

# If Natural Entities Have Intrinsic Value, Should We Then Abstain from Helping Animals Who Are Victims of Natural Processes?<sup>1</sup>

Luciano Carlos Cunha

*PhD Candidate, Federal University of Santa Catarina*

doi: 10.7358/rela-2015-001-cunh

lucianoshred@gmail.com

---

## ABSTRACT

*The idyllic view of nature is false: natural processes, given the prevalence of the reproductive strategy known as “r-selection”, tend to maximize the suffering of animals in nature. For the animals subjected to natural processes, disvalue overwhelmingly prevails over value. Any normative theory that directly considers sentient beings must recognize strong reasons to minimize such disvalue. Here, I will respond to a possible objection to this conclusion: that if non-sentient natural entities have intrinsic value, then our axiological evaluation of the situation of animals in nature must imply either that helping animals in nature is prohibited or that our reasons for helping them are considerably weak.*

*Keywords:* wild animal suffering, intrinsic value, speciesism, sentience, environmentalism, intervention in nature, natural disvalue, idyllic view of nature, conflicting values, anthropocentric speciesism.

---

## 1. NATURAL DISVALUE

Natural processes tend to maximize the number of sentient beings that come into existence only to suffer intensely and to die soon thereafter. This is due to the predominance of the reproductive strategy known as *r*-selection, which consists in producing a large number of offspring per

---

<sup>1</sup> This work was done with the support of a scholarship granted by CAPES (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior). I want to thank Catia Faria, Darlei Dall’Agnol, Eze Paez and Oscar Horta for their helpful comments and corrections on previous versions of this paper.

reproductive cycle – hundreds, thousands or even several millions. On average, only one offspring per parent survives until sexual maturity. The rest usually dies shortly after birth, generally from starvation or by being eaten alive. This reproductive strategy is followed by most animal species. This shows that the so-called *idyllic view of nature* is false (Ng 1995; Horta 2010a; Tomasik 2014). The number of animals that suffer this fate is much higher than that of those exploited for human purposes (Tomasik 2014).

The disvalue to sentient beings generated by natural processes – *natural disvalue* – vastly outweighs the positive experiences they enjoy. This is so due to their low-levels of well-being, regardless whether we consider the rate of preference satisfaction or the rate of positive and negative experiences. This is also the case when we consider the distribution of value in nature among different individuals at the light of different theories<sup>2</sup>. This implies that we have strong reasons to help animals in nature, derived from the axiological evaluation of their situation. This is so whether we look at it from an egalitarian, a prioritarian, a sufficientarian, a negative utilitarian and even from a standard utilitarian perspective (Horta 2010a, 79, 80, 86). There is, however, a possible objection to this conclusion:

*The environmentalist view*: if entities such as natural processes, ecosystemic relations, ecosystems, biocenoses and species have intrinsic value, then our reasons given by such value outweigh the reasons given by the disvalue of the situation of animals in nature.

If the environmentalist view is right, then we should not help animals in nature who suffer from natural causes. I will call this *the environmentalist prohibition*, hereafter abbreviated as (EP):

(EP) We should not intervene in nature to help non-human animals in need.

In this paper, I will not discuss whether natural entities possess intrinsic value. My goal is to show that, even if that were the case, it would not be sufficient to support (EP). That is, that we have strong overriding reasons to help the animals who suffer and die due to natural processes.

In order to argue for this, in section 2 I will claim that if there are good reasons to think that natural entities have intrinsic value, we should adopt a *hybrid position*, i.e., one that also recognizes sentient beings as worthy of moral consideration. In section 3, I will classify the different defenses

---

<sup>2</sup> For instance, utility, equality, *maximin*, sufficiency or negative and negative leaning views that give priority to the prevention of suffering over the promotion of positive well-being.

of (EP) based on their relationship (of independence or dependence, and to what degree) with the axiological evaluation of the situation of animals in nature. In section 4, I will distinguish between the value of an outcome *according to a certain respect* and the value of an outcome *all things considered*, and how this distinction implies that even if natural entities were shown to have intrinsic value, that would not be sufficient to support (EP). In section 5, I will argue that (EP) would still be unjustified even if natural entities had greater weight than other values, in determining the overall value of a situation. In section 6 my analysis focuses on the hypothesis that the value of natural entities trumps other values. Section 7 addresses the objection that adopting an *aggregative* theory of the overall value of outcomes, we should consider that the situation in which wild animals suffer from natural harms in the wild is good all things considered, and that therefore such a theory justifies (EP). Section 8 discusses the objection that harms (such as suffering and death) do not have negative value when they are caused by natural processes. Section 9 reassesses our reasons for helping animals in nature, according to different delimitations of the moral community, in light of the conclusions drawn in previous sections. Section 10 will serve as conclusion.

## 2. DIFFERENT DELIMITATIONS OF THE MORAL COMMUNITY

Consider the following distinction between direct and indirect duties. A duty is *direct* when it is owed to a member of the moral community for her own sake. A duty is *indirect* when it is owed to an entity not for its own sake but for the sake of another entity which is a member of the moral community. Now, ponder these different ways of delimiting the moral community:

- *Anthropocentrism*. Human beings are the only objects of direct duties. Non-human sentient beings and non-sentient entities are only objects of indirect duties.
- *The sentience view*. Sentient beings, regardless of species, are the only objects of direct duties. Non-sentient entities can only be objects of indirect duties.
- *The holistic view*. Non-sentient wholes such as natural processes, ecosystemic relations, ecosystems, biocenoses or species (which of them depending depends on the theory) are the only objects of direct duties. Individual beings are merely objects of indirect duties.
- *The hybrid view*. Sentient beings, regardless of species, and non-sentient natural entities are objects of direct duties (and are also objects of indirect duties). Biocentrism, the view that all living beings are morally consider-

able, is an example of a hybrid view. All the possible combinations of the sentience view, holism and biocentrism will also be hybrid views.<sup>3</sup>

If speciesism is unjustified, we must reject the anthropocentric view (for arguments against speciesism, see Horta 2010c). This entails that if human beings must be considered objects of direct duties then *ceteris paribus* all other sentient beings must be objects of direct duties as well regardless of their species. This is crucial for our purposes since environmentalist positions are often combined with anthropocentric criteria (Callicott 1990; Varner 1991). It is sometimes maintained that duties to sentient beings are only indirect, except in the case of human beings. In other cases, even when non-human sentient beings are recognized as objects of direct duties, their interests are given a lower consideration compared to the one given to similar (or even less important) interests of humans. These positions must be rejected as speciesist too.

It only makes sense to give moral consideration to beings who are capable of being harmed or benefited. When a being possesses such capacity she cannot be indifferent among the various states in which she might be. This is because she has the capacity to *experience* some of such states as positive and/or others as negative. That is, this is because that individual is *sentient*.

The main reason why all sentient beings ought to be given direct moral consideration is the following. It only makes sense to give moral consideration to beings who are in need of such consideration. Someone needs moral consideration when she is capable of being harmed or benefited. For this condition to be fulfilled, it is necessary that she is not indifferent among the various states in which she might be. For someone not be indifferent in that way, she must be able to *experience* some of such states as positive and/or others as negative. That is, that individual must be *sentient*. It is the negative value of the harms they suffer and the positive value of the benefits they enjoy what actually explains why human beings are to be given direct moral consideration. However, that also implies that any sentient being ought to be given such direct consideration, regardless of her species<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> That is: the sentience view combined with holism, the sentience view combined with biocentrism, holism combined with biocentrism and the combination of the three views together.

<sup>4</sup> This argument also poses problems for the claim that non-sentient entities are worthy of direct moral consideration. The proponent of this thesis has to show one of the following things. (1) That non-sentient entities are able to be harmed and/or benefited. That is, that not being indifferent among the various states in which an object might be is not a necessary condition for that object to be harmed and/or benefited. (2) That some objects must be morally considered even if they are incapable of being harmed and/or benefited.

However, if there are reasons to give moral consideration to sentient beings, then we must not only reject the anthropocentric view and its combination with the holistic view. We must also reject the holistic view itself, because it does not consider sentient beings as worthy of direct moral consideration. If there are also good reasons for considering non-sentient entities worthy of direct moral consideration, then we must adhere to a *hybrid view*.

### 3. DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENTALIST DEFENSES OF (EP)

There are two common ways to defend (EP) whilst accepting the claim that non-sentient entities are objects of direct duties:

*The environmental prohibition dependent on axiology:* non-sentient natural entities have intrinsic value, and so the value of an outcome (i.e., how good or bad) varies according to whether these natural entities are present or absent in it. Thus, we should not alter these entities.

According to this view, our evaluation of the value of the outcomes in which natural harms occur may be overall positive, which would thus imply that our reasons for helping animals in nature are negligible. This position is compatible with both consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories, including deontological ones. This is so because although only consequentialist theories derive *all* reasons for acting on considerations about value, non-consequentialist theories may also derive *some* reasons for acting from such considerations.

It is important to distinguish this objection from other positions that oppose helping animals in nature solely out of a concern with the risks of long-term consequences for sentient beings. The difference is that in this version of (EP), how good or bad natural harms are is not determined solely by how the well-being of sentient beings is affected.

*The environmentalist prohibition independent of axiology:* there are obligations not to alter natural entities that override any obligation or permission to help sentient beings, and that are violated if we do provide assistance to them. These obligations are independent of the value of the state of affairs in which animals suffer natural harms.

This position is only compatible with deontological theories, since it affirms the existence of obligations that are not concerned (and, moreover, limit) the promotion of the best outcome.

I will briefly address this second version of (EP) in section 9. It must be noted now that this second version will be very difficult to accept if

the victims of natural harms were human beings. For this reason, this view is usually combined with anthropocentric speciesist criteria, which should also be rejected. Furthermore, it is important to notice that all the conclusions I will draw regarding the first version apply also to this second one.

In what follows I will discuss the environmentalist prohibition dependent on axiology. I shall argue that even if natural entities have intrinsic value, it is false that helping animals that suffer from natural harms always makes the outcome worse.

#### 4. THE VALUE OF OUTCOMES: “IN A CERTAIN RESPECT” AND “ALL THINGS CONSIDERED”

The first version of (EP) confuses, on the one hand, the assessment of how good or bad an outcome is, and whether it is better or worse than the other(s) *in a certain respect*, with, on the other, how good or bad it is, and whether it is better or worse than the other(s), *all things considered* (Temkin 2000, 136, 137; Horta 2010b, 138, 139). Providing reasons to think that certain entities, events or circumstances have positive intrinsic value is not the same thing as providing reasons to think that, given a set of outcomes, necessarily the one in which those entities, events or circumstances occur more profusely is better than the others, *all things considered*. This would be so only if either the value of the outcome should be determined solely by the value of the presence of those things, or if the value of the presence of those things trumps any other value.

Accepting that natural entities have intrinsic value does not mean that, given a set of outcomes, the one with the greatest amount of non-sentient natural entities is necessarily the best one, *all things considered*. What this means is that that outcome is the best *in a certain respect*, that is, the one concerning the value of non-sentient natural entities. Denying this implies either holding a monistic axiology (Temkin 2000, 155) or accepting incommensurability and assuming that one of the values present in an outcome can trump all others. In this case, that would occur if one considered that non-sentient natural entities do not only have intrinsic value, but that they actually have a value that either is the only one that exists (thus ruling out the *hybrid view*) or that trumps any other existing value.

5. WHAT IF THE VALUE OF NATURAL ENTITIES HAS A GREATER WEIGHT IN DETERMINING THE VALUE OF AN OUTCOME?

Let us now assume, for the sake of the argument, that not only non-sentient natural entities have intrinsic value, but that it is much weightier than any other value. This is actually to concede too much, given that almost no one accepts this thesis when humans are harmed by natural processes. My goal is to show that, even accepting this it still proves to be insufficient to support (EP).

Let us first investigate the possibility that the value of non-sentient natural entities does not trump other values, but that instead it is weightier (even much weightier). Yet, even on this assumption, there are possible situations in which the value of non-sentient natural entities is lower but that, given the increase in the other values, the situation is, *all things considered*, better than another one in which the value of non-sentient natural entities is higher, but there is a considerable decrease in other values.

This is so because when we say that a value is weightier (even much weightier) than others in determining the value of a situation, but not enough to be a trump, we have to admit that there is a point where increases in the degree of other values make that situation better than others *all things considered*, even if it represents a decrease in the much weightier value. How great the increase in the amount of the other values must be and how small the reduction in the amount of the main value must be will depend on how important this core value is. At some point, this trade-off must be admitted. Otherwise, it would be to assert that such value is a trump over others. Therefore, even if the value of non-sentient natural entities in a situation is much weightier than the well-being of sentient beings it would still not be enough to support (EP).

6. WHAT IF THE VALUE OF NON-SENTIENT NATURAL ENTITIES IS A TRUMP IN DETERMINING THE VALUE OF AN OUTCOME?

Suppose that non-sentient natural entities have intrinsic value, and that their value trumps other values (at least, values that concern the good of sentient beings). This is again to concede too much. When victims of natural processes belong to the human species, almost no one assigns a greater weight to the value of non-sentient natural entities in determining how good or bad the outcome is, much less the function of a trump.

Table 1. – Trump value and outcomes.

SITUATION	S1	S2	S3
<i>Non-sentient natural entities</i>	+10	+9	+10
<i>Well-being of sentient beings</i>	-50	+9	+10

But even if that were the case, (EP) would still not be justified. This is so because we could think of ways to minimize the disvalue in the situation of animals in nature (suffering, premature death, inequality, etc.) without necessarily reducing the alleged value of the existence of non-sentient natural entities (e.g. we could try to do it without diminishing the degree of biodiversity or without disrupting ecosystems or extinguishing species). Thus, consider the following situations (see *tab. 1*), where *N* is the degree of non-sentient natural entities in a situation and *S* the degree of all that has value related to sentient beings (either in terms of individual well-being, or in terms of the value of a situation in which various sentient beings are present).

If the value of non-sentient natural entities is a trump, we have to conclude that S1 is, *all things considered*, better than S2 (although S2 is much better from the standpoint of the well-being of sentient beings). However, this would suffice to support (EP) only if it were impossible to help wild animals without reducing the level of non-sentient natural entities, which have alleged intrinsic value. Such a theory would have to admit that S3 is the best of the three situations above.

A possible objection to the previous conclusion is the following: any help given to a victim of a natural process prevents a certain natural process from taking place, and therefore decreases the amount of natural processes present in a situation. Thus, the belief that the value of a certain natural entity is a trump does not justify (EP) if the bearers of value are ecosystems, biodiversity, or species. This is because preventing a natural process from taking place does not necessarily imply a loss of value. However, if what we value above all is any natural process, then EP is justified.

Even though this is true, it seems to have absurd implications, which are easily noticeable for most of us if we imagine that the victims of natural processes are humans. For example, one would have to say that, of two situations, the one where the number of people contracting cancer and other natural diseases or deformities is greater (i.e., the situation where the value of natural processes is maximized) is better, *all things considered*, than the one where everyone is healthy. The vast majority of us would not think that the situation where everyone has cancer is better even *in some respect* than

the situation where all individuals are in good health – much less that it is better, *all things considered*. When humans are the victims, almost nobody believes that harmful natural processes have intrinsic value, much less that it trumps any other value. This seems to explain why it is usually argued not that natural processes have intrinsic value, but that other non-sentient natural entities (biodiversity, ecosystems, species, etc.) have it instead. In the few instances where the intrinsic value of natural processes is defended, this defense is combined with anthropocentric speciesist criteria. For this same reason, such position should be rejected.

7. THE OBJECTION THAT THE VALUE OF AN OUTCOME SHOULD BE DETERMINED SOLELY BY THE TOTAL SUM OF EACH VALUE

Another possible defense of (EP) would be: “although there are distinct factors, each with independent intrinsic value, the value of an outcome, *all things considered*, should be determined solely by the total sum of all that has value minus the sum of all that has disvalue”. The objection could then proceed: “the situation where animals endure natural harms in nature has positive value, *all things considered*, because the high prevalence of disvalue for sentient beings is somehow compensated by the high amount of non-sentient natural entities in the situation”.

This axiology would be an aggregationist one similar to the one utilitarianism endorses, though instead of valuing the total sum of what has value to sentient beings, it would also add to it other values given by the existence of non-sentient natural entities (see *tab. 2*). I will call this the *Aggregative Hybrid Axiology* (abbreviated as AHA).

According to AHA, S5 is, *all things considered*, better than S4 (even though S4 is better in respect to the well-being of sentient beings) because in S5 the sum is greater (not necessarily because in it the presence of non-sentient natural entities is greater).

*Table 2. – Aggregative Hybrid Axiology (AHA).*

SITUATION	S4	S5
<i>Non-sentient natural entities</i>	+1	+112
<i>Well-being of sentient beings</i>	+10	-100
<i>Total sum</i>	+11	+12

This objection does not justify (EP). This is so regardless of whether an aggregative axiology of this type is plausible. It would also be the case independently of whether there really is a higher amount of non-sentient natural entities than disvalue for sentient beings in nature. It does not depend either on whether it is possible to commensurate these values.

According to such an axiology, if the value an outcome has is in one aspect significant enough, it can compensate a similarly significant disvalue which that outcome may have in another respect. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that there are two possible ways, given that axiology, to improve a situation: by increasing what has value or by decreasing what has disvalue. Either way, we will be increasing the total sum. So, let us consider again S5, where there is a large amount of non-sentient natural entities and sentient beings have a very low level of well-being. Let us assume that this represents the situation of animals in nature. There are two ways how we can improve it, given this aggregative axiology (see *tab. 3*).

One way is to bring about S6: this would increase the amount of the already prevalent value (in this case, we increase the level of non-sentient natural entities). Another way is to bring about S7: here, we improve the situation in the same proportion by increasing the non-prevalent value (in this case, we reduce the disvalue suffered by sentient beings), even if it implies decreasing the other value.

This axiology could not say that S6 is better than S7. To decrease what is of disvalue in a situation is also a way to increase its total sum. Moreover, a normative account based on such axiology would have to say that if we face the choice between S6 and S7, it is morally optional whether to choose one or the other. Hence, those who want to decrease the disvalue that sentient beings suffer caused by natural processes would be allowed to do so. Therefore, this objection cannot support (EP).

*Table 3. – Aggregative Hybrid Axiology (AHA) and improvement.*

SITUATION	S5	S6	S7
<i>Non-sentient natural entities</i>	+112	+162	+112
<i>Well-being of sentient beings</i>	-100	-100	-50
<i>Total sum</i>	+12	+62	+62

8. THE OBJECTION THAT THE HARM INFLICTED  
TO SENTIENT BEINGS DOES NOT HAVE NEGATIVE VALUE  
WHEN CAUSED BY NATURAL PROCESSES

A final objection claims that it would be a mistake to attach negative value to the harms suffered by sentient beings when they are caused by natural processes. According to this objection, there would be nothing negative about the situation of animals in nature, since it assumes that a harm can only have negative value when it is the result of moral agency.

One possible reply to this view is that it makes very difficult to explain what is it about moral agency that imbues harms with negative value. Consider, for instance, suffering. If we had to explain why the suffering caused by moral agents contributes to the negative value of an outcome, there seems to be no plausible way to do it but to appeal to the *intrinsic* characteristics of suffering itself, which are essentially *evaluative*: it is the kind of experience always perceived as *negative* by those who experience it. This makes it something of which the experiencer wants to avoid. A crucial point to note here is that all this explanation makes no reference to the origin of suffering. The fact that suffering is an intrinsically bad experience does not change according to its origin. An instance of suffering caused by some natural process is not less bad than it would have been if it had been caused by a moral agent. The same reasoning would apply (albeit with different explanations) to other types of harms.

9. REASSESSING OUR REASONS FOR HELPING ANIMALS IN NATURE  
ACCORDING TO THE DIFFERENT DELIMITATIONS  
OF THE MORAL COMMUNITY

If we hold the sentience view it seems clear that we will claim that in nature disvalue vastly outweighs value. This will be so because of the enormous amount of suffering and premature death that exists in it and the comparatively existent small amount of well-being. However, if we hold instead a hybrid view, we will still have to claim that the situation of animals in nature is very bad because of the disvalue they suffer, even though we may still maintain that there are other valuable things in nature apart from wellbeing, that is, the presence of certain non-sentient entities. Thus, even if non-sentient natural entities possess positive intrinsic value, it is also true that these entities have significant *negative instrumental value*, since they produce in abundance things of negative intrinsic value for sentient beings.

Moreover, if we really care about sentient beings, we will try help them so as to maximize their well-being. A situation is better than any other, all things considered, if each element in it which has intrinsic value is present to a higher degree than in all the others. That is what is expected from a delimitation of the moral community that recognizes direct duties to sentient beings, regardless of whether it recognizes (and its degree of recognition) intrinsic value to non-sentient natural entities.

Nevertheless, suppose that (EP) was defended on the grounds that direct duties to non-sentient natural entities are stronger than the obligation (or permission) to bring about the best possible outcome (*the environmentalist prohibition regardless of axiology*). As said above, this is only compatible with some deontological theories. In addition, as we have seen, this appears to be an anthropocentric speciesist view, given that most of us would hardly accept its implications in those cases in which humans are the victims of natural processes. In addition, the most important point is that the previous conclusions regarding (EP) dependent on axiology also apply also to (EP) regardless of axiology. Analogously to what was discussed in terms of value, we can draw the following conclusions: (1) giving reasons for thinking that non-sentient entities are objects of direct duties (regardless of their value) would not determine that this duty is absolute, or even stronger than the duty to (or the permission to) help sentient beings; (2) even if the duty in question was stronger, or even absolute, it is possible to search for ways to help animals in nature that do not conflict with it.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the arguments above leads us to conclude that if sentient beings should be the objects of direct duties, as it seems to be the case, no axiological consideration may justify the environmentalist prohibition (EP). This is so even if we adopt an axiology that attributes intrinsic value to non-sentient natural entities, and regardless of the weight that the value of these non-sentient natural entities has in determining the value of the situation as a whole. According to some theories, the value of the situation of animals in nature would increase if certain non-sentient natural entities were present. However that might be, such a situation would also be highly disvaluable in another respect: the one concerning the well-being of sentient individuals (either in terms of their low levels of well-being or in terms of the distribution of well-being among sentient beings). That is exactly what makes it urgent to improve the situation of animals in nature.

This does not imply that whether we adopt the *sentience view* or the *hybrid view* of the moral community, our judgment of the reasons for acting with respect to the situation of animals in nature will necessarily be the same. It will probably be very different. According to the *sentience view*, when helping animals in nature our only concern is their well-being. According to the *hybrid view*, considerations about non-sentient natural entities could somehow limit our help. This shows that the debate over whether non-sentient natural entities should be the object of direct duties remains extremely relevant. Axiological considerations that take into account the intrinsic value of non-sentient natural entities are not sufficient to support (EP) nor to weaken our reasons to reduce disvalue in the situation of animals in nature (although it could somehow limit these interventions). The claim that non-sentient natural entities have intrinsic value does not pose, as it might have been initially thought, a significant threat to the conclusion that we should aid those animals in nature who are victims of natural harms.

All this drives us to the conclusion that it is justified to help animals in nature. In this paper I have left open the question of whether it is also a duty to do so. However, given the magnitude of disvalue in the wild, it seems that if humans were the victims, we would promptly recognize that looking for ways to reduce that disvalue would not only be a duty, but a very stringent one.

## REFERENCES

- Callicott, John B. 1990. "The Case against Moral Pluralism". *Environmental Ethics* 12: 99-124.
- Horta, Oscar. 2010a. "Debunking the Idyllic View of Natural Processes: Population Dynamics and Suffering in the Wild". *Télos* 17: 73-88.
- 2010b. "Igualitarismo, igualación a la baja, antropocentrismo y valor de la vida". *Revista de filosofía* 35: 133-52.
- 2010c. "What Is Speciesism?". *The Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23: 243-66.
- Ng, Yew-Kwang. 1995. "Towards Welfare Biology: Evolutionary Economics of Animal Consciousness and Suffering". *Biology and Philosophy* 10 (3): 255-85.
- Temkin, Larry S. 2000. "Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection". In *The Ideal of Equality*, edited by Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams, 126-61. New York: Macmillan - St. Martin's Press.
- Tomasik, Brian. 2014. "How Many Wild Animals Are There?". *Essays on Reducing Suffering*. Accessed July 26, 2014. <http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/number-of-wild-animals.html>
- Varner, Gary. 1991. "No Holism without Pluralism". *Environmental Ethics* 13: 175-9.