitude towards X.⁶ For instance, if ecosystem E is valuable, the commonsense view is that the value of E gives us a reason to act in some way towards it – to conserve it or promote its existence, for example – or to have some sort of pro-attitude (such as respect) towards it; just as if we claim that knowledge is valuable, the value of knowledge gives us reason to attain knowledge, or to have some kind of pro-attitude towards it.

According to the buck-passing account (BPA), on the other hand – which is defended by T.M. Scanlon and others⁷ – that X is valuable can be understood to *just be* the fact that X has properties (other than that of being valuable) that provide reasons to promote (or the like) or to have a pro-attitude towards X. If this is correct, then the commonsense view has it backwards: values are not reason-providing properties; rather, facts give rise to reasons and the normativity we derive from values actually issues from reasons.

I argue in favor of a buck-passing account, and try to show how endorsing it matters for environmental ethics. The discussion has two parts. In part I, I explain BPA and present a general argument for why the account should be preferred to the commonsense view. The

⁶ The view is labelled the 'commonsense view' by Daniel Jacobson, "Fitting Attitude Theories of Value," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2011 Edition (2011), 6. It is called the 'Moorean view' by Philip Stratton-Lake and Brad Hooker, "Scanlon Versus Moore on Goodness," in *Metaethics after Moore*, ed. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Cf. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922). The view can also be called the 'value first' view, in contrast to 'reasons first' views (such as BPA) and 'fittingness first' views (see section in part II on 'fitting attitude' accounts).

⁷ Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*; see also Derek Parfit, "Rationality and Reasons," in *Exploring Practical Philosophy: From Action to Values*, ed. Dan Egonsson, et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

argument is that the value-properties postulated by the commonsense view seem normatively redundant: they add nothing in terms of reasons to reasons provided by other present properties.⁸ I then show how BPA can be taken to suggest a ‘reasons first’ approach to environmental ethics, according to which questions of value should be approached in terms of questions about reasons – and not the other way around.⁹

In part II, various objections and worries about BPA are considered, with the aim of further clarifying the view in the context of environmental ethics. This part also considers a close relative to BPA, namely, the ‘fitting attitude’ account of value, and points out an advantage BPA may have over this type of account. It moreover looks at BPA in the context of a central theme in environmental ethics, namely, the relation between values/reasons and human agency. The arguments in part II do not depend upon the argument in part I about the implications of BPA for research in environmental ethics, and can be of interest regardless of whether one is convinced that BPA has those particular implications.

I. The buck-passing account and environmental ethics

In *What We Owe to Each Other*, Scanlon describes the buck-passing account (BPA) in the following way: ‘Goodness [value] is not a single substantive property which gives us reason to promote or prefer the things that have it. Rather, to call something good is to claim that it has other properties (different ones in different cases) which provide such reasons’.¹⁰ The account can be broken down into a negative and a positive thesis:¹¹

⁸ Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*; Parfit, "Rationality and Reasons."

⁹ Why should anything be ‘on first’? Daniel Wodak argues against what he calls ‘X-first’ views in "Who's on First?," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics Volume 15*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). Unfortunately, there is no space to consider Wodak’s arguments here. For those convinced that X-first views are false or should not be favoured, this paper might still be of interest as a discussion of how an approach to environmental ethics that focuses mainly on reasons would look.

¹⁰ Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 11.

¹¹ Schroeder, “Buck-Passers’ Negative Thesis” and Philip Stratton-Lake, “The Buck-Passing Account of Value: Assessing the Negative Thesis,” in *Reading Parfit* (Routledge, 2017).

Positive thesis: For an entity or state of affairs X, that X is valuable (good) just is the fact that X has properties – other than that of being valuable – that provide reasons to promote or have a pro-attitude towards X.

Negative thesis: Value (goodness) itself is never reason-providing – that is, ‘the fact that X is good is never a reason to have a pro-attitude, or act in certain ways, towards X’.¹²

I will focus on the positive thesis in this paper. More specifically, I will give what I see as good reasons to accept the positive thesis of BPA in the context of environmental ethics. When referring to BPA in the following, I will mean the positive thesis (unless something else is indicated).

Now, consider the claim that some X in nature – such as the welfare of an animal, or the existence of an ecosystem – is valuable or good.¹³ This can be taken to mean that X has the *property* of being valuable or good, which in turn can be understood either subjectively or objectively. For example, J. Baird Callicott develops a subjectivist theory of intrinsic value as ‘actualized [in nature] in interaction with [human] consciousness’, and holds that the value so actualized exists on an ‘ontological par’ with other properties in nature.¹⁴ On the objectivist end of the spectrum, Holmes Rolston speaks of ‘observations of value in nature’; value being ‘objectively there’; value that is ‘located’ or which ‘resides’ in particular forms of life, and value being ‘produced’ (149, 151) and ‘generated’ (152) at different levels in nature.¹⁵

¹² Stratton-Lake, “The Buck-Passing Account of Value: Assessing the Negative Thesis,” p. 82.

¹³ As is standard in the metaethical literature I relate to in this paper, I treat ‘value’ and ‘valuable’ as synonymous with ‘goodness’ and ‘good’.

¹⁴ J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 170. One might question whether this really is a subjectivist understanding, but that discussion is not important here.

¹⁵ Holmes Rolston, *Environmental Ethics. Values in and Duties to the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), pp. 146., 149, 151, and 152. It is not clear whether Callicott and Rolston would actually defend a commonsense view, though the metaphysical language used sometimes suggest that they would. In any

Understood in terms of the *commonsense view*, the property of being valuable or good provide actors with reasons to, for example, promote or have a pro-attitude towards that which has the property. And this might seem intuitively plausible: doesn't the fact that something is good or valuable generate or give rise to – if not a 'duty', as Rolston holds – then at least a (*pro tanto*) reason to care for it, protect it, promote it, or the like?¹⁶

A main reason for preferring BPA to the commonsense view emerges from what can be called the 'redundancy argument'.¹⁷ Consider the claim that animals are valuable in their own right or have 'intrinsic value', and that this involves a (*pro tanto*) reason for us to care for them. To understand this claim, we presumably need to know what it is that makes animals valuable in their own right. Let us say that the answer is that they have a certain property, P – for instance, that of being 'sentient' (able to experience pain and pleasure).¹⁸ But isn't it, then, just *the fact that animals have property P* that provides a reason to care for them? What would it add in terms of reasons to say that this fact makes them valuable? It would indeed be odd to say that we have *one* reason to care for animals because they are sentient, and an *additional* reason to care for them because the fact that they are sentient makes them valuable. And this seems to suggest that, as Derek Parfit puts it, saying that X is valuable or good is simply an 'abbreviation' or short-hand for saying that X has some natural property (such as being sentient) which provides a reason to act or feel in a certain way towards X in circumstances C.¹⁹

case, even if no environmental philosophers explicitly defend a commonsense view, it is important (for various reasons given in the paper) to discuss how one *should* understand the concept of value.

¹⁶ Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 41: 'value generates duty'.

¹⁷ Crisp, *Reasons and the Good*.

¹⁸ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: New York Review, 1975).

¹⁹ Parfit, "Rationality and Reasons," p. 20. In line with Parfit and Scanlon I from here on assume a 'naturalistic' interpretation of BPA, according to which the grounding reason-giving properties are *natural* properties. The term 'natural property' is rather vague. In the context of the current discussion, however, I believe the rough understanding of a natural property as a non-evaluative or non-normative property will suffice. It might be possible to construct a BPA that does not pass the normative buck all the way down to natural properties – it might for instance be taken to stop at lower-order evaluative properties. See Jacobson, "Fitting Attitude Theories of Value," for an overview of such possibilities. Note that BPA is neutral on the issue of whether reasons themselves are to be understood naturalistically.

I will discuss the redundancy argument at more length in the next section. In this section, I will explain why the issue is important for environmental ethics, and give some reasons to endorse BPA in this context. BPA is a metaethical or second-order view,²⁰ and it has no direct substantive implications for what in nature that should be considered to have value. Nonetheless, it has some implications for how one should approach questions of value in the context of environmental ethics. It implies that in investigating the value of nature, a main task for the environmental philosopher is to identify and discuss natural properties providing reasons to act in certain ways, or have certain attitudes or feelings, towards things or states of affairs in nature. Stating facts about such properties and reasons will, according to BPA, give us the information we need about environmental values – which we might then build on to develop our ethical views about the environment.

For example, suppose that an environmental philosopher wants to examine the normative significance of ‘existence value’, understood as the value humans may ascribe to the existence of something – for instance, a certain species or ecosystem – regardless of whether it is or will be of any particular use to them.²¹ In the spirit of the commonsense view, this issue can be approached by asking: what kind of property is existence value, and what kind of reasons might it give rise to? Suppose that the answer to the first question is that existence value should be understood in terms of preferences people have or may have with regard to the existence of things in nature.²² The question then becomes what kind of reasons such preferences give rise to. According to BPA, the answer to that question will provide the

²⁰ I assume here a distinction between *first order* axiology (value theory), which concerns substantive questions of value (or goodness), and *second-order* (or metaethical/formal) axiology, which looks at the meaning of value claims, the metaphysics and epistemology of values, and other questions in value theory that are not about what is (substantively) valuable (or good). The discussion in this paper suggests that the connection between the two axiological levels might be closer than is often assumed.

²¹ See Espen Dyres Stabell, “Existence Value, Preference Satisfaction, and the Ethics of Species Extinction,” *Environmental Ethics* 41, no. 2 (2019).

²² Joseph Alcamo et al., *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment: Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: A Framework for Assessment* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003); Stabell, “Existence Value, Preference Satisfaction, and the Ethics of Species Extinction.”

normative information we need about existence value. According to the commonsense view, however, it seems that we would have to explain some further fact about the value of those preferences which according to the commonsense view would give rise to reasons. But if there is no further fact about values, as BPA suggests, such explanation is not needed.

A proponent of the commonsense view might point out that value can be taken to supervene on natural properties. When it is asked why we should, say, protect a certain ecosystem or species, it can then be held that the answer can be given either in terms these properties or in terms of value. My understanding of BPA does not exclude this kind of answer, as I will explain in the next section (in connection with ‘derivative’ reasons). Nevertheless, BPA might be preferable on grounds of parsimony.²³ Consider, for example, the question of the intrinsic value of nature. On the commonsense view, intrinsic value in nature must be understood as a reason-giving property belonging to states of affairs or entities in nature. On BPA, however, there is no need to postulate such a metaphysical value property in order to explain the value of X, since this value can be explained in terms of natural properties of X providing reasons of some kind.

It can be objected that the parsimony argument is not convincing, since the metaphysics of ‘reasons-firsters’ is identical to that of ‘value-firsters’: after all, reasons-firsters do not deny the existence of values; they just explain them in terms of reasons.²⁴ I concede that reasons-firsters do not deny the existence of values. At the same time, on the naturalistic interpretation that I assume, BPA reduces the value property to the reason-implicating natural property (or properties) that explain(s) it – and in that sense treats what the value-firsters see as two ontologically distinct properties – values and natural properties – as explainable in terms the latter property. Strictly speaking, then, the value property postulated

²³ The parsimony argument in favour of BPA was, to my knowledge, first suggested by Scanlon in *What We Owe to Each Other*.

²⁴ The objection was posed by one of the reviewers of this paper.

by BPA is not a separate entity from the reason-providing natural property. In this sense, (naturalistic) BPA seems to have a more parsimonious metaphysics.²⁵

Whether the parsimony argument is convincing or not, understanding value-talk in terms of reasons might make it clearer what is involved in such talk. Suppose that it is a fact that X is valuable. If, as suggested by Moore,²⁶ the commonsense view implies that the value property is somehow singular and ‘unanalyzable’, then it can be difficult to see the normative implications of this fact. In contrast, it is normatively informative to say – as suggested by (naturalistic) BPA – that there are certain natural properties that X has which under certain circumstances (whatever they may be) provide agents with reasons to act or feel in certain ways towards it (although we might of course be mistaken or in disagreement about which properties that under the relevant circumstances are reason-providing, and in what way).²⁷ It is very clear (intuitive) to most of us, for example, that the natural property some sentient being has of being in severe pain in a particular situation will (under the right circumstances) imply a reason to act or feel in certain ways with regard to that being.²⁸ Furthermore, even if the commonsense view could (or would) say more about the value property (without analyzing it in terms of reasons), the most important thing in environmental ethics is arguably to get at our practical reasons, in the broad sense of reasons to act or to have certain practically important attitudes.²⁹ Turning to value properties rather than to reasons directly

²⁵ I do not consider the metaphysics of reasons in any debt here. But it can be noted that the property an X has of being a reason might be best understood in terms of a *relation* holding between the following items: facts; circumstances (including times); degrees of strength of reason; actors; and acts. Or, as suggested by Thomas M. Scanlon, *Being Realistic About Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). and John Skorupski, *The Domain of Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), in terms of (roughly) the following formula, which might be called the ‘reason relation’, or R: $R(\pi, c, d, x, \varphi)$ – fact or set of facts π is in circumstances c a reason of degree of strength d for x to φ .

²⁶ Moore, *Principia Ethica*.

²⁷ This may also be more in line with how environmental philosophers usually argue for their claims about values and normativity in nature. Cf. Samuelsson (op. cit.).

²⁸ That it will always to some extent be an ‘open question’ (Moore, G. E. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922) whether a certain natural property is in fact reason-providing has little importance, since what we are usually after in the practical context of environmental ethics is not definitions or analytic statements, but the ways in which our normative claims relate to real-world, empirical phenomena.

²⁹ Samuelsson (op. cit.) argues that the main focus of environmental ethics is practical reasons in this broad sense. On this background, Samuelsson proposes that ‘it is the concept of a reason, rather than that of value, that

may serve to obscure this practical aspect, for example by diverting our attention to value facts that are (or at least appear to be) practically irrelevant. For instance, the fact that a certain ecosystem is valuable may seem practically irrelevant for someone who does not care about ecosystems.³⁰ However, if it can be shown that there is *reason* to care about it, then this might mean that caring is something this person *should* do, whether or not he does in fact care; and this is practically relevant in so far as it involves a practical reason (to care). One could of course say that if the commonsense view is correct, then the mere fact that the ecosystem is valuable provides the agent with a practical reason (to care). The point is that in focusing directly on reasons, this obscure (and possibly misleading) detour through purportedly reason-giving value properties is avoided.

In sum, BPA suggests a ‘reasons first’ approach, where questions of value are approached and discussed in terms of reason-providing facts that are not facts about value properties, but instead, for example, facts about natural properties. As argued, this has implications for research and discussion in environmental ethics. In discussing normative issues regarding nature, BPA suggests that we focus on facts about reasons, and that this is sufficient to understand and explain the value that different parts of nature or the environment might have. There is no need for further discussion of reason-providing value-properties; and hence no need for further explanation of the metaphysics and epistemology of such properties. The discussion of value in terms of reasons is complicated enough; one can make value-talk less complicated by abandoning the commonsense view in favor of BPA.

There are, nonetheless, several objections to BPA. I turn now to consider some central objections and worries. The main aim is to clarify further the buck-passing account of value in

is most important to EE [environmental ethics]’, and that environmental ethics should have its focus ‘directly on reasons’ (p. 530). I take this to be in the spirit of my arguments for ‘reasons first’ – whereas Samuelsson does not see it as an argument for any particular position in the debate between reasons-firsters and value-firsters.

³⁰ I take the idea that value facts can be practically irrelevant from Erik Persson, *What Is Wrong with Extinction?* (Lund: Lund University, 2008).

the context of environmental ethics. As indicated in the introduction, the discussions in part II can be of interest even though one is not (fully) convinced that BPA has the particular implications for environmental ethics that I've argued for above.

II. Objections and clarifications

The redundancy argument

A worry about the redundancy argument is that it seems to imply that ordinary talk about values as reason-providing is necessarily false. Derek Parfit suggests a way to avoid this problematic implication.³¹ Suppose that I'm a policy-maker, and in the role of an advisor you recommend to me a policy protecting a certain endangered species, S. In a completely ordinary and presumably legitimate fashion, you cite as a reason for your recommendation the fact that S has value. I then ask you why you think it has value, and you reply that in addition to being very rare, it consists of living beings with sentience. According to BPA, *those* are the facts that (might) provide a reason to protect the species, and the fact that this makes the species valuable does not add to the weight of this reason. But, Parfit argues, that does not mean that we have to think of the value-fact as carrying *zero* weight, or as providing *no* normative support to your recommendation. Instead, we can think of it as a fact *deriving* its reason-giving weight from the underlying reason-giving facts or grounding properties. On this basis, BPA will allow the fact that something is good to have normative weight – it is just that its weight cannot be *added* to that of the reasons from which it derives.³²

³¹ Parfit, "Rationality and Reasons."; see also Garrett Cullity, "Weighing Reasons," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, ed. Daniel Star (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³² Stratton-Lake, "The buck-passing account of value: Assessing the negative thesis," questions whether the response based on derivative reasons is adequate. However, his objection is based on a very technical discussion of 'additivity' – the thesis that the weight of a composite of reasons A&B must be greater than any of A and B in isolation – which we can bypass here; if one does not want to abandon or go against additivity, one can instead think of the argument as saying that goodness does not provide an independent reason, or something along those lines (see Stratton-Lake (op. cit.); Parfit, "Rationality and Reasons."; Schroeder, "Buck-passers' negative thesis").

However, it is not clear what it can mean for something to be a reason, but to carry no independent (non-derivative) normative weight.³³ In brief: if something is a reason, then this seems to imply that it has at least *some* independent normative force; for if not, it seems that it is merely an *apparent* reason (or something similar), and thus not really a reason at all. In light of this, Parfit's suggestion seems problematic. Does that mean that BPA delegitimizes talk of values as reason-providing after all? I would argue that in the practical context, this kind of talk can be justified on pragmatic grounds: We *do* talk about values as reason-providing, and that might be fine in everyday discourse – so long as we avoid it in contexts that need a more fine-grained understanding, such as in certain theoretical investigations, or in practical contexts where one needs to be more specific about the relation between values and reasons – such as in a discussion of whether or in what sense the fact that a particular X in nature is valuable can be said to have normative implications.³⁴

A further objection is raised by Roger Crisp, who argues that a problem with the redundancy argument is that 'it can be run by a Moorean in favour of goodness'.³⁵ G. E. Moore famously conceived of goodness or (intrinsic) value as a non-natural, indefinable property attaching to things or states in the world.³⁶ According to Crisp, proponents of the view that such value-properties are reason-providing can give a redundancy-argument against BPA:

³³ Stratton-Lake, "The buck-passing account of value: Assessing the negative thesis".

³⁴ Consider, for example, someone who says: 'Well, X has intrinsic value – but so what?' In this context, it may be central to explain that the fact that X is valuable *means* that there are reasons to act or have certain attitudes toward X – so that a 'so what' response may be rationally flawed. In a sense, BPA as I understand it involves biting the bullet on the worry that it implies that value facts might provide merely apparent reasons. This should not be all too troubling, though, given that the practical/normative sense of something being valuable *just is* that it is reason-implicating; 'value facts' that are not reason-implicating (or only apparently so) are normatively dubious, and should not be of much concern to environmental ethics in the first place (cf. Samuelsson, 'Reasons and Values in Environmental Ethics, and Persson.').

³⁵ Crisp, *Reasons and the Good*, 65.

³⁶ Moore, *Principia Ethica*. See Stratton-Lake and Hooker, 'Scanlon versus Moore on goodness,' for further discussion of Moore's theory as against (Scanlonian) BPA.

Imagine that I am worn out and in dire need of a holiday, so I decide to take a trip to some resort because it will be good for me. A Moorean may claim that the fact that the trip will be good for me provides a complete explanation of the reason I have for taking it, and that ‘it is not clear what further work could be done by special reason-providing properties’ at a lower level.³⁷ It is not as if its being pleasant could *add* to the reason I already have to visit the resort based on the fact that it will be good for me.³⁸

A problem with Crisp’s counter-example, however, is the assumption that something needs to be added to the sentence ‘Imagine that I am worn out and in dire need of a holiday, so I decide to take a trip to some resort’ in the first place in order to explain the reason this person has to take the trip to the resort. Adding ‘because it will be good for me’, the buck-passer claims, adds nothing in terms of explaining the reasons the person has.³⁹ The same, Crisp holds, can be said about adding ‘because it will be pleasant for me’. But why is that? The most plausible explanation, I believe, is that the reason the person has to take the trip *just is* the fact that he is ‘worn out and in dire need of a holiday’ – that is, presumably, in dire need of rest, relaxation, pleasant new experiences, or some other relevant things that the trip can provide – and not some *further* fact about what will be good or pleasant for him. But that, as far as I can see, is exactly what BPA says.

Moreover, the same plausibly holds for the reasons we may have to, for example, admire or protect ecosystems or species, or promote animal welfare or the interests of non-human individuals for their own sake: if we have such reasons, it seems very plausible to hold that this is because of natural facts about ecosystems, species, or welfare, as well as (presumably) facts about reason-responsiveness (for example, psychological facts about

³⁷ Crisp refers here to Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 97.

³⁸ Crisp, *Reasons and the Good*, 65.

³⁹ In addition – and this may itself be a reason for suspicion – it seems *artificial* to add ‘because it will be good for me’ to the sentence.

agents) – rather than facts about further, stipulated properties at a ‘higher’ (or for that matter, ‘lower’) metaphysical level.⁴⁰

Value and human agency

In environmental ethics, anthropocentrism is (roughly) the view that only humans (or distinctively human capacities) have intrinsic value and moral status, while other things in nature have at best instrumental value and derivative moral status.⁴¹ Let me begin by clarifying that BPA is completely neutral between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism in this sense. Whether a view based on BPA is anthropocentric or not, depends on the *reasons* it takes there to be to care about or promote things in nature. If one holds the view that there is no reason to care for nature unless it contributes to human well-being, for instance, an anthropocentric view is implied. If, on the other hand, one thinks there are reasons to care for nature that are not about human well-being, but, for example, about animal welfare or welfare in general, or the preservation of ecosystems or biodiversity for their own sake, then a non-anthropocentric view is implied.

Nonetheless, there is a way in which BPA can be taken to imply the *existence* of human agents. We might think that humans are the only creatures capable of recognizing and

⁴⁰ Somewhat similarly to Crisp, but in the context of discourse rather than explanation, Andrew Reisner holds that one might as well translate talk of reasons (for pro-attitudes) into talk of values as the other way around (Reisner, Andrew E., “Abandoning the Buck passing analysis of final value,” *Ethical theory and moral practice* 12 (4):379-395) (2009). Whether one is best served talking about the one or the other might depend on the context (cf. the passage on ‘derivative reasons’ above). But if it is the case that value-facts are normatively redundant or derivative upon facts about ‘lower order’ reason-providing properties, then it would still hold that in the explanatory context, at least, the reduction or translation should go from values to reasons and not the other way around.

⁴¹ At least, this is the claim of so-called ‘strong’ anthropocentrism. For weaker versions see, for example, Bryan G Norton, “Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism,” *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1984) and Eugene C Hargrove, “Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value,” *The Monist* 75, no. 2 (1992). Some philosophers hold that environmental thought and action should be anthropocentric see, for example, Bryan G Norton, *Toward Unity among Environmentalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). For many of us, however, anthropocentrism is disconcerting, since it lets too much depend on human concerns; a view implying that there is no value in nature other than that conferred on it by humans might be too ‘human-chauvinistic’ (Richard Sylvan [Routley], “Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic?” (paper presented at the Proceedings of the XVth World Congress of Philosophy, Sofia, Bulgaria, 1973)), or implausible, or both.

responding to reasons. If this is true, value seems to presuppose the existence of human agents. On the other hand, reason-responsiveness might be thought of as a matter of degree, and it can be argued that non-human creatures can display a degree of responsiveness or sensitivity to reasons.⁴² In any case, there *are* human agents, and human agents are capable of recognizing and responding to reasons.⁴³ The hypothetical scenario of a world without human agents might be theoretically interesting, but it is of little practical concern and need not be considered central to the discussion of environmental ethics.

What, then, about the famous *Last Man* thought experiment, which asks us to consider the act or intention of the imagined Last Man on Earth of destroying as much as he can of life on the planet before he dies?⁴⁴ The thought experiment asks what the Last Man has reasons to do or care about, or how we should evaluate his options. In both cases, a human agent is implied: either the Last Man himself, or us (in the role of evaluators). It would make no sense to ask whether a particular rock has (normative) reason not to explode and destroy the universe. It would, on the other hand, make sense to ask whether this would be *bad*; but according to BPA, that is just to ask whether there are reasons to, for example, regret it or stop it from happening; and there clearly may be such reasons, and hence the possibility to respond to them, even if no one is actually there to respond to them. In other words, BPA presupposes at most the *possibility* that an agent responds to the relevant reasons; BPA does not require that we judge the acts of the Last Man to be normatively neutral or morally

⁴² Skorupski, *The Domain of Reasons*, pp. 462-464.

⁴³ A reviewer of the paper suggested the following responses to the concern that reasons are anthropogenic. First, the worry assumes that a necessary condition for the *existence* of a reason is that there is an agent who *has* that reason, where ‘having’ a particular reason involves possessing the sort of psychological traits needed to recognize that reason as such. That view would be contested by many objectivists about reasons, at least regarding some sorts of reasons, since they would deny that the psychological features that enable recognition of those reasons are part of the *grounds* of those reasons. Second, if the worry is that it’s mysterious how reasons can exist without reason-responsive agents, a similar worry confronts the non-buck-passer about intrinsic value: it seems no less mysterious how value can exist without there being agents who make value judgments. Hence, an objectivist view of reasons seems no worse off with respect to mysteriousness than an objectivist view of intrinsic value. (But, it can be added, not better off either.) I am a bit agnostic about whether this strong form of objectivism – that is, objectivism that implies that reasons and values do not have any basis in the ability agents have to respond to them – is plausible. But it is certainly a venerable type of position in metaethics.

⁴⁴ Sylvan (Routley), ‘Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic?’

unproblematic on the account that there will be no humans left after him that will actually regret or condemn his acts of destruction.

'Fitting attitude' accounts

One might worry that BPA inherits some of the problems that have been pointed out with regard to its closest relative in value theory, namely, 'fitting attitude' theories of value.⁴⁵ In their generic form, these theories take value to depend on 'fitting' responses (attitudes) of agents – that is, responses that there is reason to have towards (features of) objects or states of affairs.⁴⁶ For example, a fitting response to the suffering of others is some kind of concern; it is not fitting to, for example, desire it. And according to fitting attitude theories, the fittingness of this response somehow explains the disvalue of the suffering. A challenge these theories face, however, is to explain in what way value depends on the fittingness-relation. Two types of explanation seem open to the fitting attitude theorist. The first is to say that fittingness, and hence value, is determined by features of the object providing reasons for the relevant attitude. But then it seems that it is those features that explain value, and not the fittingness-relation itself. The second is to understand fittingness in terms of idealized responses (rational, well-informed, etc.). But again, this makes it unclear what explanatory work the fittingness-relation does; it seems that one must rely on an external standard – for example, a standard of rationality – and then say that value is what the idealized (rational) agent takes it to be.

⁴⁵ Canonical fitting attitude accounts include those of Alfred Cyril Ewing, *The Definition of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948) and Charles D. Broad, "Certain Features in Moore's Ethical Doctrines," in *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, ed. P.A. Schilpp (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1942). For a recent 'fittingness first' view, see Christopher Howard, "The Fundamentality of Fit," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics Volume 14*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Howard's account might avoid the objection noted below against the 'generic' accounts.

⁴⁶ Jacobson, "Fitting Attitude Theories of Value".

An advantage of BPA is that it does not rely on a fittingness-relation to explain value. Rather, BPA suggests that we learn about the appropriateness of responses by reflecting on the *reasons* we may have to respond in particular ways, and especially by considering (intuitively) reason-giving properties or features of the object. Someone may be disgusted by the appearance of a certain animal, or by its form of life, and hence be less inclined to promote its interests. But on reflection, the properties giving reasons for disgust may not provide reasons to discredit the interests of the animal, and hence may have no bearing on the value we should attach to those interests. On BPA, value does not depend on the fittingness of responses; what determines the value of an object are the features of the objects providing reasons for responses of certain kinds.

The 'wrong kind of reason' problem and intrinsic value

A central challenge for BPA is based on the so-called 'wrong kind of reason' problem (WKR).⁴⁷ WKR arises from the observation that an agent may have reasons to promote or have a pro-attitude towards something, while it seems counterintuitive to say that the thing is good or has value. Consider, for example, an evil demon who presents me with a saucer of mud, and threatens to punish me with eternal agony if I do not desire the saucer of mud for its own sake, i.e. 'intrinsically'.⁴⁸ Clearly, this fact gives me a reason to desire (have a pro-attitude towards) the cup of mud for its own sake; but the reason seems to be of the 'wrong kind', since it seems implausible to hold that the saucer of mud is valuable for its own sake, or intrinsically valuable.

Intuitively, reasons of the right kind for intrinsic value are reasons that bear on the value of the object, for example, reasons to desire a cup of mud that bear on whether the mud

⁴⁷ Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-Attitudes and Value," *Ethics* 114, no. 3 (2004).

⁴⁸ Roger Crisp, "Value... And What Follows," *Philosophy* 75, no. 3 (2000).

is desirable, or reasons to admire someone that bear on whether they have admirable traits (such as courage). The challenge for BPA is to capture this idea in a way that is not tautological, as in saying that there are reasons to desire desirable objects, or reasons to laugh at funny jokes.⁴⁹ The different strategies for solving WKR have been much debated, and there is no need to rehearse the debate here.⁵⁰ I will instead consider a proposal that might help clarify what it can mean for something in nature to be of intrinsic value according to BPA.

Philip Stratton-Lake suggests that we should distinguish not only between instrumental and non-instrumental ('intrinsic') values, but also between instrumental and non-instrumental *reasons*.⁵¹ On this basis, we can hold that it is only non-instrumental or *final* reasons that are of the right kind for intrinsic value: for something to have intrinsic value, our reasons for having a pro-attitude (etc.) towards it must not be an instrumental reason, as in a reason that we have for the sake of some other reason not related to features of the object – as seems to be the case in evil demon cases.⁵²

On the other hand, this raises the issue of what makes something a final reason. A possible answer is that we have final reasons to promote or have a pro-attitude only towards those things that have final or intrinsic *value*. This would imply that BPA, at least when it comes to explaining final reasons, is flawed, as it would suggest that BPA needs the concept of a reason-providing value-property after all. How can the buck-passer deal with this objection? Again, the natural response is to point to properties (other than the value-properties) that are (intuitively) reason-providing, and show that there is no need for 'higher order' evaluative properties in order to explain them. For example, let us stipulate that the

⁴⁹ Jacobson "Fitting Attitude Theories of Value".

⁵⁰ See Jacobson "Fitting Attitude Theories of Value," for an overview of the debate.

⁵¹ Philip Stratton-Lake, "How to Deal with Evil Demons: Comment on Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen," *Ethics* 115, no. 4 (2005).

⁵² There is a further type of case that has been much discussed, namely, that of 'sophisticated hedonism' (hedonism holding that there can be reasons for valuing other things than pleasure intrinsically). See, for example, Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-Attitudes and Value". The structure of the examples are analogous.

natural property N an activity A has of being pleasurable or enjoyable provides a subject S with a reason to desire A. Moreover, S does not have this reason because she has a reason to desire some other thing having a different reason-providing property, P; S has this reason solely because of the fact that A is N. In other words, N provides S with a *final* reason to desire A. If this is the case, is there a need to explain this further by saying that N is intrinsically valuable? According to (the final-reasons interpretation of) BPA, doing so would just be to repeat that N provides S with a final reason to desire A. Again, referring to a higher-order value-property seems unnecessary; the fact that N has the further property of being valuable or good adds nothing in terms of reasons to the reason provided by N itself.

Concluding remarks

The buck-passing account of value (BPA) suggests a ‘reasons first’ approach to environmental ethics, where questions of value are approached and discussed in terms of reason-providing facts that are not facts about values, but instead, for example, facts about natural properties. The account should be preferred to ‘commonsense’ (or ‘value first’) accounts of value, which rely problematically on normatively redundant or derivative value-properties. BPA moreover has an advantage over fitting attitude theories (of the response-dependent kind) in the context of environmental ethics: since BPA does not hold responses by agents to be determinate of value, it is not committed to holding the fittingness-relation to be determinate of value. Hence, it is in a better position to explain the independent normative force of (reason-providing) facts about nature or the environment. Lastly, it was suggested that *intrinsic* value in nature could be understood in terms of *final* reasons for pro-attitudes or actions with regard to nature or things in nature.

The paper leaves several issues unresolved. Intricate technical matters regarding the WKR problem has been left out of the discussion.⁵³ Alternative views, notably sentimentalism⁵⁴ and sensibility theories,⁵⁵ as well as more sophisticated fitting attitude accounts,⁵⁶ have not been considered. The aim of the paper has not, however, been to offer a complete exposition of BPA and its rival theories. Rather, I have attempted to show that BPA is a *plausible* account – and in some respects *more* plausible than its rivals – and that it can help clarify important questions of value in environmental ethics. Hopefully, the paper will spur further discussion in environmental ethics of the relation between value and normativity, and BPA in particular. In general, more research is needed to clarify how our (second order) understanding of the relation between values and reasons might affect our (first order) ethical views, for example about nature or the environment.

⁵³ For further discussion of WKR see, for example, Jonas Olson, "Buck-Passing and the Wrong Kind of Reasons," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 54, no. 215 (2004) and Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, 'Buck-Passing and the Right Kind of Reasons,' 56, no. 222 (2006).

⁵⁴ The classic statement of sentimentalism is given by David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975[1740]).

⁵⁵ Notably, John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998). Jacobson, "Fitting Attitude Theories of Value," gives an overview of sentimentalism and sensibility theories in the context of fitting attitude accounts and BPA.

⁵⁶ For a sophisticated fittingness first account, see Howard, "The Fundamentality of Fit".

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